


Please cite the Published Version

Fitzpatrick, Teresa  (2023) Wisteria: A Female EcoGothic Metaphor in American Fiction Through the Ages. In: Stratified Nature in Women's Writing: Past, Present and Future. Cambridge Scholars Publishing, Newcastle upon Tyne, pp. 19-34. ISBN 9781527594012

Publisher: Cambridge Scholars Publishing

Version: Accepted Version

Downloaded from: <https://e-space.mmu.ac.uk/631762/>

Additional Information: This is an Author Accepted Manuscript of a chapter which appeared "in Stratified Nature in Women's Writing: Past, Present and Future", published on 24th February 2023. Available at: <https://www.cambridgescholars.com/product/978-1-5275-9401-2>. Reuse of this version is strictly restricted to non-commercial uses. Republication, translation, or reproduction elsewhere in a book, journal, or other published item, is not permitted without prior agreement by Cambridge Scholars Publishing. The Edited Collection in which the Accepted Version appears should be appropriately credited.

Enquiries:

If you have questions about this document, contact openresearch@mmu.ac.uk. Please include the URL of the record in e-space. If you believe that your, or a third party's rights have been compromised through this document please see our Take Down policy (available from <https://www.mmu.ac.uk/library/using-the-library/policies-and-guidelines>)

WISTERIA: A Female ecoGothic metaphor in American Fiction through the ages

Teresa Fitzpatrick
(teresa.fitzpatrick@stu.mmu.ac.uk)

Abstract:

Women and nature have been so intrinsically linked in Western philosophy and the Anglo-American popular imagination, 'each denigrated with reference to the other' (Garrard, 2004), that despite feminist calls to separate them, gender and nature continue to be closely associated. Moreover, Female Gothic theories have demonstrated that monstrous nature is often configured through female corporeality. With the house and home designated as female domestic spaces, seen through the Gothic as a confined female space, it is hardly surprising that the porch and garden are similarly included within this domestic imagery. Indeed, the literary Victorian garden was often depicted as a site for young women to develop their nurturing skills and as a suitable space for chaperoned romantic relationships (Grasser, 2014). Flower imagery and gardening metaphors have reflected Western patriarchal ideals of femininity embedded by the Romantics, with monstrous nature associated with transgressive women and illicit sexual interactions taking place within the garden in Gothic texts. Yet, despite extensive criticism on nature and femininity and the more recent ecocritical turn in the Gothic, there is little research available on the frequent use of wisteria as a visual marker of the female domestic space. Moreover, as this paper demonstrates, wisteria is not just an indicator of the confining boundaries of female spaces in fiction but is consistently often a signifier of domestic abuse; one that women writers use to haunt the male imagination.

WISTERIA: A Female ecoGothic metaphor in American Fiction through the ages

Teresa Fitzpatrick
(teresa.fitzpatrick@stu.mmu.ac.uk)

Women and nature have been intrinsically linked in Western culture, literature, and the Anglo-American popular imagination, 'each denigrated with reference to the other' from pastoral, through Romanticism to contemporary fiction, with both 'gender' and 'nature' presented in literature as social constructs reflecting patriarchal concepts of what they *should* be like.¹ Although feminist theory has attempted to separate the gendered dualist constructs of woman/nature, female corporeality continues to be 'strongly associated with nature in Western thought'.² In nineteenth-century English and French literature, the garden is conceived as a domestic space wherein female gender roles are pedagogically formed within a patriarchal construct.³ Victorians perceived the garden as an extension of the house, providing an arena for younger females to develop nurturing skills using flowers and plants as surrogate children, redolent of their gender roles as housewife and mother. Moreover, the literary Victorian garden was often depicted as a "coming-of-age" training ground where appropriate adult relationships between genders were forged.⁴ Alongside the house, then, the garden has inevitably been designated a female domestic space within which patriarchal constructs of both gender and nature are depicted as orderly, controlled, and passive.

'In Victorian imaginative literature, women are frequently presented in the company of flowers', Michael Waters notes, 'to heighten their femininity'.⁵ However, as Female Gothic theories have demonstrated, 'Victorian representations of women tend to polar extremes', rendering females as symbols of either 'domestic happiness or unnatural monsters'.⁶ Transgressive women were often associated with monstrous nature. Those women who failed to conform to patriarchal constructs were aligned with wild and uncontrollable nature, while colonial encounters with indigenous females were often described as exotic jungle flowers. This dichotomous perspective of idealised/vilified woman and cultivated/wild nature in the male imagination persists well into the twentieth century, conflating female corporeality and monstrous nature in Gothic texts, and where illicit sexual interactions take place within the formalised garden setting as a way of highlighting female transgressions.

¹ Greg Garrard, *Ecocriticism* (Oxon: Routledge, 2004), 26.

² Stacy Alaimo, *Bodily Natures: Science, Environment and the Material Self* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2010), 5.

³ Celine Grasser, "Good Girls versus Blooming Maidens: The Building of Female Middle- and Upper-Class Identities in the Garden, England and France, 1820-1870", in *Secret Gardens, Satanic Mills: Placing Girls in European History, 1750-1960*, edited by Mary Jo Maynes, Birgitte Soland & Christina Benninghaus (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005), 131-146.

⁴ Grasser, "Good Girls versus Blooming Maidens", 131-146.

⁵ Michael Waters, *The Garden in Victorian Literature* (Aldershot: Scholar Press, 1988), 135.

⁶ Kelly Hurley, *The Gothic Body* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 121.

Linked with the home, '[t]he very demarcation of green space as enclosed and duly ordered garden', William Hughes explains, 'bespeaks a restrictive domestication',⁷ which seen through a Gothic lens, denotes house and garden as a confining female space. One of the frequent visual markers of the confining boundaries of female spaces in fiction is the wisteria – a plant that covers doorways, house fronts and porches. Yet, despite extensive criticism on nature and femininity, there is little research available on the literary significance of wisteria as a gendered metaphor. Using Charlotte Perkins Gilman's ghost story, 'The Giant Wistaria' (1891) and Donna A. Leahey's eco-horror story, 'The Wisteria' (2014), this paper demonstrates the persistent use of wisteria as an ecogothic metaphor, not just as an indicator of the female domestic space but one that is consistently often a challenging signifier of domestic abuse in Anglo-American fiction and a metaphor that women writers use to haunt the male imagination.

Wisteria

A popular climbing plant, with a profusion of pale purple, clustered blossoms that resemble bunches of grapes, this familiar vine was introduced into Western gardens from East Asia during the nineteenth century – an era when exotic plant acquisition provided an indicator of wealth – as a decorative ornamental for porches and trellises. Although young plants often appear quite delicate and require support if they are to be admired in full bloom, established and mature wisteria vines harden and eventually destroy supporting structures.⁸ Hardly surprising then, that wisteria has often been associated with patriarchal anxieties about the impact of female independence and with feminist writing. The sinuous vines of plants like wisteria are often equated with transgressive female figures in Judeo-Christian patriarchal culture of the West, evoking images of Eden and Eve's transgression at the behest of the snake in the Tree. Moreover, the wisteria's amazing floral displays and strangling growth offer an ambiguity that reflects the dichotomous attitudes to women within Western cultural tradition. The plant's transgressive imagery is further enhanced by its poisonous seed and anti-clockwise growth that equate it in the male imagination with the *femme fatale* - a Gothic figure that allows for a gendered reading. The trope of the *femme fatale* emerges, according to Rebecca Stott, 'from a phallogocentric point of view' as the dark, chaotic, irrational, wild side of femininity.⁹ French for 'deadly woman', the *femme fatale* has long been a figure in literature of wicked seductress and sexual enchantress, who narcissistically manipulates the men around her for her own rewards; a monstrous Other within the dichotomous perspective of idealised/vilified woman in the male imagination. This image of woman as bacchante was used by men 'to justify restricting women's rights even further' while women writers employed the *femme fatale* character as a revolutionary figure to serve their own

⁷ William Hughes, 'Foreword: On the Gothic nature of gardens', in *EcoGothic Gardens in the Long Nineteenth Century: Phantoms, Fantasy and Uncanny Flowers*, edited by Sue Edney (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2020), xiv-xvii.

⁸ Royal Horticultural Society website: <https://www.rhs.org.uk/search?query=wisteria> [accessed 1/12/2021].

⁹ Rebecca Stott, *The Fabrication of the Late-Victorian Femme Fatale: The Kiss of Death* (Basingstoke and London: MacMillan Press Ltd, 1992), 38.

interests 'as liberation from the constraints of domesticity'.¹⁰ It is my argument that wisteria, both beautiful but poisonous, is associated with this 'predatory female' who is often presented as 'alluring and deadly',¹¹ pointing towards the *femme fatale* figure that 'has been used to criticize powerful women' persistently throughout history, 'haunt[ing] Western imagination, materializing whenever male authority feels threatened by female agency'.¹² Furthermore, in the hands of female writers, the wisteria demonstrates a vegetal agency that challenges and responds to male violence in the face of female independence.

Encompassing such contradictory attributes offers the wisteria as a plant metaphor within fiction that suggests non-conforming female characters within the phallogocentric imagination. In Robert M. Coates's psychological crime thriller, *Wisteria Cottage* (1948), for example, Coates's protagonist, having insinuated himself into the company of a mother and her daughters, becomes increasingly unstable after he accompanies them to a seaside holiday cottage, and they do not adhere to his intended plans. Their eventual brutal murders by the protagonist in response to what he perceives as their transgressions, is subtly indicated, I suggest, in the novel's title through the reference to wisteria. Similarly, Marc Cherry's fictional setting for his 2004-2012 mystery-drama television series, *Desperate Housewives*, is 'Wisteria Lane', with the plant reference here again indicative of the transgressions of the idealised suburban female figure, as the suicide/murder of one of their female neighbours sparks the uncovering of domestic abuse, adultery, homicide, and cover-ups in the families along the street. This dark reality hidden behind the façade of suburban perfection, with the manicured lawns and white-picket fences is what Bernice M. Murphy refers to as the Suburban Gothic – a liminal space that is neither city nor rural and epitomizes the 1950s conflict with American conformist ideals.¹³ For Murphy, Wisteria Lane depicts 'the suburban locale as a place of quiet desperation and festering secrets which, once revealed, are rapidly replaced by yet more darkly enthralling secrets' that must be also be concealed.¹⁴ The wisteria's ambiguous nature – at once impressively floral but highly destructive – positions this plant as a gothic metaphor for women who do not conform to patriarchal expectations and signals the (often violent) oppression such independent behaviour invites within a patriarchal context.

Female writers employ the wisteria's contradictory attributes as a feminist champion for escape from patriarchal domesticity, oppression, and abuse. India Holton, for example, draws on the wisteria's *femme fatale* imagery in her fantasy-romance, *Dangerous Damsels* series, *The Wisteria Society of Lady Scoundrels* (2021).¹⁵ Her story of beautiful female

¹⁰ Adriana Craciun, *Fatal Women of Romanticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 41.

¹¹ Stott, *The Fabrication of the Late-Victorian Femme Fatale*, 49.

¹² Elizabeth Johnston, 'The Original 'Nasty Woman'', *The Atlantic*, 6 November 2016 [accessed: 12 January 2021].

¹³ Bernice M. Murphy, *The Suburban Gothic in American Popular Culture* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009).

¹⁴ Murphy, *The Suburban Gothic in American Popular Culture*, 168.

¹⁵ India Holton, *The Wisteria Society of Lady Scoundrels* (New York: Jove, Penguin Random House, 2021).

criminals (pirates) in a fantasy Victorian England undermine patriarchal expectations of female behaviour with their demonstrable independence and villainy. What is often vilified in the phallogocentric imagination are presented as more positive, with the plant's hardiness, increase in strength and ability to discard controlling support at its moment of full bloom (wisteria only flowers once it has matured), offers wisteria as an ecological metaphor in gothic texts by women writers that signals release from subjugation and the pathway to independence. Given its close association with the house and domestic settings, the wisteria 'becomes a complex metaphor for the oppression of women',¹⁶ frequently appearing in gothic tales of female entrapment and patriarchal control.

Porches: wisteria and female space

Being neither inside nor outside, porches occupy an ambiguous relation to the female domestic space. As an add-on area attached to the house, the porch can be seen as bridging the gap between house and garden - a border zone of culture and nature, even more so within an American suburban context where the porch often refers to the elevated covered decking along the outside walls. This is typically where the wisteria is found, adorning porches, decking and doorways; an impressive climber that indicates the boundary of the domestic space. In her essay exploring the American porch as a gendered spatial metaphor, Sue Bidwell Beckham argues the porch was 'betwixt and between absolute private and absolute public', a 'liminal space' where social, racial, class and gender boundaries could be broken down and women could be themselves.¹⁷ 'By the 1920s', Thomas Durant Visser outlines, 'symbolic connections between the porch and concepts of home and individuality were being recognized' and deemed 'liminal places that straddled the realms of privacy and community'.¹⁸ While 'back porches, with their suggestion of privacy and even secrecy' challenge fictional characters to confront their own ambiguities,¹⁹ the wisteria-covered front house/porch offers female gothic writers with a natural metaphor to suggest the ambiguity that accompanies the concealment of female oppression and domestic abuse. This is most evident in the tales by Gilman and Leahy, where the wisteria adorning the front porch is a conduit for revealing the patriarchal abuse as their female victims adopt the plant's destructive qualities.

Reading Wisteria through an ecoGothic approach

The significance of the wisteria as a gendered metaphor that indicates and reveals domestic abuse is best read through an ecoGothic approach. EcoGothic, according to Andrew Smith and William Hughes, is the exploration of Gothic narratives 'through theories of

¹⁶ Matthew Wynn-Sivils, 'Vegetal Haunting: The Gothic Plant in Nineteenth-Century American Fiction', in *EcoGothic in Nineteenth-Century American Literature*, ed. by Dawn Keetley and Matthew Wynn-Sivils (New York: Routledge, 2018), 161-174 (171).

¹⁷ Sue Bidwell Beckham, 'The American Front Porch: Women's Liminal Space' (1988) reprinted in Carol Delaney with Deborah Kaspin, *Investigating Culture: An Experiential Introduction to Anthropology* (John Wiley & Sons, Incorporated, 2011), 68-78 (72).

¹⁸ Thomas Durant Visser, *Porches of North America* (Hanover and London: University Press of New England, 2012), 56-7.

¹⁹ Beckham, 'The American Front Porch: Women's Liminal Space', 74.

ecocriticism' to 'help to critically reinvigorate debate about the class, gender and national identities that inhere within representations of the landscape'.²⁰ Since then, the ecoGothic has become established as the exploration of the interconnectedness of gothic and ecology,²¹ and the analysis of the 'deep unease, fear, and even contempt' for the natural world even as this is mapped onto 'the contours of the body'.²² Using a 'distinctive combination of ecocriticism with Gothic and the uncanny, alongside the "material turn" in cultural theory ... [that] encourages a process of critical reinvigoration', Sue Edney's collection of essays develops material ecoGothic methodologies with 'an emphasis on the domestic yet liminal space of the garden',²³ and it is this ecoGothic approach that I use here to illustrate the persistent role of wisteria in women's gothic writing as a metaphor for engaging with the issue of domestic abuse. Blending material ecofeminism with female gothic theories the dichotomy of the wisteria as floral beauty with a penchant for destruction, marks this unusual climbing plant as, what I have called elsewhere, an *eco-femme fatale*.²⁴ In dispelling the boundaries of the human and plant through what ecofeminist Stacy Alaimo calls 'trans-corporeality', the wisteria itself becomes the 'transgressive' female of the phallogocentric imagination. Gender and nature become inextricably combined within the wisteria not only as a marker of female oppression and domestic abuse, but in Leahey's tale as a conduit for exacting revenge.

Arguing that the material self is interconnected and inextricable from the wider environment, Stacy Alaimo's trans-corporeality explores various ways in which 'the materiality of human bodies and nonhuman natures' is 'emerging in many disciplines' such as environmental philosophy, corporeal feminism and transgender theory, to analyse 'the entangled territories of material and discursive, natural and cultural, biological and textual'.²⁵ Alaimo focuses on the material transit across human and non-human bodies, charting how the 'stuff of matter generates, composes, transforms, and decomposes'.²⁶ 'Trans-corporeality', she argues, 'not only traces how various substances travel across and within the human body but how they *do* things – often unwelcome or unexpected things' (emphasis in original).²⁷ Similarly, Nancy Tuana argues that human corporeality and the non-human world are subject to 'complex networks of relations' with 'permeable and shifting' divisions that

²⁰ Andrew Smith and William Hughes, 'Introduction: defining the ecoGothic' in *EcoGothic*, edited by Andrew Smith and William Hughes (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013), 1-14 (1, 4).

²¹ David Del Principe, 'Introduction: The EcoGothic in the Long Nineteenth Century', *Gothic Studies* 16.1 (2014), 1-8.

²² Dawn Keetley and Matthew Wynn Sivils, 'Introduction: Approaches to the Ecogothic' in *Ecogothic in Nineteenth-Century American Literature*, edited by Dawn Keetley and Matthew Wynn Sivils (New York: Routledge, 2018), 1-20 (4).

²³ Sue Edney, 'Introduction: Phantoms, fantasy and uncanny flowers', in *EcoGothic Gardens in the Long Nineteenth Century*, edited by Sue Edney (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2020), 1-15 (7).

²⁴ Teresa Fitzpatrick, 'Green is the new black: Plant monsters as ecoGothic tropes; vampires and *femmes fatales*' in *EcoGothic Gardens in the Long Nineteenth Century*, edited by Sue Edney (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2020), 130-147.

²⁵ Alaimo, *Bodily Natures*, 3, 7.

²⁶ Alaimo, *Bodily Natures*, 143.

²⁷ Alaimo, *Bodily Natures*, 146.

reveal 'sites of resistance and opposition'.²⁸ Tuana, through her concept of 'viscous porosity', asserts that the various social, cultural, political, racial and natural boundaries that establish dualisms, and even skin, flesh or garden fences, are porous membranes through which complex material interactions occur. Both critics explore how nature's material agency affects the human body; how in polluting nature we are polluting ourselves through the material interconnectedness of human and nature. Inverting these concepts within an ecoGothic approach focuses rather on the human material body entering the fictional plant as a (sometimes toxic) body imbuing nature with a gothic supernatural material agency. In both Gilman's and Leahey's tales, the wisteria exemplifies the trans-corporeal and the permeable as human and plant matter combine to create an agency of nature that exposes their relevant patriarchal villainy.

Gothic Trans-corporeality in Charlotte Perkins Gilman's 'The Giant Wistaria' (1891)

Charlotte Perkins Gilman was a well-known writer of gothic tales with 'feminist themes such as female entrapment and patriarchal control' at the centre of her stories.²⁹ In this tale, first published in *New England Magazine* in 1891, Gilman draws on gender-nature associations to situate the wisteria as a temporal marker of female repression and domestic abuse. The tale begins in an earlier age of Puritan immigration, opening with a mother's chastisement to her daughter: 'Meddle not with my new vine, child! See! Thou hast already broken the tender shoot!' immediately linking the maiden to the delicate young wisteria vine.³⁰ The reader quickly surmises that Mrs Dwining's daughter has given birth out of wedlock, resulting in her parents taking the child from her to hide the shame this brings upon the family, and which is the cause of the young woman's restless torture of the young wisteria plant. Indeed, both the young woman's spirit and the wisteria vine shoot are broken in this initial scenario of the New England home. As parental plans to permanently separate the young woman from her child are revealed, the plant mirrors the daughter's anguish at being separated already from her new-born, when the wisteria leaves move 'like little stretching fingers' across the oak porch floor as if reaching for the child.³¹ The idea is further compounded by the patriarch's association of the wisteria's vigorous growth with the mounting shame his daughter has brought with her to their new community. Of course, such stigma continued into the twentieth century, with specific 'sanctuaries' where unwed mothers-to-be were shamefully confined for the duration of their pregnancy and the babies taken for adoption, still operational well into the 1960s.

The narrative quickly switches to the author's present-day as a wealthy couple (George and Jenny) rent the old wisteria-covered house for the summer, along with their

²⁸ Nancy Tuana, 'Viscous Porosity: Witnessing Katrina', in *Material Feminisms*, edited by Stacy Alaimo and Susan Hekman (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008), 188-213 (189, 194).

²⁹ Daisy Butcher, in *Evil Roots: Killer Tales of the Botanical Gothic*, edited by Daisy Butcher (London: British Library, 2019), 77.

³⁰ Charlotte Perkins Gilman, 'The Giant Wistaria' (1891) in *Evil Roots: Killer Tales of the Botanical Gothic*, edited by Daisy Butcher (London: British Library, 2019), 79-88 (79).

³¹ Gilman, 'The Giant Wistaria', 79.

respective sisters and brother-in-laws. Keen to conjure some ghostly background to their temporary residence that has all but been abandoned by its heirs, the group's attention turns to the massive, twisted wisteria invading the porch. Interest in the supernatural was a popular pastime in the late-nineteenth century, and Jenny's disappointment at the house's lack of haunting or ghost story and all three women's determination that the place is harbouring a spectral presence not only reflects the contemporary moment of whimsy in the face of modernity but reasserts the era's emerging feminism, as the spectral presence often served to highlight repressed wrongs. In turning their attention to the 'huge wistaria' covering 'the front of the house',³² the narrative establishes the proposed repressed haunting as issuing from female / domestic oppression. It is the wistaria that haunts this New England home and exacts the spiritual revenge for the domestic wrongs to its former female inhabitant(s). The now mature plant, that 'had once climbed [the porch's] pillars' now 'wrenched [the pillars] from their places and [were] held rigid and helpless by the tightly wound and knotted arms',³³ that suggests a destabilising of patriarchal and domestic structures. The wisteria's floral beauty yet damaging growth of its domestic support structure signifies the duality of domesticity as a safe yet confining female space. Like the young woman within the initial patriarchal household, the domestic structures of the house encourage support and growth, yet although the mature plant and female seek independence from these structures (and strictures), a complete dissolution of these boundaries seems impossible. Moreover, with its 'knitted wall of stem and leaf' that 'hold[s] up the gutter that had once supported it', and its 'drooping, fragrant blossoms made a waving sheet of purple from roof to ground',³⁴ the wistaria is at once protective, supportive, and destructive, concealing. Indeed, behind the beautiful floral display lurks a history of female oppression and domestic abuse that the house's new occupants are disposed to discover.

Deciding the damage to the porch by the wisteria is potentially lethal, the tenants organise for the veranda to be repaired – with as little disturbance to the plant as possible. Following up on the spectral imaginings of the night, the 'scandal, shame and tragedy' of the Dwining family is revealed when the preserved body of a tiny baby is found in the old well and their workmen find the skeleton of a woman 'in the strangling grasp of the roots of the great wistaria'.³⁵ Natania Meeker and Antónia Szabari argue the wisteria's agency in challenging the patriarchal culture that the house and porch represent is a result of the 'mother's solicitude for the wisteria' that she is unable to express to her daughter within the confines of the era's patriarchal structures, and which 'manifest[s] itself via the plant's arabesque embrace', as '[t]he mother disappears into the plant, and only an affect lingers'.³⁶ While this reading of the plant roots as embracing mother offers a 'mode of feminist

³² Gilman, 'The Giant Wistaria', 82.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Gilman, 'The Giant Wistaria', 88.

³⁶ Natania Meeker and Antónia Szabari, *Radical Botany: Plants and Speculative Fiction* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2020), 112.

vegetality',³⁷ I argue a trans-corporeal reading offers the wisteria as an ecogothic metaphor that further 'imbue[s] the domestic scene with both horror and a destabilizing vitality',³⁸ in response to an historic case of domestic violence.

By '[e]mphasizing the material interconnections of human corporeality with the more-than-human world', Alaimo argues, 'trans-corporeality also opens up a mobile space that acknowledges the often predictable and unwanted actions of human bodies, nonhuman creatures, ecological systems, chemical agents, and other actors'.³⁹ Gilman's uncanny anthropomorphising of the climber in 'The Giant Wistaria' challenges the patriarchal violence towards women that is highlighted through a gothic trans-corporeality. Buried under the liminal space of the porch, whereby the wisteria roots exact a 'strangling grasp' of the corpse,⁴⁰ reveals, over a century later, the tragic end to the Dwining daughter's transgression and apparent lack of compliance with the patriarchal plan. Applying a trans-corporeal reading to this ecogothic metaphor, the wisteria's absorption of the material body of the daughter provides an uncanny vegetal haunting that sees the wisteria 'crawl' up the porch steps 'for all the world like a writhing body – cringing - beseeching'.⁴¹ Gilman's uncanny descriptions imbue the wisteria with a vegetal agency as it appears to take on the form of the unavenged victim buried within its roots. In a gothic trans-corporeality that sees human and plant merge to enact a bizarre haunting, the wisteria becomes more than a visual symbol of domesticity, or a supernatural tool. Both vegetal and female agency are combined in a clear challenge of patriarchal oppression and domestic violence that serves as a reminder to the contemporary modern characters and readers that despite the social advances of modernity in their privileged circles, female oppression and violence towards women continues to be concealed within the domestic space.

Trans-corporeal body horror in Donna A. Leahey's 'The Wisteria' (2014)

In a twenty-first century re-working of Gilman's tale, Donna A. Leahey upgrades the wisteria as a gendered Gothic metaphor for domestic abuse through an uncanny body horror that discards the human-nature divide. In 'The Wisteria' (2014),⁴² a tale with a distinct feminist vibe, the monstrous merging of human and vegetal re-visits and re-conceptualises gendered nature through a trans-corporeal mutation that demonstrates a 'becoming-plant' that Karen Houle suggests involves more than a shared experience, but rather is a 'heterogenous alliance' with the vegetal.⁴³ Leahey's vengeful wisteria exhibits a trans-

³⁷ Meeker and Szabari, *Radical Botany*, 113.

³⁸ Meeker and Szabari, *Radical Botany*, 113.

³⁹ Alaimo, *Bodily Natures*, 2.

⁴⁰ Gilman, 'The Giant Wistaria', 88.

⁴¹ Gilman, 'The Giant Wistaria', 83.

⁴² Donna A. Leahey, 'The Wisteria', in *Growing Concerns*, edited by Alex Hurst (Fort Smith, AR: Chupa Cabra House, 2014), 9-20.

⁴³ Karen F. Houle, 'Animal, Vegetable, Mineral: Ethics as Extension or Becoming? The Case of Becoming- Plant', *Journal for Critical Animal Studies*, IX.1/2 (2011), 89-116 (97). [last accessed: 21/08/2018].

corporeal alliance that creates a monstrous plant-human hybrid through ecogothic body horror. Body horror of the post-millennium focuses on 'anxieties surrounding transformation, mutation and contagion' of the body,⁴⁴ that a gothic trans-corporeal commingling of human and plant illustrate in a physical form. Such monsters, according to Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, depict 'those who overstep the boundaries of their gender roles or assigned sexual identity'.⁴⁵ The material and visceral trans-corporeal human-plant transformation in Leahey's tale uses the wisteria as a physical manifestation of ecoGothic body horror to underline the contemporary issues of domestic abuse and violence against women. As Gina Wisker asserts, 'Postfeminist Gothic ... revitalises feminism's broader issues, including gender equality, inclusivity and diversity' through 'reimagine[d] familiar Gothic figures', inevitably encompassing contemporary '[v]iolence and oppression'.⁴⁶ By including the plant as a gendered protagonist, Leahey re-works the wisteria as a trans-corporeal ecoGothic metaphor for the twenty-first century.

The tale begins with a domestic argument about the potential damage the 5-year-old wisteria is doing to the siding and deck of the couple's house as the tendrils are 'stretching towards the roof ... as if the plant were trying to get into the house'.⁴⁷ Like Gilman, Leahey imbues the wisteria with vegetal agency through anthropomorphic description that suggests intent. She observes with growing unease how the wisteria vines were 'reaching and exploring ... as if the plant were attacking the house'.⁴⁸ The female narrator (Gia) reveals that for her, the wisteria 'had seemed symbolic of [her] resurrected marriage' after her college professor husband's numerous affairs with his graduate assistants appears to end when his most overt tryst with Melissa results in her leaving abruptly.⁴⁹ However, while the wisteria grows as if it has 'found a bag of Miracle-Gro', Gia's marriage continues to disintegrate.⁵⁰ The violent undercurrent of their verbal exchanges suggest a level of verbal and emotional domestic abuse from husband Charles, as he threatens to kill the wisteria and her pet dog. The domestic violence plays out through the husband's missing cat, found under the deck, entangled in the mass of wisteria vines and covered in blood. In this tale of terror Leahey emphasises the material interconnectedness of trans-corporeality and the wisteria's vegetal agency when Gia struggles to free the cat. Armed with garden shears, Gia notes that as soon as she 'cut the first vine, Snowbelle [the cat] shrieked to life' as if Gia had 'cut her and not an inanimate plant'.⁵¹ Of course, plants are far from inanimate, but in exaggerating a vegetal vitality when

⁴⁴ Xavier Aldana Reyes, *Body Gothic: Corporeal Transgression in Contemporary Literature and Horror Film* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2014), 54.

⁴⁵ Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, 'Monster Culture (Seven Theses)', in *The Monster Theory Reader*, edited by Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2020), 37-57 (42).

⁴⁶ Gina Wisker, 'Postfeminist Gothic', in *Twenty-First-Century Gothic: An Edinburgh Companion*, edited by Maisha Wester and Xavier Aldana Reyes (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2019), 47-59 (51-2).

⁴⁷ Leahey, 'The Wisteria', 10.

⁴⁸ Leahey, 'The Wisteria', 13.

⁴⁹ Leahey, 'The Wisteria', 12.

⁵⁰ Leahey, 'The Wisteria', 10.

⁵¹ Leahey, 'The Wisteria', 14.

Gia attempts to pull the cat free and 'the resistance was strong enough that it feels as if the vines were pulling back',⁵² Leahey develops the wisteria beyond a mere symbol for domesticity towards acknowledging a vegetal agency that draws on a female monstrous Other – 'a menacing alterity of the natural environment' at the heart of ecophobia.⁵³ For Simon C. Estok, ecophobia is the perceived threat of the nonhuman world that holds 'imagined challenges to our existence', evoking fears 'about the transience of our corporeal materiality', revealed in the 'contempt and fear we feel for the agency of the natural environment'.⁵⁴ When Gia ecophobically prunes the vine to access its roots, the wisteria's trans-corporeal monstrosity is demonstrated when a 'thick red liquid dripped down' around the narrator 'as warm as blood' until the deck resembles 'a murder scene', which it indeed turns out to be.⁵⁵

While Gilman's characters experience ghostly imaginings that result in the discovery of a skeleton, Leahey's tale recognises vegetal agency and trans-corporeal horror in Gia's exposure of Melissa's human skeleton buried under the deck, stripped of its material flesh and blood by the vine. Wisteria and corpse actively merge as 'a skeletal hand pushed out of the earth ... At the same time, vines and leaves wrapped themselves around the bones, weaving themselves about, forming the shape of a human arm' eventually becoming a recognisable effigy of Charles' former mistress.⁵⁶ As '[i]nch by inch the skeleton dragged itself out of the dirt like a flower blooming in the sun', the wisteria vines 'swirled around the skeleton filling out a woman's shape, covering her skull to give her a face with a skin of smooth leaves and eyes of purple flowers'.⁵⁷ The ecoGothic body horror of Leahey's contemporary version of the wisteria emphasises a material commingling of plant-human as the vine, having trans-corporeally absorbed the body's flesh, creates a liminal yet physical revenant through the living plant re-forming around the skeletal structure. The vine actively keeps the figure of Melissa together, even when Gia's dog runs off with a leg bone during the vegetal form's attack on his owner as the vegetal revenant seeks Charles. A trans-corporeal monster, the Melissa-wisteria demonstrates both vegetal and female agency as it takes revenge for the woman's brutal murder and ultimately freeing Gia from her destructive marriage.

When Charles traps Gia against the wall threateningly on her discovery of his murder of Melissa, who became inconvenient to him when she became pregnant, the transformed plant-human monster enacts reprisal for the physical abuse suffered in human form. Wrapping itself around Charles, 'her skeletal mouth and vine lips closed onto his', the

⁵² Leahey, 'The Wisteria', 14.

⁵³ Simon C. Estok, 'Painful Material Realities, Tragedy, Ecophobia', in *Material ecocriticism*, edited by Serenella Iovino and Serpil Oppermann (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2014), 130-140 (130).

⁵⁴ Estok, 'Painful Material Realities, Tragedy, Ecophobia', 131.

⁵⁵ Leahey, 'The Wisteria', 16.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Leahey, 'The Wisteria', 17.

wisteria-woman begins to drag him towards her grave 'as vines erupted out of his body'.⁵⁸ The horror stems, not only in the unsettling trans-corporeality of the female gendered vine, but in a 'becoming-plant' that serves to remind us of the power of nature over man. Although Jack Halberstam argues that monsters 'can represent gender, race, nationality, class and sexuality in one body',⁵⁹ Leahey's tale offers the wisteria as an ecoGothic metaphor for a contemporary feminist dialogue of domestic abuse and oppression. The ultimate combining of vengeful woman with the female-associated plant brings this wisteria as *eco-femme fatale* into the twenty-first century.

A female ecoGothic metaphor

Wisteria is as ambiguous and contrary as the patriarchal construct of femininity it is employed to represent, but its use in the garden as a site marker of the domestic boundaries has proffered its use in fiction – gothic narratives particularly – as a signifier for domestic violence. These two tales, over a century apart, illustrate the consistent use of wisteria in highlighting female oppression, domestic abuse, and murder. Both stories centred on the wisteria revealing marital transgressions and the male violence resulting from impending discovery through a pregnancy. Yet, the wisteria challenges the patriarchal-inflected culture that places the blame solely on women by marking the burial site of murdered female victims. Drawing on concepts of trans-corporeality and notions of material interconnectedness, both authors imbue their wisteria with a vegetal agency that champions female agency in a way that haunts the male imagination, holding both genders to account in the face of domestic violence.

⁵⁸ Leahey, 'The Wisteria', 19.

⁵⁹ Jack Halberstam, 'Parasites and Perverts: An Introduction to Gothic Monstrosity', in *The Monster Theory Reader*, edited by Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2020), 148-173 (165).

Bibliography

- Alaimo, Stacy. 2010. *Bodily Natures: Science, Environment and the Material Self*, Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press.
- Aldana Reyes, Xavier. 2014. *Body Gothic: Corporeal Transgression in Contemporary Literature and Horror Film*, Cardiff: University of Wales Press.
- Bidwell Beckham, Sue. 1988. 'The American Front Porch: Women's Liminal Space' reprinted in Delaney Carol with Kaspin, Deborah. 2011. *Investigating Culture: An Experiential Introduction to Anthropology*, John Wiley & Sons, Incorporated: 68-78.
- Butcher, Daisy. ed. 2019. *Evil Roots: Killer Tales of the Botanical Gothic*, London: British Library.
- Cohen, Jeffrey Jerome. 2020. 'Monster Culture (Seven Theses)', in *The Monster Theory Reader*, edited by Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press: 37-57.
- Craciun, Adriana. 2009. *Fatal Women of Romanticism*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press
- Del Principe, David. 'Introduction: The EcoGothic in the Long Nineteenth Century', *Gothic Studies* 16.1 (2014), 1-8.
- Durant Visser, Thomas. 2012. *Porches of North America*, Hanover and London: University Press of New England.
- Edney, Sue. 2020. 'Introduction: Phantoms, fantasy and uncanny flowers', in *EcoGothic Gardens in the Long Nineteenth Century*, edited by Sue Edney. Manchester: Manchester University Press: 1-15.
- Estok, Simon C. 2014. 'Painful Material Realities, Tragedy, Ecophobia', in *Material ecocriticism*, edited by Serenella Iovino and Serpil Oppermann. Bloomington: Indiana University Press: 130-140.
- Fitzpatrick, Teresa. 2020. 'Green is the new black: Plant monsters as ecoGothic tropes; vampires and *femmes fatales*' in *EcoGothic Gardens in the Long Nineteenth Century*, edited by Sue Edney. Manchester: Manchester University Press: 130-147.
- Garrard, Greg. 2004. *Ecocriticism*, Oxon: Routledge.
- Gilman, Charlotte Perkins. 1891. 'The Giant Wistaria' in *Evil Roots: Killer Tales of the Botanical Gothic*, edited by Daisy Butcher. London: British Library: 79-88.
- Grasser, Celine. 2005. "Good Girls versus Blooming Maidens: The Building of Female Middle- and Upper-Class Identities in the Garden, England and France, 1820-1870", in *Secret Gardens, Satanic Mills: Placing Girls in European History, 1750-1960*, ed. by Mary Jo Maynes, Birgitte Soland & Christina Benninghaus. Bloomington: Indiana University Press: 131-146.
- Halberstam, Jack. 2020. 'Parasites and Perverts: An Introduction to Gothic Monstrosity', in *The Monster Theory Reader*, edited by Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press: 148-173.
- Holton, India. 2021. *The Wisteria Society of Lady Scoundrels*, New York: Jove, Penguin Random House.
- Houle, Karen F. 'Animal, Vegetable, Mineral: Ethics as Extension or Becoming? The Case of Becoming- Plant', *Journal for Critical Animal Studies*, IX.1/2 (2011), 89-116.
- Hughes, William. 2020. 'Foreword: On the Gothic nature of gardens', in *EcoGothic Gardens in the Long Nineteenth Century: Phantoms, Fantasy and Uncanny Flowers*, ed. by Sue Edney, Manchester: Manchester University Press: pp.xiv-xvii.
- Hurley, Kelly. 1996. *The Gothic Body*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Johnston, Elizabeth. 'The Original 'Nasty Woman'', *The Atlantic*, 6 November 2016

Keetley, Dawn and Wynn Sivils, Matthew. 2018. 'Introduction: Approaches to the Ecogothic' in *Ecogothic in Nineteenth-Century American Literature*, edited by Dawn Keetley and Matthew Wynn Sivils. New York: Routledge: 1-20.

Leahey, Donna A. 2014. 'The Wisteria', in *Growing Concerns*, edited by Alex Hurst. Fort Smith, AR: Chupa Cabra House: 9-20.

Meeker Natania and Szabari, Antónia. 2020. *Radical Botany: Plants and Speculative Fiction*, New York: Fordham University Press.

Murphy, Bernice M. 2009. *The Suburban Gothic in American Popular Culture*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Royal Horticultural Society website: <https://www.rhs.org.uk/search?query=wisteria>

Smith, Andrew and Hughes, William. 2013. 'Introduction: defining the ecoGothic' in *EcoGothic* edited by Andrew Smith and William Hughes. Manchester: Manchester University Press: 1-14.

Stott, Rebecca. 1992. *The Fabrication of the Late-Victorian Femme Fatale: The Kiss of Death*, Basingstoke and London: MacMillan Press Ltd.

Tuana, Nancy. 2008. 'Viscous Porosity: Witnessing Katrina', in *Material Feminisms*, edited by Stacy Alaimo and Susan Hekman. Bloomington: Indiana University Press: 188-213.

Waters, Michael. 1988. *The Garden in Victorian Literature*, Aldershot: Scholar Press.

Wisker, Gina. 2019. 'Postfeminist Gothic', in *Twenty-First-Century Gothic: An Edinburgh Companion*, edited by Maisha Wester and Xavier Aldana Reyes. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press: 47-59.

Wynn-Sivils, Matthew. 2018. 'Vegetal Haunting: The Gothic Plant in Nineteenth-Century American Fiction', in *Ecogothic in Nineteenth-Century American Literature*, edited by Dawn Keetley and Matthew Wynn Sivils. New York: Routledge: 161-174.

Teresa Fitzpatrick, BA(Hons) HUM/LIT, MA, FHEA

Final Year PhD English

A final-year PhD student at the Manchester Centre for Gothic Studies (Manchester Metropolitan University), Teresa's specific research interests are the ecoGothic and female Gothic, with a focus on speculative and horror narratives from Victorian to present day. Her doctoral thesis developed a material feminist ecoGothic framework to explore eco-social changes illustrated by cultivated vegetal monsters and their gardeners in plant monster narratives from the late nineteenth to the twenty-first century. She has written reviews for several journals, presented her research at various conferences, and contributed chapters on exotic flowers as *eco-femmes fatales* and ecoGothic monstrosity to edited collections.

Publications:

Fitzpatrick, T., 'Green is the new black: Plant monsters as ecoGothic tropes; vampires and *femmes fatales*', in *EcoGothic Gardens in the Long Nineteenth Century: Phantoms, Fantasy and Uncanny Flowers*, ed. by Sue Edney (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2020), pp.130-147.

Fitzpatrick, T., 'EcoGothic Body Horror: Monstrous Hybridity and Gender in *Doctor Who*, 'The Seeds of Doom' (1976)' in *Critical Approaches to Horror in Doctor Who*, ed. by Robert Kilker (Lehigh University Press, *forthcoming*).