Spectres of Gothic Literature: Reflections, Reworkings, Reinventions

Dear Readers,

Welcome to another special issue of *Folio. A Students' Journal!* This time, it features some of the papers submitted for the third Warsaw Literary Meetings Rising Stars (or as it's called when tenderness strikes: "Baby WLM"). This time, the issue covers papers presented during the meeting, which took place in November 2024. Organised by the From Queen Anne to Queen Victoria research group, WLM RS is a series of one-day interdisciplinary workshops for young scholars and offers opportunities for them to not only share their research but also to network a little. We would like to once again thank our presenters for their attendance and for publishing their works with us. Your fresh perspectives on the topic always inspire and provoke fruitful discussions.

Going beyond the 18th and 19th centuries, WLM RS 3 followed the theme of Spectres of Gothic Literature: Reflections, Reworkings, Reinventions, spanning from animation to novels and webtoons, offering different places where Gothic still lives, in new forms and shapes. This issue of Folio focuses particularly on the variations of the Gothic tradition, with its dark atmospheres, haunted spaces, the uncanny, and the monstrous, reappearing in the contemporary media, including TV series, films, books. Such a broad take allows us to come into dialogue with its tradition and prove its everlasting effect on modern creativity. Our contributors approach the Gothic as a dynamic framework and explore a plethora of different manifestations of the Gothic aesthetic, e.g.: the Renaissance Age of Animation (1980s-2000s) in Aleksandra Gałązka's essay; Tim Burton's *The Nightmare Before Christmas* explored by Urszula Markiewicz; the 21st-century take on the Gothic literary tropes in a popular TV series *Supernatural* in Agata Haida's essay. The issue also explores new variations of the Gothic classics: Michalina Pietrzak discusses how V.E. Schwab's duology reworks *Frankenstein*, while Leslie Wong takes us all the way to South Korea and examines the *Dracula* inspirations present in the webtoon *Delusion,* showing us that Gothic and Gothic novels do not succumb to death – they come back in a different form.

As always, enjoy reading!

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Though I know I should be wary, still I venture someplace scary…": The Gothic Craze in the Renaissance Age of Animation

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Abstract: The Renaissance Age of Animation, spanning from the mid-1980s to the early 2000s, marked a period of great transformation in American cartoons. Among these developments was the growing fusion of animation with Gothic conventions, which expanded the medium's artistic and psychological dimensions. This integration enhanced the versatility of cartoons, broadening their audience and narrative possibilities. However, despite these artistic shifts, the cultural status and academic recognition of animation failed to reflect its evolution, leaving Gothic cartoons stigmatised and largely underexplored. Drawing on American cinematic history, Erik Erikson's theory of human development, and its contemporary applications in Gothic-inspired children's literature, this paper investigates the incorporation of Gothic conventions into short-form animated productions and argues for their psychological and educational value. The theoretical framework is applied to three cartoons produced at different stages of the period: *The 13 Ghosts of Scooby-Doo* (1985), *Beetlejuice* (1989–1991), and *Courage the Cowardly Dog* (1999–2002). The analysis supports the argument that Gothic animation functions as a culturally and psychologically significant medium, serving both as an educational tool and a catalyst for social reflection. Consequently, a re-examination of its target audience and increased scholarly engagement is warranted.

Keywords: American television**,** Erik Erikson, Gothic animated shows, Gothic fiction, the Renaissance Age of Animation

Animators have been fond of quoting the dictionary definition of their art. Actually, as far as cartoons are concerned, Webster's may be spiritually correct but it is technologically wrong. Animation, as it says, means 'to give life, to bring to life.'… Slowed down, animated movies can be seen as a series of static drawings: In the felicitous phrase of theatre historian Harold Clurman, they are 'lies like truth.' But those little deceptions – twenty-four of them per second sliding past the projector gate – have created their own world, a place where natural law has no authority, where ducks can have tantrums, and rabbits may be witty, where a cat can break into hundred little cats and merge into one again, where mice and men fly without wings and dogs explode and birds run faster than jets (Kanfer 15).

On closer examination, this ostensibly neutral observation resonates deeply with Gothic fiction, as both traditions rely on manipulating perception and destabilising reality's boundaries. Just as Mary Shelley's Victor Frankenstein uses science to animate his creation, cartoonists such as Tex Avery—the co-creator of Bugs Bunny, Daffy Duck, and Porky Pig—combine scientific principles with artistic ingenuity to bring their characters to life, inviting audiences to believe in worlds filled with extraordinary beings and supernatural events. This shared ability to blur the line between the believable and the fantastical also helps explain the difficulty of defining both animation and Gothic fiction, which persistently cross the threshold between the real and the supernatural. Moreover, while grappling with profound questions of morality, identity, and power, many Gothic narratives display a distinctly cartoonish sensibility. This is evident even in the genre's foundational text, Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* (1764), where a giant helmet inexplicably falls from the sky and kills Prince Manfred's heir—a surreal and absurd moment that highlights the kinship between Gothic and cartoon traditions. Another affinity the two share is their lack of recognition for their wide-ranging potential, a neglect that initially consigned both to marginal positions within academic discourse. This neglect is even more pronounced in their fusion, which – unlike the two forms considered separately – remains to this day in the scholarly shadows.

This study examines the diverse use of Gothic conventions in American animated television shows from the mid-1980s to the early 2000s, a period referred to as the Renaissance Age of Animation. It begins with a brief history of American animation's relationship with Gothic fiction, highlighting how their elements gradually blended to create iconic productions such as *Scooby Doo, Where Are You?* (1969–1978) by Joe Ruby and Ken Spears. The paper also considers how a genre traditionally associated with violence and corruption entered what was initially an almost exclusively children's medium. The original target audience may also help explain why animated shows remain undervalued in academic circles, with few studies emphasising their significance—particularly in relation to Gothic fiction, itself a historically marginalised field of study. Nevertheless, recent growing scholarly interest in Gothic themes within children's literature, including Michael Howarth's *Under the Bed, Creeping: Psychoanalyzing the Gothic in Children's Literature*, which draws heavily on Erik Erikson's work on human development, offers valuable insights into the psychosocial significance of Gothic cartoons and their unique engagement with the genre. To demonstrate the multifaceted potential of Gothicised animation in practice, the study concludes with an analysis of three American animated series: *The 13 Ghosts of Scooby-Doo* (1985) by Hanna-Barbera Productions, *Beetlejuice* (1989–1991) by Nelvana, and *Courage the Cowardly Dog* (1999–2002) by John R. Dilworth. Each of these productions represents a different stage in the incorporation of Gothic conventions into short-form animation and illustrates distinct approaches to using the medium beyond superficial amusement, enabling a comparative analysis of this cultural amalgamation across a transformative era in American animation.

A Brief History of Gothic Cartoons

The earliest use of Gothic conventions in Hollywood animation can be traced back to Disney's *Silly Symphony* animated shorts, including *The Skeleton Dance* (1929), *Trees and Flowers* (1932), *The Old Mill* (1937), and the popular Mickey Mouse cartoon *Lonesome Ghosts* (1937). While the extent to which

these works were Gothic-inspired varied, the genre was recognised early on as a valuable artistic contribution – particularly notable considering *Gertie the Dinosaur* (1914), the first American cartoon, had been created only fifteen years earlier. Both *Trees and Flowers* and *The Old Mill* earned Academy Awards for Best Cartoon Short Subject, further solidifying the connection between Gothic fiction and the burgeoning animation industry through critical acclaim and close temporal proximity.

Fig. 1. Disney's *Trees and Flowers* as an example of an early Gothic cartoon.

Despite the initial success, several decades passed before audiences witnessed Gothic conventions being applied more comprehensively in animated series. This was due in part to the fact that animation remained a slow and costly process, with each frame meticulously drawn and coloured by hand, and each short film requiring intensive collaboration of large teams of trained artists. Significant sociopolitical and economic obstacles compounded these technical challenges – World War II and its strict censorship (Davis 70), the rise of television and its shifting industrial structures (Wells 44), and the increasing regulation (Furniss 108) – all hindered the industry's development. The 1960s brought further difficulties,

as public anxiety over the Vietnam War, civil rights protests, and the assassinations of Martin Luther King Jr. and President John F. Kennedy resulted in substantial apprehension about children's media (Perlmutter 124). Cartoons were criticised for excessive violence and racial insensitivity, leading to boycotts from concerned parents and advocacy groups (Perlmutter 134–135).

While these turbulent times posed considerable challenges to animation studios, they also spurred innovation, shifts in creative approach, and the rise of television cartoons. In 1967, Frank Silverman, the head of CBS children's programming, proposed to Hanna-Barbera's production team "a series that would be a combination of horror and comedy, not unlike the old NBC radio series of the 1930s and 1940s, *I Love a Mystery*" (Perlmutter 73). The concept also drew inspiration from comedies such as *Hold That Ghost* (1941), directed by Arthur Lubin, and *Abbott and Costello Meet Frankenstein* (1948), directed by Charles Barton. Another of Silverman's ideas was to feature a group of adolescent protagonists, modelled after the popular live-action show *The Many Loves of Dobie Gillis* (1959–1963), created by Rod Amateau. This, combined with a goofy, talking Great Dane, helped to diffuse excessive terror and suspense. The resulting phenomenon, *Scooby-Doo: Where Are You!* (1969–1978), delighted both children and adults. The animated show quickly joined *The Flintstones* (1960–1966), *The Yogi Bear Show* (1961–1962), and *The Jetsons* (1962–1963) in Hanna-Barbera's hall of fame, becoming a model for American cartoon producers grappling with industry-wide crises. This period – often referred to as the *Dark Age of Animation* – was marked by a lack of creativity, financial and time constraints, and heavy interference from government regulators and network executives ("Dark Age of Animation").

Fig. 2. *What a Night for a Knight* – the first episode of *Scooby-Doo: Where Are You!*

In 1981, Ronald Reagan deregulated U.S. television, lifting a long-standing ban on merchandise-driven programming. This change brought significant financial and professional benefits to cartoon studios but also provoked backlash from parents' groups, who argued that children were being subjected to glorified toy commercials that displaced traditional Hanna-Barbera productions (Perlmutter 170). Nonetheless, these action-packed shows resonated with their target audiences, with several becoming enduring pop culture phenomena fondly remembered today. At the same time, the rise of cable television offered animated series producers greater creative freedom. Because cable networks targeted younger viewers, they were more willing to embrace experimental content. Stations such as Nickelodeon and Cartoon Network were not bound by the same strict regulations as the major networks, enabling shows like *Beetlejuice*. These cartoons not only employed a wide range of Gothic aesthetics but also engaged more mature themes, including identity, belonging, and the liminality between life and death (Perlmutter 172).

At the same time, The Walt Disney Company capitalised on the loosening of television policies and began producing its own animated television shows. This shift became a pivotal factor for animation studios operating in television: "It was as if a simple presence of Disney 'magic' in television animation could now atone for the industry's past sins" (Perlmutter 172). Those who had previously regarded cartoons as mere television program fillers were compelled to reevaluate their stance, as Disney productions had long been recognised as a legitimate form of art. Empowered and liberated, animators regained their creativity and grew bolder in pushing the boundaries between what was deemed family-friendly and what was considered inappropriate for younger audiences. This newfound freedom led to a much wider variety of animated shows that were both more developed and progressive, including Gothic cartoons such as *Beetlejuice* and *Courage the Cowardly Dog*.

Psychoanalysing Children's Gothic Fiction

Although there has been a significant shift in animators' artistic liberties in recent decades, the vast majority of content aimed at young children today remains cautious and conservative. Upbeat and optimistic themes dominate, as there is widespread resistance to sensational themes when dealing with material for minors: "…there are many parents who believe Gothic elements are too scary for children; they believe that reading scary stories will scar their children for life… that Gothicism subverts the didactic role" (Howarth 6). Gothicism as a genre is frequently perceived as inherently unsuitable for children. Concerns persist that the violence and terror characteristic of the genre may hinder children's development, potentially leading to long-term psychological harm. These apprehensions are partly rooted in the association of modern Gothicism with earlier literary works that include themes of sacrilege, rape, incest, and murder, such as Matthew Lewis's 18th-century novel *The Monk*.

However, Gothic cartoons produced in the USA during the 1980s and 1990s differ significantly from the Gothic novels that parents often associate

with the genre. These cartoons avoid subjects considered taboo for juvenile audiences and instead focus almost exclusively on light-hearted topics that children can easily relate to. The Federal Communications Commission (FCC) strictly regulates broadcast content, completely prohibiting obscene material and restricting indecent or profane content to specific hours. As a result, all daytime animated shows, regardless of genre, are required to adhere to these regulations.

Renowned 20th-century psychoanalyst Erik Erikson proposed an eight-stage model of human psychosocial development, which outlines a series of conflicts that individuals must navigate to achieve maturity (Erikson 247–272). His theory emphasises that growth is a continuous process, spanning from birth to late adulthood, as individuals learn lessons and acquire virtues that enable them to progress to subsequent stages of development. Importantly, advancing to the next stage does not imply mastery of a particular skill; lessons can and often should be revisited (Erikson 219–234). Moreover, an individual's chronological age does not necessarily determine their stage of development (Erikson 270). Building on this framework, this paper argues that Erikson's model is valuable in understanding two frequently overlooked aspects of Gothic fiction: its didactic and therapeutic potential.

In *Under the Bed, Creeping: Psychoanalyzing the Gothic in Children's Literature* (2014), Michael Howarth draws on Erikson's psychosocial development framework to challenge the notion that Gothicism poses a threat to children's mental well-being. He emphasises that "Gothicism has always been an integral part of children's literature" (Howarth 4) and supports this claim with numerous examples. Each period in English history, beginning as early as the ninth century, is marked by prominent works featuring Gothic elements. For instance, "During the Middle Ages, children read medieval epics like *Beowulf* (c. 850) and *The Song of Roland* (c. 1150), works brimming with pages and pages of bloodshed and violent imagery" (5). He further explains that these conventions are justified by their educational value: such works address important behavioural issues,

provide moral instruction, and, above all, evoke fear to help protect children from real-life dangers and hardships (8, 163).

While times have changed, the Gothic continues to serve as an invaluable didactic and psychological tool. Howarth notes, "It feels good to have an outlet for the emotions we experience in our own lives, emotions we might want to repress or deny. Gothic stories entertain because they allow us the opportunity to lose ourselves in another character's anguish and distress. At the same time, these stories produce *Schadenfreude*, creating a sense of comfort and pleasure by reminding us that, at least for the moment, we ourselves might be free of such pain and emotional duress" (6). Gothic narratives thus allow the audience to express, experience, and understand emotions that might otherwise be ignored. By encountering these feelings vicariously, readers are given valuable opportunities to learn how to cope with negative emotions without directly suffering through them.

These insights are equally applicable to Gothic-influenced media, including animated television shows. Both children and adults enjoy following the adventures of Scooby-Doo and his friends; however, few would willingly trade places with the canine character as he repeatedly exposes himself to danger. The emotional impact of such cartoon-Gothic narratives can be particularly beneficial, as they provide audiences with an outlet for processing both fear and humour. Moreover, the didactic elements of these stories should not be overlooked. Tales imbued with terror and suspense are inherently more engaging, making audiences more receptive to their underlying educational messages.

Gothic Fiction and the Renaissance Age of Animation Cartoons
***The 13 Ghosts of Scooby-Doo* (1985, Hanna-Barbera Productions)**

From Mystery to the Supernatural
The 13 Ghosts of Scooby-Doo serves as a prime example of how transformations within the American television industry impacted animated series. With fewer regulatory restrictions, Hanna-Barbera animators were granted greater creative freedom to explore darker and more macabre

themes. This series also marked a significant departure within the *Scooby-Doo* franchise, best known for its inaugural show, *Scooby-Doo, Where Are You!* (1969), as the monsters were no longer unmasked as humans in disguise but instead appeared as genuine supernatural creatures. Enhanced by a sinister soundtrack composed by Hoyt Curtin and even more atmospheric settings, the series succeeded in delivering genuine scares and revitalising waning interest in the franchise. While the earlier formula offered comfort through its predictable narrative structure, the repetitive and overexplained supernatural hoaxes of earlier iterations had grown monotonous, creating a demand for innovation.

Fig. 3. Opening sequence depicting Scooby-Doo characters reimagined as a ghost-busting group with the addition of Scrappy-Doo and Flim-Flam, the absence of Velma and Fred, and an expanded role for Daphne.

From Episodic Formula to Serial Narrative

This innovation emerged through the introduction of unexplained supernatural phenomena and, for the first time in the franchise, a serialised narrative structure. Departing from the traditional episodic format, *The 13 Ghosts of Scooby-Doo* established a continuous storyline. The series opens

with Scooby and a reassembled gang crash-landing in a remote Himalayan village. From the outset, the visual and narrative elements are infused with Gothic aesthetics and themes, as the gang becomes stranded in an isolated and ominous setting, surrounded by sublime and otherworldly landscapes. The plot soon reveals that the village is plagued by both literal and metaphorical demons from its past. At the centre of the story are thirteen ghosts, once intent on achieving global domination, who cursed the villagers and transformed them into werewolves. Though the villagers ultimately managed to imprison the malevolent spirits within a magical chest stored in the local castle, Scooby and Shaggy are tricked into unlocking it, unintentionally releasing the ghosts and assuming the responsibility for recapturing them. The villains' design and characterisation stand out for their depth, variety, and complexity. For example, the gang's first adversary, Maldor the Malevolent, is a master of black magic from the Dark Ages who casts the "Sleep of the Centuries" curse on Princess Esmeralda after she refuses him access to the Wonder Wand of Zagraz.

Fig. 4. From the episode "Scoobra Kadoobra": Maldor the Malevolent uses his magical powers to observe Scooby and his friends as they fall into his trap.

Vincent Price and the Gothic Mentor

Another noteworthy feature of the series is the introduction of a mentor figure, Vincent Van Ghoul, voiced by the renowned American actor of macabre cinema, Vincent Price. Celebrated for his performances in classic horror films such as *House of Wax* (1953), directed by André de Toth, *House on Haunted Hill* (1959), directed by William Castle, and Roger Corman's Poe Cycle of the 1960s, Price established himself as a twentieth-century Gothic icon. The character he voices, Van Ghoul, is a powerful mystic who had previously vanquished the thirteen ghosts. His narrative arc embodies three key aspects of Gothic fiction: the intrusion of the past into the present, the destabilisation of traditional gender roles, and the critique of authority. The ghosts frequently seek vengeance against Van Ghoul, forcing him into various roles, including that of a paternal protector and, at times, a damsel in distress. The series humorously undermines patriarchal norms by portraying Van Ghoul, a supposedly omniscient and powerful figure, as comically vulnerable. For instance, he is often easily tricked by the spirits or, in one of the episodes, requires the gang's assistance because, as he claims, his castle is "being recobwebbed" ("Scooby in Kwackyland"). These playful subversions of authority and gender conventions contribute to the show's complexity, enhancing its appeal to audiences of all ages.

Fig. 5. From the episode "Coast-to-Ghost": Vincent Van Ghoul, tricked by a vengeance-seeking demon, relies on the gang to save him from being turned into stone.

Beetlejuice **(1989–1991, Nelvana Ltd.; The Geffen Film Company; Tim Burton, Inc.)**

The Animated Adaptation

Beetlejuice is an animated adaptation of Tim Burton's live-action dark comedy of the same name. Although the 1980s were notable for adapting live-action productions into animated formats, this particular show distinguished itself through its ingenuity and quality. The cartoon was recognised with a Daytime Emmy Award for Outstanding Animated Program and, as media historian Hal Erickson aptly notes, it was "one of the few animated series (based on an outside source) to equal or even occasionally improve upon its source material" (Erickson 133).

Fig.6. The cartoon adaptation of Tim Burton's blockbuster film.

Contrasts between the Living World and the World of the Dead

Like its cinematic counterpart, *Beetlejuice* navigates between the real world and the Neitherworld, an afterlife realm populated by bizarre creatures, including the titular ghost. The stark contrast between these two realms – Lydia's orderly suburban town and the chaotic, surrealistic Neitherworld – illustrates one of the central themes of Gothic fiction: the tension between

opposites. This duality is further emphasised as the boundaries between the realms blur, with the Neitherworld intruding upon the real world and vice versa. Lydia represents logic and civility, while Beetlejuice embodies chaos, rule-breaking, and unpredictability, creating a striking juxtaposition that closely aligns with Gothic fiction's preoccupation with opposing forces (Botting 5, Punter and Byron 3).

Duality as a Central Theme
The theme of duality takes on an uncanny yet whimsical dimension in several episodes where Beetlejuice employs his boundless powers to immerse himself in the world of the living while concealing his true identity from Lydia's parents and schoolmates. His disguised persona, Betty Juice, exemplifies this theme—embodying Beetlejuice's eccentric and chaotic nature in appearance, yet displaying a demeanour that is far more composed and adaptable, reflecting the traits of a well-mannered young girl. This exploration of duality continues in an episode where Lydia and Beetlejuice construct an anthropomorphised car, drawing on Gothic traditions exemplified in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818) and Robert Louis Stevenson's *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (1886). The car is brought to life during a storm after being endowed with the brain of a madman, resulting in a split personality—humorously foreshadowed by Lydia naming it "Dragster of Doom" and affectionately nicknaming it "Doomie". However, the car's dual nature complicates the narrative, as it struggles to control its darker alter ego. Each time Doomie experiences emotional distress, Dragster of Doom emerges, unleashing chaos that surpasses even the wildness of the Neitherworld. Through these storylines, the series skilfully weaves Gothic motifs of duality, doppelgängers, and loss of control, enriching the narrative with both complexity and humour.

Educational Value
The show also integrates Gothic tropes such as duality, the grotesque, and otherness into its narrative structure, employing them to convey moral lessons to its audience. Central to the story is the unconventional friendship

between Lydia and Beetlejuice, which underscores the importance of loyalty and acceptance while simultaneously addressing broader themes. Both characters embody the notion of otherness: Lydia faces social rejection due to her strong Gothic inclinations, while Beetlejuice's penchant for mischief renders him an outcast, even in the anarchic Neitherworld. This dual exploration of alienation promotes tolerance and critical thinking, as the series critiques the tendency of both real-world and Neitherworld characters to misjudge and ostracise Lydia and Beetlejuice rather than embracing their individuality. Lydia's relationship with Beetlejuice exemplifies the transformative power of understanding and acceptance. Despite Beetlejuice's eccentric appearance and often inappropriate behaviour, Lydia refrains from passing judgment. Her openness is rewarded with a loyal and caring companion, reinforcing the value of empathy and the importance of rejecting societal biases.

Fig. 7. Betty Juice, Beetlejuice's teenage girl disguise, which he frequently adapts to accompany and assist Lydia with her real-world adolescent challenges.

Psychological Benefits of Gothic Immersion
Additionally, the Gothic qualities of *Beetlejuice* serve as a mechanism for processing emotions and personal challenges. The Neitherworld offers Lydia an escape from the judgmental attitudes of her peers and the restrictive expectations of her parents, creating a space for catharsis. Filled with humorous and supportive characters, this supernatural realm allows her to embrace her individuality. As noted by Howarth, this therapeutic aspect extends to the audience, who can vicariously explore their own emotional struggles through the narrative (Howarth 6). While many animated shows offer escapism (Jiang et al.), Gothic elements heighten emotional engagement, promoting deeper immersion and psychological relief. These darker themes, balanced with comedic elements, amplify the therapeutic effect, solidifying *Beetlejuice* as a remarkable example of premillennial Gothic animation.

Courage the Cowardly Dog (1999–2002, Stretch Films; Cartoon Network)

Gothic Premise and Narrative Overview
The emotional depth, surrealist atmosphere, engagement with complex social issues, and bold implementation of horror tropes are just a few features that make *Courage the Cowardly Dog* one of the most distinctive representatives of Gothicism during the Renaissance Age of Animation. The series tells the story of an elderly couple living with their dog, Courage, on an isolated farm in the town of Nowhere. However, the narrative can be interpreted as a paradoxical exploration of what these elements typically imply, as the couple's life is anything but peaceful and mundane. They are continuously harassed by sinister visitors and disturbing events, with their lives and safety resting entirely on their pet.

Fig. 8. Opening sequence depicting Courage rescuing his owners, Muriel and Eustace.

The Struggles of the Elderly

Both the selection of the protagonists and the fact that the dog possesses the highest degree of awareness and agency are particularly thought-provoking aspects of the production. This aligns with the stereotypical perception of the elderly as helpless in the face of difficulty and vulnerable due to reduced adaptability and limited access to information. Although supernatural elements play a significant role in the show, the real-life drama of the elderly can be interpreted as its central theme, with the couple consistently portrayed as victims. Scholars of Gothic fiction often view the genre as a vehicle for expressing trauma and cultural anxiety—a tool through which Western society processes collective fears (Hogle 18–19, Lamont 312–314, Spooner 20–30). Nevertheless, such qualities are rarely ascribed to cartoons, which have long been excluded from serious scholarly analysis. While this may have been justifiable in the context of early animated shows, which often lacked narrative complexity, contemporary works like *Courage the*

Cowardly Dog warrant critical attention and should not be dismissed solely based on their medium.

Anxieties of a Changing World

One of the reasons why the cartoon can be seen as exceptionally eerie and unsettling lies in its metaphorical representation of modern life's pressures and its reflection of humanity's deepest fears. With technology rapidly dominating every aspect of society, economic insecurity on the rise, and the pace of life accelerating, many people—particularly American seniors— experience heightened discomfort, fear, and anxiety (Reid et al. 496, Tsetoura 205). The elderly, often more socially isolated and less adaptable to change, are especially susceptible to these stresses (Donovan et al.). Although the show frequently addresses such issues through humour and exaggeration, it often leaves viewers with a lingering sense of unease and quiet grief.

Fig. 9. The solitary, decaying farm where Courage and his family live evokes classic Gothic themes of isolation, ruin, and foreboding.

Bravery Through Fear

Beyond its engagement with social concerns, *Courage the Cowardly Dog* also serves as a valuable educational tool, with its protagonist embodying a powerful role model through his bravery and resilience. Despite his overwhelming fear, Courage repeatedly intervenes to save his elderly owners from sinister threats, confronting his weaknesses and navigating situations with uncertain outcomes. These qualities make him highly relatable to viewers, who may see themselves more clearly in his flawed, anxious nature than in idealised heroic figures. The show presents the act of facing one's fears as a recurring, unavoidable part of daily life, encouraging audiences to confront challenges rather than evade them. Resonating with Howarth's application of Erik Erikson's studies on identity crises, the cartoon effectively incorporates these psychological insights into a Gothic framework. In doing so, it illustrates how the genre mirrors real-life problems and pushes audiences out of their comfort zones to promote psychological growth. By joining Courage in his battles against the uncanny and supernatural, viewers cultivate mental resilience and develop the tools needed to face and overcome their own psychological challenges.

Conclusion and Implications

This study has demonstrated that the Gothic mode has been an integral part of American short animation almost since the rise of the industry. Initially employed with reserve and selectivity, the genre of terror and sensation proved to be a catalyst for a young medium long pigeonholed as a mere children's entertainment and television filler. By incorporating a wide range of Gothic conventions into animated shows, producers created a space for exploring identity, individual and collective anxieties, and the social dynamics of the modern Western world through universal yet original narratives. Howarth's research on Gothic children's literature and the analyses of *The 13 Ghosts of Scooby-Doo*, *Beetlejuice*, and *Courage the Cowardly Dog* both attest to the great potential of Gothic cartoons, revealing their significant didactic and therapeutic qualities. These case studies also position

such productions as powerful agents of social reflection and change. Their capacity to foster empathy and social awareness may stem precisely from their unobtrusive and seemingly purely entertaining character, inviting scholars from diverse fields within the humanities and social sciences to draw inspiration and employ Gothic cartoons as tools in their pursuits.

While this study set out to provide a broad overview of the transformations that occurred in American Gothic animation—particularly from the mid-1980s to the early 2000s—it was necessarily limited to three productions and selective in the Gothic-infused qualities it examined. Yet, given the current stage of research on the topic, it constitutes not only a meaningful but also an essential contribution, showcasing Gothic cartoons as a legitimate field of academic enquiry deserving of sustained critical attention. Future scholarship should further examine the impact of employing Gothic tropes, without necessarily restricting the scope to the period discussed or even to the American film industry. It would be particularly enriching to juxtapose these results with Gothic animation originating from other cultures or with contemporary American short animation, thereby deepening our understanding of how popular media extends literary traditions and codifies the darker aspects of the real world. The findings of this research also emphasise that this academic discourse should not be confined to Gothic fiction and animation studies alone. Further investigation could productively inform adjacent fields such as cross-media adaptation, psychology, pedagogy, and the intersections of sociology and media communication, including gender, race, and queer studies.

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The Traces of the Gothic in
The Nightmare Before Christmas (1993)

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Abstract: Gothic is a genre that is difficult to define because of how much it evolved throughout the centuries. However, one of the genres birthed from Gothic is horror. One of the most well-known horror movies for children that presents disturbing imagery, monstrous characters and a horrifying plot is *The Nightmare Before Christmas* (1993) by Tim Burton and Henry Sellick. It seems that in this movie, there is a high quantity of elements similar to features found in Gothic novels. In this paper, I analyse *The Nightmare Before Christmas*, looking closely at its plot, characters, and imagery to discover the traces that link it with the Gothic genre.

Keywords: film, Gothic, *The Nightmare Before Christmas*, Tim Burton

Irina Rata notes that it is quite difficult to define what Gothic genre is (104). While discussing this problem, she states that Gothic is often perceived as unstable as "its elements came to contaminate almost every other genre" and moreover, "it generated new genres" (Rata 104). As initially the term was used to describe those pieces of art that did not conform to neoclassical standards and questioned aesthetics, morality, social order and problems of that time, the result was that "the fears of change and decline of the ethical, moral, and social traditions were reflected in the so called, fin-de-siècle or fin-de-millénium Gothic" (Rata 104–105). However, the genre evolved: at first, humans were the monsters of the story. Later on, monstrous creatures appeared on the pages, as in, for example, *Frankenstein, or the Modern*

Prometheus published in 1823 by Mary Shelley, or Bram Stoker's *Dracula* from 1897. The topics such as "mystery and supernatural, madness, doubling, hereditary curses, psychological and physical terror and the uncanny" were incorporated into the genre (Rata 105). And the development did not stop there: modernists understood Gothic as interior drama, and their modifications lead later on to the inclusion of horror, terror, oppressiveness, and even more monstrous creatures into the genre (Rata 106–107).

From at first including elements of horror to then birthing the genre of the contemporary horror (Rata 110), the features of Gothic seeped into different genres. One of the most well-known horror films for children that presents disturbing images, terrifying characters, and a horrifying plot is *Tim Burton's The Nightmare Before Christmas* from 1993 directed by Henry Sellick and produced by Tim Burton. Burton first presented the idea of the film to Disney in 1983, but the Studio decided against producing it, as it was deemed to go too much against what Disney brand stood for at the time. However, after Burton's success with *Batman*, Disney agreed to the production of the movie but with a PG rating and not under the name of the Disney Studio but their more adult-themes oriented Touchstone Studio, as reports Scott Mendelson from *Forbes* ("'Nightmare Before Christmas' Turns 20").

While watching the film, I realised that in this movie there is a high quantity of elements that seem similar to features found in the Gothic convention.[1] It has the imagery criticised by G. R. Thompson: "ghosts, demons, trapdoors, castles" (1), it has monstrous characters – with inward and outward monstrosity; it alludes to the topic of Gothic villains and Gothic heroines, and includes such tropes as a heinous crime or monsters craving love (Garasic 9). Therefore, the Gothic features heavily in Tim Burton's films. In this paper, I analyse *The Nightmare Before Christmas*, while looking closely at its plot, characters, and imagery to discover the traces that link it with the Gothic genre.

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[1] I am not alone in this observation: Daniel Serravalle de Sá wrote an article "O Imaginário Gótico de Tim Burton" (2023) and Edwin Page dedicated a whole book to this subject, entitled *Gothic Fantasy: The Films of Tim Burton*.

Plot

The plot of the film focuses on Jack Skellington, the Pumpkin King of the Halloween Town. Jack is weary of his duty of organising Halloween night every year. When he finds out about other holiday towns, and samples the cheer of the Christmas Town, in his hubris, he decides that this year he will be the one to organise Christmas. In order to take the place of Santa Claus, Jack orders three tricksters, Lock, Shock, and Barrel, to commit the first of the series of heinous crimes: they are to kidnap "Sandy Claws" and hide him somewhere for the duration of the holiday. Unfortunately, the tricksters deceive Jack, and deliver Santa Claus to one of the most vicious monsters in the Halloween Town: Oogie–Boogie. Then, Jack commits his own heinous act – he usurps the place of Santa Claus, and with the gifts that have been prepared by the inhabitants of the Halloween Town, travels to the mundane world. However, the nature of Halloween Town's inhabitants has influenced their preparations for Christmas: the gifts – instead of bringing people cheer – bring nightmares to life. Because of the terror that Jack and the gifts have caused, the army of the mundane world shoots "the impostor" down from the sky. When the Pumpkin King sees that his dreams of bringing cheer and joy instead of nightmares and fear to children are not going to happen, he realises that the experience has allowed him to understand his nature better and once again feel like his old self. However, if he wishes to restore the balance of the world, he now has to race against time to redeem himself and save Santa Claus and Sally, his friend, from his rival – Oogie Boogie.

The film contains several tropes common in traditional Gothic stories. First of all, the tragic monster is a misguided hero. Jack rebels against his fate and duty, and he has reasons for that – he is weary of the repetition, and he feels tired of the pressure of being lauded as the King of the Halloween Town. Everyone expects him to be the most monstrous, the most terrifying, the best of them: "You're such a scream, Jack!" (*Tim Burton's The Nightmare Before Christmas* 4:50–4:52), "You're a witch's fondest dream!" (*Tim Burton's The Nightmare Before Christmas* 4:52–4:54), "You made walls fall, Jack!" (*Tim Burton's The Nightmare Before Christmas* 4:54–4:57), "You made the very

mountains crack, Jack!" (*Tim Burton's The Nightmare Before Christmas* 4:58–5:02). Skellington is tormented by an unfulfillable void, a sense of deprivation of something in his life, and this emotional distress prompts his questioning of his identity. When he discovers the Christmas Town and how the love, cheer, and joy make him feel, he – in accordance with his nature – decides to steal this feeling for himself. However, he is ingrained in the culture of the Halloween Town and, thus, does not have the necessary tools to understand Christmas, as his experiments prove. His frustration leads him to anger and even enhances his feeling of superiority: "Just because I cannot see it, doesn't mean I can't believe it! You know, I think this Christmas thing is not as tricky as it seems. And why should they have all the fun, it should belong to anyone!" he cries, and the follows with "Not anyone, in fact, but me! Why, I could make a Christmas tree and there's no reason I can find I couldn't handle Christmastime! I bet I could improve it too! And that's exactly what I'll do!" (*Tim Burton's The Nightmare Before Christmas* 32:58–33:23). After being shot down from the sky, Jack recognises his mistake and attempts to redeem himself:

What have I done? What have I done? How could I be so blind? All is lost. Where was I? Spoiled all, spoiled all! Everything's gone all wrong. But I never intended all this madness! Never! And nobody really understood. Well, how could they? That all I ever wanted was to bring them something great! Why does nothing ever turn out like it should? (*Tim Burton's The Nightmare Before Christmas* 1:02:19–1:03:44).

The film touches upon the trope of a heinous crime. In this case, it is a series of transgressions that have been committed by different inhabitants of the Halloween Town. The first one belongs to Jack: it is his decision to steal the joy and cheer he has felt in the Christmas Town for himself by usurping the place of Santa Claus. By overstepping the boundaries of his holiday and trying to prepare Christmas in the Halloween Town, Jack causes a catastrophe in the mundane world. Even though his friend, Sally, tries to warn him and even stop him, Jack believes that he knows better, that he can improve Christmas, and thus sets himself up for failure. His act almost ruins the holiday for the ordinary people. The tricksters are responsible for the

second heinous crime: almost killing Santa Claus. Though they were cautioned by Jack that the ruler of Christmas Town has to be kept safe for the duration of his unwilling stay in the Halloween Town, Lock, Shock, and Barrel decide to play a trick on Jack. Against his orders to not involve his rival, Oogie Boogie, the Trio decides to push "Sandy Claws" into Oogie Boogie's lair. This almost results in the death of their prisoner, as Oogie Boogie knows no mercy and enjoys toying with his victims before their deaths. The action of the three tricksters could have ended with the ultimate destruction of the Christmas holiday.

Finally, the last trope is the monsters craving love, explored by Mary Shelley (Garasic 9). In the case of the film, we can see this in Jack and Dr Finkelstein. Jack explains this feeling when he sings, "Oh, somewhere deep inside of these bones, an emptiness began to grow. There's something out there far from my home, a longing that I've never known" (*Tim Burton's The Nightmare Before Christmas* 7:47–8:13) and "The fame and praise come year after year; does nothing for these empty tears" (*Tim Burton's The Nightmare Before Christmas* 9:26–9:42). He does not understand this feeling, and so when he encounters the cheer and joy suffusing the Christmas Town, he cries: "I've never felt so good before! This empty place inside of me is filling up; I simply cannot get enough! I want it! Oh, I want it! Oh, I want it for my own!" (*Tim Burton's The Nightmare Before Christmas* 16:50–16:58). After his unsuccessful attempt to organise Christmas holiday for humans, he feels revitalised. He also realises that his friend Sally has been trying to be there for him from the start. She has cared for him, bringing him sustenance while he has been endeavouring to understand Christmas, and she has tried to reason with him.

In the end, he sees that the feeling he had been chasing, can be found much closer home with her. He sings to her, "Ah, my dearest friend, if you don't mind, I'd like to join you by your side. Where we can gaze into the stars, and sit together, now and forever, for it is plain as anyone can see we're simply meant to be" (*Tim Burton's The Nightmare Before Christmas* 1:10:54–1:11:31). As for Dr Finkelstein, whose character I discuss more in the next section, he represents not only the motif of a monster searching for love but also the

Gothic "concept of a man-made woman" (Aldana Reyes 11). Similarly to Jack, the Doctor craves to have someone who would understand him and love him – and for that reason, he has created Sally. However, throughout the film, he learns that Sally's wishes are dissimilar to his own. Therefore, Finkelstein decides to build himself someone who will strongly resemble him – not only in appearance but also in his way of thinking. Thus, when he does create a new woman for himself, he gives her half of his brain so she can match his intellect and genius.

Characters

Characters present in *The Nightmare Before Christmas* possess certain features shared among heroes of Gothic stories. There is tradition of inward tension, struggle of the hero (Hogle 8), of the oppressed heroine (Hogle 9–10), of the characters having a God-like aspirations in bringing the dead back (Rata 113). It is also worth mentioning that the attempt made in the 1950s and 1960s "to revive a Gothic form of horror" in the movies resulted in "further solidifying … the association of Gothic horror with monsters" (Aldana Reyes 9). In this movie, all of the main characters are monsters and some of them can be associated with the aforementioned traditions. I begin with the presentation of the main hero, Jack Skellington, then proceed to Dr Finkelstein and Sally, and finally to the monsters of the film, including the ultimate villain, the Boogie Man.

Jack Skellington has the body of a monstrous skeleton. It is peculiarly elongated, and his head resembles a ball from a baseball, with hollows for eyes and mouth with stitches. He is the tallest inhabitant of the Halloween Town, towering over all others. He lives solitarily in his tower on a hill, from which he can look down at the Halloween Town. His title among the inhabitants of the Town is the Pumpkin King, as he is the most successful of them when it comes to being scary. Though the Town has a Mayor elected by the inhabitants who should bear the responsibility of organising Halloween night, the factual burden lies with Jack. The inhabitants expect him to cause the most fear each year, and then the whole Town heaps praises

on him. The title of the King and the awe that surrounds him, make him feel superior: "there are few who'd deny, at what I do, I am the best for my talents are renowned far and wide. When it comes to surprises in the moonlight night – I excel without ever even trying" (*Tim Burton's The Nightmare Before Christmas* 6:48–7:04). At the same time, he experiences weariness with the routine of repeating Halloween every year. Skellington feels a longing for something that he cannot describe and is sure that nobody could understand him: "But who here would ever understand that the Pumpkin King with his skeleton grin would tire of his crown? If they only understood he'd give it all up if he only could" (*Tim Burton's The Nightmare Before Christmas* 8:51–9:11). His hubris and ennui are behind his decision to abduct Santa Claus and take his place when he finds that what he covets is the feeling of love, cheer, and joy. Jack's attempts to usurp the place of Santa Claus also come from the fact that he feels trapped in the routine of Halloween; he wishes to experience something new, and to that end, he is ready to fight against his nature. Though his actions are questionable, he tries to redeem himself in the end and is able to recapture his identity, learn to accept his nature, and find love.

Doctor Finkelstein's name immediately brings to mind Mary Shelley's Victor Frankenstein. Similarly to him, he is also a genius with God-like aspirations. Finkelstein is some rat-humanoid hybrid who can experiment on his brain. He is squat, with an elongated muzzle like a rat or a duck, and has square teeth and eyes hidden behind tiny black goggles. His head can be open to expose the brain, and sometimes, when thinking, the Doctor opens it to scratch at his cerebral cortex. However, because of his monstrous body, he needs help with a lot of menial tasks and uses a wheelchair to move around. As Frankenstein needs to have his creature, Dr Finkelstein creates his own forms of life: one of them is Sally. Finkelstein views her as his daughter and a servant. He rarely, if ever, permits her to leave the tower on the hill where they live, and the girl is supposed to do his bidding. In the first scenes of the movie, we see him after he wakes up from Sally's poisoned soup and finds the girl in the town. He tries to take her back to his tower on a hill, arguing that she is not yet ready for such excitement and is not allowed to leave the tower. Sally unwinds the stitches from the arm he is pulling her

by to escape from him. Nevertheless, later on, she comes back to his tower to retrieve her arm. The Doctor leads her through the gloomy interior of the tower up to his laboratory, made from metal, with a plethora of disturbing items: there is a hand in a beaker, a dead mouse lies on his notes, an eye in the pincers, and a table with bonds. On that table, he ties Sally down to repair her arm while berating her for slipping him a nightshade and escaping. Doctor screams at her, "You're mine! You know?! I made you with my own hands!" (*Tim Burton's The Nightmare Before Christmas* 10:48–10:54). He resembles the figure of a Gothic villain who is a tyrannical guardian: he has patriarchal power over the heroine, threatens her, and imprisons her in his tower for her disobedience (Murphey 6–7); he is affluent (Murphey 13), and he does not have a positive female influence of a wife, which results in his "tyrannical behavior" towards the girl he is "meant to protect" (Murphey 19).

Sally is being confined by her creator, similar to other Gothic heroines (for instance, Sibella Valmont from Eliza Fenwick's novel *Secresy; or the Ruin on the Rock*, who was confined by her uncle to ensure her submission to his will). Her body has been stitched together from different body parts available to the Doctor and stuffed with fallen leaves. As long as she has all the limbs close to her and one arm and hand attached to the main body, she knows how to stitch herself together. Sally also behaves like one of those "Gothic heroines who seek both to appease and to free themselves from the excesses of male and patriarchal dominance" (Hogle 5). On the one hand, she escapes from the tower every time she can, but on the other, cares for the Doctor in her own way – for example, after once again poisoning his soup to make him fall asleep, Sally covers him with a blanket before leaving the tower. However, Sally is not only wilful (as proved by her acts of poisoning), but also proactive, though rarely successful in her actions: she jumps from the tower and stitches herself back to bring her love interest a meal; she warns Jack about her vision of his Christmas becoming a catastrophe; when the girl is not able to convince Jack, she creates a fog, hoping it will stop him; she braves the Boogie Man's lair, to rescue Santa Claus. She is aware of her sexuality, as shown in the scene in which she can shortly distract Oogie

Boogie with her shapely leg. Although she needs rescue from the ultimate villain, she does not behave as a usual damsel in distress.

Finally, there are numerous monstrous inhabitants of the Town. Some are easily recognizable: the pale vampires of different statures, living in coffins, dressed in black robes, who can take out their leukopenic eyes and then put them back inside, have elongated chins and sharp teeth, sticking out of their mouths. This brings to mind the 1922 film *Nosferatu: A Symphony of Horror.* There are also standard ghosts, bats, werewolves, and witches, though those last ones have different skin colours ranging from green to gray; some of these witches have more than two eyes, and most have sharp teeth and monstrous noses. However, the movie also includes childhood monsters, for example the one who hides under beds and another who can be found in the shadows under stairs, as well as the murmurs in the wind and someone who is there when you ask, "Who is there?". Among the inhabitants of the Halloween Town, there is also a tree with talking skeletons hanging from its branches, a clown with a tear-away face and other terrifying clowns, the shadow of the moon at night, zombies, grim reapers, mummies, slime oozing monsters, aquatic creatures, and other hard to identify monsters. Outside of the Town proper lives the ultimate villain: Oogie Boogie. This creature finds pleasure in inflicting pain and suffering on others; he lives underneath the three tricksters' tree house, and his lair resembles the demented casino. The space is filled with skeletons of the Boogie Man's victims and the torture devices he has inflicted on them. Oogie Boogie seems scared of Jack, and when the time for the confrontation between them comes, the Boogie Man happily uses all the available devices to vanquish the Pumpkin King while avoiding a direct fight. He is not a Gothic villain, as he is the ultimate evil with no light inside him, nothing to make him seem a conflicted and complicated character in whom the evil predilections win over his good traits.

Imagery

The imagery of the film adds to the menacing atmosphere of the movie. It also shares some distinct features with the portrayals of a Gothic setting. As Xavier Aldana Reyes notes, "Thanks mainly to horror cinema, which has consistently and circuitously visualised myths and motifs from Gothic novels and short stories, the Gothic has become an eminently aesthetic experience;" listing the symbols that became almost allegorical to the pop-cultural vision of Gothic: "spooky ruins, cemeteries at night, large dark castles on dramatic promontories, or secret laboratories overflowing with bubbling flasks and beakers, and images such as ravens, skulls, the full moon, or broken dolls and mannequins" (8). Though the Halloween Town substitutes castles for towers, ravens for bats, and dismisses the spooky ruins, it preserves the atmosphere. First of all, the world of the Halloween Town exudes oppression – one of the most prominent components of the Gothic atmosphere. The oppression of time, as the purpose of the Halloween Town is to prepare festivities for the 31st of October each year, and the citizens spend the entire time between the two dates organising everything for that one night of the year, and then, they start anew.

Secondly, there is the constraining space: the space of the Halloween Town proper is strictly outlined, and it contains most of the Halloween world – outside the centre, we see one cemetery, Jack's tower, Doctor's tower, and tricksters' house. When it comes to buildings, the ones in the town are usually menacing: dark and tall; or dark, round and squat, with narrow windows, often with bars in them – they seem to loom over the narrow dark streets. Surprisingly, one resembles a demented Pac-Man. The only open space is the main square of the town. As for Jack's home – it is a mansion with a tower. It sits on a platform above a precipice, and the stone stairs lead to its dark doors. The doorbell is a spider that screams when pulled, and the doorknob is in the form of an eye. Jack spends most of his time at the top of the tower, where he has a panoramic view over the Town and the cemetery. The room is circular, not spacious, and centred around the spiral staircase. The shelves full of books decorate one side of the room, while the other side

has large windows. A fireplace separates the sides of the room. However, Jack is not the only one living in an unnerving house. Sally and Dr Finkelstein live on another hill. Their house is a stone tower whose interior is usually dark and full of shadows. When Doctor rides around it in his wheelchair, he frequently has a lamp with him, which casts menacing shadows on the stone walls. On the highest level of the tower, there is a laboratory that resembles a torture chamber, full of parts of bodies, scary devices, and even a table with straps. In addition, Sally's room brings to mind a cell: an old prison bunk with a ratty blanket, a thick metal door with a bar to close it from outside, a window with bars, and a small table. Of course, we later learn that the window can be opened; however, her room is far from welcoming.

The town hall's inside resembles the abandoned church, with pews along the main aisle, and the lectern on the dais is in the shape of a coffin. The candlesticks on the walls are sculpted to look like snakes. The building is dark and massive, with a colonnade in front of the narrow, coffin-like doors. The house of the trickster trio and Oogie Boogie brings to mind a tree house. A pipeline entwines around the outside of it, leading underneath the tree to the Boogie Man's lair as the insides of the tree house are dark and dusty. A large number of bugs live there, and the trio catches them, tortures them, and pushes them down the pipe to the Monster's lair. The tricksters sometimes send him other victims, as we can see the humanoid skeletons scattered in the receiving chamber of his domain. Some skeletons are part of the defensive machines that serve to amuse Oogie Boogie, while others are still in the torture devices he used on them before their deaths. The only escape leads through an inaccessible small window high on one of the walls with bars inside it.

Conclusion

Xavier Aldana Reyes observes that "it is possible to suggest that, where horror has continued to exploit monsters for their scary qualities as sources of direct threat, the Gothic has followed the steps of Frankenstein and produced more nuanced engagements with monstrosity" (13). In *The*

Nightmare Before Christmas, we see both approaches to monstrosity. On the one hand, there is the horror approach: the Boogie Man is the evil incarnate, and his character is there to horrify not only in its appearance but also in behaviour; on the other hand, though there are moments in which Jack is scary, he is also a more developed character, whose struggles, ambitions, and motivations we can see and understand. Jack Skellington is not a monster just for the sake of being a monster: we can see that it is part of his nature, but what defines him are his actions – both heinous and good in different circumstances. The setting of the film demands the presence of monsters, but as they state in the opening song: "Life's no fun without a good scare! That's our job but we're not mean in our Town of Halloween!" (*Tim Burton's The Nightmare Before Christmas* 3:22–3:31).

The Gothic traces in the movie concentrate on allusions and references to the well-known tropes and recognisable imagery. Doctor Finkelstein references Victor Frankenstein: simultaneously a genius and a monster. However, Finkelstein shares the need for companionship with Victor Frankenstein's creature, as he himself, is a monstrous being. In the end, Finkelstein decides to share his brain with a female who could become his true other half. The vampires from the Halloween Town bring to mind the first movie vampires; the monsters are gruesome, but their monstrosity is part of their nature – their maliciousness is natural and not villainous. Except for the true evil: Oogie Boogie. The film's imagery references the images of both the Gothic ingrained within the pop-cultural consciousness as well as traditional tropes from Gothic novels. This blending brings the film even more to the sphere of this aesthetics as this aspect of hybridisation accompanies the Gothic since the beginning of the genre (Aldana Reyes 2).

Because of Tim Burton's childhood fascination with Gothic works and horror (Burton 2–3, 19), the film derives inspiration from both genres. As its primary audience is supposed to be underage, the main protagonist cannot be the true evil monster of the film. According to Megan Estelle Troutman, "Jack's monstrosity stems from a celebratory misunderstanding" and she further explains that "The lyrics [of the song "Poor Jack"] convey why Jack, though unintentionally monstrous in Christmastown, does not function as

the actual monster of the film" as "[t]he true monster must intentionally enact a threat against one or more characters in the film, like the film's intentional monster: Oogie Boogie" whose "intentions seem wrought in evil desire" (144–145). Because the intended audience would not be able to easily work through the psychological horror of the main protagonist's descent into evil characteristic for the Gothic works, the addition of the Boogie Man is necessary as it "helps delineate the line between good and evil and allows Jack to remain wholly good, despite his questionable actions" (Troutman 146). This means that the dread evoked in the Gothic novels is toned down and made palatable to the intended audience. Through connecting various conventions and traditions, Tim Burton and Henry Sellick have created a horror film for young audience with Gothic elements that children enjoy and which they can understand and accept. This, in turn, fulfils one of the features of Gothic, pinpointed by Jerrold E. Hogle – it allows them to distance themselves from what it shows about their own nature and to claim it is only entertainment (18).

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Castle on the Wheels, Haunted Family, and Monsters:
Supernatural as the Gothic Tale

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Abstract: When thinking about the Gothic, what comes to mind are well-known works like Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* (1764), Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818) and Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897). Over time, however, the Gothic has evolved and extended beyond literature, manifesting in various media, including film, television, and music. In this paper, I argue that the modern TV series *Supernatural*, created by Eric Kripke and first broadcast in 2005, exemplifies the continued influence of Gothic elements in contemporary media. The production interweaves diverse genres, encompassing Gothic, horror, fantasy, comedy, and drama. The pervasive atmosphere of suspense, terror, and dread, evoked through a menagerie of monsters, ghosts, demons, and vampires, along with a series of familial tragedies and paranormal phenomena, defines main characters' unendingly ominous road trip. The protagonists are engaged in a constant battle against evil forces, simultaneously hunting and being haunted. By analysing various themes in the series, I prove that no matter the time and media, Gothic prevails and can be found even in such a modern TV show as *Supernatural*. The study particularly emphasizes the fact that the Gothic cinema cannot be precisely defined, yet it questions and dwells on numerous issues, both social and moral.

Keywords: family, Gothic, haunting, religion, *Supernatural*

The TV series *Supernatural* is notable for its integration and cross-referencing of multiple genres, thus hindering the possibility to place it within one category. The show, created by a number of different directors, was in production for over 15 years. It cannot be denied that the collective contribution of these people resulted in a hybrid work encompassing elements of Gothic, horror, fantasy, comedy, adventure, and drama. This can be seen as a characteristic of the Gothic cinema which, according to *Dracula and the Gothic in Literature, Pop Culture and the Arts*, is described as spanning though a variety of genres (Ermida 1). The pervasive atmosphere of suspense, terror, and dread evoked through a menagerie of monsters, ghosts, demons, and vampires, along with a series of familial tragedies and paranormal phenomena, defines Winchesters' unendingly ominous road trip. The protagonists are engaged in a constant struggle against malevolent forces, simultaneously continuing the pursuit and being haunted by the very entities they seek to vanquish. The series has been a prominent presence in popular culture for over a decade, consistently attracting viewership on television and influencing the lives of its audience. Furthermore, the production has left a significant legacy, with dedicated and loyal fans all over the world, who with great interest and anticipation, have followed the supernatural story of the Winchester family, as the number of its members has both grown and diminished over time (Abbot and Brown 6–7).

This article aims to posit an interpretation that *Supernatural* pays tribute to the Gothic tradition, while simultaneously incorporating its characteristic elements. While some may not perceive the Gothic elements as overtly visible, they nevertheless constitute a significant aspect of the series. It needs to be stressed that one of the most important themes in the series was an ongoing threat of an apocalypse and impending doom that might be alluding to the Gothic film. In the 20th century such a scenario was a result of risks and anxiety caused by the nuclear age and the uncertainty about the end of a certain epoch (Hughes, 81–82). *Supernatural*, however, may have reflected some concerns of American society soon after the 9/11 and the war with terrorism, a never ending battle between good and evil (Gonçalves, 4–5). What is more, the narrative is presented as a journey and draws upon the

conventions of an American road movie. In the first seasons, each episode features the brothers facing a different monster, which recalls the *X-Files'* monster-of-the-week component and its peculiar mythology prevalent in all episodes. *Supernatural*, similarly to the classic series, has the aesthetic of a TV horror, to which the characters often make references, thereby acknowledging the legacy of the *X-Files* (Abbott 8–9). Melissa Edmundson in her introduction to *The Gothic Tradition in Supernatural: Essays on the Television Series* writes that "From the beginning, Kripke wanted the series to emphasize the brothers' quest and the genuine fear that exists in a seemingly quiet suburban setting" (1–2). In the process of creating *Supernatural*, the director Eric Kripke placed a particular emphasis on the urban myths and legends that reflect a range of fears prevalent within society. Some of these tales may have been employed as cautionary narratives, while others may have been conveyed in the style of traditional storytelling. In the context of *Supernatural*, however, they become integrated into a more complex and intricate plot. The series demonstrates that paranormal phenomena can manifest in seemingly mundane settings, challenging the assumption that such occurrences are confined to isolated or unconventional locations. It illustrates that the potential for terror and dread exists even in the most ordinary and familiar environments, infiltrating the everyday lives of ordinary citizens. This is precisely the message that Eric Kripke sought to convey in his production by removing the supernatural elements from their traditional settings and placing them within the context of ordinary homes, including those of the series' viewers (Edmundson 1–2).

The narrative of the Winchesters begins in an ordinary and familiar domestic setting, comprising a nuclear family. Nonetheless, this idyllic situation is short-lived, as the boys' mother is killed by a demon shortly after the birth of Sam, the younger brother. At that moment in their lives, the boys are unable to comprehend the meaning of this event and the nature of the mysterious force that has murdered one of their parents. Their secure and familiar home is invaded by supernatural forces, and their bedroom becomes a site of horrifying events, stripping them of their refuge and safe haven for the remainder of their lives. The domestic imagery is disrupted by an

external force, and the young boys are unable to effectively combat it. It is evident, however, that the circumstances will evolve over time. The initial experiences of the Winchester brothers have a profound and enduring impact on their lives, effectively eliminating the possibility of a tranquil childhood and a secure and enduring familial home. Furthermore, it suggests that the Winchester family is haunted, a notion that is substantiated in subsequent seasons, wherein both brothers confront not only their traumatic past, but also their own internal struggles revolving around the supernatural.

Numerous Gothic stories take place in a haunted castle, however, in *Supernatural*, the location of the haunted castle, situated in a remote and isolated setting, is transformed into an iconic car. In *Key Concepts in the Gothic*, William Hughs explains the concept of a haunted space, particularly underlining the change from the castle to the house:

> Though First-Wave Gothic possibly favoured the haunted castle or abbey over the domestic Gothic space, the haunted house became more common as writers in both Gothic and the ghost story progressively came to favour works set in a recognisably contemporary period and in geographically familiar space. (88)

Adopting this line of reasoning, the concept can be applied to Dean's car, which can be regarded as the brothers' safe haven, albeit one that is occasionally haunted by supernatural forces. Analogous to the haunted house, the car, which is regarded by the Winchesters as a domestic space, almost equal to their home, becomes a site of supernatural occurrences. Impala, Dean's cherished vehicle, is regarded by the brothers as a sanctuary, a fortified refuge that enables them to safeguard themselves and repel malevolent forces. For Dean and Sam it is their link to the family, their father and the past which continues haunting them. The vehicle serves as both their arsenal and, on occasion, their bedroom, whereas the boot is where they store all their belongings, with a particular emphasis on holy water, salt, stakes and fake IDs. When viewed through the lens of Gothic tradition, Impala can

be seen as a metaphor for both a fortified refuge, Winchesters' own "castle on the wheels" and a place of haunting. This is the setting for much of the series' action, for all the important discussions between the brothers, as well as the planning of future hunting and recollections of their past experiences happen inside the iconic black car. Even though it allows the brothers to feel emotionally vulnerable and reminds them of home, it can never be considered entirely safe. On more than one occasion, the car has been possessed by ghosts or played an important part in various supernatural events, endangering passengers' lives.

Yet, it does not change the fact that Winchesters never stop driving the car. Given that the majority of their time is spent travelling, they lack a fixed and permanent place of refuge. The constant movement and lack of any certain place of residence, characteristic of the Winchesters, suggest freedom to assume any identity in any location. This freedom is carefully exercised each time they assume a new identity and embark on a new case, enabling them to remain anonymous, while simultaneously indicating a form of detachment from the past and their personal problems. Such distance allows them to function outside the law and society, becoming increasingly akin to the creatures they hunt, and thus inevitably discarding any semblance of a regular life. Moreover, every time the brothers begin a new adventure, they always say, "It is time to hit the road."

The episodes always starting and ending with Sam and Dean driving Impala and travelling to another location might be regarded as evidence that the television series also exhibits certain characteristics of a road movie. It should be noted that the brothers have an option of visiting Bobby, a friend who acts as their foster father and treats them as his own children. The old hunter's house can also be perceived as a kind of a castle or a fort, where the brothers fight against the forces of evil and protect themselves from unearthly powers. Nevertheless, it remains a substitute for a genuine home, as the brothers never possess any substantial personal belongings apart from Impala.

The course of the events reveals that, for the Winchesters, the concept of family encompasses not only those related by blood but also those

encountered during their lengthy and arduous journey. These individuals, in addition to providing support and assistance, also engage in conflict with and on behalf of the Winchesters. Subsequently, their circumstances undergo a slight alteration, as they obtain a bunker that was previously owned by the Men of Letters, a secret organization that brings together scholars on the supernatural. Starting from season 8, the bunker is transformed into their new refuge and stronghold. It becomes a place where they can finally feel secure, welcoming friends and living together, at the same time resisting against any supernatural beings. Nonetheless, the bunker never replaces their iconic car.

The monsters depicted in the *Supernatural* series diverge from their conventional Gothic portrayal. In the series, Sam and Dean encounter creatures that appear in the 18th and 19th-century Gothic fiction; however, these creatures are not merely representations of the monstrous; they are depicted as being much more similar to humans. In season 4, episode 5, titled "Monster Movie," both brothers travel to Pennsylvania to investigate a vampire murder, which later turns out to be committed by the famous Dracula himself. The television series features an extensive array of monsters that encompass a multitude of fantastical beings, beginning with the ones present in various urban legends, Slenderman, tormented souls and ghosts who still have some unfinished business on earth, and ending with mythical creatures, demons and angels. The narrative does not only depict the representation of centuries-old, terrifying entities, such as werewolves and vampires, but also delves into the portrayal of humans who can be as frightening as supernatural beings, and whose actions and demeanour suggest a monstrosity within themselves. The abundance of such uncanny and horrifying figures is a direct result of the intricate nuances of human nature, with some being the product of human imagination, and subsequently being integrated into the reality they inhabit. The TV series shows monsters in their traditional understanding and those that emerged thanks to the access to the internet and spread of information, leaking into technology and haunting people accessing it. During most of the series hunters have to fight with vampires, creatures known from some of the first

Gothic stories, like Bram Stoker's *Dracula*. The brothers, however, in season 10, episode 13 "Halt & Catch Fire," come across a ghost which kills people through electronic devices such as a radio, laptop or a phone, often including the use of various social media platforms. The perils and creatures that hunters encounter in the *Supernatural* series are frequently concealed in plain sight, residing among neighbours and, on occasion, manifesting as a plague or a killing fog. It is impossible to anticipate the nature of the threat that lurks in the darkness or the manner in which it might emerge in a seemingly secure environment. This demonstrates that conventional limitations are becoming blurred and the monstrosity that previously encapsulated all that was known can now assume a multitude of forms and meanings (Halberstam 27). As Judith Halberstam states in *Skin Shows: Gothic Horror and the Technology of Monsters*, the Gothic story is designed to elicit feelings of fear and desire in the audience, and this is a key aspect *Supernatural* attempts to achieve through its regular broadcast to viewers in their homes (Halberstam 2; Edmundson 1–2).

It is evident that the landscape surrounding the characters plays a significant role in eliciting a sense of anxiety and fear. The Midwestern setting serves an ideal backdrop for the exploration of haunting and familial tragedy, recurring themes in the *Supernatural*. This region is characterised by rural landscapes, isolated farmhouses and post-industrial towns, collectively contributing to an ambience of mystery and seclusion. The protagonists, Sam and Dean, dedicate the majority of their time to travelling from one town to another, investigating American suburbs that are shrouded in mystery and suspense. What helps them locate the presence of paranormal phenomena and activities of evil forces is the occurrence of anomalous meteorological events, which serve as a marker for unusual happenings. These usually take place in the suburbs which are seemingly calm and peaceful, but in reality, conceal darker and sinister creatures. Despite suburban areas being a common scene for the incidents mentioned, the Winchesters are often found in locations considered marginal or ominous, including gloomy bars, neglected motels in secluded areas, and burial grounds. Nonetheless, even though the brothers are usually regarded as marginal characters lacking a

sense of belonging, even within the aforementioned spaces, they are not well accepted.

According to Hughes's *Key Concepts in Gothic*, "American Gothic characteristically balances its mythologies between the wilderness and the city" (20). This idea is vividly illustrated in *Supernatural*, where monsters from local legends emerge in unexpected locations, posing a threat to communities located not only in areas that are typically considered safe and tranquil, but also in densely populated places. The eerie atmosphere in the TV series is further enhanced by the fog and almost ever-present darkness, coupled with the fact that a significant part of the action is set at night. This specific ambience evokes a sense of pervasive danger and an enduring absence of peace. Seemingly ordinary neighbourhoods and houses surrounded by trimmed lawns might be an unexpected hiding place for the most terrifying monsters. In *Supernatural,* violence can erupt from anywhere, even from usual and familiar spaces, never allowing the characters to feel certain. The eventual arrival of harmony and tranquillity is often a result of some significant personal sacrifices and the characters suffering considerable losses. One might note that the Winchesters' compulsive need to hunt and kill, coupled with an apparent inability to ever take a break, suggests some deeper issues and wounds shaped by the external forces. They are always ready to give up everything just to indulge in what they do best, confronting fear and terror.

Even though one could say that *Supernatural* presents a stereotypical and old-fashioned masculinity, where men prioritize strength and violence over intellectualism and reason, in the show masculinity is often questioned and reconstructed (Ronnenberg 134). By showing various clichés and stereotypical masculinity, the Gothic television series explores ideas about society and gender, bringing into question the structures and relations heavily reinforced in the society. The Winchesters are shown as masculine heroes who win all the fistfights, drink lots of alcohol and are able to get any girl they want, most often saving them first from deadly perils (Wright 104). In the story they pose as the handsome saviours, muscular and self-confident, who cannot show any signs of attachment or feelings. The show

not only addresses the struggles of the working class and the margins they are forced into, but also examines and rejects toxic masculinity. Throughout the series, the brothers, Dean in particular, learn to become emotionally vulnerable and open about their weaknesses. Most male characters in *Supernatural* are presented as cultural and often stereotypical constructs. Julia Wright in *Men with Stakes: Masculinity and the Gothic in US Television* mentions that the cultural norms and patriarchal values are represented by cliché figures such as "the strong father, the rebellious son, the self-sacrificing hero, the self-indulgent villain" (2–7). Dean's character presents a parody of conventional masculinity since most of his actions and behaviour are overdramatised. It is clear that his machismo and boldness serve as cover for his true feelings and vulnerability he does not want to show to others, his younger brother in particular.

The Winchester brothers are distinguished by their relentless pursuit of change and their willingness to forsake the comforts of familiarity and security. In doing so, they expose themselves to the perils of the external environment and struggle with the shadows that lie within, and beyond the self. This aligns with the convention of American Gothic, which can be situated in liminal spaces and areas of transition, often presenting utmost polarities of good and evil, identity and the self. Beyond the exploration of various extremes, religious profanities, and occultism, the genre focuses on the fears surrounding the trauma and guilt associated with slavery and race, social anxieties concerning class and gender, and Protestantism (Lloyd-Smith 3–9). As Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock observes in an interview on the subject, many authors writing in this genre in the 18th and 19th-centuries also embrace the theme of embarking on adventures and confronting the unknown in their works (Marini and Weinstock 5–6). In the episode "Yellow Fever," Dean says that "Normal people, they see a monster and they run, not us. No, no, no we search out things that want to kill us, yeah, huh, or eat us. You know who does that? Crazy people. We are insane" (Abbott 7). He makes it evident that the Winchesters do not acquiesce to the reality they inhabit, nor do they ignore the misfortunes and inexplicable occurrences that take place in their homeland. Despite being conscious of the perils inherent

to their endeavours, they persist in taking the risk, fighting, and assisting those in need. They are unconventional heroes, strongly alienated from the reality and norms shown on the television, far from financial stability and peaceful life (Ronnenberg 141).

The brothers may be regarded as Gothic protagonists, exhibiting traits that could be perceived as both villainous and heroic. In *Supernatural*, the individuals are not entirely black or white, often existing somewhere between the conventional notions of good and evil. Even the main characters, who are typically seen as heroes, can be perceived as having flaws. Their actions, such as saving innocent lives, usually result in unintended consequences. Despite their good intentions, they frequently prioritize themselves over others, causing irreparable damage to the world around them. It is challenging to categorize them as either good or bad, given that their intentions and actions are morally upright and virtuous; nevertheless, they tend to lose sight of these principles when it comes to their familial and fraternal relationships.

What needs to be mentioned is the fact that the Winchester brothers are not affiliated with any particular social class and they occupy a position on the societal periphery. Such individuals may be perceived as the "white trash" (Burnell 47), which could be explained as the white Other, given that they do not adhere to the norms and standards typically associated with whiteness, and, thus, existing as the outsiders. In the suburban Gothic, the suburbs are depicted as a place where evil lurks beneath the facade of idyllic family life and tranquil communities, deceiving the residents. The genre primarily emerged during the 1950s and 1960s, a time when the concept of the American Dream was closely associated with mobility. Consequently, there was an increase in the number of families who decided to move to suburban areas. Besides that, the suburban Gothic addresses the anxieties that can be found among the perfect suburban communities (Miquel-Baldellou 200–201). It is evident that the two brothers do not align with the characteristics associated with the suburban milieu; instead, they embody an external force. This is further accentuated by the fact that their familial background, or the absence thereof, deviates from the conventional,

idealised conception of family. Yet, they are still prepared to assume the role of heroes. Nevertheless, their actions and typical activities related to hunting portray them as monstrous in the eyes of the ordinary people they attempt to rescue. Regardless of the nobility of the cause, the actions of burning bodies, hunting and killing will always be perceived as cruel and savage (Burnell 61–64). The Winchesters lack an academic background, proper upbringing, and loving parents who would support their children's achievements. Moreover, they are engaged in rescuing the world from its periphery, and their lives are far removed from the conventional image of the "white picket fence" associated with the American Dream (Abbott 13).

The lives of Sam and Dean are characterised by a series of unfortunate events, numerous deaths and encounters with monsters. This has resulted in the brothers often endangering the lives of those around them, compelling them to choose solitude and frequently abandon the people they care about in order to avoid placing them in harm's way. From the outset, Winchester's destiny appears to be irreversibly intertwined with the actions of their ancestors, who also engaged in hunting. In particular, Sam's designation as a vessel for Lucifer and Dean's predestined demise, marked by a life characterised by violence and darkness, serve to illustrate the pervasive influence of evil that continues to challenge and tempt their family. From the outset, both brothers were predestined to become vessels of Archangel Lucifer and Michael in heaven's holy war. In addition, the Winchester family has been greatly involved in the struggle against evil and has led the life of hunters, thereby shaping the lives of the siblings from their earliest age. Regardless of their dreams, they invariably return to hunting and sacrifice their pursuit of comfort and stability. One might say that they lead a life similar to the Gothic hero, who according to Hughes,

> is a consistent recipient of damnation, variously being delivered to the demons of Hell on his final demise; spending his life seeking to exchange his doom with some other desperate individual; or else being outcast from the society of humankind as the consequence of some perceived wrongdoing. (53)

The brothers, however, long for a life of domesticity and peacefulness, yet this aspiration remains unfulfilled until the conclusion of the series, which is only revealed in the final season. This is reflected in Sam's final scenes in "Carry On," the last episode, when he is finally able to leave the nomadic life fraught with danger behind. The viewers can see Sam's life after his brother's death, the way he gets married and starts a family, keeping the memory of Dean alive by giving his son exactly the same name. Nonetheless, not all characters are afforded the opportunity to experience a positive resolution. Ultimately, Dean suffers a meaningless demise, failing to achieve the conventional happy ending. Furthermore, throughout their journey, the brothers experience the loss of numerous friends and family members, and they never cease to remember the deaths they have witnessed.

The character of Sam carries a significant burden, as he is compelled to grapple with a demon blood addiction. This addiction is the result of being fed demon blood at a very early age, as a consequence of his mother's deal with the same demon many years prior. Additionally, he is responsible for releasing Lucifer from his confines, but ultimately makes the selfless decision to sacrifice himself, thereby liberating the world from the influence of the devil. Likewise, Dean strives to suppress his natural attraction toward violence, finding it even harder due to the acceptance of the mark of Cain that heightens his thirst for aggressive behaviour. Nevertheless, it would be a mistake to assume that Sam and Dean are the only characters in *Supernatural* who might be perceived as ambiguous and wavering between good and evil. The narrative features a complex web of interactions between various supernatural entities, including angels, demons, hunters, and monsters. Some of these entities are aligned with the human race, while others are its adversaries. It can be observed that there is no character in the narrative who is completely defined, since even God is presented in a way that contradicts the traditional vision of a benevolent deity.

Religion, even though not always treated with the utmost seriousness, plays an important role in *Supernatural*. It provides a backdrop for the narrative and introduces elements that are significant for the plot and development of the events. Throughout the series, the Winchesters learn

about heaven and hell, an apocalypse they must stop, angels and demons they must defeat, and, last but not least, God, who happens to be indifferent to humanity. One might draw upon the American Gothic to examine the Puritan roots of America and the image of God that Puritanism introduced. In the *Supernatural* universe, the concept of God is represented by a human-like being, yet this deity displays characteristics that are in stark contrast to those of mortal humans. Despite appearing as an ordinary individual, he exhibits the harsh and malevolent nature, commonly associated with the Puritan God. With each episode, it becomes evident that Chuck, the persona assumed by the deity, makes decisions and instigates events for reasons that are not only mysterious but also seemingly arbitrary (Marini and Weinstock 5–6). The creators of the television series portray both heaven and hell as despotic and tyrannical powers. The true intentions of God remain obscure, rendering his plans for humanity and the world equally enigmatic. What is more, the concepts of heaven and hell are depicted as having become corrupted and governed by power and deception. This is evidenced by their focus on the wellbeing of their own inhabitants, rather than on the general well-being of the oblivious humanity. This fosters a further lack of trust in God. Rather than instilling fear in the main characters, the situation concerning divine and hellish issues exacerbates Sam and Dean's distress and anger. Due to God's capricious plan, they have become entangled in matters that are unknown to the general public and have been deprived of the opportunity to live a life of normalcy. Furthermore, it has resulted in significant sacrifices and losses that have permanently altered their existence.

The creators of the series constantly question what it means to be human and when the line between humanity and monstrosity, between good and evil eventually blurs. At times, it becomes difficult to differentiate between heaven and hell as demons yearn for love and affection, while angels aim for destroying the world. Not only do supernatural beings change and evolve, but the same thing happens to humans. The boundary between the human and monster as well as between the hunter and hunted constantly changes. Moreover, one can notice similar changes in the situation of the

Winchester brothers, who each season undergoes different trials, sometimes consorting with demons, sometimes going to hell, even becoming demons themselves (Edmundson 8–9).

Even though *Supernatural* is not purely a Gothic production, it does incorporate some significant Gothic elements and can be treated as a variation on the convention. One might not find here haunted castles and damsels in distress, yet it cannot be denied that the series presents an alternative approach to Gothic traditions. The creators pay homage to the classic productions, inviting the audience to get lost in haunted mansions, escape from Dracula, and help confused ghosts and mysterious spectres find peace and their own place in the world.

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"Plenty of humans were monstrous, and plenty of monsters knew how to play at being human": Contemporising *Frankenstein* in *Villains* by V. E. Schwab

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Abstract: This paper focuses on dissecting *Villains*, a duology written by V. E. Schwab, as a contemporised version of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*. The Gothic-inspired tale of two former friends deals with the consequences of a tragic incident which eternally alters the lives of two ambitious medical students who transform into ExtraOrdinary. The essay compares the characters of *Vicious* and *Vengeful* with those of Frankenstein, focusing on the books' execution of the main theme. In her story, Schwab identifies the fear of internal monstrosity alongside the inability to distinguish those monstrous from non-monstrous as one of the prevalent anxieties of modern times. Contemporised Frankenstein presents a new type of monster, the ExtraOrdinary, enhanced humans who acquire their extraordinary powers in life-threatening situations. By introducing such characters, Schwab disseminates monstrosity. By integrating an evolution-developed mechanism of self-protection which can turn someone into an EO, Vicious counters Shelley's monstrousness, whose terror was subsided by its irrepliability and implausibility of its recreation.

Keywords: *Frankenstein*, gothic, gothic, monstrosity, retelling, vicious, *Villains*

Evil does not die; it reinvents itself. Therefore, it is no surprise that modern writers draw inspiration from the Gothic, a genre deeply connected with reflections on evil and its nature. Classic tales are modernised by subverting tropes or archetypes, reshaping stories to elaborate on or expand the original

messages. In "Introduction: the Gothic in Western Culture," Jerrold E. Hoggle credits the longevity of Gothic to it being a "symbolic mechanism, particularly its haunting and frightening spectres," which "have permitted us to cast many anomalies in our modern conditions, even as these change, over onto antiquated or at least haunted spaces and highly anomalous creatures" (6). The stories leave a lasting impression; the audience tells and *retells* them, and Hoggle refers to such retellings as "recastings" that "help us both deal with newly ascendant cultural and psychological contradictions and still provide us with a recurring method for shaping and obscuring our fears and forbidden desires" (6). *Villains*, a duology, at least for the time of writing this article, consisting of two books, *Vicious*, published in 2013, and its 2018 sequel, *Vengeful*, by V. E. Schwab, belongs to such recastings.

The story of Victor Vale and Elliot Cardale, two university students researching the phenomenon of the Extraordinary, is heavily inspired by Mary Shelley's 1818 *Frankenstein, the modern Prometheus*, a remarkable and genre-defining Gothic novel. *Villains* acknowledges its nature as a retelling by incorporating references to the original and elements from Frankenstein adaptations ingrained in pop culture. The opening scene of *Vicious* transpires in a cemetery, with the first image the readers encounter being a man humming while digging up a grave. This event references one of the most iconic pop-culture associations with Frankenstein, although absent from the book: the concept of the Monster being a revived corpse. The startling contrast between disturbing a place of someone's posthumous peace and idle singing introduces the aura of mystery characteristic of Gothic. The character is revealed to be Victor Vale, named after the original Frankenstein. His surname, Vale, is a homophone of the word "veil," foreshadowing the *unveiling* of something. The books contain more such nods towards the readers. For instance, *Vicious* informs the readers that Victor's remedy for academic stress and dullness is vandalising books. He crosses out parts of paragraphs with a marker, *retelling* them, often completely altering the initial meaning to a more pessimistic message, just like Schwab adjusts *Frankenstein* to her agenda. He is particularly fond of vandalising self-help books written by his parents. It is presented as an act of spite, a rebellion against the

pseudo-positive talk; nonetheless, vandalising a self-help book can also be a form of foreshadowing of the character's moral decay. *Vengeful* continues to sneak easter eggs, especially in the character of Dr Haverty, an acclaimed scientist employed by EON (ExtraOrdinary Observation and Neutralisation) to study *Extraordinary* individuals. His methodology consists of physically torturing his subjects to assess their abilities. In his ferocious passion and dedication to science, he echoes Shelley's Frankenstein, especially the version of him beloved by pop culture: a cruel, mad scientist.

The first part will discuss Victor and Ellie as Frankenstein-esque characters through a comparison between the duo and the original Frankenstein. The second part will concern Schwab's presentation and execution of monstrosity exemplified by the phenomena of *ExtraOrdinary*. For clarity reasons, throughout the essay, I shall refer to Shelley's Victor Frankenstein as Frankenstein. In contrast, Victor Vale and Ellie Cardale will be referred to either by their names or surnames.

To assess whether Victor and Ellie can be classified as Frankenstein-esque characters, I will present how I define this term. Frankenstein-esque characters are astute scientists whose remarkable intelligence allows them to take on the role of a *creator* or *reviver*. Other non-mandatory traits they exhibit are: first, being victimised by academia or the academic environment, and second, being Gothic villains. Despite the key functions they hold for the convention, defining Gothic villains has proven unfeasible. The simplified definition I will use is an individual, predominantly but not exclusively male, born into privilege, which the villains exploit to antagonise those whom they consider inferior, particularly women. Their psychological profiles are products of the interlacing of goodness and evil within them, the source of inner moral conflict tormenting them, which allows them to exceed the token roles of a tyrant or a monster and echo real-life conflicts and "the struggle between their good nature and their evil propensities is what awakens echoes of real nightmare in the reader" (MacAndrew 81). Shelley's *Frankenstein* not only exemplifies the shift into a morally ambiguous hero-villain, but also subverts the audience's expectations by challenging internalised prejudices of the perception of the villainous: Frankenstein, a

human, is monstrous, while the Monster is made monstrous by humans. *Villains* mimics Shelley's techniques in its discussion on the nature and perception of the monstrous. The characters' names elaborate on that conversation, as most sound like pseudonyms of superheroes, something Ellie remarks on upon being introduced to Victor, pointing out the alliteration and wordplay of Victor Vale. In a manner characteristic of a hero or villain origin story, after his transformation into an Extraordinary, Ellie adopts a different name, Ellie Ever, short for Forever, reflecting his desires for commemoration. Despite the hero-like names, *Villains* present a tragic tale about superpowers being degraded into tools of malice. Victor's control over pain levels and Ellie's regeneration are fragmented abilities of the perfect doctor who alleviates suffering and heals. The split debilitates those skills, deforming them: easing the pain does not heal its source, failing to prevent the victim from dying, and healing only works on Ellie, who must endure the pain.

There are parallels and divergences between the lives of Victor, Ellie, and Frankenstein. Born into an affluent, reputed Swiss family of counsellors and syndics, Frankenstein experienced a mirthful boyhood, "a lesson of patience, of charity, and of self-control" (35). His parents' affection for each other was profound and genuine, and with equal intensity, they cherished their offspring. They approached their parental duties with the utmost importance, bearing "deep consciousness of what they owed towards the being to which they had given life" (35). From an early age, Frankenstein differed from his peers, favouring studying over entertainment. His thirst for knowledge was encouraged by his immediate environment and earned him the regard of adults. He found himself drawn to the topic of natural philosophy: the metaphysical, the secrets of heaven and earth, the insights of the human soul, and the essence of the world.

Contrary to Frankenstein's upbringing of "tender caresses and [his] father's smile of benevolent pleasure" (35), Victor and Ellie are products of dysfunctional families. Victor is the only child of a wealthy family of acclaimed self-help book authors who "produced" their son amid their busy schedules. Disengaged from Victor's life, they witnessed rather than

experienced it, and the absence of parental affection decreased Victor's ability to feel sympathy for others, shaping him into a sardonic and emotionally repressed man. Even in the eye of the tragedy, their son's sentence for murder, the Vales capitalise off their misfortune by publishing another book in which they mock their estranged offspring. Pale and lanky Victor with light-blond hair and sharp features does not abide by the aesthetic of the Gothic villain I presented. His darkness is internal rather than external; nevertheless, it is present and crucial for the construction of the character. In his later years, this darkness becomes more pronounced, as his appearance takes on a demon-like quality, with gaunt, lanky features, hollow cheeks, and a sickly complexion. At the beginning, Victor's character is stylised as a typical power-hungry Gothic villain, an alternative version of Frankenstein, young and aggressively ambitious. Still, during his imprisonment, in his 20s and early 30s, he reevaluates his priorities, choosing to focus on vengeance rather than expanding his abilities. He embodies his role of the Gothic villain with reason and purpose. His abilities become his shield, employed only when he is targeted, and never to terrorise those who, similarly to him, wish to survive. Furthermore, Victor seems to have retained some goodness, as evidenced by his decision to aid Sydney Clarke, a wounded girl roaming the streets.

Vicious reveals little regarding Ellie's past, but *Vengeful* dives into his backstory. He was born the only child in a nuclear family terrorised by its patriarch, a fanatically religious pastor. Incapable of bearing the domestic violence, Ellie's mother committed suicide, abandoning her son to her husband's mercy. Young Cardale deluded himself into believing he possesses a profound, intimate relationship with God, whom Ellie considers his protector. Convinced of God's approval of the deed, Ellie pushes his father down the stairs in what he perceives as an execution of divine will. His connection to God became the root of his Frankenstein-like God complex. Where Frankenstein plays God by creating, Ellie destroys, believing himself to be God's assistant in purging the world from evil, the source of which he had located in the existence of ExtraOrdinary. After being orphaned, Ellie migrated between households, failing to find a home due to

the effect his traumatic experiences have on his conduct, alienating him from his foster families and resulting in the debilitation of Ellie's emotional and social development. To amend it, terrified by his otherness, Ellie approached his constant relocations as opportunities to craft his "masking": the practice of mimicking the behaviour of others to learn how to act according to social codes. He successfully fooled people around him, acquainting them with his carefully crafted persona of a charismatic and intelligent guy. His conventionally attractive features, including rich brown hair, broad shoulders, and brown eyes, combined with his tall and lanky figure, enabled him to gain people's trust and conceal his wicked nature. Victor proved to be the only person capable of noticing and deciphering some of Ellie's masking, unravelling the darkness underneath the façade. Ellie's character is encapsulated in Victor's observation:

> He was like one of those pictures full of small errors, the kind you could only pick out by searching the image from every angle, and even then, a few always slipped by. On the surface, Eli seemed perfectly normal, but now and then Victor would catch a crack, a sideways glance, a moment when his roommate's face and his words, his look and his meaning, would not line up. Those fleeting slices fascinated Victor. It was like watching two people, one hiding in the other's skin. And their skin was always too dry, on the verge of cracking and showing the color of the thing beneath (16).

Ellie's appearance was simultaneously an asset and the manifestation of his monstrosity because his regenerative powers halted his ageing. He turned his youthful appearance into a weapon, granting himself better access to his victims, whom he charmed, and getting away with his older crimes because he appeared to be too young to have been able to commit them. He is the subversion of Frankenstein's Monster, aesthetically pleasing yet internally corrupted.

Ellie and Victor's attitudes towards women echo Frankenstein's by appealing to the trope of a Dangerous Lover, frequently appearing in Gothic

stories. Deborah Lutz defines such characters as "the one whose eroticism lies in his dark past, his restless inquietude, his remorseful and rebellious exile from comfortable everyday living" (9). Ellie benefited from exploiting his attractiveness to attract girls' attraction, while Victor dismissed women unless he recognised in them qualities he considered useful for his purposes. The gender dynamic, deeply reminiscent of the gender dynamics in Gothic, is most pronounced in the relationship between Victor, Ellie, and Angie Knight, the catalyst for the animosity between the men. Angie befriended the duo, starting *with Victor*, and entered a romantic relationship with Ellie, becoming the first woman Ellie deemed valuable and, according to him, the first person to have evoked genuine feelings in him. Her name was a combination of two words: Angie, likely a play on "Angel," and Knight, both words associated with goodness and protectiveness. In the name of God, angels fight evil, while knights are to be valiant and loyal to their lords, and their duties include protecting the innocent.

Unlike Elizabeth, Victor's lover, she was a developed character, equipped with remarkable intelligence and a bright personality. Like many Gothic female characters, Angie became the means for the men's success, for which she paid with her life. Despite her extensive knowledge, she was excluded from Ellie and Victor's research, as the men, like Frankenstein, isolated themselves in their studies. Angie was doomed by the brilliance which makes her special. She was exploited to enable Victor to play God, and her skills were twisted into a contributor to her death. Victor, corrupted by his ambitions and mad with envy, weaponised Angie's concern for his well-being – Angie expressed her anxieties that Victor may be struggling with suicidal inclinations or addiction – to coerce her into assisting him. Angie met her end when Victor, freshly transformed and in anguish, unknowingly used his new skills on her. Ironically, without her involvement in the experiment, Victor would not have been able to succeed and, consequently, would not have killed her. Her role in the story is brief, and as soon as she has proven useful, there is no further need for her. Her death bears a resemblance to Elizabeth's passing, as both were victims of male ambitions and both have perished bearing the consequences of said ambitions.

Similar to *Frankenstein*, the academic environment in *Villains* catalysed Victor and Ellie's tragedy because the institution provided research resources and fed the students' ambitions. In the story, academia is a root of moral corruption, filled with enablers, a place that unravels one's true identity in students and academics. Like Frankenstein, Ellie decided to destroy his findings to protect humanity. His efforts were sabotaged by his supervisor, who, blinded by the premise of recognition and financial rewards, attempted to dissuade Ellie from abandoning his project. The physical altercation between the two turned violent and ended in the professor's death. Another aspect of the critique of academia is that, while it allows people to connect with others, especially those who share similar interests, these connections can also be destructive. While Frankenstein researched in seclusion, Victor was essential for Ellie's success. Vale was Cardale's greatest supporter, someone who understood Ellie's drive and was willing to self-sacrifice for the benefit of their project. Envious of his friend's genius, Victor not only persuaded him to commence empirical experiments but also volunteered as the test subject. His controlled overdose determined the need for the presence of pain in transformation, a breakthrough that would not have been possible without Victor's steadfastness, and which allowed the men to become *ExtraOrdinary*. Furthermore, according to the results of Ellie and Victor's research, a deliberate transformation requires at least two participants: someone to subject themselves to the near-death experience and someone to revive them, as opposed to Frankenstein, who experimented alone. In the best-case scenario, that someone would have been a knowledgeable person whom Ellie could trust, and, as the book implies, Victor was the only one who could have fulfilled this role. Let us now compare Schwab's and Shelley's presentation and execution of monstrosity, focusing on what the books define as monstrous and examine the parallels and differences in the books' approaches to the topic.

The monsters in *Villains* are ExtraOrdinary or EOs; humans with special abilities, the products of a mysterious evolutionary mechanism to prevent death in emergencies. An ExtraOrdinary emerges in a near-death experience, when a person is clinically dead, in agony, and possesses a

ferocious will to survive. Especially the first condition is what makes EOs the equivalents of Frankenstein's Monster, albeit the pop-culture version, in which the Creature is a revived corpse, and it is also the reason for Ellie's hatred for EOs, whom he perceives as direct contradictions of God's divine plan. The disturbing knowledge that anyone can transform, as opposed to Frankenstein's inimitable vague experiment, implies that monstrosity is natural and innate, and the transformation is simply a matter of circumstances and character. The acquired abilities are personalised due to their connection to the person's last thoughts or intentions. Victor, who died in agony, manifested pain control ability. Ellie, who experienced hypothermia in an ice-filled bathtub, developed skills to mend himself. Sydney Clarke, who drowned alongside her sister, Serena, became capable of resurrecting people, the gift born from her desire to save her beloved sister. The books maintain an aura of ambiguity around EO's monstrosity. For many, they are indeed monsters. Their "birth," as I shall refer to it, is commensurately monstrous to the "birth" of Frankenstein's Monster. There are mentions that they seem to "lack" something, a spark in their eyes, interpreted by many as a human soul. With that in mind, one cannot simply assess who is an ExtraOrdinary because the internal transformation usually has no direct effect on the external, with the emphasis on *usually*, since Ellie proves to be an exception. Nevertheless, upon looking at him, without prior knowledge of his actual age, it is impossible to identify him as an EO.

Subverting Shelley's story, Monsters in *Villains* are lovable, not just capable of loving others, as was the case for Frankenstein's Monster, but can be the subject of someone's affections. This is most visible in the dynamic between Victor and Sydney. As the story progressed, their relationship shifted into a child–caretaker dynamic, retelling the initial connection between Frankenstein and the Monster, when the Monster was cognitively a child and Frankenstein, as his creator, was the closest to a parental figure. The difference is that in *Villains*, both Victor and Sydney are the Monsters. Contrary to Frankenstein, Victor became a father figure to Sydney, someone both to protect her and to provide opportunities for her to act her age (for instance, he tasked his former cellmate, Michael, to babysit the girl in Victor's

absence and allowed her to keep a stray dog), something that Frankenstein's Monster was deprived of. In turn, Victor's wickedness, which he did not conceal in front of Sydney, did not hinder the affection the girl developed for him.

Schwab expands on Shelley's depiction of Monstrosity by including a variety of female Monsters. Where in *Frankenstein,* the female Monster was reduced to a means for the Monster to fulfil his desire for love and family, female EOs have consequential roles in *Villains*. Frequently, their abilities are connected with social expectations of women, either contradicting or appealing to them, albeit with a twist. Serena Clark's siren's voice enabled her to compel others into submission and secure her position of authority, especially in male-dominated environments. On the other side, Sydney's gift of resurrection transformed her into a nurturer, a more traditionally female role.

Retelling can be defined as "a new version of a story" ("Retelling"). As a body of work, *Villains* utilises the core of *Frankenstein,* enriching it by relocating the setting to the 21st century, thereby implementing period-appropriate issues and diversifying the characters. As exemplified, Schwab's monstrosity is more extensive; it is something innate to humans and highly individualised. The expanded role of women accommodates female villains and victims, both of whom are allowed to be monstrous. Elements of Gothic convention create an ambience of unrest, uncertainty, and the uncanny, while the altered setting provides a plausible explanation for the events. The initial threat, Frankenstein's Monster, is disseminated from a creation of a genius to an inborn monstrosity, further diminishing the distance between the monstrous and the human. The blurring of the lines between these two seemingly opposites echoes Shelley's technique of humanising monsters and depicting humans as monstrous. Schwab identifies the fear of internal monstrosity and the uncertainty whether the monstrous can truly be distinguished from the non-monstrous, or perhaps whether one can recognise oneself as monstrous, as one of the most prevalent anxieties of the modern world.

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From Oriental Tourist to Inside Outsider:
Imperial Dracula in the South Korean Webtoon *Delusion*

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Abstract: This article reads the South Korean webtoon *Delusion* as a cross-cultural adaptation of Bram Stoker's *Dracula*, one where the plague of vampirism travels to the Orient instead of the Occident. By inverting the direction of the original Dracula's voyage, the webtoon flips late-Victorian fears of racial contamination and reverse colonisation on their head, transforming the elder vampire K and his half-human progeny Jeonghwa into personifications of Euro-American imperialism's eastward expansion in the nineteenth century. The article argues that, despite *Delusion*'s historical setting, its Dracula-like characters are less a tallying up of previous transgressions than a reflection of the Euro-American West's "insider outsider" status in contemporary East Asia. Following a brief introduction to *Delusion*'s plot and historical context, the article discusses how K and Jeonghwa's journeys differ from Dracula's. Both father and daughter masquerade as imperial European Others to enjoy lavish lifestyles and extraterritorial privileges in Shanghai and Seoul. Their open-ended fates at the webtoon's conclusion, however, suggest that they have become just as much "inside outsiders" in contemporary East Asian societies as the Euro-American interlopers who have never truly been expelled.

Keywords: Bram Stoker, cross-cultural adaptation, East Asia, Euro-American imperialism, migration, palimpsest, vampirism

Irked by having "had to sit in [a] carriage for more than an hour before [the train] began to move" from the station in Klausenburgh, Jonathan Harker tetchily observes that "it seems to me that the further East you go the more unpunctual are the trains. What ought they to be in China?" (Stoker 2–3). Neither Harker nor the client he is about to meet, a certain Count Dracula, ever finds out. In Bram Stoker's 1897 novel, the Black Sea port of Varna is as far East as either of them travels. Harker's idle musing, however, might plausibly be answered by the vampiric villain of the South Korean webtoon *Delusion* (2019–2020), who eschews Victorian

London for Qing dynasty China. This alternative itinerary for conquest and domination enables the webtoon to rewrite the original novel's historical subtext and probe the legacy of Euro-American imperialism in East Asia. In this article, I argue that *Delusion*'s inversion of the vampire's direction of travel constitutes less a critique of the imperialist Occident's past misdeeds than an interrogation of the influence it still wields in contemporary East Asia, both as an externally imposed hegemony and an internalised presence within East Asian subjectivities. Dracula may not have been able to remain in England long enough to become a permanent fixture of the English landscape, but the same cannot be said of his counterpart in *Delusion*, who has become "East Asia's 'inside outsider'," or a foreign entity that "has evolved into [the region's] dominant system of reference" (Chen 181, 165).

Delusion and its historical context

Delusion is a webtoon, a type of episodic digital comic originating in South Korea and meant to be read by scrolling vertically downwards on a smartphone or computer. It is written and illustrated by the South Korean artist Hong Seong-hyeok, who publishes under the pseudonym Hongjacga. Its first episode premiered in September 2019 on the digital platform Naver Webtoon under the Korean title of *Hyeonhok*. Subsequent episodes were released weekly, ending with the sixtieth and final episode in November 2020. On the other hand, all sixty episodes of the English translation were made available simultaneously in March 2021.

As the first text panel of its first episode proclaims, *Delusion*'s frame narrative is set in "Gyeongseong, 1935," with the now-disused name for Seoul indicating that this coincides with the Japanese occupation of Korea from 1910 to 1945 (Hongjacga, "Episode 1"). Down-on-his-luck painter Yun Iho has fallen behind on his rental payments and fears the worst when his landlord summons him. However, Iho's landlord only wishes to recommend him to a new client who wishes to have her portrait painted in a European style. This mysterious client, an elderly woman of means named Marisa, owns and lives in an opulent hotel where Iho must take up residence if he accepts the job offer. Once he moves into the South Gate Hotel, Iho discovers that Marisa is the alias of an immortal vampire named Song Jeonghwa, who has not left the hotel in decades because she has not aged since the day she arrived in Gyeongseong. Like the hapless Jonathan Harker, Iho soon finds himself a prisoner of his alluring hostess, although the commission to paint her portrait is genuine and not merely a cover for her next meal. When Iho's artistic

talents fall short of Jeonghwa's bizarre request to paint her as an elderly woman, she decides to regale him with her life story, hoping that the weight of her years will help his imagination succeed where his trained eye has faltered. Almost half of *Delusion*'s narrative consists of Jeonghwa's story-within-a-story, which takes Iho and the reader over fifty years further into the past, to a late-nineteenth-century Shanghai carved up into concessions by various Euro-American powers. This is when we are introduced to both Cheng Jinren, vampire hunter extraordinaire and the love of Jeonghwa's life, and K, Jeonghwa's father, nemesis, and "the longest-living vampire" on record (Hongjacga, "Episode 18").

The Shanghai inhabited by K, Jinren, and a teenage Jeonghwa is coterminous with the Victorian era in Britain. In East Asia, where no major polity was ever fully colonised by a Euro-American power, the nineteenth century was nevertheless defined by a struggle against Euro-American imperialism unprecedented in its intensity and scale. The Manchu Qing dynasty, which ruled China from 1644 to 1912, was defeated by the British Empire in the First Opium War (1839–1842), resulting in the first of what would later come to be known as "unequal treaties" (Cassel 16). Under the 1842 Treaty of Nanjing, Qing China was forced to cede Hong Kong Island to the British and open up four treaty ports to foreign trade. In the years that followed, France, Russia, and the United States would also join Britain in carving out literal "concessions," or residential enclaves where foreign nationals "gradually acquired control over urban planning, administration, police matters, and judicial discretion," out of cities such as Tianjin, Xiamen, and Shanghai (Wang 4). The Shanghai International Settlement, formed by the merger of the British and American concessions in 1863, is where a significant portion of *Delusion*'s storyline is set.

Korea's Joseon dynasty (1392–1897), on the other hand, was largely successful in repelling Euro-American attempts to forcibly open its borders, not because it was militarily superior or because it learned from the mistakes of Qing China, but because "none of the Western powers considered the opening of Korea important enough to send a large-scale invasion force against her … all of the powers had more important preoccupations elsewhere" (Han 368). Instead, Korea's first unequal treaty—the 1876 Treaty of Ganghwa Island—was contrived by a Westernising Japan and "modeled upon those which the Western powers had imposed upon China" (Han 374). Although most of the major Euro-American powers subsequently foisted their own unequal treaties on Korea, the fact that it was Japan which first wedged its foot in Korea's door was a sinister portent of

things to come. Increasingly convinced that building a colonial empire was the best way to safeguard national sovereignty, Japan would select the neighbouring Joseon dynasty as a natural first target. The decades following the Treaty of Ganghwa Island were characterised by the gradual spread of Japanese influence over Korea's domestic affairs and foreign policy. Japanese victories over Qing China in the First Sino-Japanese War (1894–1895) and Tsarist Russia in the Russo-Japanese War (1904–1905), meanwhile, ensured that none of Korea's erstwhile allies were in a position to come to its aid when full annexation was declared in 1910. This was the beginning of Korea's colonial period (1910–1945), during which the Korean people suffered a degree of oppression so severe that the memory of it lingers to the present day. The depredations of Japanese colonial rule are not explicitly depicted in *Delusion*, but must nevertheless be kept in view in any discussion of imperialism in the Korean peninsula.

Exploiting imperial privilege

There are, technically, two Draculas in *Delusion*. Jeonghwa, whose initial role as Iho's client-cum-jailer parallels the dynamic between Dracula and Jonathan Harker at the beginning of Stoker's novel, is introduced to the reader first. Once she starts regaling Iho with what she calls "the story … of a cursed bloodline," however, the mantle of the Count falls more firmly onto K's shoulders (Hongjacga, "Episode 7"). I will return to Jeonghwa towards the end of this article, but the webtoon's doubling of K with Dracula is my primary focus.

K travels from Europe to East Asia—specifically from the principality of Wallachia to Shanghai—mirroring the geographical border crossing performed by the webtoon's own act of cross-cultural adaptation. Unlike the indigenised protagonists of the Sherlockian television adaptations *Detective L* (China 2019) or *Miss Sherlock* (Japan 2018), however, K does not become Asian and remains very much of European provenance and heritage. During a meeting of the vampire-hunting society known as the Order, Jinren reveals that K is none other than Gheorghe Balassa, "the notorious vampire who disappeared from Wallachia centuries ago" (Hongjacga, "Episode 18"). Along with Moldavia and Transylvania, Wallachia is one of the three medieval principalities that make up the territory of present-day Romania. Although the original Dracula claims to be a noble of Transylvanian Szekely descent and speaks disparagingly of "when the flags of the Wallach and the Magyar went down beneath the [Ottoman] Crescent," he has

nevertheless been popularly identified with the historical Vlad the Impaler, who was Voivode of Wallachia on three separate occasions in the fifteenth century (Stoker 32). The equation of the real-life Wallachian Vlad with the fictional Transylvanian Dracula has resulted in an unfortunate interchangeability between the two principalities in subsequent adaptations that exploit the dubious historical connection, such as the Japanese videogame franchise *Castlevania*. K's Wallachian provenance, therefore, enables the webtoon to palimpsestically superimpose the antagonist of Stoker's novel over its own. Every action performed by K before and after the moment his antecedents are revealed then becomes overdetermined by the precedent of Stoker's Count. This is a crucial precondition for understanding what *Delusion* is saying about the tortured legacy of Euro-American imperialism in East Asia.

The language used to describe the Count and the threat of vampirism he represents in *Dracula* has long been interpreted by scholars as reflective of late-Victorian anti-immigrant or xenophobic sentiments. Stephen Arata, for example, argues that "*Dracula* enacts the [Victorian] period's most important and pervasive narrative of decline, a narrative of reverse colonization … which makes the nation vulnerable to attack from more vigorous, 'primitive' peoples" (623). Arata, however, also notes that "in the marauding, invasive Other, British culture sees its own imperial practices mirrored back in monstrous forms", thereby investing such narratives of reverse colonisation with "the potential for powerful critiques of imperialist ideologies, even if that potential usually remains unrealized" (623). In *Delusion*, the potential for imperialist critique is indubitably realised, even as the webtoon problematises an easy equivalence between Euro-American imperialism and vampirism.

At the point where Jeonghwa chooses to begin recounting her past to Iho, K is already well-established at the top of semi-colonial Shanghai's pecking order. Although K's arrival in Shanghai is accompanied by a series of grisly murders and unexplained disappearances, the wealth he amasses and the image he cultivates as "an honest, polite, handsome, tall and blonde European gentleman" enable him to rise above all suspicion. As Jeonghwa informs Iho, however, K "was neither honest nor blonde." He wears a blonde wig to conceal his natural dark hair, the intent behind which is made amply clear by the effect it produces on the local Shanghainese, who describe him variously as "that English gentleman," "he's from France [and] said to be very polite," and "a German of noble birth" (Hongjacga, "Episode 7"). K is exploiting the fact that blonde hair is one of the most powerful

signifiers of difference used to distinguish between individuals of European and Asian heritage. In 1850s Shanghai, it was also a visible marker of the victorious Euro-American imperial powers who had just defeated the Qing Dynasty in the First Opium War and were waging a second. The Treaty of the Bogue, foisted upon the Qing in 1843, granted all British nationals on Chinese soil extraterritorial privileges, which meant they could not be charged with any criminal offence by the local authorities (Cassell 51–52). By donning a blonde wig, K deliberately promotes the misconception that he is of Western European origin to claim extraterritorial status and enjoy impunity for his crimes. His disguise not only gestures towards the divide within present-day Europe whereby countries formerly under Ottoman or Soviet rule, like Romania, are unable to automatically claim the prestige and privileges that come with being part of the "West," but also demonstrates how a fetishisation of alterity was instrumental to furthering Euro-American imperial ambitions in the so-called Far East. K, like Dracula, is from a part of Europe which had become thoroughly Orientalised and Othered in the eyes of the Euro-American imperial powers, yet a blonde wig is all it takes for him to appear "Western" in the eyes of the Chinese inhabitants of Shanghai.

If the context of *Dracula*'s publication "includes the decline of Britain as a world power at the close of the nineteenth century" (Arata 622), then K's arrival in Shanghai enacts a distinct —but not unrelated—narrative of decline half a world away. The rapid succession of foreign incursions on Chinese sovereignty that began with the First Opium War and ended only with the formation of the People's Republic of China in 1949 is retroactively referred to as China's "Century of Humiliation" (bǎinián guóchǐ). Following China's defeat in the First Sino-Japanese War, Chinese intellectuals and patriots began lamenting their country's "abrupt transition from a powerful, proud, and unified state to one whose territory was 'carved up like a melon' … by foreign powers and whose army had been humiliated" (Kaufman 5). K's assumption of a Western European persona, therefore, invokes these discourses of disillusionment and transforms him into the personification of an imperialist threat which had already become a material reality, as opposed to the as-yet-unrealised fear of a homeland soon to be overrun by "primitive Orientals". Vampirism is still the monstrous manifestation of an invasive and malignant foreign presence in *Delusion*, but the directionality of travel has now been reversed. For Arata, Stoker's novel "sets up an equivalence between Harker and Dracula: one can be seen as an Orientalist travelling East, the other … as an Occidentalist travelling West" (638). K, however, is able to assume Harker's role as

an Oriental tourist without even a modicum of the effort expended by Dracula to become "a most accomplished Occidentalist" (Arata 637).

The crucial difference between Dracula's westward and K's eastward migrations lies in how each perceives their final destinations, and in how the people at those destinations perceive them. Dracula longs "to go through the crowded streets of … mighty London, to be amid the whirl and rush of humanity, to share its life, its change, its death, and all that makes it what it is" (Stoker 22). London's allure stems from its unparalleled blood reserves and its place at the epicentre of modernity, which is why Dracula seeks to learn "the habit of a new land and a new people who have come to be since he was" (Stoker 356). K, on the other hand, professes to love Shanghai and "like it … better than Europe" because "with all the connections and wealth [he has] built up, anything is possible." "I shall erect my kingdom here," he goes on to declare, betraying the imperialist overtones of his ambitions (Hongjacga, "Episode 37"). For K, Shanghai is the perfect hunting ground not because of any inherent quality of the city, but rather because of the unique historical conditions that enable him to operate without fear of interference or reprisal. Dracula and K might both represent threats of invasion, but there is a vast power differential between Dracula's painstaking attempts to learn British customs and K's effortless imbrication into local networks of wealth and influence without any concession to assimilation.

"The vast number of English books" Harker discovers in the Count's library stems from Dracula's desire to—when he eventually arrives in England—become "like the rest, so that no man stops if he sees me, or pause in his speaking if he hear my words, to say, 'Ha, ha! A stranger!'" (Stoker 21–22). Despite his best efforts, the letter Lord Godalming receives from the estate agents Mitchell, Sons & Candy still positively identifies Dracula as a "foreign nobleman" and expresses a genteel disdain at his "paying the purchase money in 'notes over the counter', if your Lordship will pardon us using so vulgar an expression" (Stoker 303). Dracula's money has opened English doors, but it has not made him any less "primitive" to the people in the chambers within. By way of contrast, Jinren's investigation into the source of K's wealth and influence reveals "that there is indeed a cozy relationship between K and the Shanghai Municipal Council … they've been helping K for decades, since he first settled in Shanghai" (Hongjacga, "Episode 18"). The Shanghai Municipal Council was comprised predominantly of white Anglophone businessmen, and its members were the de facto rulers of the Shanghai International Settlement (Haan 211-22). Their alliance with K demonstrates not only

how inclusive the British understanding of the "civilised West" suddenly becomes when the integrity of their own country is not at stake, but also how K would not have had to learn anything of the Chinese language or society with the Council members acting as his intermediaries. Dracula can only rely on wolves and an institutionalised madman to further his schemes in London for all his wealth and learning; K taps immediately into the heart of power in Shanghai, where the unholy union of capitalism and imperialism trumps considerations of race, ethnicity, and class.

The distinction between K and his Victorian forebear, therefore, should first and foremost be understood within a paradigm of incursion that reenacts the nineteenth-century encounters between an imperialistic "West" and a purportedly isolationist "East". Whereas the threat of reverse colonisation in Britain is embodied by Dracula himself, however, K is not the source of Euro-American imperialism in East Asia—he merely exploits it to his own advantage. Nevertheless, K's imperial designs identify him as a symbol of imperialism writ large, untethered to any particular country or time and consequently capable of standing in for successive waves of imperialism stretching into the present.

Internalising the imperial vampire

Euro-American imperialism created a curious structure of feeling within East Asia characterised by what Chen Kuan-Hsing calls "the limits of colonial identification on the one hand, and the postcolonial politics of resentment on the other" (xiii). The "West" became simultaneously regarded as a threat to be expelled and an exemplar to be emulated. Although the Shanghai International Settlement is now a thing of the past, the "West"—primarily but not solely through the hegemonic influence presently wielded by the United States—is still "East Asia's 'inside outsider' or 'outside insider'—in either case, an important element in the formation of identity and subjectivity in East Asia" (Chen 181). In *Delusion*, both the circumstances of Jeonghwa's relocation from Shanghai to Gyeongseong and K's eventual fate attest to the Euro-American West's continued status as the site of colonial identification and postcolonial resentment in East Asia.

The mixed-race, mixed-species Jeonghwa is the naturally conceived offspring of a human woman "of Joseon descent"—Joseon being the precursor to the contemporary demonym "Korean"—and an undead Wallachian vampire, a biological impossibility in the world of the webtoon whose existence takes even K

by surprise (Hongjacga, "Episode 16"). For some perverse reason that the webtoon does not spell out, K rapes Jeonghwa's mother but chooses to spare her life, thereby creating a compelling metaphor for the nineteenth-century variant of Euro-American imperialism which imposed a series of humiliating and unjust concessions on the incumbent regimes but permitted them to remain in power. If K represents the imperialist extraction of resources and capital from a depleted Far East, then Jeonghwa might be considered the unforeseen and improbable byproduct of the inevitable collision of cultures that ensued. However, it would be too simplistic to read Jeonghwa as a mere hybrid of "East and West" not only because K is such an ambiguous signifier of Euro-American modernity himself but also because of the reception she meets with in Joseon.

When Jeonghwa flees Shanghai to evade capture and execution by Jinren's vampire-hunting colleagues, she does so under her own name. By the time she arrives in Joseon, however, she has assumed another identity altogether – that of the Italian socialite Marisa Biella, who "had been on her way to Joseon to facilitate the cultural exchange between Westerners and the Joseon people at the King's request" (Hongjacga, "Episode 44"). This is the name by which Iho learns about his new client in the first episode, a loose end that the webtoon does not tie up until over forty episodes later. The real Marisa, who has turned into a feral vampire thanks to an infected bite sustained earlier in the trip from Europe, attacks Jeonghwa on the Joseon-bound ship she has stowed away on. When Jeonghwa tastes Marisa's blood during their brief battle, she realises she has inherited "the ability to absorb memories by consuming another's blood" from K (Hongjacga, "Episode 43"). These memories and the knowledge of European culture and learning they contain enable Jeonghwa to impersonate Marisa and take over her role as "the gatekeeper of a cultural revolution" (Hongjacga, "Episode 45").

Even with Marisa's refined sensibilities at her fingertips, however, Jeonghwa would have been hard-pressed to maintain the charade if she had not also inherited some of her father's Wallachian features, which instantly mark her as a racial Other in Joseon despite being of part-Joseon descent herself. There is a profound irony in how Jeonghwa's smooth assimilation into Joseon society is contingent upon her ability to perform European-ness with the aid of Marisa's stolen memories and K's bloodline, rather than the ancestral connection she inherits from her mother. When Iho meets Jeonghwa in 1935, she has been living in the lap of luxury for decades, her status and privilege untouched even by the advent of Japanese colonisation. Just as K acquires untouchability in Shanghai by concealing

his Wallachian origins and masquerading as a Euro-American imperialist, so does Jeonghwa suppress her Joseon heritage to enjoy the benefits of being a sophisticated European aesthete in a country eager to safeguard its independence by osmotically absorbing the vigour of Euro-American modernity. The factors that made Shanghai such an attractive destination for K are again at play in the royal treatment Jeonghwa (as Marisa) receives in Joseon, but here they are complicated by the Joseon court's inability to recognise that the "West" which they desire so fervently to emulate has already become a part of them, thanks to Jeonghwa's mixed blood and borrowed memories. Before Japanese colonisation, the Second World War, and the Korean War, the "West" was already present within Korean society as an "inside outsider".

At the end of Stoker's novel, Dracula is driven back to Transylvania from London, where the threat of reverse colonisation he had personified is comprehensively extinguished by his meeting the true death. At the end of *Delusion*, however, K is very much still alive. He might have been an imperialist play-acting as an Oriental tourist during his time in Shanghai, but he, too, becomes an "inside outsider" once the scene of the action shifts to Gyeongseong. During a climactic Shanghai showdown with Jeonghwa and Jinren, K is stabbed in the back with "a silver dagger [of] the highest purity," shot through the head with "silver-plated bullets" (Hongjacga, "Episode 38"), staked with a burning ember torn from the ruins of his palatial mansion, and finally hacked to pieces with a blade that closely resembles the "great Kukri knife" Jonathan Harker uses to deal the finishing blow to Dracula (Stoker 419). He resurrects himself from blood samples retained by the Order for experimental purposes, destroys the Shanghai branch by exploiting their thirst for forbidden knowledge, and tracks Jeonghwa down in Gyeongseong, where he poses as a member of the very Order dedicated to the extinction of his kind (Hongjacga, "Episode 53"). In more ways than one, then, K has literally become the enemy within, hiding in plain sight. Eventually, K and Jeonghwa have another violent confrontation, after which both vanish without a trace, seemingly ending the threat of vampirism within Korea.

When Jeonghwa visits an ageing and cancer-stricken Iho at his studio in the early 1970s, however, Jeonghwa reveals that "the fight that began on that day still hasn't come to an end." She will "have to continue to fight against [K] until the balance of power is one day tipped" (Hongjacga, "Episode 60"). Jeonghwa's use of the phrase "balance of power" immediately brings the Cold War backdrop of her final encounter with Iho into sharp relief and resurrects the spectre of the Korean

War, which ended with Korea cleaved into two ideologically opposed nation-states. Despite the obvious analogy and his retrospectively suggestive initial, K has not suddenly become the embodiment of North Korea's ruling Kim dynasty. Rather, his refusal to go gently into the good night is a reminder that Euro-American imperialism, with an emphasis on the American, has not come to an end in contemporary South Korea. As Gi-Wook Shin relates, "the United States was considered the savior of the Korean nation, having liberated the country from the shackles of colonialism and prevented it from falling under communist rule" (13). However, the contingent of nearly 30,000 soldiers it still maintains on South Korean soil is proof of an unspoken occupation that is still ongoing despite sporadic eruptions of violence (Schober 2–3). These contrasting attitudes do not necessarily translate into a prominent role for the United States within *Delusion* but rather indicate how American imperialism during the Cold War resurrects and perpetuates the memory of previous imperialisms.

At the same time, Jeonghwa's continued presence indicates that the "West" has become so thoroughly internalised within South Korean society that it is no longer possible to tell where the "West" ends and Korea begins. When Jeonghwa visits a retrospective exhibition of Iho's work in 2019, a sign at the entrance proudly proclaims that Iho's European-style paintings of Jeonghwa are now part of the "Republic of Korea['s] Modern Cultural Heritage" (Hongjacga, "Episode 60"). By opting not to kill off either of its vampire characters, *Delusion* thus demonstrates a willingness to confront the legacies of an earlier age of Euro-American imperialism, both in its updated postwar iteration and as a component of East Asian subjectivities.

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