

HEARING GHOSTS:

**Writing a Low Fantasy YA Gothic Fiction
for young adult males**

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for young adult males**

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ABSTRACT

Keywords: fridging, gendering, hero, hesitancy, identity, romance

This paper examines binaristic gender norms in the field of Low Fantasy Young Adult Gothic literature. The twenty-first century has witnessed a significant increase in the popularity of Gothic fiction for young adults. The genre's vogue arguably lies in its suitability as 'an ideal mode of expression for the emerging adolescent,' (Coats, 2008:84). It takes as its concern a range of contemporary anxieties experienced by teenagers pertaining to issues of gender, sexuality, race, social media and technology. However, Smith and Moruzi contend that 'by far the majority of YA Gothic texts feature white, often middle class, typically heterosexual female protagonists.' (Moruzi et al, 2021:6). The rising popularity of the paranormal romance has contributed to a surge in the number of young female readers (and writers) of the genre. These readers can explore contemporary YA Gothic literature as a platform for expressing adolescent female concerns. Concomitantly, a generational shift has occurred wherein young male readers of Gothic fiction have retreated from the genre, (Crawford, 2014: 235) perceiving that YA Gothic novels offer them no such expressional outlet. The objective of the Creative Writing unit accompanying this thesis is to produce a "cross-cutting" YA Gothic novel intended to appeal to both male and female young adult readers. My novel positions a male protagonist at its heart, aiming to address and delve into teenage male issues and themes. It seeks to serve its male readers as paranormal romance serves its female readers. Drawing from a content analysis sample of YA Gothic novels published in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century, and grounded in theories and scholarship from Hendershot (1998), Botting (2008) and Todorov (1973), which explores the gendered histories and modalities of the Gothic, as well as insights from my own novel, this paper examines binaristic gender norms in Low Fantasy YA Gothic fiction. It argues that these norms prevent the genre from serving as a locus for young male anxieties and concerns. These concerns include representation of mental health problems in young males, romantic relationships, and the changing nature of adolescent male identity. The narrative technique of pregnant hesitancy is showcased as an effective method of imbuing a Low Fantasy YA Gothic novel with such themes. The paper also reflects on the specific inspiration and process for the creative work. A source of toxic gendering norms is located via an exercise in creative reflective practice conducted by the present writer, wherein the habit of fridging (Simone 1999) is explored and discussed.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter 1: Introduction	5-29
Chapter 2: Literature Review	30-43
Chapter 3: Methodology	46-61
Chapter 4: Subverting the YA Gothic Hero & The Crisis of Male Identity	62-88
Chapter 5: Paranormal Romance	89-103
Chapter 6: Pregnant Hesitancy & The Representation of Mental Illness in YA Gothic Literature	104-117
Chapter 7: Gothic Heroines in Fridges	118-127
Chapter 8: Conclusions	128-131
Bibliography	132-137

INTRODUCTION

This PhD's purpose is to create a Low Fantasy YA Gothic novel that reflects contemporary adolescent male concerns in the same way or similar way as Low Fantasy Paranormal Romances such as *Twilight* (2005) or *Fallen* (2009) reflect contemporary adolescent female concerns. It aims to place a male protagonist at the centre of its narrative whilst maintaining "crosscutting" appeal that will attract young female and young male readers alike, providing an alternative to the current binarised scenario wherein most YA Gothic texts are viewed as either 'feminine' or 'masculine'. The choice of Low (or Intrusion) Fantasy has been influenced by both my personal tastes as a reader and writer of the mode and by my observation that such fiction rarely offers young male readers a means of engaging with the concerns that currently preoccupy them.

The purpose of this thesis is to explore binaristic gendering norms in the Low Fantasy YA Gothic fiction tradition and to argue that these norms prevent the tradition from functioning as a locus for adolescent male readers' concerns. (Similarly, one purpose of the accompanying novel is to act as a vehicle for addressing such themes by challenging the tradition's binarised gender norms to the extent that they will fail to emerge. Mental illness, social exclusion, feelings of otherness, changes in the nuclear family unit and unrequited feelings of romantic teenage love are all themes experienced by the young male protagonist of *How to Hear Ghosts*, the novel that accompanies this thesis and fulfils its Creative Writing adjunct.)

Novels such as J.J. Harwood's *The Shadow in the Glass* (2021) or Marianna Baer's *Frost* (2011) feature teenage female protagonists who encounter paranormal forces whilst experiencing social anxiety, peer group pressure, romance or their own attempts to 'interrogate the limits placed upon them by the adult authority figures that they encounter' (Moruzi et al, 2021:4). Smith and Moruzi identify YA Gothic novels as sites for addressing such teenage concerns, yet most YA Gothic novels view the experience of adolescence through the eyes of female protagonists; indeed, male protagonists scarcely feature in Low/Intrusion Fantasy YA Gothic narratives at all.

The scarcity of young male protagonists in a fictional genre is problematic if one's concern is to enable the genre to represent the adolescent male experience. A cursory glance at typical Low Fantasy YA Gothic texts, such as Rachel Caine's *Glass Houses* (2006), discloses an immediate portrayal of female adolescent tribulation.

On the day Claire became a member of the Glass House, somebody stole her laundry.

When she reached into the crappy, beat up washing machine, she found nothing but the wet slick sides of the drum, and- like a bad joke - the worst pair of underwear she owned, plus one sock. (Caine, 2006:11)

The effect is one of immediate relatability for female adolescent readers, with evocation of student life's grimmer aspects communicated in the novel's opening lines; this evocation promptly develops into an awareness that the laundry theft is merely one episode in a prolonged campaign of bullying - by fellow female students - which establishes the narrative as an opportunity for female readers to, as YA novelist Chris Crutcher puts it, 'find solace in characters who walk the same emotionally dangerous paths they walk' (Richmond, 2019:2). The value of establishing an affinity with a fictional character who experiences an episode of bullying (or similar predicament to the reader's) cannot be underestimated. As Kia Richmond states, 'The positive attributes of young adult literature have been well-established by scholars ... these include YAL's capacity to help readers see themselves on the pages of the books' (Richmond, 2019:1). Again, there is an abundance of such examples in Low Fantasy YA Gothic fiction, yet they invariably focus on adolescent experience from the viewpoint of female protagonists. It is therefore necessary to construct a male protagonist who can inhabit the centre of a narrative and provide a similar site where young male readers can partake of the genre and 'see themselves on the pages'.

The ability to explore the uncertainties that accompany the changing nature of adolescent male identity in the twenty-first century is similarly attendant upon establishing a male protagonist. According to Reeves, challenges faced by teenage males in the post-millennial world include poor performance in education (compared to girls), increased incidence of mental health difficulties and uncertainty regarding their relationships with the opposite sex

(which includes confusion over behaviour deemed appropriate towards women in the wake of media coverage relating to the #MeToo movement) (Reeves, 2022:xi). But while Michelle J. Smith and Kristine Moruzi state that 'YA Gothic texts of the twenty-first century grapple with ... tensions between the specific anxieties embodied in the figure of the young adult protagonist and the cultural anxieties of the new millennium' (Moruzi et al, 2021:10) there is, once again, a dearth of male protagonists in Low Fantasy YA Gothic with whom we might explore such anxieties.

The Low Fantasy YA Gothic novel similarly fails to provide a potent male perspective on teenage romantic relationships. Binarised tropes from paranormal romance have been dominant in YA Gothic fiction's representation of teen romance since the success of *Twilight*. Novels such as Abigail Gibbs' *Dark Heroine* (2012) and Tracy Wolff's *Crave* (2023) share norms inherited from Mills & Boon/Harlequin Romance fiction in their portrayal of adolescent sexual relationships. These norms displace a teenage human male perspective: the Byronic, brooding male romantic lead (who is usually a vampire), the comparatively helpless human heroine, the unrealistically happy ending that manages to exceed Hollywood tropes by defying old age courtesy of vampiric immortality. Today's male participant in Gothic Romance is likely to be a vampire, like James, the hero of L.J. Smith's *Night World: The Secret Vampire* (1996), who has 'outlaw good looks, which always reminded her of James Dean' (Smith, 1996:89), though contemporary species of vampire are generally monogamous and morally upstanding compared to their forebears.

The notion of Low Fantasy YA Gothic literature serving as a locus for young male readers' anxieties is blocked, then, by the lack of a male protagonist. The failure of the tradition to explore young male mental health problems is perhaps its most glaring omission, given the high incidence of mental health difficulties among adolescent males (*Mental Health of Children and Young People in England, 2020: Wave 1 Follow Up to the 2017 Survey*). Representations of mental illness in Gothic literature have been notoriously ill-informed since the eighteenth century, chiefly serving as plot devices or an attempt to horrify. The representations of adolescent mental health difficulties in YA Gothic literature have improved over time, however, and while the subject is never explored to the extent that the examination of the mental health disorder becomes the narrative's *raison d'être*, its portrayal in contemporary YA Gothic literature is usually endowed with verisimilitude based on medical

understanding of the condition being portrayed, (such as in Amy Lukavics' *The Women in the Walls* (2016)). Furthermore, its status as a plot device has been upgraded via YA Gothic authors' occasional tendency of impregnating the mental health condition in question with thematic importance. This narrative strategy is usually centred in the popular 'unreliable narrator' trope, stemming (in such examples as Caitlin Starling's *Yellow Jessamine* (2020)), from the protagonist's questionable sanity, which leads to a moment of 'hesitancy' (Torodov, 1973:24-25) in which the reader is left uncertain regarding the reality of the story's paranormal phenomena. Writers such as Amy Lukavics have utilised this period of hesitancy - which effectively evolves into what might be called thematically pregnant hesitancy - for the purpose of furthering the themes of their stories, though, once again, such a technique remains unavailable for the purposes of furthering themes associated with male adolescence due to the absence of young male narrators in Low Fantasy YA Gothic fiction.

LOW OR INTRUSION FANTASY

It is here, then, that the matter of definition must be encountered, and the term "Low Fantasy" has been chosen, though it is also commonly referred to as "Intrusion Fantasy", a term defined by Farah Mendlesohn as 'a "this world" fantasy' in which 'the narrative leads toward the acceptance of the fantastic, by the reader, if not the protagonist' (Mendlesohn, 2008:115). As a subgenre of fantasy fiction it is distinguished from High Fantasy by setting its narrative in realistic environments where paranormal events intrude on an otherwise-normal world. (The High Fantasy school of fiction complies with Mendlesohn's notion of "Immersive Fantasy", which takes place in fictional worlds that have their own distinct sets of rules regarding reality and physical laws, such as Tolkien's Middle Earth.) The High Fantasy school of YA Gothic fiction likewise complies with Mendlesohn's notion of Immersive Fantasy in novels such as T.L. Huchu's *The Library of the Dead* (2021) or Kendare Blake's *Anna Dressed in Blood* (2012), which feature youthful male Gothic superheroes combating dark forces in a manner more akin to Bilbo Baggins than *Twilight*. These heroes live in worlds where ghosts or vampires are common, rather than in real-world settings associated with Low Fantasy. Low Fantasy is more likely to feature relatable day-to-day issues of the sort experienced by Bella Swann prior to her

encounter with the intrusion in *Twilight*, and, as such, it may be argued that Low Fantasy's realistic environment offers superior scope for portraying "this world" teenage problems.

One crucial reason for *How to Hear Ghosts* fitting so readily into the tradition of Low Fantasy YA Gothic fiction lies in its reliance on the Todorovian concept of hesitation. Tzvetan Todorov supplies us with a definition of fantastic literature as fiction in which the protagonist 'hesitates, wonders (and the reader with him) whether what is happening to him is real, if what surrounds him is indeed reality ... or whether it is no more than an illusion ... In a world which is indeed our world, the one we know, a world without devils, sylphides, or vampires, there occurs an event which cannot be explained by the laws of this same familiar world' (Todorov, 1973:25).

Julia Briggs echoes Todorov's emphasis on the importance of hesitancy in her own definition of what constitutes a ghost story. 'Ghost stories have multiple meanings, but one constant element is the challenge they offer to the rational order and the observed laws of nature, though they may do so in a variety of ways' (Briggs, 2012:176). As an enthusiast of the Low Fantasy Gothic tradition of literature, my own experience suggests that its moment of hesitation, wherein the rational order is challenged, constitutes its chief appeal to the reader and its chief challenge to the writer. The venerated and difficult trick of "suspension of disbelief", accompanied by the startling presence of the uncanny is the thrill that lies at the heart of Low Fantasy Gothic fiction - and it represented the biggest challenge to me during the writing of *How to Hear Ghosts*.

The main distinction I intend to signal before proceeding further will be an insistence on exploring only YA Gothic fiction that belongs to the realm of Low or Intrusion Fantasy. *How to Hear Ghosts* is, after all, a work of Low/Intrusion fantasy. The use of the mode's hesitancy, which forms the basis of Intrusion Fantasy, serves as a crucial element in the presentation of a YA Gothic novel's theme. Representation of mental health issues in the novels I have chosen to study, for example, reveal a different *raison d'être* and narrative strategy for the use of hesitation according to each novel's thematic concern. Amy Lukavicz's depiction of her heroine's mental health issues in *Daughters unto Devils* (2015) is used to explore themes of patriarchal oppression and uses the protagonist's mental state of uncertainty and prior illness as a means of creating hesitancy in the narrative which serves to emphasize the presence of patriarchal authoritarianism. Alternatively, Andrew Michael Hurley's *The Loney* (2014) uses

mental health difficulties experienced by one of his male protagonists as a means for establishing ambiguity and hesitancy whilst simultaneously weaponizing the hesitancy *and* the mental health disorder in order to create a critique of religious fundamentalism that occupies the thematic heart of the novel.

THE GHOST STORY

It may be appropriate to add that *How to Hear Ghosts* also participates in the “ghost story” subgenre, which comes close, according to Julia Briggs’ definition, to providing the satisfactory signifiers that concur with Gothic fiction as its parent genre.

Ghost stories constitute a special category of the Gothic and are partly characterised by the fact that their supernatural events remain unexplained ... Ghost stories commonly provide an alternative structure of cause and effect, in which the supernatural is not explained away but offers its own pseudo-explanation according to some kind of spiritual law of action and reaction: an unburied corpse, a murder victim or some other secret apparently buried safely in the past returns to haunt the perpetrator, as in Sheridan Le Fanu’s ‘The Familiar’ or M.R. James’ ‘A School Story’. (Briggs, 2012:177)

Briggs’ definition certainly aligns with the plot of *How to Hear Ghosts*, which unfolds around Oliver Quinn, a sixteen-year-old boy who moves in with his uncle after the sudden death of his mother. Oliver’s Uncle Dominic, a professional stage medium, tours the northern theatre circuit. Ollie becomes deeply engrossed in his uncle’s vocation, suspecting that he too might have inherited the Quinn family’s gift of Sight, as he begins to perceive voices and whispers. One particular voice seems to drive him to find a mysterious letter that arrived in the weeks shortly before his mother’s death, the contents of which she refused to disclose. In his uncle’s study, Ollie stumbles upon an old book - titled *How to Hear Ghosts* - which convinces him he *is* a seer. Together with his schoolfriend, Hannah, they delve into the paranormal world guided

by the book, attempting to trace the letter's location. Ollie believes this letter carries a curse responsible for his mother's death. Following the book's instructions, they engage in recording Electronic Voice Phenomena. Ollie discerns voices within these recordings, voices eerily similar to the ones he heard in his head before discontinuing his covert misuse of his uncle's anti-depressant medication. Upon finding the letter, Ollie discovers it accuses Dominic of exploiting a grieving mother's dead child in order to deceive the audience during an on-stage 'channelling'.

How to Hear Ghosts operates within the Low/Intrusion Fantasy framework, employing the narrator's mental health difficulties to create hesitancy while concurrently utilising it as a strategy to fashion the young male Gothic protagonist's 'nomadic subjectivity' (Germaine, 2018:8) via a "coming-of-age"-style revelation that his uncle and the concept of "home" are deceptive. Chloe Germaine's perception of twenty-first century YA Gothic texts as potential channels for themes of homelessness, encompassing a call to adventure, transformative experiences and 'a line of becoming (which) affords all the positive possibilities suggested by nomadic philosophy', reframes homelessness as nomadism and 'offers an alternative ethical vision of writing for children to the widespread pedagogical view expressed by children's writers, critics and other commentators' (Germaine, 2018:3). *How to Hear Ghosts* challenges the conventional perspective of YA literature as instructive and aims, through its phase of hesitancy, to embrace the Gothic as a subversive form capable of fostering 'a questioning and rebellious subjectivity' (Germaine, 2018:4) where hesitancy signifies a coming-of-age journey immensely beneficial to the YA audience, promoting inquisitiveness over the customary pedagogical methodology. The line of becoming that emerges in the novel as a result of the narrative's hesitancy can also be viewed as a subversion of Low Fantasy YA Gothic fiction's binarised norms, since it climaxes with the protagonist's acceptance of a new identity - another of the story's themes - wherein Ollie allows himself to be "entered" by spirits at the story's finale in a subversion of traditional gender roles.

Tropes of Low Fantasy (which correspond with ghost story elements, as defined by Briggs) are also used in *How to Hear Ghosts* for constructing a romantic relationship between the story's leading male and female protagonists. Their relationship is based in a Low Fantasy context (since Ollie and Hannah's relationship takes place in the "real world" and is triggered by joint interest in amateur ghost-hunting *and* the subsequent period of hesitancy they encounter).

Their ensuing romantic relationship portrayal involves attempting to subvert the traditional paranormal romance and can only succeed by unfolding in a Low Fantasy/real-world setting.

THE GOTHIC

The term “Gothic” has been chosen as a signifier because it is the term of preference of myriad researchers and critics in the field. Robin Sowerby states ‘Horace Walpole set the seal upon a new usage in English with his famous description of *The Castle of Otranto* as a gothick story in 1764’ (Sowerby, 2012:25), and Fred Botting goes further, pointing out:

Here, the word “gothic” assumes its powerful, if negative, significance: it condenses a variety of historical elements and meanings opposed to the categories valued in the eighteenth century. In this respect, the real history of “gothic” begins with the eighteenth century, when it signified a “barbarous”, “medieval”, and “supernatural” past (Longueil, 1923, 453-4). Used derogatively about art, architecture, and writing that failed to conform to the standards of neoclassical taste, “gothic” signified the lack of reason, morality and beauty of feudal beliefs, customs, and works ... emerging at a time of bourgeois and industrial revolution, a time of Enlightenment philosophy and increasingly secular views, the eighteenth century gothic fascination with a past of chivalry, violence, magical beings, and malevolent aristocrats is bound up with the shifts from feudal to commercial practices in which notions of property, government, and society were undergoing massive transformations ... (Botting, 2012:14)

The term is pejorative, then, in its application as a signifier of a zeitgeist’s rejection of its culture’s past values. The use of Gothic as a term to represent ‘a time of barbarity and feudalism before the blessed arrival of the Enlightenment and the benefits of science and reason that it bestowed’ (Spooner, 2006:14) appears in its eighteenth-century ideological incarnation as a signifier of primitive belief and superstition. It also signals a *devaluation* and rejection of these things, since they were heavily associated with a past culture that had been dominantly and diametrically opposed to the values of the present: the genesis of industrialisation and early capitalism depended on notions of progress, civilisation and

rationality, and defined itself in opposition to the feudalist era's primitive thinking. (The initial usage of the word 'Gothic' originates with the Germanic tribes who overthrew Roman civilisation during the fifth century, and who have since been condemned to posterity as barbarians. Their 'overthrow of what is conventionally viewed in the West as one of the greatest civilisations of all time lies behind the modern understanding of Gothic as the passionate overthrow of reason' (Spooner, 2006:13)).

In her 2006 study of Gothic culture, Catherine Spooner goes on to define Gothic in its contemporary form as follows:

Gothic texts deal with a variety of themes just as pertinent to contemporary culture as to the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, when Gothic novels first achieved popularity: the legacies of the past and its burdens on the present; the radically provisional or divided nature of the self; the construction of peoples or individuals as monstrous or 'other'; the preoccupation with bodies that are modified, grotesque or diseased. Gothic has become so pervasive precisely because it is so apposite to the representation of contemporary concerns. (Spooner, 2006:8)

The definition of contemporary Gothic provided by Spooner here applies perfectly to the themes and concerns dealt with in *How to Hear Ghosts*. She deepens the connection with the novel and the genre by maintaining that 'Gothic is inherently concerned with the incursions of the past into the present, with hauntings and repetitions' (Spooner, 2006:12). Oliver Quinn, the young protagonist of *How to Hear Ghosts*, certainly qualifies as a vessel for these concerns. Spooner's definition expands further to encompass Ollie's predicament: 'In Gothic texts, the past returns with sickening force: the dead rise from the grave or lay their cold hands upon the shoulders of the living ... the past is a site of terror, of an injustice that must be resolved, an evil that must be exorcised' (Spooner, 2006: 18). Indeed, Spooner's definition of contemporary Gothic has been so thematically applicable to the anxieties and problems that preoccupy Ollie Quinn that my initial decision to categorise *How to Hear Ghosts* as a "paranormal YA" text (as suggested by various industry agents and professionals) was jettisoned in favour of the Gothic category. Spooner adds justification to the decision by pointing out that 'In twentieth century film and fiction, the troubling ghosts of past traumas

were not restricted to architectural locales, but made the mind itself a kind of prison' (Spooner, 2006:18). Again, this is applicable to Ollie's Gothic story, which unfolds chiefly in the haunted house of his psyche.

Spooner ponders whether it is accurate to say that texts ever 'belong' to a single genre. It might be more precise to suggest that they 'participate' in genres, since 'to participate does not entail complete identification; it merely suggests a relationship with that genre' (Spooner, 2006:26). Cyndy Hendershot underlines the importance of emphasizing 'the Gothic as a mode in order to extend the boundaries of the transgressive Gothic from either a rigid periodization in the late eighteenth century or a rigid definition that spans centuries but which puts forth certain machinery (i.e., a haunted castle, a damsel in distress, the presence of the supernatural etc) as necessary in order for a work to be Gothic' (Hendershot, 1998:1). Similarly, Germaine contends that 'the Gothic denotes any text that uses recognisably Gothic tropes or characters, or that draws and makes reference to a history of the Gothic in its multiple forms' (Germaine, 2018:34). Crawford concurs, asserting that *any* definition adhering to a strict set of criteria is nebulous, for the reason that:

I do not believe that such rules reflect the way in which genres actually function. A genre, in the sense that the word is used by readers, booksellers, and publishers, is not composed of a checklist of generic requirements, against which any given work of fiction can be compared in order to discover whether it belongs to that genre or not; instead, it is defined by a constellation of associated tropes, and works of fiction participate in those genres to the extent that they partake of these tropes which define it. Nor is this constellation fixed: it can shift and change as the genre develops, and almost always does so. (Crawford, 2014:9)

Indeed, if we concur with the logic of Crawford's position it simplifies matters considerably and "Low Fantasy YA Gothic" fiction may be viewed, in the final analysis, less as a genre than as a tradition.

YOUNG ADULTS

My definition of what constitutes “Young Adult” paranormal fiction, as with previous category decisions, correlates with Crawford’s assertion that categorisation rests with the identification of tropes. As Chloe Germaine maintains, the category of “Young Adult” or “Teen” fiction ‘is not helpful since it denotes marketing strategies, rather than suggesting anything about real readers. Different bookshops shelve works differently, and one publisher might suggest a work is for young adult readers, while a comparable work from another publisher (in terms of theme, length and content) might be suggested as a “9+” work ... The children’s Gothic novel, *Coram Boy*, is included in the UK curriculum for Key Stage 3 (ages 11-13), even though the book includes typically “Young Adult” content, such as sex and violence’ (Germaine, 2018:35). The inclusion of Stephen King’s work in this thesis may be viewed as inappropriate, since King’s corpus is generally regarded as adult horror fiction. However, his popularity with young adult readers (and his work’s categorisation under the label of Young Adult Horror in many bookshops and internet sites celebrating it as such) suggests otherwise.

FEMININE TERROR AND MASCULINE HORROR

The Young Adult Gothic genre of today has evolved gradually from a two-century-old gothic romance tradition of novels written by and for women. Ann Radcliffe, its ‘great enchantress’ and the most popular novelist of eighteenth-century England, created novels that focussed on female protagonists’ struggles with a male tyrant. The term “Female Gothic”, coined by Ellen Moers in her book *Literary Women* (1976), was initially used to refer to Gothic fiction written by females, though the term does more than merely denote the writer’s gender. Moers regards it as ‘a coded expression of women’s fears of entrapment within the domestic and within the female body’ (Moers, 1976:91), arguing that female authors of Gothic romance were covertly attempting to convey feelings of imprisonment and discontent towards patriarchy through their writing. According to Moers, Radcliffe created a style of narrative with a female protagonist who is simultaneously a heroine and victim. Her imprisonment by a powerful male figure expresses the threat of eighteenth-century patriarchal society, in which political, social and economic power lay with men. (Moers, 1976:91)

From its beginnings in the late eighteenth century, the Gothic thriller, or Gothic romance, became posited firmly within the realm of Romance literature intended for female readers. Chloe Germaine asserts that the *young female* reader was 'arguably the addressee of the earliest gothic fiction' (Germaine, 2018: 103) and Kate Ferguson Ellis elaborates: 'Its feminist defenders have argued that it was practically created by women writers, who took Walpole's one attempt to move the novel away from "a strict adherence to common life" and fashioned a series of conventions that have served ever since to explore the concerns of a growing body of women readers' (Ferguson Ellis, 2012:457). Ferguson Ellis maintains that the Gothic Romance *and the novel itself* were targeted - from their conception - at 'the woman novel reader, whose newly created leisure allowed her to make use of the circulating library and whose "placement" in the home made her a reader eagerly courted by publishers ... These readers were a major market not simply for novels but for novels about haunted houses and their haunters' (Ferguson Ellis, 1989:x). Ferguson Ellis goes on to explain that the newly formed female reading public that appeared alongside the arrival of the novel was made possible by the proliferation of female education that arose in the latter half of the eighteenth century and 'by the separation of spheres that released women, at least ideally, from physical work' (Ferguson Ellis, 1989: x).

The first readers and writers of the Gothic novel were middle-class women. The narratives they provided and consumed (such as Radcliffe's *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, (1794)) were distinguished by their utility as vehicles for the expression and preoccupation with feminine themes and concerns. Domestic entrapment and unequal power relations existing between men and women, including the threat of male violence directed against females, were common thematic features in the earliest Gothic novels. As Ferguson Ellis points out, 'The strand of popular culture we call the Gothic novel can be distinguished by the presence of houses in which people are locked in and locked out. They are concerned with violence done to familial bonds that is frequently directed against women' (Ferguson Ellis, 1989:3). The haunted castles of Radcliffe's novels can be viewed as symbols of the kind of claustrophobic domestic spaces which many young women were forced to inhabit whilst experiencing fear and anxiety at the prospect of male violence and oppression.

The notion of Gothic literature as a (young) female pursuit, brought about by the emancipatory effects of eighteenth-century education acts and young women's simultaneous

entrapment in the patriarchal confines of house and home does not necessarily vindicate a justification of the 'masculine'/'feminine' separation of the Gothic, however. As Fred Botting states, 'since the eighteenth century the notion that tales of love and adventure were produced and consumed, in the main, by female writers and readers has remained a persistent, if fallacious, cultural fiction' (Botting, 2008:10). Germaine's 'imagined reader' - a female in the case of the eighteenth-century gothicist - can be seen to have dominated the marketplace's targeting strategies then as it does now. The falsehood of this notion of 'imagined reader' can be demonstrated by the obvious (and largely unacknowledged) penchant that existed among male readers of the period, particularly the teenage M.G. Lewis, (whose *The Monk* was published in 1796, emerging wholesale from an infatuation with Ann Radcliffe's work).

The Monk represents the 'masculine' Gothic tradition's birth in earnest, with its violently murderous and rapacious protagonist and demonic forces. Lewis created a more sensational type of Gothic romance, exploiting horror and violence in *The Monk*, which features comparatively graphic depictions of rape, as well as matricide, incest and burial alive. As Angela Leonardi states, 'The different schools ... are distinguished by some critics as novel of terror and novel of horror. Sometimes this same distinction is tied to gender, with female equated with Terror Gothic, and with male being equated with Horror Gothic' (Leonardi, 2016:16). Terror and horror, then, are considered by some scholars as two different traditions into which Gothic fiction is divided. As Leonardi states, 'The division finds its source in the stylistic differences between ... M.G. Lewis and Anne Radcliffe' (Leonardi, 2016:16). Radcliffe herself went so far as to characterise the distinction between terror and horror in her essay "On the Supernatural in Poetry" (1826):

Terror is characterised by 'obscurity' or indeterminacy in its treatment of potentially horrible events; it is this indeterminacy that leads the reader towards the sublime. Horror, in contrast, nearly annihilates the reader's responsive capacity with its unambiguous displays of atrocity ... Terror and horror are so far opposite, that the first expands the soul, and awakens the faculties to a high degree of life; the other contracts, freezes, and nearly annihilates them ... and where lies the great difference between horror and terror but in the uncertainty and obscurity ... respecting the dreaded evil. (Radcliffe, 1826:168)

Supposedly, then, in terror, the reader's imagination is left to work in partial darkness, struggling to envisage scenes that are obscured, and which provide it with stimulation, expansion and the freedom associated with imaginative flight, while (masculine) horror numbs the imaginative faculties via its explicitness. Such distinctions seem analogous with a possible modern-day comparison between, say, James' *The Turn of the Screw* (1898) and a 1980s "video nasty".

Views of Gothic fiction as a field which exists in two separate strands - 'feminine' and 'masculine' - are not unique to the twenty-first century, then. Critical historians readily situate the Gothic romance as a subordinate form of the more enduring, developed and historically embedded genre of romance. Joseph Crawford identifies the link between Gothic and romance as coming into existence during the twelfth century amid tales of courtly love doubling as stories of aristocratic chivalry and magical adventure, which 'proved so enduringly popular that, for the next 500 years, a single genre - 'romance' - served simultaneously as Western Europe's preferred form of both' (Crawford, 2014:12). Crawford's history of the development of the Gothic romance tale also makes sense of the emergent popularity of the nineteenth century male 'romance', wherein acolytes of Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* (1764) - Walter Scott, Robert Louis Stevenson, H. Rider Haggard - addressed a male readership with specifically masculine notions of romance (wherein themes of adventure were more prominent than themes of love) and whose novels can be viewed, especially under their subsequent categorisation of "boys' adventures", as predecessors to the modern brand of 'masculine' YA Gothic advocated by Charlie Higson and Jonathan Maberry.

Fred Botting refers to the tradition as 'A line of male, dark romance subordinating love to adventure', which 'can also be traced from Walpole's concoction, picking up the threads of chivalric warriors and noble, martial adventures and licensing more 'masculine' tendencies towards power and violence' (Botting, 2008:11). The licensing of these 'tendencies towards power and violence' is, of course, a staple of the 'masculine' Gothic tradition, which includes today's YA horror fiction.

From a point early in its genesis, then, the Gothic romance became the site of a gendered battle in which 'the earliest male gothicists undertook to wrest the form from the female

hands in which they saw it too firmly grasped' (Ferguson Ellis, 2012:458). Indeed, in more contemporary times, male critics have laid claim to the genre's thematic raison d'être as a vehicle for addressing masculine concerns: Robert D. Hume has argued that the defining and significant feature of the genre was *not* a persecuted heroine trapped in a sinister castle, but the exploration of 'a complex villain-hero' (Hume, 1969). Joseph Crawford affirms that:

Gothic fiction has always been popular with female readers and writers from Reeves and Radcliffe in the late eighteenth century right down to Meyer and her imitators in the present day. However ... this tradition of Gothic by and for women has always existed alongside a counter-tradition of Gothic fiction by and for men, characterised by its male protagonists, spectacular violence and relative lack of interest in the romance plots which have usually been so central to women's gothic ... for every Ann Radcliffe, a Matthew Lewis; for every Charlotte Bronte, a James Malcolm Rymer; for every Anne Rice, a Stephen King.' (Crawford, 2014:235)

Indeed, Crawford's tradition and counter-tradition appear to exist as binary opposites, and to serve opposing functions: while the 'feminine' tradition provides a voice for female anxieties and concerns, the 'masculine' Gothic deploys an adventure narrative which raises a threat which is violently dispatched to provide closure and a sense of mastery, as in Stoker's *Dracula* (1897).

VAMPIRE ROMANCE

The Count's transfiguration into a Hollywood movie star became crucial in reconfiguring this tradition of opposition at a historically significant juncture, a hundred years after the publication of Stoker's novel. Botting cites Francis Ford Coppola's film version of *Bram Stoker's Dracula* (1992) as a vital factor in propagating the Paranormal/Vampire Romance, deconstructing the Count as a romantic figure, which 'diminishes his villainy and monstrosity ... like Heathcliff, or like those brooding, occasionally callous, silent types of Mills and Boon or Harlequin romances, all he needs is the love of the right woman. And she appears' (Botting, 2008:2). The framing of the Count as a sympathetic, heroic character effectively provided the

Gothic elements of his story with closure and allowed him to be transformed into a romantic figure more relatable to the traditions of romance fiction. The most famous Gothic monster/villain of them all was thus sanitised and ennobled in his 'quest for love in the face of death' (Botting, 2008:2), prefiguring the rise of the heroically humanised vampire lover of the paranormal romance explosion that would follow.

Crawford identifies the 1989 publication of Anne Rice's *The Mummy* as the first instance of a best-selling contemporary paranormal romance novel. Marketed as horror fiction rather than romance, it aimed to captivate the readership that had relished her acclaimed *Vampire Chronicles* series. However, unlike Rice's earlier horror novels, her central plot is romantic. *The Mummy* narrates the story of the evolving love-relationship between Ramses, an immortal, mummified Egyptian pharaoh, and the daughter of the archaeologist who unearths him. It is an identifiable progenitor of many subsequent paranormal romances that were to follow, depicting a young woman who captures the heart of an immortal and supernaturally powerful man. This woman is drawn into danger (which they jointly overcome) and, ultimately, the man bestows his supernatural powers upon her, permitting them an eternal, blissful co-existence. *The Mummy's* success signalled a transformation on the genre's orientation: two years post-publication, paranormal romances with non-human protagonists began to be catalogued under romance imprints. Lori Herter's *Obsession* (1991) details the life of a young woman who captivates David De Morrissey, a vampire epitomising the Byronic hero archetype previously examined in older Gothic and romance fiction – a character who is tall, dark, attractive, affluent and isolated from society. The cover of the first paperback edition also announced: 'Lori Herter has created a new genre - the vampire romance' (Crawford, 2014:66).

The eruption of the vampire romance/Paranormal Romance trend post-*Twilight* led to renewed influx of YA Gothic Romance. This renaissance echoed the traditions of the Female Gothic but contemporised it as a platform for young female readers to explore their sexuality and desires more overtly. 'The metaphoric interpretation of the vampire's bite as akin to sexual penetration, for example, is part of the appeal of this genre ... Thus, the sexual experience is mediated through the Gothic, particularly for girls' (Moruzi et al, 2019:10). In contemporary YA Gothic literature some form of romantic resolution is typically present. 'These romantic outcomes ... provide some closure to the anxieties surrounding YA Gothic,

reassuring readers that the protagonist has someone to love them, even in troubling times' (Moruzi et al, 2021:9).

Crawford's exploration of the Paranormal Romance subgenre reveals the emergent divide between male and female Gothic fiction enthusiasts, especially post-*Twilight*. Smith and Moruzi highlight that 'By far the majority of YA Gothic texts feature white, often middle class, typically heterosexual female protagonists' (Moruzi et al, 2021:6). Crawford likewise notes this shift in YA paranormal fiction's gender orientation.

Over the last decade ... the genre of popular gothic fiction has become dominated by female writers to a perhaps historically unprecedented extent, with the 'male gothic' counter-tradition increasingly retreating to the still male-dominated realms of film, comics, online culture and computer games instead. The anger and bewilderment of traditional horror fans at the success of *Twilight* reflects this generational shift, which has moved the genre's thematic centre of gravity away from violence, horror and monstrosity, and towards love, romance and redemption. (Crawford, 2014:235)

It may be argued that these two separate strands still exist in the Low Fantasy YA Gothic literature of today, with *Twilight* and its paranormal romance progeny (such as Kate Laurens' *Fallen* series of 2009-2015) representing the contemporary 'feminine' Gothic, while, as Germaine states, today's 'imagined male reader, or schoolboy, is courted through gross-out aesthetics and the trappings of a "masculine horror tradition"' (Germaine, 2018:103). This so-called masculine horror tradition tends to subordinate themes of love, romance and emotion in favour of adventure, gore and spectacular violence:

A burster was lying in the middle of the road. A father by the looks of it, though it was hard to tell. He had the familiar look of a vegetable, or a piece of fruit, left too long in the sun. The skin blackened, shrivelled and split, the overripe flesh inside squeezing out. His insides had turned to mush.

This was what happened if any grown-up lived long enough to let the disease run its full course. They literally burst. Arran prodded the body with his trainer. As he did so the skin popped, and a stream of puss oozed out followed by a bright pink blossom of fat. (Higson, 2009:6)

Radcliffe's distinction between terror and horror seems apposite two hundred years after it was written and there can be little doubt here that Higson's approach, with its 'unambiguous displays of atrocity' opts for M.G. Lewis' horror tradition, as does much contemporary male addressed YA Horror. (One of the binarized norms of YA Gothic fiction that *How to Hear Ghosts* attempts to subvert via a cross-cutting approach is the adoption of Radcliffe's 'feminine' terror strategy, despite the presence of a male protagonist.) Yet despite the undoubted popularity of Charlie Higson's *The Enemy* series (2009-2015), Germaine's reference to *imagined* male readers indicates the gendered perspective with which readers of YA horror fiction are viewed by the publishing industry, even as the success of paranormal romance 'reflects a broader shift in the twenty-first-century book publishing industry in which girls and women were seen as a large potential market for these kinds of books' (Moruzi et al, 2021:9).

Twilight's depiction of romantic affiliations aligns more with the fantastical aspirations found in Mills & Boon romance literature than with any prior paranormal fiction trope. The paranormal romance subgenre, as Crawford defines, has its roots in mass market romance compositions tailored for women. Crawford elucidates paranormal romance as 'A work that tells the story of the development and consummation of a positive, loving romantic relationship between a human and a vampire, adhering to all the standard romance-novel tropes apart from the convention that the hero and heroine should be live human beings' (Crawford, 2014:9). This definition, however, risks being perceived as the predominant understanding of contemporary Young Adult Gothic literature, to such an extent that numerous young adult readers might mistakenly consider it all-encompassing. If Crawford's assertion holds - that 'the "male gothic" counter-tradition (is) increasingly retreating to the still male-dominated realms of film, comics, online culture and computer games' (Crawford, 2014:9), it suggests that the genre might be inadvertently marginalising them.

The potency of Gothic literature as an introduction to the literary world and book-reading habits is perhaps undervalued. The sheer magnitude of sales and published titles showcases

the genre's vast appeal. The oft-mentioned tale of an American after-school literature class which opted for Stephen King's *Christine* over F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* and subsequently witnessed a surge in student attendance frequently features in newspaper columns applauding King's extraordinary success. It simultaneously underscores the significance of Gothic fiction as a catalyst for introducing young readers to the broader pleasures of literature.

The twenty-first century book-publishing industry may well argue that this separation of Gothic into "masculine" and "feminine" strands is merely the result of catering to consumer demand. Paranormal romance is descended from mass market romance fiction specifically written for women and there is likewise no shortage of male-addressed and male-centred fiction available in the field of YA Gothic literature, the origin of which dates to the likes of Stevenson and Haggard in the nineteenth century. Therefore, it cannot be argued that male and female readers have not been catered for by the YA Gothic market. Yet the YA Horror subgenre generally fails to fulfil the deeper function of providing a locus for the exploration of certain adolescent male concerns. While Smith and Moruzi situate the YA paranormal romance in the tradition of the "Female Gothic", which they define as 'a mode of Gothic writing in which female writers gave voice to women's fears about their powerlessness within patriarchal society' (Moruzi et al, 2021:9), the absence of a similar 'mode of Gothic writing' in which young male readers might identify their own concerns and fears suggests inadequacy. Those concerns often centre around male identity itself, as well as the exponential increase in mental health problems among young men, not to mention the imbalance in performance of young males compared with young females in academia and the workplace. Smith and Moruzi maintain that 'Changes to adolescence in the twenty-first century have contributed to the rise in YA Gothic fiction' and cite the experience of adolescence in the new millennium as more complicated and uncertain than ever before (Moruzi et al, 2021:3). If this is the case then the provision of a literary platform for the discussion of adolescent male anxieties - a platform that functions the way Paranormal Fiction does for young females - seems overdue.

THE CROSS-CUTTING YA GOTHIC NOVEL

One problem with the binary model of 'masculine' and 'feminine' Gothic put forward by critical discourse and popular histories of the form is that neither tradition adequately serves young male twenty-first century readers of YA Gothic fiction in terms of addressing their current concerns. It is not until we encounter a text where the opposing strands interact with each other, blurring the distinction between 'masculine' and 'feminine', that we are likely to find a locus for discussing such themes. Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* serves as a vehicle for straddling the boundaries and addressing modern day themes (despite its two-hundred-year distance from today's audiences) by providing a protagonist who disrupts gender norms. Frankenstein's creature often gives voice to contemporary anxieties surrounding adolescent male identity and (male *and* female) readers' sense of marginalisation. It could be argued that the desirability of creating a contemporary YA Gothic text that similarly cuts across gendered boundaries and exists successfully outside the binary opposition of Gothic's 'feminine' and 'masculine' traditions (whilst providing young male adult readers with a platform for their post-millennial concerns) is significant.

The "cross-cutting" appellation used here has been coined and adopted in order to signify texts which resist the polarity that exists between female "terror Gothic" and male "horror Gothic" traditions. (Leonardi, 2016:16) This polarity is observable in the YA Gothic field's attitude towards its readers. The "cross-cutting" approach therefore attempts to abandon the gendered perspective with which readers of YA Gothic fiction are viewed by the modern publishing industry. Cross-cutting YA Gothic texts do not resort to the 'cultural fiction' (Botting 2008:10) that seeks to justify the "masculine"/"feminine" separation of the Gothic that still dominates the marketplace's targeting strategies. While Ellen Moers' use of the term 'female Gothic' remains pertinent in identifying Gothic fiction which expresses female anxieties, and Crawford's description of a 'male Gothic counter tradition' is likewise apposite, it is Germaine's notion of the 'imagined reader' (Germaine, 2018:103) - a reader who exists as a false construct that effectively dominates the mentality behind marketing strategies - that informs the cross-cutting aesthetic.

Cross-cutting YA Gothic texts reject the book-publishing industry's preference for separating YA Gothic literature into "masculine" and "feminine" strands. The idea that male readers of

YA Gothic literature exclusively crave novels characterised by graphic violence and an absence of romantic plotlines is discarded, as is the notion that female YA Gothic readers exclusively desire romance. The cross-cutting YA Gothic novel borrows elements from both traditions in order to blur the boundary between them. *How to Hear Ghosts*, for example, adopts the male protagonist associated with male “horror Gothic” whilst including a romance plot and the sort of obscurity and indeterminacy associated with female “terror Gothic”.

Yet there is no *shortage* of YA Gothic novels with cross-cutting appeal - such as those written by Frances Hardinge or Jonathan Stroud’s *Lockwood & Co.* series (2013-2017). Unfortunately, neither paranormal romance or male-centred YA horror (or the works of Hardinge or Stroud) address the adolescent male experience of mental health difficulties or the uncertain nature of contemporary teenage male gender identity. The reason that *How to Hear Ghosts* has been devised as a cross-cutting text is that doing so renders it less liable to be subsumed by binarised tropes recognisable from either polarised genre, the likes of which might have thwarted attempts at producing a Low Fantasy YA Gothic novel that functions as a platform for certain issues.

AIMS

My novel addresses the creation of a cross-cutting Low Fantasy YA Gothic novel, which features a teenage male Gothic protagonist at its heart as a means of exploring adolescent male concerns similarly to the way in which YA Gothic heroines are used to reflect teenage female issues. To ensure that the novel remains cross-cutting in its gendering practices, its protagonist will be constructed as a Gothic hero who disrupts the tradition's gender norms, avoiding the generic elements taken from paranormal romance *and* the 'male gothic' counter-tradition identified by Crawford, (such as the typically Byronic masculine hero of countless paranormal romance texts,) whilst the story's supporting characters will also avoid both traditions' more obviously gendered tropes so that a binarised construction of gender does not emerge.

How to Hear Ghosts is not entirely without precedent in its attempt to deliver a cross-cutting narrative, though some of its strategies for doing so are indeed novel. A discussion of these strategies, along with similar precedents from two Gothic YA texts will be included in the first chapter of this thesis, which focuses on the YA Gothic hero as a subverter of Gothic gender conventions. The novel's paranormally gifted yet vulnerable and wryly self-effacing male protagonist, who harbours an unrequited love for a resilient and practical female character contrasts sharply with the genre's typical Byronic-male-immortal-meets-female-mortal pattern.

The work of Cyndy Hendershot (1998) and her representation of masculinity in gothic literature offers valuable insight to resolve questions concerning the representation of the male Gothic hero. Investigating how Gothic fiction positions the male protagonist, she questions how such texts depict masculinity and how these portrayals influence the kind of heroes presented to readers. Hendershot's scrutiny of masculinity within the Gothic will be complimented by Livi Michael's *The Angel Stone* (2006) and Stephen King's *The Shining* (1977) to explore methods of subverting the binarised hero (and constructing a less binarised protagonist), demonstrating precedents for the creation of a psychically gifted but vulnerable young male protagonist occupying a work of paranormal literature read by teenagers. Michael's and King's tales serve as perfect prototypes in illustrating how the "male child in peril" protagonist can challenge binary notions of gender and heroic masculinity in the genre,

reversing the 'male gothic' counter-tradition. I will contend that *The Shining*, despite being written before YA paranormal fiction became a recognised genre, offers the first and perhaps most influential instance of this trope in literature read by young adults. Meanwhile, Michael's *The Angel Stone* showcases the concept's evolution, presenting an even more vulnerable child hero and adding *another* YA Gothic protagonist who challenges binary notions of gender both figuratively and physically. This opening chapter will include, as will all subsequent chapters of the thesis, a demonstration of how the pertinent generic elements were applied during the crafting of my novel.

The portrayal of a romantic relationship that subverts the genre's gender norms will be the concern of the second chapter. The matter of challenging the traditional binarised tropes of paranormal romance whilst exploring a theme (romance) usually abandoned by the 'masculine' YA Horror tradition will form this segment of my contribution to knowledge in the field of writing Low Fantasy YA Gothic fiction. Fred Botting excoriates 'the myth of romantic union' (Botting, 2008:21) and ridicules the romantic elements that paranormal romance shares with Mills & Boon/Harlequin; but it is also necessary to ask: does a Gothic romance really *have* to be portrayed in this way? Rachel Caine's *Morganville Vampires* series (2006-2016) provides a precedent for challenging paranormal romance's binarised tradition, whilst simultaneously providing an alternative to Botting's definition of romance as a consumer-targeted chimera.

Much of the present research on the depiction of romantic relationships in YA paranormal literature comes from studies focussing chiefly on Stephenie Meyer's *Twilight* series (2005-2008). The use of *Twilight* as a foil to illustrate an opposing model of a YA Gothic romantic relationship will therefore be useful in terms of juxtaposing the significance of *How to Hear Ghosts*' (and Caine's) less binary portrayal. I will argue that the romance plot in *Twilight* is essentially a wish-fulfilment fantasy operating in the tradition of Mills & Boon Romance fiction and, as such, serves as an opposing model to the one adopted by my own novel.

Due to my novel's opening preoccupation with its protagonist's mental health and his subsequently questionable reliability as a narrator, the topic of *hesitancy* arises in Chapter 3. Tzvetan Todorov's definition of hesitancy is used to describe a phase in the paranormal narrative wherein the reader *and* the protagonist ask themselves 'whether what is happening

to him is real, if what surrounds him is indeed reality ... or whether it is no more than an illusion' (Todorov, 1973:24). The chapter argues that it is possible to imbue the text's period of Todorovian hesitancy with purpose and therefore make it thematically pregnant so that it might serve the function of furthering a YA Gothic novel's theme. I will argue that this narrative strategy is workable in the context of Low (or Intrusion) Fantasy YA Gothic fiction since the intrusion itself is a device that is particular to Low Fantasy; indeed, it is the intrusion that causes the hesitation, wherein the protagonist doubts his sanity and/or the reality of his world. I will use Amy Lukavics' *Devils unto Daughters* (2015) and Andrew Michael Hurley's *The Loney* (2015) as examples, highlighting the way in which Lukavics uses it to further her critique of oppressive patriarchy while Hurley does the same as a means of emphasising the ineffectual nature of fundamentalist religion. (My own use of hesitancy in *How to Hear Ghosts* emerged as a means of promoting Chloe Germaine's principle of nomadic subjectivity as an alternative to the notion of viewing the YA Gothic in pedagogical terms.)

The chapter will also discuss the genre's representation of adolescent mental health issues, since mental illness is the vehicle by which pregnant hesitancy is achieved in each novel. The portrayal of mental illness in young males is scarce in YA Gothic fiction. Its discussion as a topic of academic research in the Gothic tradition is equally rare despite the high incidence of mental health problems among teenage boys. The depiction of mental illness in Andrew Michael Hurley's *The Loney* (2014) is one of the few instances of Gothic fiction providing such a representation. I will use *The Loney* and K.J. Richmond's analysis of a range of mental illness portrayals in YA fiction to further explore the question of whether YA Gothic literature can be used as a platform to explore the issue. Given the sparsity of any fictional examples or academic research into the subject, I believe the findings will illustrate that the significance and scale of mental health issues in young males has been inadequately represented by the genre's practitioners. My novel's use of pregnant hesitancy as a means of deepening the traditional Gothic portrayal of mental illness by using it to explore literary themes, I will argue, is similarly distinctive and can serve others who wish to use it as a method for doing so.

Finally, the fourth chapter of this thesis will serve as a creative-critical reflection exercise, detailing the various obstacles encountered during the construction of my non-binary Low Fantasy YA Gothic novel. In response to the question, "Was there anything surprising or anything that didn't work out as planned?" I will document the instances of "fridging" that

occurred during the initial stages of the creative process. This term, coined by the American comic book writer Gail Simone as early as 1999, describes narrative events in which female characters are injured, raped killed or disempowered to progress a male protagonist's story arc. 'While the woman plays an integral part in the narrative, in terms of characterisation, the focus is on the trauma of the man, not what the woman has experienced,' asserts Dr Miriam Kent (*Guardian* 21st September, 2018:6). This practice is indeed prevalent among male fiction writers and appeared during the early drafts of *How to Hear Ghosts*. The chapter thereby demonstrates the gendering habits practiced by a male writer who is intent upon creating an unbinarised, cross-cutting text. It will examine outcomes of this self-reflective/creative investigation, linking the findings to previous literature in the field.

The chapters on constructing a Gothic protagonist and a Gothic romance which challenges the genre's gendering norms as a means of creating a Low Fantasy YA Gothic novel that serves as a platform for adolescent male themes will form my contribution to knowledge in the field of writing Low Fantasy YA Gothic fiction. These contributions will be furthered by an explanation of pregnant hesitancy and its role in enhancing the portrayal of adolescent male mental health difficulties in the YA Gothic tradition. The final chapter warning of the dangers of fridging will likewise hopefully serve to inform other writers and investigators of the craft.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The twenty-first century has witnessed a significant rise in Gothic fiction texts targeted at young adults, including prominent series, such as Richelle Mead's *Vampire Academy* (2007-2010), Maggie Steifvater's *Shiver* (2009-14), and, most notably, Stephenie Meyer's *Twilight* (2005-08). This review of YA Gothic fictional and critical texts enables me to recognise key works that have emerged and engaged with the field of Low Fantasy YA Gothic fiction in recent years, specifically those relevant to an attempt to explore changes in adolescent male identity, teenage romantic relationships and the genre's portrayal of mental health issues.

Prior to writing *How to Hear Ghosts*, as a result of my initial research into the subject via academic and critical responses, I discovered there were numerous classifications of Gothic literature available and I became aware of the importance of identifying the *type* of Gothic fiction I intended to write before commencing with the necessary creative work. To this end, a key text in helping locate and define the specific category of Gothic literature I would be writing was Farah Mendlesohn's *Rhetorics of Fantasy* (2008). Mendlesohn states 'there are certain types of fantasy and ... to be effective they need to be written a certain way' (Mendlesohn, 2008:246). The subject of definition in Fantasy literature is a potentially timeconsuming concern, and Mendlesohn's book succeeds in transcending various arguments about labels and categories by introducing a system of classification that applied itself effectively to the type of Gothic fiction I wished to create.

Mendlesohn proposes four distinct categories of fantasy - *portal quest fantasy* (in which the protagonist departs from their familiar environment to journey through a portal into an unknown realm), *immersive fantasy* (set in a world crafted by the author - distinct from the one the reader inhabits), *intrusion fantasy* (where the 'real' world is ruptured by an intrusion, causing disruption that must be addressed or defeated, 'sent back whence it came, or controlled' (Mendlesohn, 2008:115)) and *liminal fantasy*, (which might involve a genuine fantastic element; indeed, the narrative might or might not be fantastic at all, contingent upon the narrator's reliability, or whether the author writes in literal or figurative terms, among various other factors).

Mendlesohn considers 'how different modes by which the fantastic enters the text shapes the writing of those fantasies' (Mendlesohn, 2008:246) and, in doing so, helped me clarify the

nature of *How to Hear Ghosts* as a work of Intrusion Fantasy prior to writing. This was an important step in the creative process, as I had already identified the type of fiction I preferred to read and write, without initially being able to identify the rules by which it functioned. Upon reading Mendlesohn's book I was able to identify the tradition of YA Gothic Low Fantasy - named Intrusion Fantasy by Mendlesohn - as a tradition that required new modes of representation for its young male readers.

Mendlesohn's *Rhetorics of Fantasy* chiefly proved effective as a means of helping me shape my creative work (and to decide which creative works to study and compare my own with). It has little or no bearing on themes dealt with in this critical component. It features no research on adolescent masculinity, or paranormal romance or the trope of fridging. Its only reference to Todorovian hesitancy occurs within the context of discussion about liminal fantasy, in which it is posited as a means of breaking the contract of understanding between reader and author as to whether the fantastic event is really happening.

Catherine Spooner's *Contemporary Gothic* (2006) explores the causes of the present dominance of Gothic in modern Western culture - from its consistent representation in literature and cinema to its extensive impact on music, fashion and art, (as well as its presence in consumer society through the mass-production of Halloween merchandise). She investigates the recent manifestations of the Gothic sensibility and subculture, analysing the use of ominous imagery in adverts and deriving meaning from modern Gothic literature. She argues that these symbols constitute a vital representation of current social themes.

Spooner continues with an insistence that Gothic remains relevant in post-millennial culture, noting that 'in the last few decades of the twentieth century and at the beginning of the twenty-first, Gothic narratives began to achieve prominence in both popular and academic culture' (Spooner, 2006:21). This is suggested by the emergence and popularity of Gothic Studies courses in various universities and the literary and cinematic pre-eminence of the Harry Potter and *Twilight* series. She maintains that 'Contemporary Gothic is not preoccupied with the end of the world, but rather the end of innocence' (Spooner, 2006:23). As with Mendlesohn's text, Spooner's *Contemporary Gothic* was crucial in informing the creative element of my work because of her insistence that contemporary Gothic concerns itself with issues such as 'the legacies of the past and its burdens on the present; the radically provisional

and divided nature of the self'(Spooner, 2008:8) - all of which tally with the concerns of Ollie Quinn in *How to Hear Ghosts*, leading me to the conclusion that my novel was thematically rooted firmly in the Gothic tradition, as defined by Spooner, who maintains that the concerns of the modern Gothic text are essentially the same as those that populated the Gothic text of the eighteenth century.

Spooner's chapter on "Teen Demons" begins by asserting that 'The body at the centre of many contemporary Gothic narratives is definitely an adolescent one' (Spooner, 87:2006). However, her analysis of contemporary Gothic's relationship to adolescence confines itself to texts featuring female protagonists. She echoes Ellen Moers' assertion that 'The appeal of the Gothic to women writers, at least, can be attributed in part to the outlet it offers for "the savagery of girlhood";' (Spooner, 89:2006) and in doing so draws attention to the absence of critical response awarded to the adolescent male. Spooner's analysis pinpoints the increased prominence of teenage girls within popular culture, noting that a situation has arisen wherein females are now recognised as part of the Young Adult Horror and Gothic market, and that the increased visibility 'of a significant female audience for the genre has played a part in the development of Gothic heroines' (Spooner, 99:2008). During the 1970s, the horror film had been viewed as the province of the young adult male, though this is no longer the case.

Spooner's analysis of male adolescence in Gothic consists of a brief discussion of the mode's focus on the male teenager as outsider. 'The focus on the outsider, traditionally a feature of what has been called 'male' Gothic ... has also enabled a teen Gothic more oriented towards masculinity, reinterpreting the theme of social alienation with relish' (Spooner, 104:2006). Her contention that Johnny Depp's performance as an updated version of Frankenstein's creature in *Edward Scissorhands* (1990) represents the prototype for this contemporary 'teen male outsider' model illustrates the multi-media nature of her narrative, but fails to locate a literary equivalent.

Joseph Crawford's *The Twilight of the Gothic* (2014) provides an exploration of the history of the paranormal romance subgenre, tracing its origins to the twelfth-century courtly romance. This emphasises Gothic fiction's initial status as a minor subgenre of romantic fiction, primarily written by and for women, stemming largely from the works of Ann Radcliffe in the eighteenth century. Crawford delineates the tropes and thematic parallels between the Gothic and

Romantic genres, such that the post-*Twilight* supremacy over its parent Gothic genre appears as a logical evolution. He delves into the widespread appeal and the polarising nature of the paranormal romance subgenre, highlighting that many admirers of Gothic/paranormal YA fiction feel estranged due to its prevailing dominance. He further examines the masculine 'counter-tradition' that celebrates horror over romance, a stance that has countered the feminine Gothic since the publication of M.G. Lewis' *The Monk* (1796). The gendering norms of paranormal romance are documented, including the appearance of the Byronic male 'romantic lead', who has evolved along a 'line of descent' (Crawford, 67:2014) from Walpole's Manfred and Lord Byron to Polidori's vampire, Lord Ruthven (said to have been directly inspired by Byron himself) to Heathcliff, Rochester, through Count Dracula, Maxim De Winter, the vampire Lestat, David De Morrissey and Edward Cullen.

No notion of a YA novel that explores the male perspective on romantic relationships is mentioned, aside from Anne Rice's *Interview with The Vampire* (1976), in which 'murderous acts of vampirism were frequently described in overtly sexual terms, reminiscent of the sado-masochistic sexuality of Rice's earlier erotic novels' (Crawford, 2014:57). The inclusion of *Interview with the Vampire* is significant, given its male perspective on romance and its literary invention of the vampire as male protagonist doubling as romantic figure - the male archetype of today's YA paranormal romance.

Fred Botting's *Gothic Romanced* (2008) also charts the evolution and interplay of Gothic and Romance literature from the eighteenth to the twenty-first century. Similar to Crawford, Botting observes how these genres, from their inception, were interwoven, even though Romance's world of idealism and decorum seemed diametrically opposed to the Gothic's realm of shadow, savagery and monstrosity. Botting demonstrates how Romance fiction has transformed in tandem with the Gothic genre, such that the boundaries between them have become increasingly nebulous, culminating in the paranormal romance phenomenon epitomised by *Twilight*. However, in contrast to Crawford, Botting is keen to highlight the pitfalls of romance. In his critique of the emergent paranormal romance tradition he promotes the perspective that romantic idealisation 'forgets ... the misfortune and unhappiness on which romantic passion is grounded and the disturbing and often paradoxical tradition of romance and desire forged by the practitioners of "courtly love"' (Botting, 2008:16). He contends 'Romance undergoes many alterations over eight centuries, while continuing to

provide a form of fantasy and desire. As culture and its forms change, so the circulation of romance and its reception alters.' (Botting, 2008:31) Botting adopts the assertion that the portrayal of passionate love has become increasingly ridiculous, partially thanks to a major alteration in its mediation. This perspective on Romance is naturally at odds with the view promoted by the paranormal romance genre (and Romance fiction as a whole), which conforms to a traditional model typified by Isabella and Edward's romantic relationship in *Twilight*. Botting provides a critique of the Mills & Boon norms that inform paranormal romance, and, as such, begs the question: does a teenage romance need to be portrayed in this way?

There have been few Gothic novels that focus on romantic relationships as viewed from a male protagonist's perspective (apart from Rice's, whose protagonist isn't human). Thus, there has been little that might serve as a prototype for the kind of romantic portrayal depicted in *How to Hear Ghosts*. One alternative depiction of adolescent romantic relationships which does inform my narrative, however, is Rachel Caine's Morganville Vampires novel, *Glass Houses* (2008), which, unlike the rest of Caine's series is an intrusion fantasy in that the existence of vampires in the town of Morganville is unknown to its female protagonist at the story's outset. The book is exceptional in that it pairs two human beings rather than a human and a supernatural creature as its romantic relationship model and does so in a manner that mirrors depictions of teenage romantic relationships in the rest of YA literature, including its mundane nature – such as the day-to-day realities of student housesharing and conversations interrupted by lengthy episodes of gaming. As such, it represents a notable subversion of the norms contained in paranormal romance, though without offering first person male perspective.

The use of *Twilight* as a foil to illustrate an opposing model of a YA Gothic romantic relationship has therefore been useful in terms of providing a contrast that highlights the significance of *How to Hear Ghosts*' less binary portrayal. I will argue that the romance plot in *Twilight*, essentially a wish-fulfilment fantasy operating in the tradition of Mills & Boon Romance Fiction, serves as an opposing model to Caine's.

Cyndy Hendershot's *The Animal Within: Masculinity and the Gothic* (2001) furnishes invaluable insight into Gothic texts from the 1790s to the late twentieth century, examining the genre's depiction and characterisation of masculinity, comparing the content and representation of male protagonists in various canonical texts. Hendershot's study does not encompass an exploration of homosexual masculinity (unlike that of Ellen Brinks) as her primary objective is to spotlight the Gothic's portrayal (and fragmentation) of normative, heterosexual masculinity by revealing its insecurity and incoherence - the insecurity and incoherence of the masculine subject position that covertly underpins the "official" and traditional perception of the heterosexual male. She zeroes in on:

... how the Gothic reveals the tension between the historical experience of men and women and the myth of masculinity as whole and dominant, rather than concealing the fissures that threaten to expose the male subject as a subject like the female one, one lacking and incapable of ever achieving wholeness and mastery. (Hendershot, 2001:3)

Hendershot posits that 'the female subject position is the condition of all of us' (Hendershot, 2001:3) and that a rigorous examination of the conventional view of male subjectivity indeed challenges the dominant narrative that shapes our ideological 'reality', rooted primarily in the integrity of the family unit and the competence of the male subject. She underscores the significance of many Gothic texts, arguing that by interrogating the supposed competence of the male subject (as when Count Dracula undermines Jonathan Harker's masculine competence by threatening to consign him to his harem of captive females, or as Mary Shelley defines masculinity by positioning a fearsome yet empathetic male character in the role of the feminine 'other', concomitantly hinting through the reader's empathy that this is a fate common to all), they serve to unveil our understanding of "the real world" as merely an ideological construct crafted by patriarchy. Hendershot suggests that 'the Gothic provides an area in which male lack can be revealed, whether its revelation produces horror, as in *Dracula*, or pleasure' (Hendershot, 2001:3).

Hendershot's challenge to the idea of masculinity as an illusory construct is pertinent to the young male reader and his uncertainty regarding the nature of male gender identity. (If we

don't know whether the traditional norms and definition of masculinity are constructed for us by someone else, might we wish to choose our own definition, and might it include elements of sexuality and gender identity not included in the old one?)

Hendershot also questions how non-traditional masculinities should be viewed: should we regard them as *feminine*? Or 'are they to be classified under some as yet undefined term? ... Is the creature in *Frankenstein* feminine because marginal, even though he is housed in a male body?' (Hendershot, 2001:4) The knowledge gap revealed in this question can be attributed to the publication date of *The Animal Within*, which predates the widespread use terms such as "non-binary". Furthermore, it inevitably omits Gothic texts from the twenty-first century that would have benefited from Hendershot's insight. Nevertheless, the book's approach of equating the feminine with the marginalised monstrous other played a pivotal role in characterising Oliver Quinn as a feminine/marginalised/monstrous protagonist. In the book's final scene, for instance, Marsha denounces him/his gift as 'psycho'. His gender identity, like that of Frankenstein's creature, is open to question according to Hendershot's definition, since it includes elements that challenge the gender norms associated with Gothic fiction, which proliferate as he comes to recognise his talent.

Ellen Brinks' *Gothic Masculinity* (2003) also displays a dearth of up-to-date research on the gender norms of the Gothic hero, given its twenty-year old publication date. Nonetheless, its emphasis on effeminacy and the supernatural in English and German Romanticism remains pertinent, echoing Hendershot's assertion that cultural fantasies of masculinity (presented as realities) are frequently subverted by the Gothic narrative. Brinks notes the recurrent motif in Gothic tales wherein a male protagonist, after confronting an effeminising supernatural force, finds himself 'dispossessed of his real and symbolic masculine estate' (Brinks 2003:2). She traces this motif of 'distressed masculinity' in canonical texts such as Coleridge's *Christabel* (1816) and contemporaries of Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto*, as well as in Freud's psychoanalytical study, *The Uncanny* (1919). The canonical nature of the texts examined exposes the knowledge-gap in *Gothic Masculinity* regarding its applicability to twenty-first century Young Adult Gothic fiction. This makes it appear even more chronologically outdated compared to Hendershot's study. However, its investigative relevance to modern Young Adult Gothic literature is undeniable. There's an evident thematic link between the concerns of eighteenth-century Gothic fiction and those of the twenty-first century: both historical periods

grapple with evolving sex-gender roles. As Brinks elaborates, ‘During the eighteenth century, masculinity was continually being redefined ... some culturally salient features of the “third” gender, or “effeminate male” emerge ... Whereas in earlier centuries adolescent boys were allowed a “grace” period for sexual experimentation ... the eighteenth century took a dimmer view’ (Brinks, 2003:16). Brinks contends that the Gothic genre permitted the era’s heterosexual culture to ‘cast off its own homoerotic yearnings, representing them in supernatural guise as “other”, where the struggle to deny or normalize shapes the narrative dynamic’ (Brinks, 2003:13). Yet the Gothic also highlights anxieties about the ‘unclear, though often asserted, boundaries between ‘licit’ and ‘illicit’ sexual behaviour or orientations,’ and, in doing so, has been used to ‘explore the individual desires that such culturally mandated distinctions would render unacceptable. As a symbolic place of othering as well as the site of its ghostly or uncanny longings, the gothic disturbs fantasies of selfevident or certain self-knowledge’ (Brinks, 2003:13). Brinks’ findings remain relevant to late twentieth-century and post-millennial concerns regarding shifting sex-gender roles and identities, such as the ongoing discourse on Transgender Rights. Indeed, this draws attention to the uncertain nature of male gender identity in the twenty-first century - which this thesis hopes to draw attention to in terms of providing such issues with a site for exploration in the form of a Low Fantasy YA Gothic novel - and Brinks likewise posits the Gothic as a site upon which such issues can be explored.

Brinks’ findings were also instrumental in the creation of *How to Hear Ghosts*. The book is temporally aligned with the eighteenth-century Gothic texts wherein, as Brinks suggests, ‘Masculinity (is) continually being redefined.’ Brinks’ model of the Gothic scenario in which ‘a male protagonist encounters an effeminizing supernatural force’ (Brinks, 2003:11) is perfectly applicable to the character of Oliver Quinn, who similarly ‘finds himself divested or dispossessed of his real and symbolic masculine estate within the imaginary, interiorized, or fantastic spaces of these narratives’ (Brinks, 2003:2). Ollie’s psychic ability presents a departure from traditional masculinity, relegating him, at first, to the level of Brinks’ ‘distressed masculinity’ during this Gothic bildungsroman. Brinks’ observation is thereby validated: ‘Gothic tropes and tableaux cross a range of genres and perplex social and “natural” distinctions concerning masculinity and male sexuality to produce multiple, often

contradictory, identifications' (Brinks, 2003:11). This is one aim of Low Fantasy YA Gothic, as witnessed in *How to Hear Ghosts*.

Including Tzvetan Todorov's *The Fantastic* (1973) might seem anachronistic, given its publication date and its broad exploration of Fantasy as a whole, rather than a specific focus on the Gothic. Todorov examines works of fantastic literature to define the genre itself, and, in doing so, provides a definition of the fantastic as a genre reliant upon a period of "hesitation". In this phase, the protagonist and reader are forced to determine whether the narrative's fantastical component is truly supernatural or merely illusory. This concept of hesitation was pivotal for the storyline of *How to Hear Ghosts*, particularly as an extended technique where both the narrator and the reader remain uncertain about the precise nature of the paranormal phenomenon seemingly encroaching on Ollie's psyche. Todorov's terminology was also crucial for developing my notion of 'pregnant hesitation', which I will explore in the chapter of this thesis focused on portrayals of mental illness in YA Gothic narratives. The idea concurs with an understanding of Rosemary Jackson's critique of the limitations of the structuralist nature of Todorov's work, which 'fails to consider the social and political implications of literary forms' (Jackson, 1981:6) and aims to extend Todorov's concept beyond such limits.

Chloe Germaine's *Twenty-first Century Children's Gothic* (2018) compiles a range of postmillennium YA and children's Gothic fiction, using a new model of analysis. This approach opposes the traditional stance of literary criticism that is typically adopted when examining both children's literature and Gothic fiction. The dominant pedagogical model for Young Adult and children's fiction attempts to find a unifying meaning in novels to assess their value as instrumental tools for the emotional, literary and social education of children and young people. Germaine rejects this mode of reading YA and children's Gothic texts, especially as the Gothic has been repurposed in children's fiction, post-millennium. She favours viewing it as a creative force through which self-transformation and *becoming* can be imagined for the young reader, via what she terms 'nomadic subjectivity'. Germaine identifies the theme of homelessness in YA and Children's Gothic literature as a means of challenging both genres' pedagogical model. Notably, homelessness has been re-imagined in such texts as *A Series of Unfortunate Events* (1999-2006) as 'a line of becoming', which 'affords all the positive possibilities suggested by nomadic philosophy' (Germaine, 2018:2). As a result, select YA and

Children's Gothic texts introduce 'a new form of writing for children that reconfigures homelessness as nomadism ... but also resists the cosy restitution associated with children's literature' (Germaine 2018:2). The traditional pedagogical perspective held by children's writers, literary critics and academics is thus challenged by the alternative ethical vision of writing for young adults and children which forms the essence of Germaine's 'nomadic subjectivity' model. This model, she argues, has been crafted in twenty-first century Gothic children's literature; it also aligns with the vision incorporated into the writing of *How to Hear Ghosts*.

Germaine refutes the pedagogic model's assertion that children's books predominantly aim at 'producing a critically engaged reader', (Germaine 2018:3) envisioning this reader as a passive, 'implicitly teachable child' (Germaine, 2018:3). She also challenges long-standing perceptions of Gothic literature which depict it as an unsuitable pursuit for young readers, contending that 'Cast as a transgressive mode, Gothic might be used by the writer of children's books to inculcate a questioning and rebellious subjectivity' (Germaine, 2018:4). This perspective marks a significant shift in the perception of both Gothic and YA/Children's literature and certainly influenced the final aim behind *How to Hear Ghosts*.

However, Germaine's critique of the pedagogical view of Children's (and YA) Gothic literature is to some extent countered by Kia Jane Richmond's *Mental Illness in Young Adult Literature* (2019). Richmond upholds the significance of the pedagogical aspects of Young Adult fiction, particularly in highlighting its capacity to engender empathy and comprehension in young readers regarding the experiences of others. This understanding arises when readers immerse themselves in imaginary situations from the perspective of a fictional character, especially one whose life significantly differs from their own. The merits of Bibliotherapy – employing texts to assist individuals managing with mental health issues – are detailed and stressed, as is the importance of its recognition by educators and researchers in the education sector. Bibliotherapy rests on the premise that individuals can gain insight into their own lives through literature, which can aid them in experiencing therapeutic relief and fostering connections with others. Richmond continues to champion the inclusion of characters with mental illnesses in Young Adult literature, concluding that this pedagogical approach is immensely beneficial for readers facing mental health challenges.

Richmond's book amasses a vast body of research centred on mental illness issues in Young Adult literature, categorising and elucidating how mental disorders and the fictional characters who experience them) are portrayed in twenty-first century Young Adult novels. Both positive and negative representations of mental illness and its treatment in young adult fiction are explored. Richmond's text focuses on twenty-first century Young Adult fiction novels, referencing diagnostic criteria from the fifth edition of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*. Its objective is to equip school and youth services librarians, educators, therapists and others who engage with adolescents with insights into how fictional characters with mental illnesses are portrayed in YA literature. Other vital social and identity concerns such as race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, social media, peer pressure, friendships, gender and sexuality are also considered.

Each chapter in Richmond's book follows a consistent structure, beginning with an overview of a specific mental disorder detailed in the *DSM's* fifth edition, including criteria for diagnosis and available treatment options. The ten chapters address: Attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), Schizophrenia, Bipolar Disorder, Depressive Disorders, Anxiety Disorder, Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder, Trauma and Stress-Related Disorders, Feeding and Eating Disorders, Substance-Related and Addictive Disorders, and Nonsuicidal Self-Injury. Every chapter also contains summaries of selected young adult novels featuring characters demonstrating symptoms of the highlighted mental illness. These chapters elucidate how the disorder impacts the character personally and the reactions of parents, friends, teachers, health-care providers and others in their community. Additionally, the treatment or support the character receives is explored, revealing its effect on both the character and plot's progression.

However, the scope of Richmond's book is somewhat restricted, as it only includes novels featuring characters from locations within the United States. More pertinent to the research for this thesis, Richmond's book is notably lacking in any mention of Young Adult Gothic literature - a surprising oversight given the genre's popularity (for example, the self-harming behaviour depicted in the *Twilight* series is not discussed).

Nevertheless, Richmond provides numerous Young Adult novels in her book, typically within each of the ten chapters that delve into both female and male protagonists suffering from a

mental illness or disorder. There is no indication of any gender bias within the pages of *Mental Illness in Young Adult Literature*. This is not mirrored in YA Gothic fiction: while finding YA Gothic novels with protagonists experiencing mental health issues was straightforward, it was considerably more challenging to locate YA Gothic literature that depicted a male protagonist with a mental illness. Consequently, this thesis' discussion on mental health illness portrayals in Young Adult Gothic literature is limited to the portrayal of Selective Mutism in a young male character in Andrew Michael Hurley's *The Loney* (2015) and the story of a thirteen-year-old boy's bereavement in Patrick Ness' *A Monster Calls* (2011).

Amy Lukavics portrays a young female protagonist experiencing mental health difficulties in *Daughters unto Devils* (2015). Amanda Verner evokes the female narrator of Charlotte Perkins Gilman's short story *The Yellow Wallpaper* (1892), who similarly raises anxieties around feminine identity and masculine oppression. At the same time, Lukavics incorporates Todorov's notion of hesitancy into the plot for thematic purposes.

The field of 'sonic Gothic' studies had been unknown to me prior to the creation of *How to Hear Ghosts*. The soundworld of the Gothic novel has been explored in the writings of Isabella van Elferen, who traces the genre's reliance on sound effects and musical motifs. Van Elferen's studies on sonic Gothic bear huge relevance to the use of sound that permeates *How to Hear Ghosts*; indeed, her writings make it clear that my novel exists within a well-established tradition. Van Elferen's *Gothic Music* (2012) examines the soundscapes of Gothic texts, spearheading the study of sonic Gothic whilst tracing developments in sound and music through the genre's historical and cultural manifestations. She pays particular attention to the way virtual sounds and music are used in Gothic literature, as well as the way in which these sounds are actualised in cinema, television, Gothic video games, fashion and the Goth music that functions as a soundtrack for a youth subculture where Gothic narratives are experienced as part of a lifestyle that defines itself through dance and dress.

Gothic Music's analysis of the sounds used in Gothic literature is brief compared to the same book's examination of film, TV, popular music and gaming. Van Elferen's exploration of disembodied voices is significant, however. The discussion of the "uncanny voice" as a strategy for evoking terror draws uncanny parallels with the modus operandi of *How to Hear Ghosts*, which relies on the disembodied voice. Van Elferen's discussion of this is frustratingly

brief, however, and a deeper, more extensive examination of the uncanny voice may be found in Matt Foley's *Gothic Voices* (2023).

Foley's work introduces 'vococentric Gothic' as a critical category, tracing important moments in Gothic fiction when the voice takes precedence as an uncanny, seductive or monstrous object. The range of texts proffered demonstrates the ubiquity of these vocal motifs across the Gothic genre's history. Foley illustrates how uncanny voices have occupied the soundworlds of Gothic writing since the age of the Gothic Romance in the 1790s. Uncanny voices also take precedence and proliferate in contemporary forms across a range of media, such as radio, television, film and podcasting, whether it be in the form of the voice of the possessed child in *The Exorcist* (1973) or the acoustic motifs used in the *Black Tapes* mockumentary (2015-17). Foley's definition of vococentric Gothic refers to the moments in Gothic fiction when the voice produces awe, terror and mystery, and *How to Hear Ghosts* may thus convincingly be described as a vococentric Gothic novel.

In the final chapter, I investigate the phenomenon of "fridging", which has proved elusive in terms of tracking down printed material and research. To the best of my knowledge, there has not been an extended examination of the fridging trope, that is, the trope of "killing off" characters, usually female, who serve the narrative solely to further a primary (male) character's developmental arc. The information I managed to gather on this topic was sourced from websites (notably Gail Simon's *Women in Refrigerators*), which offers a list of literary instances, and various other websites discussing the recent surge of this trend in Hollywood. This upswing seems largely due to the post-millennial rise of superhero blockbusters. Thus, my primary recommendation regarding this topic is the urgent need for more comprehensive research on the subject.

Regarding works of Young Adult Gothic fiction that have emerged since the turn of the millennium, there is certainly a precedent for texts that appeal equally to young male and female audiences while eschewing the tradition of paranormal romance. A leading practitioner in this field is Frances Hardinge, whose novel *A Skinful of Shadows* (2017) avoids portrayals of romantic relationships yet appeals to both male and female readers. Its Gothic heroine, imperilled by her surroundings, navigates a coming-of-age journey within an

Intrusion Fantasy context, just as Oliver Quinn does in *How to Hear Ghosts*. Similar to Ollie, in *A Skinful of Shadows*, the protagonist possesses a psychic gift, which, she is assimilating and learning to master. Another of Hardinge's novels, *The Lie Tree* (2015), like *A Skinful of Shadows* is predominantly dedicated to the rites-of-passage-style discovery of youthful female identity. The Gothic protagonists are female rather than male, however, and Hardinge noticeably chooses to avoid adolescent romance in both *A Skinful of Shadows* and *The Lie Tree*.

The fictional works most pertinent to my thesis are embodied in Stephen King's *The Shining* (1977). Although some may find its inclusion contentious, typically being seen as adult horror fiction, it has undoubtedly influenced nearly every Gothic writer, encompassing authors of Gothic fiction for young adults, including Tiffany D. Jackson and Kat Ellis. The book provides Young Adult Gothic fiction with an archetype for the non-binary Gothic hero, challenging the genre's established notions of masculine bravery. Livi Michael's *The Angel Stone* (2006) exemplifies this ongoing tradition in the Low Fantasy Young Adult Gothic field - the showcasing of a vulnerable child protagonist, whose vulnerability is increased by her/his psychic gift.

The inclusion of Stephenie Meyer's *Twilight* (2005) might appear superfluous, given the frequent mention of the novel and its series in discussions about Young Adult Gothic literature. However, its presence in the chapter on paranormal romance is vital, given that the relationship between Edward Cullen and Isabella Swann sets the standard for nearly all romantic relationships depicted in Young Adult Gothic literature since its release. The selection of Rachel Caine's *Glass Houses* (2005) from her Morganville Vampire series stands as the most distinctive alternative to Meyer's Mills & Boon-influenced portrayal of teen romance intended for a Young Adult audience. This distinction made it pertinent to my own interpretation of an alternate representation of YA paranormal romance. There have been few YA Gothic novels focussing on romantic relationships as viewed from a male protagonist's perspective and, therefore, there has been little that might have served as a prototype for the kind of romantic portrayal depicted in *How to Hear Ghosts*. Rachel Caine's Morganville Vampires novel, *Glass Houses* (2003), however, pairs two human beings rather than a human and a supernatural creature as their romantic relationship model.

Amy Lukavics' *Daughters Unto Devils* (2015) offers a compelling depiction of the mental health challenges faced by a young protagonist in a contemporary YA Gothic narrative. It was chosen for its resemblance to *How to Hear Ghosts* in that it presents a young individual's mental health crisis, which later evolves as an intrusion fantasy. This transition initially led readers to speculate whether the fantasy might be liminal, a Todorovian strategy of hesitation. Its constraint as a comparative text is its female protagonist, who embodies issues of identity and suppression intrinsically linked to femininity. Andrew Michael Hurley's *The Loney* (2015) is almost unique in presenting a young male grappling with mental health challenges in a Gothic context. One could argue that its primary limitation, in this regard, is the retrospective perspective of an adult narrator. Still, its depiction of a young male character's mental struggles, employing Todorovian hesitation to convey the narrative's theme bears significant resemblance to the approach adopted in *How to Hear Ghosts*.

It also should be mentioned that the portrayal of adolescent male mental health difficulties in *How to Hear Ghosts* is not entirely unprecedented in Low Fantasy YA Gothic literature. Patrick Ness' *A Monster Calls* (2011) provides a striking antecedent. The story's thirteen-year-old protagonist, Conor O' Malley, struggles to cope with the consequences of his mother's terminal illness. He is also a victim of bullying and extreme isolation, including a distant relationship with his father and grandmother. Awakening regularly from a recurring nightmare at seven minutes after midnight, as the novel begins he encounters the "Yew Tree Monster", a towering mass of branches and leaves formed in human shape. The monster claims to be a version of English folklore's Green Man and warns Conor that it will tell him three stories, after which Conor must tell a true story of his own - namely, the events that transpire in his recurring nightmare - which ultimately lead Conor to face his subconscious feelings of guilt and loss.

As the story progresses, his mother's condition worsens and Conor's encounters with the monster have escalating consequences. The creature appears to provoke and assist him in demolishing the furniture in his grandmother's house, and, in a similar fit of uncontrollable violence, Conor hospitalizes the school bully. This violent episode casts doubt on the monster's existence, however, since it occurs in front of an audience of teachers and children, none of whom witness the monster's presence. This late-occurring instance of Todorovian hesitation presents the possibility that the creature may be a figment of Conor's imagination,

a manifestation of his deteriorating mental health. (The presence of the voices in *How to Hear Ghosts* is portrayed in similarly ambiguous style so that the reader is prompted to question whether they might merely be a product of Ollie's deteriorating mental state.) *A Monster Calls* settles the question of the Yew Tree Monster's existence at the story's conclusion, however, when Conor's mother dies at seven minutes past midnight, suggesting a synchronistic link with the monster's nightly arrival, which likewise resolves the story's categorisation as a Low Fantasy (and not a liminal) text. The issue of adolescent male mental health is nevertheless confronted in *A Monster Calls*, despite the story's supernatural element, since the reader is forced to contemplate the circumstances and pressures that might lead to a thirteen-year-old boy behaving violently and irrationally, even to the point of potentially experiencing hallucinations.

A Monster Calls presents a more explicit and obvious YA Gothic portrayal of adolescent male mental health difficulties than can be found in Hurley's or Lukavics' novels. The reason for its absence in the chapter on representations of YA male mental illness lies with its moment of hesitancy. The moment of Todorovian hesitancy in *A Monster Calls* is thematically significant: it draws attention to the underlying causes and pressures that lead to mental health problems and antisocial behaviour in adolescent males. Conor's (and the reader's) suspicion that he is imagining the monster's existence emphasizes the loneliness of childhood bereavement. But it eventually becomes clear that the monster *is* a real presence throughout the story, functioning as a guide whose purpose is to teach Conor the importance of "letting go" of his mother, facing his fears, and accepting his loss, which is the book's *real* theme. Prominence is given to Hurley and Lukavics' novels over Ness' because they both present a more *novel* approach to pregnant hesitancy in terms of the themes they choose to address: mental health problems are linked to religion and patriarchy respectively. My conviction is that such novelty of theme serves to better illustrate the concept of pregnant hesitancy.

METHODOLOGY

Prefacing the critical essay to follow, this Methodology section of the thesis opens with discussion and reflection on the textual influences that provided writerly inspiration for the creation of *How to Hear Ghosts*. The texts discussed here are not Young Adult novels per se but provided personal and specific inspiration for writing the novel. The second section of this account documents the writing and redrafting process that was adopted during the construction of the novel itself.

TEXTUAL INFLUENCES

As a former English teacher at various Further Education colleges, I have long been interested in the leisure-time reading preferences of my students. The considerable commercial success of Stephenie Meyer's *Twilight* series (2005-2008) highlighted the affinity many of my post-sixteen English Literature students had for Young Adult Gothic fiction, an attraction that was by no means limited to young female readers. As I delved into Gothic YA titles recommended to me by male and female students alike - my preferences and theirs often aligned with Low Fantasy YA Gothic novels like Amy Lukavics' *The Women in the Walls* (2016) and Frances Hardinge's *A Skinful of Shadows* (2017) - I soon recognised the books recommended to me exclusively featured young female protagonists. This led me to ponder whether the notable absence of male protagonists in the Low Fantasy YA Gothic tradition stemmed from the publishing industry's oversight in catering to market demands. Did such gendering practices emerge within the publishing sphere or were they a reflection of Low Fantasy YA Gothic writers' inclinations? Could this omission of male protagonists carry potential repercussions? Regardless of the cause, I embarked on writing my own YA Gothic novel to satisfy the creative component of my PhD. My penchant for Low Fantasy YA Gothic was as applicable to my writing practices as it had been to my reading habits; indeed, this had been the case since the idea of becoming a writer first struck me, aged thirteen, during an out-of-season holiday in a half-deserted hotel whilst reading Stephen King's *The Shining* (1977). Recognising the dearth of male protagonists in the Low Fantasy YA Gothic realm, I resolved to infuse my fiction with a young male protagonist.

The absence of YA Gothic literature as a recognised genre during my adolescence had confined my earliest reading habits to the schoolboy gross-out aesthetics associated with James Herbert's adult horror fiction. Playground recitations of atrocities depicted in *The Rats* (1974) and *The Fog* (1975) constituted my initial literary forays into the Gothic. The pre-eminence of Herbert and King in horror literature during the 1970s and 1980s meant such recitals became generational norms. (On Herbert's death in 2013, Waterstones spokesman Jon Howells proclaimed, "*The Rats* and *The Fog* terrified a generation ... There wasn't a boy in school when I was 13 that didn't devour his books, loving every visceral, creepy and titillating scene.' (Allen, 2013:1))

The popularity of King and Herbert among teenage readers during the 1970s and 1980s suggests adult horror fiction's status as an antecedent of YA Gothic fiction. The subsequent success of Christopher Pike and R.L. Stine in the late 1980s initiated the recognition of YA Gothic as a literary genre; however, the appeal of adult horror literature to young adult readers remains sufficiently strong to blur distinctions between the genres. Susan Hill's *The Woman in Black* (1983), for example, is an adult horror novel which has obtained popularity among Young Adult readers to the extent that it currently appears on several GCSE examination board listings.

The Shining (1977) is principally classified as adult horror, though its influence upon YA Gothic is profound. Stephen King's inclusion within the YA Gothic genre, often reflected in shelving arrangements in bookstores, stems from his huge appeal to Young Adult enthusiasts of Gothic fiction. The same applies to his work as a whole, which frequently addresses adolescent concerns, controversially so in the case of *Rage* (1977), which was banned from American bookstores by order of the author himself as a result of its association with the 1999 Columbine High School massacre. Catherine Spooner concurs:

The crucial precedent for the new teen Gothic is *Carrie* ... a bullied teenager takes revenge on her oppressors with her telekinetic powers. Carrie is a victim, oppressed by her fanatical mother and casually cruel classmates ... Significantly, she is also on the brink of adolescence.

(Spooner, 2006:105)

Carrie reflects the darkest regions of the high school experience with a destructive revenge fantasy (not unlike Frankenstein's creature's) which is enabled by abilities that originate from her mind, as do Danny Torrance's in *The Shining*. The archetype of the psychically gifted child/adolescent protagonist emerges from King's oeuvre and materializes fully formed in the figure of Oliver Quinn in *How to Hear Ghosts*.

The notion of a YA Gothic novel with a male protagonist also owes much to the adult horror literature that preceded YA Gothic fiction's recognition as a marketable genre. The protagonists who feature in King's horror novels, for example, (with the notable exception of Carrie White,) are invariably male. Their tribulations frequently involve crises of masculinity, be it Paul Sheldon's writerly emasculation at the hands of a crazed female fan in *Misery* (1986), Arnie Cunningham's victimisation as a high school nerd in *Christine* (1983) or Jack Torrance's failure to function as a father and provider in *The Shining* (1977). On a personal note, the absence of male protagonists in Low Fantasy YA Gothic fiction has, therefore, been all the more noticeable to a writer such as myself, rooted in twentieth century adult male-oriented sensibilities. (My enthusiasm for King's fiction eventually led me to investigate his influences, which included Richard Matheson's early works. *I Am Legend* (1955) and *The Shrinking Man* (1958) also primarily explore themes of beleaguered masculinity.) The absence of fiction that explores such male-oriented themes in a YA Gothic context therefore became tantamount to a writerly challenge.

The influence of "feminine terror" on *How to Hear Ghosts* is also significant. Gothic novels such as Shirley Jackson's *The Haunting of Hill House* (1959) and Susan Hill's *The Woman in Black* (1983) rely on the "feminine terror" approach advocated by Ann Radcliffe, whose assertion that "Terror is characterised by obscurity or indeterminacy" (Radcliffe, 1826: 168) informs the sequence of terrifying events and *sounds* experienced by Arthur Kipps in Hill's *Woman in Black*. The narrator *hears* a horse and carriage in distress, followed by the screams of a young child. This key scene is rendered obscure and terrifying via the vococentric soundworld that "feminine terror" frequently adopts as its primary strategy. Similarly, Jackson's *The Haunting of Hill House* obscures its depictions of paranormal phenomena via closed doors, darkness, suspicion and audible clues which suggest (rather than graphically illustrate) the extent of Hill House's horrifying history. The Radcliffean strategy is taken to perhaps its fullest extent in Henry James' *The Turn of the Screw* (1896), which is the primary

inspiration for *How to Hear Ghosts*. James' ghost story provides obscurity, ambiguity and indeterminacy unmatched in Gothic literature, serving as a blueprint for extending a sense of uncertainty through an entire narrative, courtesy of the 'potentially unreliable first-person narrator' motif, which served to directly influence the voice of Oliver Quinn. The question of whether the paranormal elements in the narrative are figments of the storyteller's imagination is a hook that still ensnares (this) readers' attention.

My personal preference for Radcliffean ambiguity and obscurity ultimately eclipsed graphic portrayals of horror associated with Lewis, Rymer, King, Herbert et al. As Radcliffe states, they "awaken the faculties to a high degree of life" (Radcliffe, 1826:168). *How to Hear Ghosts* thus adopts the "feminine terror" approach found in Jackson, Hill, Radcliffe and James whilst exploring themes of masculine identity and anxiety located in Matheson and King's "male" school of adult horror fiction - themes that are seldom explored in YA Gothic writing. *How to Hear Ghosts* constitutes a new type of YA Gothic novel. Apart from one or two notable exceptions, such as Patrick Ness' *A Monster Calls* (2011), its exploration of adolescent male themes and anxieties is rarely undertaken in Low Fantasy YA Gothic fiction. The use of Radcliffe's "terror" aesthetic to explore such themes serves to further blur distinctions between "feminine" and "masculine". *How to Hear Ghosts* sits astride the masculine/feminine boundary with a "cross-cutting" appeal similar to the approaches found in Frances Hardinge's *A Skinful of Shadows* (2017) and *The Lie Tree* (2015).

DRAFTING AND REDRAFTING

When an author asks her/himself the question, "What are you going to write about?" it is probably essential for them to answer the point *intuitively* in the first instance - according to their literary tastes, enthusiasms and preferences - rather than according to the apparent dictates of a marketplace, say, or the advice of peers. As Stephen King has pointed out, many commentators erroneously assume that 'the writer controls the material instead of the other

way around. In terms of genre, it's probably fair to assume that you will begin by writing what you love to read ... The writer who is serious and committed is incapable of sizing up story material the way an investor might size up various stock offerings.' (King, 2000:183)

At this early juncture, as King points out, there is another assumption/maxim proffered that may prove similarly problematic to the fledgling author of YA Gothic fiction:

The dictum in writing classes used to be "Write what you know". Which sounds good, but what if you want to write about starships exploring other planets or a man who murders his wife and then tries to dispose of her body with a wood-chipper? How does the writer square either of these, or a thousand other fanciful ideas, with the "write-what-you-know" directive?

(King, 2000:186)

The answer was to familiarize myself with the genre I had chosen to write in: with its conventions of style and plot, such as, say, the theme of buried or hidden secrets which appears common to all Gothic novels. I reasoned, prior to writing, that the more Low Fantasy YA Gothic fiction I read, the more likely it would be that I would be able to avoid merely revisiting the genre's well-mined conventions and tropes in a predictable manner.

STORY IDEA

The Young Adult fantasy writer, Neil Gaiman, has stated, 'a story idea tends to appear when two ideas come together' (Gaiman,9:1996). I found this to be the case during the genesis of *How to Hear Ghosts*. It had long been an ambition of mine to write a story based around the paranormal. Additionally, the idea of a fraudulent medium struck me as analogous with the era's political climate, with such figures such as Boris Johnson and Donald Trump being reviled as demagogues who offered comfortingly delusory solutions to complicated problems.

My prior life experience of working as an English teacher proved invaluable in combining the idea of a fraudulent psychic with a genuinely paranormal milieu. My English students, who would often find themselves stuck when it came to thinking up ideas during story-writing

exercises, were regularly given a methodological prompt and instructed to begin planning their creative writing with two building blocks common to every work of fiction: namely, character and situation.

I recalled my own advice at this point in the novel-building process, and, having created a detailed history for the antagonist (Dominic) and protagonist (Ollie), I realized that I was already in possession of a situation which might create conflict. The two characters' story arcs would be overshadowed by the death of Miranda Quinn: Ollie's goal would be to discover the truth surrounding his mother's death, while Dominic Quinn would be determined to prevent Ollie from doing so, since such discovery would initiate his exposure as a fraud. I subsequently devised a "MacGuffin" - an object that would motivate my characters to act and propel the plot, and a term I had become familiar with from its use in Alfred Hitchcock biographies - in the form of the letter that Miranda received shortly before her death.

The writing down of ideas as they occur in the imagination is useful at the earliest stages of formulating a story. Many published writers insist on always carrying pen and paper with them in case an idea should occur to them that may be forgotten should they fail to make a note of it. This was a practice I had long been in the habit of adhering to, and since my attention was focused on concocting a "MacGuffin", I found that such ideas tended to emerge, not at will, but because of the subconscious producing them during periods when the conscious mind is otherwise preoccupied (-which, in my own case, tends to be immediately upon waking, either in the middle of the night or first thing in the morning).

The story's "second idea" lay in Ollie's latent psychic ability, which he initially believes to be a side-effect of unprescribed anti-depressant medication he has been illicitly taking in the aftermath of his mother's unexpectedly sudden death. Ollie is presented with an almost overwhelming puzzle of his own: is he hearing voices of the dead, or is he merely losing his sanity? He therefore serves as an ideal "unreliable narrator" (- the story is told in first person from Ollie's perspective). I had previously decided that the "unreliable narrator" device was perfect in terms of establishing ambiguity. (Ambiguity, especially when presented via the unreliable narrator's viewpoint, proves more unsettling to readers of a ghost story in terms of its refusal to provide satisfactory answers for what happened during the narrative. Henry James' *The Turn of the Screw* is unquestionably the most famous example of this strategy –

the reader is left unsure whose reality they have been inhabiting during the novel, and whether the ghosts in the story were real at all.)

THE SACRED FLAW APPROACH

The creation of a protagonist (or a hero) prior to placing her/him in a story involves more than the writer simply listing a series of character traits or a description of physicality. Whilst it is certainly necessary for the writer to “know” or be familiar with their main character before creating a narrative which contains them, many authors and screenplay-writers have discussed the necessity of endowing their main character with a crucial flaw. Indeed, many writers prefer to focus on character first and foremost, to the extent that every other ingredient in a story becomes subservient; their chief motivation as writers, after all, is to convey the nature and secrets of the human mind and personality. As author and journalist Will Storr writes:

If you disregard character (your plots) risk becoming predictable. In life our plots emerge out of who we are. It's the *active decisions we make* that create the events of our days. These decisions reflect our character - our values, flaws, personality and goals. It's in this way that the lives we lead emerge out of the people we are. This is true in life and it should also be true in story. (Storr, 2019:206)

Storr's investigation into the methods of how we, as humans, are manipulated and compelled by master storytellers applies psychological research and the latest developments in neuroscience to show how stories make sense of the world for us. He describes his “Sacred Flaw Approach” as a toolbox for telling better stories via an exploration of human traits and characteristics. His emphasis on a main flaw in a protagonist's character will be familiar to English Literature students used to being bombarded with discussions of Hamlet's (or Macbeth's or Lear's or Othello's) “fatal flaw”.

The appeal of Storr's method lay, for me, in its relevance to the character of Ollie, who I found myself psycho-analysing at length during the writing of *How to Hear Ghosts*. (Prior to reading

Storr's work, I had been somewhat dismissive of the "How to Write" book, having read several unsatisfactory examples of the genre.) John Yorke's insistence on locating motivation in fictional characters as part of the creation process seemed particularly germane, however:

'If a character doesn't want something, they're passive. And if they're passive, they're effectively dead ... Aaron Sorkin put it succinctly, "Somebody's got to want something, somebody's got to be standing in their way of getting it. You do that and you'll have a scene.'" (Yorke,2014:9)

Indeed, Yorke goes onto insist that, 'at its most basic, that's all story is.' (Yorke, 2014:10) This holds true, perhaps even more famously, in the worlds of stage and cinema. The Stanislavski method of acting (also known, often derisively, as "method-acting", and stereotypically accompanied by the cry of "Where's my motivation?") revolutionized stage and screen acting from its inception in the early 1920s, when the Russian actor, director and theoretician Constantin Stanislavski first articulated the idea that characters in fiction (and in the real world) are motivated by desire. 'We are all motivated by objectives, however small, however inconsequential, for most minutes of every day. If we weren't, we wouldn't get out of bed.' (Yorke, 2014:12) And so, in order to establish Ollie's character, it was necessary to first establish his motivation and goals.

This would seem to be simple enough, but Storr goes a step further when he quotes psychologist Jonathan Haidt: 'Follow the sacredness. Find out what people believe to be sacred, and when you look around there you will find rampant irrationality.' (Storr, 2019:208) Storr's assertion that this is what the storyteller should be hunting for in her/his characters, immediately struck me as supremely relevant in my analysis of Ollie, who was, before the beginning of the story, prone to an irrational pursuit of the sacred in terms of his thinking. (Ollie's mother had died, he lives with his uncle, who is a celebrated medium, and he is prone to hearing disembodied voices as a result of the anti-depressant medication he is taking, all of which reinforces a belief in Dominic's authenticity, and an urge to contact his dead mother.) As Storr maintains:

In order for them to change, our protagonist needs to start off broken. When we meet them, in act one, they should be immersed in a reality of rampant irrationality without really being

aware of it ... a person you might meet in your everyday life who's become locked into some belief or behaviour that's somehow damaging them, even if they can't see it. In order to locate the thing they're irrational about, we need to ask what they make sacred. The things we make sacred are, to a great extent, the things that come to define us. (Storr, 2019:213)

The character of Ollie Quinn, then, represents a particularly extreme example of Storr's dictum. It seemed evident that his faulty belief should power his journey through the novel, forcing him through each scene, and that the reader should see the consequences of his irrational belief as they unfold. The point of the story, then, (and Storr argues it is the point of every story), would be to test and retest and ultimately break the protagonist's faulty idea of the world. In *How to Hear Ghosts*, this occurs when Ollie finally assimilates his discovery that his uncle is a fraud and, having decided to try and move on from the bereavement he has suffered (rather than use his uncle's spiritualism as a crutch to try and protect him from the pain of losing his mother), he publicly exposes his uncle's hoax.

Complications arose when my supervisor suggested that Ollie himself should have genuine psychic ability - an idea which I gradually grew to like, and the moment when two ideas came together. In terms of establishing ambiguity, this presented even greater intrigue. I decided that Ollie should be suffering the side-effects of medication when he experienced paranormal phenomena at his mother's funeral, and that this should veil the supernatural occurrences in increased ambiguity. The introduction of Ollie's medication into the situation also, however, made it possible that he should fail to initially recognize the emergence of his psychic talent when it manifested itself, and that this would lead him to further question his sanity. (Again, this is a recognizable trope in paranormal fiction, from King's *The Shining* to the character of Eleanor Vance in Jackson's *The Haunting of Hill House* and even in Daphne DuMaurier's novella "Don't Look Now").

The *point* of a story, according to Storr, is to answer the question: 'Who am I?'

This, after all, is the question that must be asked of any novel's protagonist. Storr maintains that we read novels chiefly because we are interested in character. As the writer Dean Wesley Smith states: 'Readers read for characters' (Smith, 2015:66) All successful novels, therefore, chart the change (or development) in a protagonist's personality, which have occurred as a

result of the events she/he has experienced during the story. The question that the story is posing throughout (and the question that the reader is asking her/himself) is “Will the protagonist rise to the challenge she/he has been faced with?” or, ultimately, “Who will she/he become?”

In terms of the change and development in Ollie’s character, the question that posed itself was, “What happens in the novel to affect Ollie’s emotional development and way of thinking?” My response to this was based, perhaps, in emotional bias: I wanted Ollie to survive, but also to move on from the loss of his mother by realizing that the answer to his problem lay in facing up to the pain of bereavement rather than using inappropriate medication and a belief in spiritualism as a crutch for supporting himself (dubiously) through the trauma ... *even if the spirit world **does** seem to be proven to exist.*

In any event, I did recognise, having become acquainted with Storr’s Sacred Flaw Approach, that it fit perfectly as a method for delineating the character of Ollie. Starting out with little more than a close definition of a single flaw may feel initially reductive. In the early stages of the process, it may seem as though the character is little more than a one-dimensional sketch. But starting with absolute specificity was extremely useful, and it resulted in a complex and unique character.

THE CORE STORY

Having thus established the main character and the situation, what remained was for them to interact sufficiently with each other so that they could produce a basic story structure. If we are to pursue John Yorke’s (and Stanislavski’s) principle of a story being the result of a character’s desire for something clashing with *another* person’s desire for something, then it stands to reason that a basic story structure will emerge from this arising conflict. But, as we shall see later, another story element needs to be introduced alongside these factors to *instigate* the story: it is popularly referred to (by writers, publishers and creative writing teachers) as “the inciting incident”. (Other terms include “the catalyst” or “the ignition point”. Joseph Campbell referred to it as “the call to arms”. (Campbell, 1949:68)

The inciting incident is the life-changing event that needs to occur at the start of a story for the tale to begin in earnest. This event will disrupt the status quo of the protagonist's world, creating so much disruption that the hero will have no choice but to open her/his eyes and look at the world in a new way, finding it impossible to return to their normal life. They must obey its call-to-arms, which will send them on the road towards change.

In order to create a basic structure for a story, then, it may be achieved by adhering to the following formulae:

*When an **inciting incident** happens, the story's protagonist needs to achieve her/his goal in order to stop the antagonist from achieving her/his goal.*

In the case of *How to Hear Ghosts*, I discovered that it was possible to summarise the story in a paragraph by using this formula. It was, however, necessary to establish an inciting incident in order to bring about the clash of interests and wills of the protagonist and antagonist, which would, in turn, create a story.

The inciting incident occurs when Ollie experiences "voices" at his mother's funeral, one of which, he subsequently believes, may be the voice of his mother commanding him to find the letter. Ollie, in the aftermath of his mother's death, is desperate to believe in "Spirit" ... but he can't be sure that the voices weren't merely a by-product of the medication he has been taking. This uncertainty provided the novel with a "hook" (for the reader's interest) and Ollie himself with an objective. But *How to Hear Ghosts*, first and foremost, is a *paranormal YA* novel, and the answer to its riddle lies in Ollie's latent spiritual talent. He is beset by questions: has he inherited his uncle's psychic gift? Is he experiencing mental health problems? (In other words, "Who *is* he?") Is his uncle a fraud? Each of these questions represented another hook for the reader.

THE STAKES

For any novel to work successfully and attract interest from its reader, it must invoke a sense of jeopardy wherein the protagonist faces a threat, with "stakes" that are sufficiently high that they create dramatic tension. These stakes must rise accordingly as the novel approaches its crescendo, and the same state of play must hold true for the antagonist as for the hero.

Asking myself the question “What is at stake for Ollie *and* Dominic should they fail to achieve their goals?” produced readily apparent answers. Ollie’s goal, initially, was to find evidence that would satisfy his craving for the belief that his mother has survived death via the world of spirit. We are subsequently made aware, however, that Ollie’s sanity may be at risk. But the stakes heighten further when he realizes his uncle is a fraud, who is prepared to have him sectioned rather than risk exposure and a threat to his career.

THEME

If we agree with Storr’s insistence on character and identity (and the question of “Who am I?”) as being the point of a story, then, by implication, the *theme* at the heart of a novel must be related to the life-lesson that the protagonist learns at the conclusion.

The theme, or message, (or question) at the heart of my novel did not become apparent until I had completed its first draft.

It is important to identify the difference between theme and thematic point of view. If we argue, for example, that the theme of a novel such as Suzanne Collins’ *The Hunger Games* (2008) is survival, we may also go on to argue that the book’s thematic point of view - that is to say, the overall stance that the author is taking with regard to their story’s theme - is that life is about more than *just* survival. Similarly, the theme at the heart of *How to Hear Ghosts* concerns bereavement and loss; but its thematic point of view maintains that it is possible to discover oneself and the truth of one’s identity amid such loss. Such a perspective only emerged following completion of the novel’s first draft, though, importantly, it did serve to direct the story’s events and the characters’ behaviors during the writing of subsequent drafts. (Ollie’s actions became more obviously noble at the end of the story once the author had realized the story’s subtext, for example.)

PLANNING AND “PANTSING”

The notion that the writer either plans and structures her/his novel from start to finish before they have written it *or* writes it spontaneously (“by the seat of their pants”, as it were, and without foreknowledge of how the story - or even the subsequent paragraph - will progress) has resulted in a labelling of authors into two distinct methodological categories of “planner” and “pantser”.

The notion that *both* approaches might be adopted simultaneously is rarely discussed. During my completion of *How to Hear Ghosts*, it was necessary for me to make use of a detailed outline/plan whilst simultaneously writing the novel in a manner that was so *unplanned* that it often necessitated abandoning the initial structure. Yet the spontaneity would have been impossible had it not been facilitated by the existence of an initial framework.

GOAL/OBSTACLE/ACTION

Chris Sykes affirms Stanislavski’s approach to fiction, maintaining that each scene in a story should be governed by the characters’ desired goals. ‘Trouble is required in stories; this is usually called conflict ... Characters need to test themselves against other characters and the situations in which they find themselves.’ (Sykes, 2013:29) Therefore, it is necessary for the character’s pursuit of her/his goal to come up against an obstacle that prevents them securing it. The action that the character takes in order to overcome the obstacle (and whether or not they are subsequently successful) serves to illuminate the route that the story’s action will subsequently follow.

This focus on goal, hurdle and subsequent action (based directly on Stanislavski’s approach) served as a method by which I planned and structured the progress of *How to Hear Ghosts*. Prior to commencing with the writing of each scene, I began by jotting down a brief summary of what Ollie’s (and Dominic’s) objective was in the scene itself. I also made a note of the obstacle or hurdle that was standing in their way, and the action that the character would need to take to surmount this obstacle. The exercise served to provide a series of starting points that would clarify (rather than dictate) in advance the action and events that would

follow. (The writing itself did not follow a pre-planned course as a result of this measure, as will be shown, though the story itself did become gradually clearer in my mind during the writing process.)

THE STAGES

I had been advised to read a select number of texts on the craft of fiction writing prior to embarking on the Creative Writing PhD. The most prominent of these works is undoubtedly mythologist Joseph Campbell's *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (1949), a work of comparative mythology, which cites the similarities found in various myths and stories, outlining Campbell's theory of the shared story structure of narratives found in numerous myths in differing chronological periods, geographical areas and cultures. The similarities of these myths resulted in Campbell formulating his idea of the monomyth, which he refers to as "the hero's adventure" whilst identifying its motif of the archetypal narrative, summarized thus:

A hero ventures forth from the world of common day into a reign of supernatural wonder: fabulous forces are there encountered and a decisive victory is won: the hero comes back from his mysterious adventure with the power to bestow boons on his fellow man.

(Campbell, 1959: 26)

In outlining the monomyth, Campbell describes a number of stages along the hero's journey. "The hero's adventure" begins in the ordinary world. He must depart from this ordinary world when he receives "the call to arms". With the help of a mentor, the hero will cross a "guarded threshold" that leads him to a supernatural world, where familiar laws and order do not apply. There, the hero embarks on a "road of trials", where he is tested along the way. The archetypal hero is sometimes assisted by allies, and subsequently faces the "ordeal" (or the greatest challenge of the journey). Upon rising to the challenge, the hero receives a reward (or boon). The hero must then decide to return with this boon to the ordinary world. He then faces more trials on the road back, and upon his return, the boon or gift is used to improve the hero's ordinary world ("the application of the boon").

WRITING INTO THE DARK

Despite the benefits of such a heavily planned story structure (outlined above), all of which provided a framework for *How to Hear Ghosts*, it would be inaccurate to describe the planning method as entirely sufficient. As Chris Sykes maintains:

The writing process is different for different people, but if you want to use a plan, the best approach would be to lay the plan out before you write and then write to it, *but* to feel free to adjust your plan ... New ideas come to you all the time in writing; you cannot conceive of them all before you start. We are talking about the process of creation here, and it *is* a process. If you could state everything you wanted to say in a script or novel before you started what would be the point of the novel or script or of the creative process at all?

(Sykes, 2013:220)

To some extent, the process of writing without an outline is necessary in order to boost one's creative voice and to keep *the writer* more interested in her/his writing. This may seem like a contradiction of everything that has been explained so far, but the creative practice of what Dean Wesley Smith calls "writing into the dark" is a necessary approach to creating a work of fiction. Smith asks the question:

So as a writer, why do an outline and then have to spend all that time creating a book you already know? "Boring" doesn't begin to describe it ... The key is to make a novel fresh to the reader. If the writer is bored or feeling like the book is "work" to write, you can bet that feeling is coming through the words to the reader. But if you have no idea where the book is going, the reader sure won't either!

(Smith, 2015:5-6)

Almost as soon as I finished sketching the main characters of *How to Hear Ghosts* in accordance with Storr's "Sacred Flaw Approach" and finished outlining a detailed story

structure in accordance with Campbell's monomyth, I dispensed with the outline completely and began to write without once referring to any of the notes. Smith's principle of "writing into the dark" was ultimately far more enjoyable, and resulted in drastic changes to the established outlines, all of which made the completed first draft unrecognizable from the plans I had constructed prior to writing it, (though the character sketches remained largely similar). This was perhaps because story ideas were continually generated subconsciously even as the writing progressed.

E.M. Forster states: 'The characters arrive when evoked, but full of the spirit of mutiny ... they try to live their own lives and are consequently often engaged in treason against the main scheme of the book.' (Forster, 1927:72) The phenomenon of a novel's characters behaving independently of their creator and directing the story away from the author's original intention is commonly cited, and was familiar to me during the writing of *How to Hear Ghosts*. The subconscious is presumably the agent of such spontaneity, and no plans exist, as yet, that control its input. My ultimate strategy was to work with a plan but to be prepared to modify the plan as I went along. Many of the most surprising and pleasing moments in writing *How to Hear Ghosts* came from small detours that deviated from my plan; but having a strong spine laid out in advance helped me depart from it whenever it felt right to do so.

Smith's insistence in simply writing the next sentence when faced with uncertainty as to how to proceed may seem foolhardy to some, but the importance of spontaneity cannot be overstated as a means of allowing creative writing to remain fresh and enjoyable. Even so, I feel it would have been impossible to write into the dark without a structure of some kind to deviate *from*.

It is probably true to say that there are as many ways to write a book as there are writers. As mentioned, it has been by adopting a number of different approaches, some of them apparently contradictory, that I managed to complete (and enjoy writing) a contemporary work of YA Gothic fiction, which I will critically assess in the work that follows.

SUBVERTING THE YA GOTHIC HERO AND THE CRISIS OF ADOLESCENT MALE IDENTITY

The declining presence of male protagonists in contemporary Low Fantasy YA Gothic fiction is detrimental to the tradition's potential as a locus for exploring adolescent male concerns. The task of constructing a YA Gothic novel that addresses this function necessarily involves the creation of a male protagonist who can express (in third or first person) his concerns directly to the reader.

The creation of a cross-cutting narrative is probably advisable in this context, since twenty-first century male gender identity is less obviously binarised than the norms of male-addressed YA Horror or female-centred paranormal romance would suggest. The Byronic male love interest of paranormal romance (most easily recognisable in his current form as the teenage vampire, Edward Cullen) and the YA Horror/Gothic High Fantasy hero who typically expresses meagre interest in romantic relationships, subordinated as they are to the adventure content of his story (see Higson's *The Enemy* series (2009-2015)) - bears small resemblance to the "average" male teenagers who encounter issues surrounding gender identity, romantic relationships and mental health in YA novels such as Karen M. McManus' *One of Us Is Lying* (2017) or Claire Hennessy's *Nothing Tastes As Good* (2016).

The male character in question may occasionally be described as a non-binary Gothic protagonist. The term "non-binary", in this instance, is used to describe a fictional character whose personality fails to fit neatly into the category of "man" or "woman"/"male" or "female", or the binary view of gender - namely, the idea that there are only two genders. The non-binary notion of gender does not necessarily refer to or include people of transgender status but to the idea that some people have a gender identity that blends or contains elements of being a man *and* being a woman. Examples of non-binary gender identity abound in contemporary YA fiction in its attempt to reflect shifts that have occurred in the post-War world. The example of Cooper from McManus' *One of Us is Lying* - a high school sports star who presents as a perfect example of teenage masculinity whilst concealing an affair with a male peer - serves us well as an illustration of the non-binary identity, though non-binary identity need not be restricted to matters of overt (or covert) sexual behaviour.

The task of creating a cross-cutting YA Gothic protagonist theoretically involves the integration of elements that will succeed in transcending categories of “masculine” and “feminine” Gothic from the binaristic model of the current form. This begins with the act of creating a protagonist who has the potential to defy either category’s expectations. It seems advisable, therefore, that one should familiarise oneself with “masculine” and “feminine” traditions in YA Gothic heroism, along with any texts that have previously challenged them.

The decision to study Livi Michael’s *The Angel Stone* (2006) and Stephen King’s *The Shining* (1977) rests on the fact that both texts provide protagonists who act as prototypes for the subversion of the traditional Gothic YA hero/heroine binary. The concept of the “vulnerable child” serves as a vehicle for transcending gender polarities in both cases, as does the notion of the male hero characterised by themes of disempowerment and Otherness - thus characterised to the extent that they are essentially feminized, at least according to Cyndy Hendershot’s definition of the term.

Hendershot states that ‘The Gothic fragments stable identity and stable social order. One of those norms infiltrated by the Gothic is gender’ (Hendershot, 1998:1). The notion of challenging gender identity polarities is hardly new to the Gothic tradition. Hendershot argues that the Gothic presents and fragments ‘normative, heterosexual masculinity and its presentation of this supposedly coherent subject position as one frequently incoherent and plagued by insecurities and varieties beyond the official story of the heterosexual man’ (Hendershot, 1998:3). The portrayal of the masculine hero in Gothic fiction has frequently been anxious and uncertain by comparison with the depictions of masculine heroism found in other fictional genres (such as the boys’ adventure stories of Stevenson and Haggard, or the Pulp Crime fiction of Chandler or Hammett, which form securely masculine strands that remain stable through various offshoots, all the way from James Bond to Jack Reacher). Van Helsing’s “crew of light” in *Dracula* (1897) are plagued by insecurity regarding their sexual identity, (for example, when Jonathan Harker is encoded as a feminine Gothic character by being imprisoned in a castle and threatened by the Count, even to the extent that he is considered a member of the Count’s harem).

Hendershot is careful to point out that 'while the Gothic frequently reveals male lack and hence subverts dominant notions of masculine plenitude, it also frequently demonizes this lack and dispels it by the end of the work' (Hendershot, 1998:3). *Dracula* thus dispels the threat of 'male lack' via a phallic act of penetration - the stake through the heart - at the novel's climax. The endeavour to negate male lack only serves to re-establish the Gothic genre's division into separate masculine and feminine spheres. A more favourable approach, then, is to challenge the genre's binary dichotomy by crafting a narrative and protagonist that underscore, in Hendershot's terms,

... how the Gothic reveals the tension between the historic experience of men and women and the myth of masculinity as whole and dominant, rather than concealing the fissures that threaten to expose the male subject as a subject like the female one, one lacking and incapable of ever achieving wholeness and mastery, highlighting the Lacanian viewpoint that the female subject position is the condition of all of us. (Hendershot, 1998:3)

This is the contention of *How to Hear Ghosts*, which posits its male protagonist as a YA Gothic hero who identifies with his family's feminine role models (-his mother and his Nana Lou, as well as with the nonbinary elements of his uncle's profession and sexual identity-) at the expense of a relationship with his father, who presents a traditionally masculine role model, encouraging Ollie to leave his uncle and join a military academy. Additionally, Ollie evolves his gender identity by exploring his psychic talent and refusing, ultimately, to view the uncanny as a threat, which involves allowing himself to be 'entered' by it in the tradition of the female psychic archetype (rather than impaling the threat with a phallic stake).

Thus we may recognise the role of the contemporary Low Fantasy YA Gothic novel and its potential for serving as a vehicle for the exploration of male identity and its uncertainties in an echo (and update) of its Gothic forebears' tradition of doing the same.

THE SHINING

A salient characteristic of gendering tendency in contemporary YA Gothic fiction is that male protagonists, when present, are often depicted as weakened, emasculated or vulnerable. Stephen King's best-selling novel *The Shining* (1977) provides Gothic fiction with perhaps its most evident portrayal of diminished masculinity, which is rendered obsolete and finally supplanted by an alternative model of the Gothic hero, which emerges in the form of a child protagonist. As a result, it establishes a foundational point for the discussion of the adult and YA Gothic hero as a vehicle for expressing anguish concerning male identity, casting a shadow wide, as King's oeuvre typically does, over the Young Adult Gothic domain.

The Shining evolves around the Torrance family, which notably comprises three primary protagonists. Jack Torrance, a writer and recovering alcoholic, has lost his teaching position and gratefully accepts a winter caretaker role at The Overlook, a secluded hotel nestled in Colorado's Rocky Mountains. He is accompanied by his family - his wife Wendy and their five-year-old son, Danny - and they reside in the hotel during the off-peak season. This results in their isolation as the snowfall severs their connection to the outside world throughout the harsh winter. As their relationships deteriorate, it becomes evident that The Overlook Hotel is haunted. The residing spirits are drawn to young Danny, who possesses psychic abilities referred to as "shining", and the family falls deeper into turmoil as The Overlook's influence becomes increasingly dominant. By the narrative's conclusion, Jack has become deranged and determined to kill his wife and child.

The Shining addresses masculine concerns with a young and mentally gifted protagonist who emerges as a hero (similar to Oliver Quinn) and provides a locus for addressing issues of insecure male identity. The book's portrayals of masculine instability avoid the phase of adolescence, focusing instead on childhood and adulthood in the figures of Danny and Jack. The relevance of such portrayals is significant, however, given the adolescent anxiety which attends encroaching adulthood, especially regarding the matter of the male's role in the workplace, which forms the core of Jack Torrance's mental crisis.

The Shining holds a particular relevance to any discussion of the YA Gothic hero as vulnerable child and disempowered Other (as well as the concomitant idea of the *emasculated* Gothic hero) since it presents a narrative involving the child-hero superseding his father. As the story

unfolds, it becomes clear that the Torrance family consists of not one but *two* psychically gifted male protagonists, who are, nevertheless, rendered powerless (and in Jack's case overwhelmed) by the haunted environment. The subsequent emergence of the female protagonist (Wendy) is significant. Many popular readings of the novel's film adaptation yield accusations of misogyny (Miller, 2004), but *The Shining* may properly be viewed as the first Gothic text in which archetypes of helpless heroine and effectual hero are radically subverted, and where a child hero emerges.

Even so, *The Shining's* five-year-old protagonist possesses psychic ability which *should* serve to empower him against threat; but the nature of the paranormal environment he inhabits renders him disempowered - his gift makes him a target for the Overlook hotel rather than a master of it, afflicting him with a vulnerable spot, which provides the Overlook with an opportunity to undermine his sanity (and his father's).

Jack's slow descent into homicidal monstrosity takes nearly five hundred pages: he is striving to be a better person at the start of the novel; he is haunted by his addiction to alcohol and tragically misdirects anger at the people he cares about. In *Masculinity and Femininity in The Shining*, Lakkaya Palmer writes, 'Jack looms tall in the cultural zeitgeist as an inherently evil figure' (Palmer, 1996:102). But delving deeper into his portrayal, Palmer acknowledges gender definition as a root cause in Jack's deterioration. King illustrates this crisis in Jack's masculinity as soon as it becomes clear the Torrances are facing unseen threats.

'I love you too,' he said, but he was only mouthing the words. His hands were still clenched into fists ... She hadn't said a word about what was going to happen to them *after* they got down, when the party was over. Not one word. It had been Danny this and Danny that and Jack I'm so scared. Oh yes, she was scared of a lot of closet boogeymen and jumping shadows, plenty scared. But there was no lack of real ones, either. When they got down to Sidewinder they would arrive with sixty dollars and the clothes they stood up in. Not even a car ... There would be no job, not even part-time or seasonal, except maybe shovelling out driveways for three dollars a shot. (King, 1977:294)

The Gothic text as a locus for the exploration of flaws in the construction of male identity has never been so apparent as it is here. Hendershot's notion of masculinity as a construct does little to alleviate the looming threat that the construct presents. Stephen Davenport has written that *The Shining* 'historicizes twentieth-century American masculinity by tracing gender performance and anxiety through multiple decades and generations of males' (Davenport, 2000:309).

The emotionally wounded figure of Jack Torrance arrives at the Overlook Hotel nursing memories of his dead father, a brutal masculinity model, who, like Jack, possessed a violent temper, a history of alcoholism and 'won all his arguments with his children by use of his fists' (King, 1977:223). Jack struggles to reject this model and tries to be a good father to his son but his violent temper and alcoholism have already caused him to break the child's arm two years previously. Davenport claims that *The Shining* outlines the 'hard-to-soft story of twentieth century masculinity, especially as represented by the three generations of Torrance men, at the centre of which is Jack, whose emotional life is born of bad parenting and expectations about a basic formula: how and where to be a man' (Davenport, 2000:310). *The Shining* therefore represents a depiction of toxic masculinity and the consequences of allowing dominant (albeit increasingly outmoded) notions of masculinity to take control.

Jack's failure to achieve success as the breadwinner, especially when he is fired from his respectable job as an English teacher and his family is driven to financial hardship, holds a horror of its own. As Stephen Bruhm asks, 'What greater horror could we imagine than the white, middle-class, American family man - Jack Torrance, unemployed English professor turned caretaker?' (Bruhm, 2010:469). The pressure placed upon fathers as breadwinners can be overwhelming, of course, and there was (and still is) a societal expectation that men must do all they can for their families without complaining. After his job loss, Jack starts to drink more to escape the burdens of family life, and eventually gives in to his suppressed rage at being a failure. The result is writerly impotency. The pressures weighing on him emasculate and effectively castrate him.

As Lakkaya Palmer writes, 'we can see that the expectations upon Jack to be head of household, patriarch, father and husband contribute to him eventually crumbling. Jack suppresses his true emotions to fulfil society's view of what a man and father should be, and

these factors are influential in him becoming mentally and physically abusive towards his son and wife' (Palmer, 1996:102). Despite this storyline's apparent lack of relevance to young male readers, the prospect of imminent fatherhood coupled with job insecurity is close enough to the experience of many teenagers to warrant concern. The question of "what it is to be a man" is one that frequently rears its head at inopportune moments in the lives of adolescent males.

Indeed, the core of Jack Torrance's flaws centres on his narrow definition of masculinity. Toxic masculinity is defined by Haley Schojbert as:

How societal expectations of men to be aggressive, strong and stoic limit the range of their acceptable behaviours and how these unrealistic expectations are harmful to their ability to express emotion or convey attitudes of weakness or submissiveness. In the case of Jack Torrance, these emotions, repressed by shame or otherwise, manifest themselves in anger, violence, sexual frustration, and resentment towards his wife and son. (Schojbert, *The Shining and Toxic Masculinity*)

The portrayal of toxic masculinity begins in earnest when Jack loses his job as an English teacher due to an act of violence towards a student. We learn he has broken his son's arm in a drunken rage. As Jack himself proclaims, 'He had failed as a teacher, a writer, a husband and a father. He had even failed as a drunk' (King, 1977:330).

Jack should have been the hero of this story: he is the first character we are introduced to in its opening pages and the reader has come to know him intimately and to identify and empathise with his struggles, but by the end of the novel the process of emasculation and disempowerment have reduced him to a figure of evil. When discussing *The Shining* in terms of the emasculation of the YA Gothic hero, it is impossible to do so without first contemplating what precisely *has* changed in the realm of masculine identity since World War II. The book was published during the heyday of post-WWII feminism and what Stephen Davenport refers to as the continuing marital struggle over separate work spheres and the role of primary breadwinner in the mid-1970s' (Davenport, 2000:320). The view of men as strong, stoical breadwinners was starting to change and has since grown more uncertain.

In relation to the discussion of Jack as emasculated hero of the Gothic genre, one of the most crucial plot details in *The Shining* is also one of its most frequently overlooked, subtly alluded to as it is by its author. The reveal that Jack, like Danny Torrance, has “the shine” is extraordinarily significant, even in terms of understanding the basic progress of his mental deterioration.

Jack stood in the dining room just outside the batwing doors leading into the Colorado Lounge, his head cocked, listening. He was smiling faintly.

Around him, he could hear the Overlook Hotel coming to life.

It was hard to say just how he knew, but he guessed it wasn't greatly different from the perceptions Danny had from time to time ... like father, like son. Wasn't that how it was popularly expressed?

(King, 1977:377)

Contrary to expectations, Jack's psychic ability does not serve as a protective charm against malevolent forces as it might have in a work such as Frances Hardinge's *Skinful of Shadows*. Instead, *The Shining* subverts the Gothic hero archetype: Jack's “shine” only serves to emasculate and *disempower* him. Like his son Danny, Jack becomes a target for the Overlook due to his psychic sensitivity. Furthermore, his vulnerability surpasses that of his son because of his initial denial of this innate power.

Prior to the reveal in Chapter 43, Jack has lived in a state of denial regarding his “shine”. When medical science and “masculine” rationality present him with a common-sense explanation for his son's psychic abilities during a visit to a doctor's surgery, he seizes it:

‘Next you'll be telling me he can levitate,’ Edmonds said, still smiling. ‘No, no, no, I'm afraid not. It's not extrasensory but good old human perception, which in Danny's case is unusually keen. Mr Torrance, he knew your trunk was under the stairs because you had looked

everywhere else. Process of elimination, what? It's so simple Ellery Queen would laugh at it. Sooner or later you would have thought of it yourself ...

'Goddammit, I bet that's just right,' Jack said. (King, 1977:162)

In this context, Jack's Gothic literary antecedent is John Baxter, the bereaved father of Daphne Dumaourier's short story, *Don't Look Now* (1971), who possesses psychic ability but stubbornly refuses to acknowledge it, ignoring augers and warnings until finally meeting his death. Like Baxter, Jack's ability is subverted and turned against him by a fatal character flaw, which amounts to a masculine insistence on scepticism and scientific rationality in the face of the uncanny. The denial of supernatural phenomena in the realm of science is an unsustainable trope in Gothic fiction. The stereotypical juxtaposition of masculine logic against feminine intuition (often paired with female psychic sensitivity in Gothic narratives) is overturned in *The Shining*. Notably, Wendy Torrance is the sole protagonist in the novel without psychic ability. Her lack of this sensitivity serves ultimately to strengthen her. Throughout *The Shining*, Wendy's consistent level-headed practicality enables her to withstand both her husband's (and the Overlook's) murderous intent. Such practicality has traditionally been ascribed to the husband, or the male Gothic hero, as dictated by character archetypes prevalent in Gothic literature before the publication of *The Shining*. Hendershot's notion of the Gothic as a sphere for questioning the binary nature of masculine and feminine identity and exposing it as a mere construct seems especially applicable here, given King's subversion of the "male" and "female" stereotype.

Jack Torrance is a Gothic male protagonist emerging during the height of the 1970s feminist movement only to be supplanted by his story's heroine in terms of saving the day. On initial inspection, Wendy Torrance might appear a poor example of the "new Gothic heroine". She evokes the Radcliffian archetype of "heroine trapped in a haunted castle" but her heroic stature hinges on her determination to confront and manage the crisis threatening her family. Indeed, Wendy Torrance is a far cry from Gothic literature's (or the film's) then-traditionally shrill damsel in distress. She is terrified by her husband but remains remarkably composed throughout the novel. Her domesticity is a brave demeanour she assumes so that her family can heal, and a role she slips into whenever Jack fails in *his* domestic duties. As Laura Miller

writes, 'She doesn't wave around a baseball bat; she buries a knife in Jack's back when he breaks two of her ribs with a roque mallet. She doesn't weep and hide, she barely escapes with her life, fighting desperately to stay conscious and protect her son' (Miller, *What Stanley Kubrick Got Wrong About The Shining*, 2004).

The Shining represents a seismic subversion of the Gothic hero/heroine tradition at the point where it becomes clear that Jack Torrance has become the Overlook's victim while Wendy is emerging as the more capable entity. She succeeds in dragging his unconscious body into the hotel's pantry and locking him inside, though her manoeuvre is immediately thwarted by the intervention of the hotel's ghostly previous caretaker.

'Your wife ... appears to be ... somewhat stronger than we had imagined. Somewhat more resourceful. She certainly seems to have gotten the better of *you*.'

Grady tittered.

'Perhaps, Mr Torrance, we should have been dealing with her all along.' (King, 1977:424)

Indeed, it is significant that Wendy is the sole member of the Torrance family who does not possess "the shine". Among other things, this status as a non-psychic guest of the hotel stands as an inversion of the "female witch" archetype and undermines the cliché of feminine intuition. Due to her non-psychic status, Wendy becomes the only protagonist whose sanity is not disempowered by the Overlook. She negotiates its threat via real-world resourcefulness distinctly at odds with Jack's lack of practicality. In this sense, Wendy stands as a prototype for assertive heroines such as Claire Danvers or Amanda Verner, who populate today's YA Gothic literature, having displaced the Gothic masculine hero of yore.

Danny Torrance, meanwhile, is unquestionably the site upon which the gendered battle between Wendy and Jack is fought out, and on which the nativity of the YA Gothic/paranormal child-hero occurs. Danny is not yet performing the expected behaviours of his gender; he therefore represents something of a *tabula rasa*, and it is his mother who eventually succeeds in claiming him. He has, what is more, emerged as a negation of Jack's sceptical and scientific masculinity. As a paranormal hero, Danny defies rationalisation, or at

least his father's version of rationalisation, and has effectively come to embody a feminised version of Victor Frankenstein's monster. Hendershot's identification of Mary Shelley's creature with femininity is based on the assertion that Victor Frankenstein associates his 'lack and mortality with femininity and sexuality, thus underscoring the process of disavowal in which the male subject, as epitomized by the male scientist, must engage in order to preserve his sense of masculine wholeness' (Hendershot, 1998:79). This misguided sense of preserving masculine wholeness via a process of disavowal marks a line of descent that leads directly from Victor Frankenstein to Jack Torrance.

A broadening of the definition of femininity is necessary to fully appreciate the extent to which Danny Torrance has become a feminised subversion of the binary tradition that the Gothic hero embodied prior to the publication of *The Shining*. Danny is feminised in the sense that he occupies the status of Other thanks to his liminality and difference, just as Frankenstein's creature had done in Shelley's novel. Danny is likewise disavowed and betrayed by a father who lacks in the same way that Victor's creature is abandoned by its parent. 'Rejected by Victor, unable to be gendered as masculine due to his liminality and difference, the creature becomes the feminine through which Victor can disavow his lack,' Hendershot writes (Hendershot, 1998:80). Many critics have noted the association of Frankenstein's creature with the feminine. Although the creature is anatomically male, within Western culture the marginal is typically equated with the feminine. 'Thus, those who for sexual, racial, political, social, or other reasons cannot accommodate themselves to the masculine ideal are typically defined as masculinity's Other - that is, femininity' (Hendershot, 1998:80).

Apart from his feminised Otherness, Danny also represents a "coming to the fore" of child protagonists in the paranormal genre, providing an added bond between this novel and the young adult readership of twenty-first century Gothic/paranormal fiction. As such, he also provides a more positive role model in the genre than that presented hitherto by child protagonists in 1970s supernatural literature. The examples of *Rosemary's Baby* (1967), *The Exorcist* (1971) and *The Omen* (1976), to name only the most notorious - all of which were successful novels that were turned into hugely successful films - amounted to a literal demonising of children as "the Satanic other", probably emerging from parental paranoia borne of the social upheaval emerging in the wake of a post-war generation gap, rock n' roll and a decline in religious belief.

Danny also succeeds in undermining Jack's role as surely as Wendy does. We may acknowledge that Jack possesses 'the shine', but there is no question that Danny Torrance possesses it in far greater potency. This explains the hotel going to such lengths to ensure that the Torrances won't leave. Jack realises as much: he becomes envious and resentful of his son, who not only presents an obstacle of responsibility standing in the way of his desires but has even managed to acquire a higher importance in the eyes of the Overlook itself. By the story's climax, Jack Torrance has been emasculated and disempowered to the extent that even his five-year-old son has replaced him as a more credible adversary of the hotel.

The marital discord between his parents leads Danny to separate himself from them, and this separation forces him, in effect, to become the first "child hero" of modern Gothic fiction. The category of Young Adult fiction itself had not been invented by 1977, but *The Shining* can again be seen as a prototype of the modern YA Gothic novel in the sense that it portrays a child who frees him/herself from parental shackles in an almost Miltonian sense in order to embark on adventure - even if the adventure, and its attendant act of disobedience, lead him to his encounter with the dead woman lying in the bathtub in Room 217.

But it is Danny's access to power, and to the shining, which makes him the hero of the novel. As Steven Bruhm maintains, 'For Danny, shining is access to power as well as to horror. Danny is represented in the novel as liminal, at the edge of power, cognizant of, yet bewildered by, the mysteries around him ... yet from the outset Danny is clearly the knower, he who possesses the visions' (Bruhm, 2012:476). In this sense, Danny again resembles the young male protagonist of *How to Hear Ghosts* in his pursuit of 'a line of becoming'. Danny's visions are provided by Tony, his imaginary male friend, and yet the power itself is framed in feminine terms, via allusions to Lewis Carroll's child heroine.

Danny scrambled backward, screaming, and suddenly he was through the wall and falling, tumbling over and over, down the hole, down the rabbit hole ... (King, 1977:305)

In the novel's penultimate scene, Dick Halloran saves Wendy and Danny from the exploding hotel, bringing them back to civilization. However, Danny's intervention orchestrates this

rescue. The play of a child hero's agency and power, cloaked in imagery associating him with the heroine of Lewis Carroll's *Alice* books - despite his vulnerability, lays the foundation for a young adult Gothic hero who subverts the genre's gender norms.

THE ANGEL STONE

Livi Michael's *The Angel Stone* (2006) spans time, moving between modern day Manchester (where a scientist has mysteriously vanished and abandoned his teenage daughter, Kate, amid research into the possibility of time travel), and the Manchester of 1604, where Simeon, a thirteen-year-old boy with learning difficulties, is set to attend the local cathedral school. *The Angel Stone's* portrayal of a vulnerable child-hero mirrors that of Danny Torrance: Simeon is a paranormally gifted youngster placed in jeopardy, who embodies Hendershot's notion of femininity by virtue of his rejection from patriarchal society. (Simeon's sole point of contact and refuge is with his mother, who embodies the notion of escape and freedom associated with the uncultivated woodland and countryside surrounding seventeenth century Manchester and its male-populated church school.) Simeon is more ostracised, and thus more feminised than Danny since his learning difficulties mark him out as 'Butterworth's loon', a figure of male inadequacy and 'lack' who fails to find a place 'within a gender system that attempts to associate masculinity with wholeness' as Hendershot would have it. (Hendershot, 1998:79)

It is here, through Simeon's perspective of his own plight, that the youthful male Gothic protagonist relays his anxieties to the reader, which amount to a terrified alienation at the prospect of school: the cathedral school in question is, after all, a hive of patriarchally religious tyranny and bullying. As Smith and Moruzi have commented, 'Many of the characters in YA Gothic literature ... interrogate the limits placed upon them by the adult authority figures that they encounter, as well as the structural, institutional and patriarchal forces that restrict the cultural and social possibilities available to them' (Moruzi et al, 2021:4). In this sense, Simeon is feminized via his rejection of the patriarchal and the institutional - he is a marginalized creature who lives outside the perimeters of society and, unlike Frankenstein's creature, prefers to do so.

Simeon's initial presence at the centre of the narrative transforms him into a locus for questioning the nature of male identity, which is undoubtedly pertinent despite the story's seventeenth century milieu, since Simeon's character is a clear subversion of traditional YA Gothic gender norms. He displays startling athletic prowess during his attempts to escape the school whilst simultaneously attracting scorn from his peers for the effeminate displays of weeping and hand-holding that signify him as a mummy's boy.

Simeon's extreme Otherness is attributable to his learning difficulties *and* his mediumistic abilities as a seer. He inevitably challenges the binary polarities of the "masculine" and "feminine" notions of the Gothic. 'In a position of liminality the creature occupies the uncanny position the feminine holds within Western culture,' Hendershot writes of Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818). 'The creature, meant to embody a wholeness, mirrors back to Victor a masculinity inhabited by lack' (Hendershot, 1998:80). Simeon's femininity is similarly pronounced and made even more explicit by the nature of his mysticism, which is nurtured by his mother and the gypsy community that have travelled with them. As Botting writes:

Unnatural constructions of otherness and abnormality, monsters participate in a wider denaturalisation of ideological construction of identity, gender, race and class divisions and distributions of power, to the extent, perhaps, that their monstrosity is all too easily generalised and rendered visible as signs of modern humanity: instinctual, repressed, monsters disclose the other side of the psyche; oppressed and excluded, they reveal the monstrosity of the systems of power and normalisation to which all are subjected. (Botting, 2008:15)

In this sense, Simeon qualifies as a "monstrous other"-style Gothic hero even more plainly than Danny Torrance. His psychic talent is an unknown quantity and even his developmental challenges resist masculine classification and definition, since what is probably autism cannot be defined as such. Given the limitations of the era's medical knowledge, his condition, like autism, remains undefined, paralleling the medieval interpretation of epilepsy and imbued with mystical and ambiguous characteristics. Simeon's singing talent in the cathedral choir further distinguishes him as feminised.

The Choirmaster began to play, simple phrases at first, but each time the boy followed, and the notes he sang struck like arrows into the notes that Robert Leigh played, perfect and true. Higher and higher the notes climbed ... It was astonishing. The Warden had only once before heard anything like it, from the castrati who sang in the great cathedral in Rome.

(Michael, 2006:244)

Simeon manages to defy the expectations of the church's masculine culture and remains at the school despite his transgression of traditional male norms. His heightened alienation within the school's masculine culture reinforces his portrayal as a male protagonist who inverts gender rules, and the book's challenge to gendered polarities becomes even more pronounced when we encounter his transgender protector, Kit Morley.

Hendershot observes that 'sexual difference is called into question by Gothic bodies that challenge the most accepted hard facts about what it means to be a sexed human. In the modern and postmodern Euro-American world the body has traditionally been used as a means of representing masculine superiority and feminine inferiority' (Hendershot, 1998:9). Contrarily, the Gothic body of Kit Morley challenges the notion of masculine superiority throughout the duration of *The Angel Stone*, especially during Kit's sword duel with Chubb, the school's sports champion and bete noir. After besting Chubb (but succumbing to a treacherous counterfeit blow), Kit is impaled and her/his gender identity is revealed for the first time to the astonished reader. (Up until this point, Kit had been referred to as 'he' in the narrative.)

Kit and Chubb excelled at both sports. Kit was lighter, but more agile, disarming his opponents with lightning moves ... They would display their skills along with the finest in the country at Oxford and Cambridge early in the New Year ... (Michael, 2006:137)

Thus, the notion that a girl can do anything a boy can do, even in the physical sense, is established. Prior to her *Twelfth Night*-style unveiling, Kit Morley has displayed attributes

consistent with a traditional masculine adventure hero. She excels at physical sports and academic study and, unlike Simeon, she is accepted into the school's all-male culture as one of its superiors. Her slender build, smooth face and general avoidance of alehouses and whoring are the only hints of detectable femininity. She confounds gender expectations so completely that when the reveal arrives that 'he' is a female it is received with genuine surprise by the reader.

Simeon's femininity is highlighted whenever he finds himself in Kit's company, (when, for example, Kit irritably refrains from holding Simeon's hand), and from their introduction to each other, Kit is portrayed as the physical and mental superior of the two. The nature of Kit's identity is portrayed in terms of fluidity and a chameleon-like adaptability even before the reveal occurs.

Simeon stared at him, then said, "You are like a moth that changes colour on the bark of a tree."

It was the longest sentence he had ever uttered. Kit knew the kind of moth he meant – he had seen them on the trees near his old home. They changed colour according to their background.

(Michael, 2006:180)

The notion of Kit as a chameleon, who refuses to allow him/herself to be defined by a gender identity which has been foisted upon her against her wishes, whether by society or by nature itself, is a gross subversion of YA Gothic's binarized tropes. The uncertainty of male gender identity becomes a source of self-discovery and liberation in Michael's locus. Freud argues that 'The ego is first and foremost a bodily ego; it is not merely a surface entity, but is itself the projection of surface ... It may thus be regarded as a mental projection of the surface of the body' (Freud, 1923:26). In this sense, Kit Morley has succeeded in confounding and subverting gender polarities through her own mental projection and self-reconstruction of the body's exterior. She has undertaken an act of self-definition that rebuts both her society's (and the reader's) gender expectations, modifying her appearance and rendering her ego imperceptible by impeding the dominant patriarchal culture from interpreting her as it wishes

to. As Hendershot articulates, 'Readings of the body are crucial to gender identity because through them the body serves as the visible image of the subject's ego' (Hendershot, 1998:9).

Furthermore, once Kit's gender identity has been "exposed", she doesn't allow it to subsequently define her. She displays momentary confusion, for sure: ('Kit limped over to the tapestry and pushed it aside. Even walking felt strange, as though now she was a girl she didn't know how to move, or even think' (Michael, 2006:339).) But before long, her desire to be the person she has all along chosen to be reasserts itself, picking up her sword. ('It felt reassuringly familiar.' (Michael, 2006:343).)

She has spent days engrossed in a translation of Homer's *Iliad*. Before this, she had pondered the experience of actual combat on a battlefield, imagining herself as a male hero and wondering 'when it came to it, would he be brave enough to stand his ground or would he turn and run, as Hector had run from the incensed Achilles?' (Michael, 2006:191) When the moment arrives for her to demonstrate her mettle, she is not found wanting, and she confronts the true nemesis:

Involuntarily, Kit's hand went to his sword. She crouched first, then lay flat on her stomach, creeping towards the open crypt ... This was it. The time had come for her to find out whether she was a hero or a coward. (Michael, 2006:353)

The temporal bridge between 1604 and the twenty-first century appears courtesy of Kate's modern-day mad scientist father and the historically authentic figure of Dr John Dee. Both are in search of the path to eternal life promised by the Angel Stone. Dee is portrayed here as a Faustian figure, dabbling with occult forces and bartering with malevolent spirits in his quest for knowledge, notably that of Edward Kelly. The occult power Kelly embodies seeks to counteract the novel's intentional challenge to traditional gender distinctions. Kelly's potential possession of Kate at the climax of the novel mirrors the psychological dynamics of sexual assault. His initial response upon the promise of occupying Kit's vulnerable female form is revealing:

The spirit began to pace. “I knew there was something wrong with that boy,” it said. “He’s a girl!”

Dr Dee ground harder, breaking up the tiny leaves.

“I ain’t coming back as no girl,” said the spirit. “No way.” (Michael, 2006:297)

The sentiment betrays the contempt in which women were held during the seventeenth century, though Hendershot elaborates on the notion of gender difference during the era by explaining that ‘the social superiority of man over woman vis-à-vis the Great Chain of Being solidified sexual difference, since man was placed hierarchically higher than woman’ (Hendershot, 1998:10). But Dee acknowledges Kit’s superiority in this instance:

Kit was the brightest scholar in the school, the one on whom they pinned their hopes.

Let your women keep silence in the churches, he thought. 1 Corinthians 14:34

(Michael, 2006:288)

Indeed, patriarchy’s received wisdom regarding the female body and its inferiority is thrown sideways by Kit’s act of gender-defying agency.

The boys never bathed, nor openly undressed. Kit had managed her changing body in secret, binding her small breasts. She had the muscles of a boy from all the swordplay and archery. She had learned to sound like one, speaking and singing ... The Warden looked at Kit. There was nothing female about her, even the way she lay in bed and ran her fingers through her hair was like a boy, not a young woman. He could envisage no kind of future at all for Kit as a woman. (Michael, 2006:289)

Ultimately, Dee cannot help but admire Kit’s extraordinary feat of determining her own fate, seamlessly navigating both male and female roles in a purportedly male-dominated world.

After all, Queen Elizabeth's reign had presented the binary tradition with a figure who exemplified that anything can be achieved irrespective of sexual identity.

GOTHIC VOICES & THE RADCLIFFEAN HERO

My plan to construct a novel that might blur YA Gothic's binaristic gender norms to create a unique representation of haunting involved adopting Ann Radcliffe's aesthetic of "feminine terror". The intention was to create a novel that would address adolescent male concerns via a young male protagonist while appealing to male *and* female readers by using terror instead of horror.

The aim was to construct a representation of haunting that could be described as unique. The use of an unreliable narrator to portray such a haunting was well-established in the genre. On the other hand, the illicit use of anti-depressant medication as a means of undermining the young narrator's credibility, thereby creating a sense of ambiguity, was unprecedented in YA Gothic fiction. Likewise, the use of "feminine terror" as a means of portraying male anxieties was unusual in the genre.

"Feminine terror" emphasizes obscurity and indeterminacy. As Joan Passey writes, "It is obscurity that provides space for the imagination to function, to fill in the gaps, as sound disperses to fill sublime chasms." (Passey, 2016:198) In the case of *How to Hear Ghosts*, "feminine terror" invokes Gothic literature's vococentric soundworld as a key strategic weapon. The field of "sonic Gothic" studies has been explored by Isabella van Elferen, who contends, 'In Gothic, in/audibility is at least as important for the representation of ghosts as in/visibility ... the Gothic uncanny has an emphatically sonic mode of performance throughout its history.' (van Elferen, 2012:24) Indeed, the disembodied voice as a disturbing indicator of ghostly presence is a motif that populates Gothic fiction even in its earliest manifestations, such as when Emily hears uncanny-sounding voices in *The Mysteries of Udolpho*.

Van Elferen contends, 'It was the Bronte sisters that definitively set the standard for the description of disembodied voices in Gothic literature. Cathy's ghostly voice in *Wuthering Heights* has become an emblem of ghostliness ... And every reader of *Jane Eyre* (1847)

remembers Grace Poole's chilling laughter.' (van Elferen, 2012:21) Van Elferen maintains that the voice as an announcement of spectral presence is a long-established tradition in Gothic literature by virtue of its power to unsettle, especially when its source is uncertain in terms of its spatial origin.

Angela Leighton, in her study on the use of sound in literature, establishes the point that 'Sound lends itself to a vocabulary of the preternatural. While the sense of sight verifies without any need for interpretation, hearing, with its often surmised or memorised location of origins, slips easily into a more distant apprehension, memory, or sometimes even imagination of a sound.' (Leighton, 2018:4) This goes some way to explaining the preference for sound as a tool for evoking "feminine terror". Ann Radcliffe's definition of terror and obscurity in "*On the Supernatural in Poetry*" (1826) emphasises the efficacy of an object or terrible event being presented as 'obscure' to sight or to the aural sense. This approach generates, in Matt Foley's words 'a sense of mystery ... promoting a heightening of the senses as it does so: terror, intertwined with curiosity, ensues.' (Foley, 2023:14)

It is by demonstrating the link between Radcliffe's aesthetic of 'disconcerting and uncanny oralities' (Foley, 2023:14) and her construction of a "feminine terror" aesthetic that we can highlight the tradition's contrast with that of "masculine horror".

'The often-excessive visual dimensions of the Gothic novel have long been scrutinised by critics,' Foley writes, 'whether that be to attack the Gothic as a low-cultural form ... or to explore the mode's continuing predilection for displaying visual excesses, such as ... the porous, graphic corporealities of a writer such as Matthew Lewis.' (Foley, 2023:14)

Lewis' graphic visual aesthetic finds a contemporary equivalent in Stephen King's predilection for "opening the door" so that his readers may be shown the full extent of the visual horror that lies behind it. (King, 1980:135-136) Reliance on visuals in "masculine horror" stands in stark contrast to the feminine preference for the sonic. Indeed, Lewis' *The Monk*, initially notorious for its excesses of visual horror and vulgarity, apparently prompted Radcliffe to write *The Italian* (1797) as a response, with its many representations of sonorous and persecutory voices.

Voices appear in abundance in Ann Radcliffe's fiction, throughout, though they are often aligned with her signature motif of the explained supernatural. In *The Mysteries of Udolpho*

(1794), the uncanny voice introduces the book's supernatural element when Montoni's conversation with his confederates is interrupted by a demanding cry: 'Repeat them!' (Radcliffe, 1794:289). The voice that calls is disembodied and panic and confusion subsequently arise: 'Montoni was silent; the guests looked at each other to know who spoke, but they perceived that each was making the same enquiry ... "Listen!" said a voice ... All the company rose from their chairs in confusion.' (Radcliffe, 1794:290)

Radcliffe provides no clue to the origin of the voice and the reader is left to conclude that it belongs to some ghostly presence in the castle. The idea is subsequently reinforced by the groans and cries Emily hears from her bedchamber at night, and when the voice is heard a second time, accompanied by groans, the ghostliness of the presence seems verified. Nevertheless, Radcliffe concludes her novels with explanations for all seemingly supernatural elements. The ghostly voices in *A Sicilian Romance* (1790) are similarly revealed to be the cries of a wronged woman incarcerated in a prohibited wing of the Castle Mazzini.

Oliver Quinn's encounter with feminine terror and the Gothic's vococentric soundworld thus establishes him as a contemporary *male* Radcliffean hero. His terror is ultimately revealed as a hoax of "explainable supernatural" origin that has served to conceal a paternal secret in the typical Radcliffean tradition. Similarly, in *A Sicilian Romance*, Louisa Bernini's "low and dismal" spectral voice provides a response in her son, Ferdinand, who listens in "deep amazement" (Radcliffe, 1790: 96-97) to his mother's uncanny-sounding cries, just as the disembodied maternal voice calls to our hero again in *How to Hear Ghosts*, resulting in a similarly profound revelation that usurps the prevailing power dynamics that support the tyranny and secrecy of the paternal usurper.

Radcliffe's insistence on a rational explanation for the supernatural contrasts with Walpole and Lewis' insistence on an authentically supernatural presence. In *A Sicilian Romance*, the imprisoned mother's wails are initially thought to be the ghostly howls of a disquieted spirit: ultimately, however, the supernatural is explained away by the emergence of a hitherto hidden injustice perpetrated by a tyrannical patriarchal figure. *How to Hear Ghosts*, on the other hand, features supernatural phenomena that *are* ghostly in origin, yet the narrative's uncanny elements still point to a rational explanation for the antagonist's paranormal abilities. Dominic Quinn's psychic talents are exposed as fake and explainable in the Radcliffean

tradition, while Ollie's encounters with the paranormal are portrayed as authentic (albeit ambiguously) elsewhere. The literature of terror (Radcliffe) and the literature of horror (Walpole and Lewis) are thus simultaneously evoked in an effort to incorporate both traditions and blur distinctions between "masculine horror" and "feminine terror".

How to Hear Ghosts may be viewed as a "feminine terror" text in its use of eerie and uncanny voices, however, since, as in Radcliffe's novels, the voices are used to produce narrative effects. Uncanny-sounding voices in *The Mysteries of Udolpho* and *A Sicilian Romance* serve to propel their respective stories. As Foley writes:

Atmospheric sounds and noisy frights, perhaps the literary equivalent of what horror critics term "jump scares," that aim at generating Gothic affect are to be distinguished from auditory phenomena such as eerie or uncanny voices that are central to producing narrative effects. (Foley, 2023:17)

The voices in *How to Hear Ghosts* serve as a tool for the evocation of Radcliffean terror *and* as a narrative device. The ghost of the bleeding nun that features in Lewis' *The Monk* merely serves to generate Gothic affect (ie "jump scares"). Lewis' bleeding nun is primarily 'noisy' - an unstructured and unruly auditory haunting, which deploys the vococentric Gothic to achieve somewhat crude Gothic effects. (Lewis, 1796:139) We are told that the nun's ghost 'wept and wailed ... to the universal terror' of the castle's 'inhabitanancies', (Lewis, 1796:139) and, unlike the hauntings and voices of *How to Hear Ghosts* and Radcliffe's romances, no rational resolution for this haunting is provided.

Therefore, as Foley points out, the voices that are found in Lewis' "masculine horror" tradition 'do not invite the kinds of attentive listening that shapes the soundworld of the Radcliffean Gothic.' (Foley, 2023: 18). The Radcliffean heroine, after all, listens attentively - just as Oliver Quinn does - so that (s)he may make sense of an auditory mystery ... Suspense can itself be pleasurable, activating desire and bringing with it the anticipation of an answer,' Foley writes, therefore, '... the attentive listener of the Gothic ... listens with the expectation of a revelation.' (Foley, 2023: 18)

Matt Foley has introduced the critical category of vococentric Gothic, pointing to 'moments in Gothic fictions when the voice produces sublimity, terror, horror, awe, mystery, seduction and more' (Foley, 2023:1). Indeed, the vococentric soundworld of dark romanticism has proved

to be extremely influential upon the acoustics of *How to Hear Ghosts*. Foley states that ‘Since the age of the Gothic Romance, which found its genesis in the mid-eighteenth century, disembodied, monstrous or uncanny voices have populated the soundworlds of literatures of terror and horror.’ (Foley, 2023:1) A persistent and important strand to Gothic aesthetics concerns itself with voice, then, dating back to the soundworld of Walpole’s *Castle of Otranto* (1764), if only in terms of the supernatural groaning that echoes throughout the castle as a herald of injustice and false inheritance similar to the one Oliver Quinn hears in *How to Hear Ghosts*. The tradition holds a particular relevance to *How to Hear Ghosts*, which can be categorised as a contemporary vococentric YA Gothic novel which relies specifically on the sound of disembodied, uncanny voices in order to create its initial moments of suspense and “feminine” terror.

Foley insists on the *primacy* of voice as a crucial ingredient in the soundworld of Gothic writing. ‘Essentially, vococentric Gothic is an auditory experience: if we listen attentively to Gothic texts, even literature, we realise that the voice can often take precedence over visual Gothic motifs’ (Foley, 2023:1). He cites Vernon Lee’s “A Wicked Voice” (1890) as a standard example of a nineteenth century vococentric Gothic short story. Lee’s tale invites comparison with *How to Hear Ghosts* because, as Foley points out, its voice threatens established orders in a multitude of ways.

‘The story’s ... representation of the voice as persecutory ... and as an object of obsession speaks to a fundamental power of voice to metamorphose and to engage our fears and desires in myriad guises. If narrative voice shapes the world we encounter, audible voices may penetrate this world’s integrity, signifying change and, often in the Gothic and Horror, creating disjuncture and conflict.’ (Foley, 2023:2)

The cry of Amanda Verner’s unseen baby in Amy Lukavics’ *Daughters unto Devils* (2015) persecutes and obsesses the protagonist, bearing testimony to the power of the uncanny voice as a tool for engaging fears and desires that preoccupy the contemporary YA Gothic. The baby’s disembodied voice calls into question the integrity of the world Lukavics’ narrative voice has so far created; likewise, the voices in *How to Hear Ghosts* undermine the

paternalistic order established by Dominic Quinn in his attempts to deceive his nephew, be they the voices of Ollie's dead mother or murmurs he hears in his head and/or on Dictaphone recordings.

The reason for the privileged status assigned to the voice, above all other aural considerations in Gothic literature's soundworld, lies in its crucial function as narrative device, rather than mere atmospheric tool. Foley states, 'Disembodied and acousmatic voices *demand* action from their listeners' (Foley, 2023:6). 'In the early Gothic novel, a moan may act as a demand or call for justice. Often, the disembodied moan belongs to a locus that is beyond the field of the characters' - and readers' - vision.' (Foley, 2023: 15) In this sense, the voices in *How to Hear Ghosts* fulfil the same function as the voices in Radcliffe's Gothic Romances, and the hero is likewise Radcliffean in every conceivable sense, or at least he would be were he a female.

POSSESSION

Hendershot's work in the Gothic and its representation of masculinity applies itself unerringly to the concept of "possession", which appears as a trope in *How to Hear Ghosts*. Indeed, the idea of possession is a recurring trope in Gothic fiction. The idea of an alien Other inhabiting a body speaks to our fear of rape, invasion and loss of control. Hendershot points out that 'Yet, even with the Gothic, possession is more often an act that happens to only one-half of the human race - women ... Why is the possession of the male body such a cultural taboo that even supernatural forces respect the division between men as possessors and women as possessed?' (Hendershot, 1998:143) The example of the teenage Regan MacNeil in William Peter Blatty's *The Exorcist* (1971) presents the most notorious archetype, (with her possessor being overtly male,) but tales of possession are rife in literature. Examples include Dracula's exclusively female victims (with Jonathan Harker evading such a destiny), the possessed witches of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and the dynamics between the female quarry and male predator in Sarah Pinborough's *Behind Her Eyes* (2017).

Hendershot claims 'The possessed male body poses a problem for Western culture because possession has so adamantly been troped as feminine' (Hendershot, 1998:43). In this section

I examine my claim to have created a YA Gothic novel that challenges traditional Gothic gendering norms through its protagonist. The strength of this claim rests largely on the notion that “possession” in *How to Hear Ghosts* is troped as masculine.

The definition of possession may be broadened here to include the concept of “channelling” - a paranormal skill supposedly inherent in mediums and psychics. The subject in question is effectively being “entered” - in cases of possession and channelling - and a precedent is provided by *The Shining*’s Danny Torrance, whose visions and experiences inhabit *him* and do not translate as a force against others. Channelling resembles possession in the sense that ‘The possessed male body potentially undermines stereotypes, placing the “complete” and “full” male anatomy in peril by opening it up to feminine possession’ (Hendershot, 1998:43). In the opening scene of *How to Hear Ghosts*, Oliver Quinn experiences psychic attack, in which uncontrollable and unwanted forces occupy his consciousness. The invasion occurs repeatedly throughout the novel and can be characterised as a form of psychic rape. As such, it is essentially “non-masculine”, at least in terms of the socially “acceptable” notions of masculinity that have been familiar from previous texts. Ellen Brinks maintains that, as in contemporary Western society, ‘During the eighteenth century, masculinity was continually being redefined’ (Brinks, 2003:17). Quoting Terry Castle’s description of the ‘female man’, she goes on to outline how this redefinition has been ongoing:

The Western image of masculinity has altered strikingly over the past two centuries, gradually absorbing many once exclusively feminine modes of experience. Characteristics once seen as belonging only to women – moodiness, heightened sensitivity, susceptibility to hysteria, and so on – have come increasingly to be perceived as belonging to both sexes. (Castle, 1995:34)

Oliver Quinn is presented throughout *How to Hear Ghosts* as a young male protagonist exhibiting weakening sexual polarities in the manner described above by Castle, right down to his moodiness, heightened sensitivity and susceptibility to hysteria. He can be said to have absorbed the once (supposedly) exclusively feminine mode of experience, which we may refer to as “being entered”, as does his role model and guardian.

Prior to his decision to embrace the phenomena, Ollie is also presented with the *spectre* of possession when his uncle pretends to channel *and* be possessed by the spirit of Ollie's dead mother. Dominic thus provides his nephew (and the reader) with a male role model and guardian who likewise subverts cultural perceptions of the mystic - the mystic is, after all, traditionally a female figure. The archetype of the witch or female fortune teller usually springs to mind, and the medium who can contact the dead has been an overwhelmingly female archetype in Western culture since the rise to fame of the Fox sisters and the advent of the nineteenth century's spiritualist craze. Dominic Quinn, meanwhile, provides us with the image of the male father figure "being entered", in an inversion of the possession model with all its sexual and feminine associations.

Ollie Quinn is undeterred by the prospect and embraces it, exploring his own mediumistic talent through token-reading, wherein he is inhabited by residual impressions emanating from other people's lives and past histories, including those of a dead woman suffering the loss of her child. Ollie's decision to become possessed by a feminine personality in this way could arguably constitute a resistance of dominant cultural patterns of masculine behaviour. The example set by his uncle (and the uncle's essential subservience to his female manager, Marsha, who is also effectively a member of Ollie's new family unit) amounts also to an inversion of the traditional family structure. This inversion of gender norms serves as a model of domestic and familial influence more in line with the twenty-first century than the family unit of the past.

Dominic Quinn feigns possession by a feminine personality (Ollie's mother) and, in doing so, similarly resists dominant cultural patterns of masculinity. His initial decision to become a (fraudulent) medium dates to his childhood persecution by bullies (only briefly alluded to in the novel), which is made feasible via Nana Lou, the Quinn family's genuinely spiritualist matriarch. The women in the Quinn family who do possess the Sight - including Nana Lou and Ollie's mother, Miranda - are incarcerated and labelled insane due to the same masculine scientific rationalist worldview that Jack Torrance employs when dismissing his son's psychic talent.

Hendershot points out that in Hitchcock's *Psycho* (1960) 'the possessed male body poses questions and concerns endemic to late 1950s American culture concerning McCarthyism and

masculine totalitarianism' (Hendershot, 1998:44). Similarly, it may be argued that the hoax possession of Dominic by spirits poses questions and concerns endemic to the Brexit-crisis period in contemporary British history. The 'attempt on Hitchcock's part to explore the male body possessed by the feminine and its relationship to a rigidly normalising post-War America' (Hendershot, 1998:50) can be viewed as comparable with Dominic's faux possession. This possession serves as an exploration of the hysteria surrounding the threat of invasion and narratives of loss of control that pervaded British society and discourse during the "Vote Leave" period. Dominic's charlatantry certainly allegorises the populism of the era's demagogues, including the "fear of invasion" and "loss of control" chimeras they invoked.

Indeed, Dominic Quinn was initially conceived as a character whose moral agenda hinged on self-interest of the Johnsonian/Trumpian variety. His power was achieved through similar "easy-fit" solutions and answers that sidestepped confronting uncomfortable truths. Indeed, the parallels between Dominic Quinn and the archetype of the manipulative politician were evident even at the time of writing.

Unlike the tragic figure of Norman Bates, Oliver Quinn ultimately recognises himself as a self-possessed subject. This is partially because the female spirit that haunts and possesses him during the narrative is a supportive, pacifying figure. She contrasts with the dominant, aggressive figure of Norman's mother, and allows for an integration of "masculine" and "feminine", which would have been foreign to a more dominant figure. This is why Ollie succeeds in a process of assimilation at the story's conclusion, in stark contrast to Norman's failure.



PARANORMAL ROMANCE

The twenty-first century paranormal romance subgenre is associated in the public consciousness with vampire fiction and female readership, largely due to Stephenie Meyer's *Twilight* series and its monumental success. The Romance genre has become intertwined with the evolution of YA Gothic fiction to such an extent that Mills & Boon Romance Fiction elements are prevalent throughout the *Twilight* series and YA paranormal romance as a subgenre.

Serena Trowbridge posits, '*Twilight* is a Romance dressed up as Gothic: it has the trappings of the (Gothic) genre but not the substance' (Trowbridge, 2013:109). The conventions synonymous with modern Romance fiction trace back to the 1970s acquisition of Mills & Boon by Harlequin. This resulted in the UK publisher's absorption by its Canadian counterpart and subsequent inclusion in the American market under the "Harlequin Romance" imprint). Concurrently, Kathleen Woodiwiss' historical romance novel, *The Flame and The Flower* (1972) deviated from tradition by incorporating more overt sexual content than had previously been typical for the genre. The concurrent success of these developments signified a global shift in readers' preferences towards more explicit romantic content. Woodiwiss and her contemporaries often characterised their male leads in the mould of the Byronic hero and the trope was subsequently updated by Mills & Boon/Harlequin to incorporate graphically erotic elements. Lutz describes the 1970s Romance subgenre of "Erotic Romance" as growing 'out of the older genre of the Gothic Romance like a new shoot emerging from the same tree' (Lutz, 2006:49). The trope of the virginal young woman falling into the clutches of a physically and financially powerful Byronic male (only to redeem him through her love) was familiar from the earliest Gothic novels of the eighteenth century.

This tradition is faithfully represented in Stephenie Meyer's *Twilight*, in which Isabella Swann, a teenager, relocates to the small Washington town of Forks. There, she becomes familiar with the Cullens, a group of five attractive and adopted teenagers. One of them displays a curious hostility towards Bella before rescuing her from various perils and revealing his identity as a member of a 'vampire family'. Furthermore, he unveils that Bella is his 'cantante' - the one human whose blood is irresistibly tempting to him - implying that he constantly

grapples with the urge to kill her. Despite these challenges, they fall in love. The climax sees Edward Cullen rescue her from the clutches of a malevolent vampire named James.

The storyline bears many similarities to earlier works of vampire fiction. Crawford points out that:

In the vampire romance genre, Meyers' *Twilight* was a latecomer. Published in October 2005, it appeared in an already populous field, established fifteen years earlier by Klause, Smith, Miller, Herter and Shayne, and subsequently popularized and diversified by Hamilton, Feehan, Harris and Davidson ... Virtually every element which appeared in it - the small-town high school setting, the teenage heroine, the love triangle, the distinction between good and bad vampires, the mysterious, beautiful school-boy who turns out to be a good vampire with a special connection to the heroine – had already appeared in earlier vampire romance fiction, most obviously in Smith's *Vampire Diaries* novels, whose basic premise was extremely close to that of *Twilight*. (Crawford, 2014:159)

The tropes of paranormal/vampire romance, then, date back beyond *Twilight* to the vampire fiction of the early 1990s, and to the Mills & Boon/Harlequin romances of the 1970s, and even to the earliest works of Gothic Romance. However, *Twilight* has prominently established them in contemporary paranormal YA fiction. Moreover, *Twilight* has introduced new norms in the genre, taking its central romantic fantasy to unprecedented extreme. As Crawford writes:

Twilight is the wish-fulfilment fantasy to end all others ... By the end of the fourth book this utterly ordinary young woman, seemingly destined for a life of complete obscurity, has been blessed with enormous wealth, unlimited power, incredible beauty, superhuman strength, everlasting youth and the perfect and eternal love of the most beautiful man in the world, along with a devoted family and a daughter who is literally the most special and most intelligent child on Earth ... Finally the universe yields and gives her whatever she wants ... The ordinary rags-to-riches "Cinderella" romance story has nothing on this. (Crawford, 2014:162)

The depiction of romantic relationships in *Twilight* is predominantly a wish-fulfilment fantasy. Bella's initial description of Edward Cullen focuses mainly on the flawless perfection of his physical appearance, more akin to an idealisation of the male form than its reality – his 'straight, perfect, angular' facial features and 'perfect lips', all of which are 'devastatingly, inhumanly beautiful' and which belong 'on the airbrushed pages of a fashion magazine. Or painted by an old master as the face of an angel.' Bella refers to him, prior to discovering his name, as 'the beautiful boy' (Meyer, 2005:17).

Meyers' books focus on Edward's physical perfection to the extent that Bella's mortal male peers are eclipsed and rendered microscopically pathetic in their hapless attempts to court her attention. The books have been attacked for their lack of realism and for providing an unhealthy portrayal of sexual and romantic relationships that propagate 'false and dangerous life lessons to impressionable young readers' (Crawford, 2014:163).

Crawford agrees that 'Any real-world relationship which resembled that of Bella and her controlling vampire lover, Edward, would be an abusive one' (Crawford, 2014:163). The protagonists have been condemned as anti-feminist and sexist role models who glamorize controlling and abusive behaviour. The scene wherein Edward reveals his vampire nature to Bella, along with his almost overwhelming desire to kill her, (to which she responds by expressing her willingness to risk her life to be with him) is, as Crawford suggests, 'a sort of *reductio ad absurdum* of the romance convention that the more dangerous a man is, the more sexually attractive he will be' (Crawford, 2014:117). Thus, the tradition of the dangerous Byronic male romantic hero reaches its explicit zenith. The archetype of the vulnerable, ordinary, clumsy and insecure heroine who falls for him is likewise revealed as perennial. Both archetypes have their roots in Mills & Boon Romance tradition, which is inherently linked with the wish-fulfilment fantasies of the genre's predominantly female readership.

Crawford is quick to point out, 'No evidence exists of ... causal links between *Twilight* fandom and vulnerability to abuse' (Crawford, 2014:201). Indeed, he quotes *Twilight* fans' response to criticism of their supposedly 'impressionable' condition with responses 'that emphasize that they understand perfectly well that the books are fantasy rather than reality' (Crawford, 2014:202). Catherine Spooner argues that criticisms of *Twilight*'s wish-fulfilment fantasy 'are based on the assumption that literature should be "educational" for young women - teaching

them something and providing moral guidance' (Spooner, 2013:17). She cites criticism of *Twilight* by the UK government minister for Education, Michael Gove, as revealing 'plenty of prejudices about women's reading ... not least the idea that young women can't make their own informed choices or be active critics of the texts they read' (Spooner, 2013:17). Chloe Germaine contends that 'feminist critiques of Romance are grounded in a similar assumption that fiction ought to serve a pedagogical function. Moreover, concerns about the effect of Romance on its female-reader upholds this construction of the female reader as a dupe' (Germaine, 2018:111). This sentiment aligns with her earlier assertion that gendered critiques of the Gothic form 'tend to disavow Romance and devalue female readers' (Germaine, 2018: 103). Such perspectives echo critiques of 1790s Gothic Romance, which was considered detrimental and a threat to paternal authority and social structure. Primarily, concerns revolved around 'the security of gender divisions and the propriety of young female readers' morals and manners' (Botting, 2008:11). The perception of Romance fiction (and, by extension, paranormal romance) as jeopardising female education due to its perceived absence of moral educational objectives and failure to instruct young women in proper behaviour harks back to the patriarchal authority that early Gothic Romance narratives sought to address.

The concept that a work of paranormal YA fiction might serve purposes beyond simple escapism and fantasy wish-fulfilment merits exploration. Discussion regarding the purpose of Young Adult fiction generate contrasting views on whether the genre primarily serves as an escape or has a pedagogical function. Crawford notes a presumption prevailing in various circles that 'Young Adult novels should act as a kind of handbook to contemporary teenage life, and that Young Adult romance novels, in particular, should offer their readers some sort of fictional blueprint, which they can use to make sense of their own romantic relationships in the real world' (Crawford, 2015:163).

Chloe Germaine echoes Murphy Selinger's argument, suggesting that 'Romance criticism is too easily drawn into a restrictive debate: are these novels good or bad for their readers? This question insists on a broadly educational remit for literature for women, a remit which in turn constructs women as in need of education' (Germaine, 2018:12).

Perhaps it is more suitable to view Romance fiction as primarily escapist, rather than instructional, considering the purposes it serves. The escapist nature of Romance appears enduring, with paranormal romance emerging as its most recent variant. Fred Botting posits that 'Romance is a narrative mode that seems to survive the collapse of modernity's metanarratives, persisting, even in its most clichéd forms, in the face of general incredulity' (Botting, 2008:19).

The prospect of a work of Low Fantasy YA Gothic fiction providing spaces in which to address male concerns about sexual and romantic relationships looks decidedly bleak, then, especially given the fact that young males have not (thus far) been mentioned in this discussion in credible terms. Human male teenagers are marginalised in *Twilight* to the extent that they resemble figures of social and Romantic apartheid. Trowbridge's assertion that *Twilight* is essentially a romance (rather than a Gothic work) pinpoints paranormal romance's failure to address adolescent male themes, since Romance fiction is targeted at a female audience. Botting excoriates romance, describing it as though it were a virus that has managed to mutate and adapt over centuries to survive and thrive in numerous environments.

Romance undergoes many alterations over eight centuries, while continuing to provide a form for fantasy and desire. As culture and its forms change, so the circulation of romance and its receptions alters. Commenting that passionate love has become an 'increasingly ridiculous thing', Lacan goes on to note a major alteration in its mediation: 'we undoubtedly play upon this alienated and alienating process, but in an increasingly external manner upheld by an increasingly diffuse image ... in a darkened cinema with an image on the screen.

(Botting, 2008:31)

The notion that romance has altered, adapted and been diluted and denigrated due to the changes in the nature of the media outlets it inhabits, according to Botting and Lacan, means that it is also rendered absurd. It has grown sterile and impotent: an act of voyeurism occurring on-screen that has transmitted itself into the collective psyche of audiences. While suggesting that popular media, in reiterating images of love, have turned its sublimity into something ridiculous, Lacan's statement (alluded to by Botting) also implies that the

psychological dimensions of passion have been diluted into images, and that these screen images have replaced the romantic tradition's human interest ingredient to the extent that they assume its function whilst simultaneously objectifying men and women as idealised figures, dissipating the themes of prohibition and deferral that were traditionally so profound and vital in sustaining feelings of passion (all of which is duplicated in Bella's surface-level descriptions of Edward's 'perfect' physicality).

... The romance enjoyed in the cinema seems to follow this pattern, throwing up a succession of images that captivate and carry away the viewer in an imaginary plenitude sustained by a dual, rather than ternary, relation. Fantasy screen and media screen collide, eclipsing or flattening the triangular distance inscribed by a symbolic perspective, and pressing more disturbingly on the viewing subject: while it may heighten sensational enjoyment, the fascination with, flattening and proximity of the image ... follows the patterns of simulation which inaugurate a different kind of seeing, one beyond believing, appearance, representation or reality testing. (Botting, 2008:31)

The 'flattening of the image' that Botting describes can be detected in Bella's blandly perfect descriptions of Edward's physique, which incorporate comparisons with advertising and media representations. Bella (or Meyer) continually uses the word 'perfect' as an adjective to describe Edward throughout the *Twilight* series, recalling the airbrushed, unnatural perfection of pristine advertising images. The tradition of romance, then, has succeeded in blurring the gap between reality and wish-fulfilment to the extent that the audience is left numbed by it.

Furthermore, the narrative strategy of *Twilight* (and its paranormal/vampire romance progeny) goes *beyond* the usual limitations of mass media (Hollywood-style) happy ending narratives in its pursuit of escapism. Botting contends, 'the myth of romance, no matter how much it saturates culture and frames expectations, remains just beyond actualisation since, like desire, to completely realise it would be to kill it' (Botting, 2008:31). But Meyers' *Twilight* series shows no compunction about attempting to ignore the contradiction of reality-thwarting fantasy, bolstering the self-contradictory myth. As will be shown, the series seeks

to ignore such contradictions and boost the fantasy further via Hollywood happy ending which goes one better even than Hollywood and the Mills & Boon tradition.

'Romance is not, despite repeated and insistent representations to the contrary, the satisfaction of love or the fruitful contentment of the settled couple but stems from passion' (Botting, 2008:13) which is essentially doomed, since its resolution in contentment and satisfaction render it quenched and simultaneously extinguished. Even though the cultural history of romance can be charted from its beginnings in twelfth century European courtly love stories, its manifestations pervade contemporary culture in novels, films and advertising in the form of idealised eroticism exacerbated by a desire to escape 'mechanical boredom' (de Botting, 2006:15-16). 'Modern romance is still invoked as an elevating and vital experience, "something that will alter my life and enrich it with the unexpected, with thrilling chances, and with enjoyments ever more violent and gratifying"' (Botting, 2006:291). *Twilight* makes this same promise to its protagonist, albeit in an eternally perpetuating manner, courtesy of Edward and Bella's immortality. But Botting echoes de Rougemont, who maintains that this idealisation of romantic love 'forgets ... the misfortune and unhappiness on which romantic passion is grounded and the disturbing and often paradoxical tradition of romance and desire forged by the practitioners of "courtly love"' (Botting, 2006:191). The principles of satisfaction and gratification are subsumed in the courtly love tradition in favour of a portrayal of anguished suffering upon which love is often based: the lovers' love depends on obstructions, suffering and absence for its existence. 'Passion, paradoxically, arises in conditions of restraint rather than freedom' (Botting, 2006:282). Or, as the Count can be heard to say in Coppola's film, 'Absence is the aphrodisiac of the self' (Coppola, *Bram Stoker's Dracula*:1992). The ancient insight that accompanied the romantic tradition wherein desire was dependant upon suffering and anguish has been forgotten and sidelined via consumer society's demand for instant gratification.

Furthermore, Botting argues that 'popular cinema attempts an impossible reconciliation conjoining romance with the happy ending of marriage' (Botting, 2008:14) so Romance no longer means the renunciation of happiness, material goods or even life itself as it did in those original courtly love stories, such as Tristan and Iseult or Romeo and Juliet, but it is rewarded with all sorts of worldly enjoyments. *Twilight* champions this new model by showing Bella and Edward being allowed to settle down and enjoy an ideal life with every possible perk.

Botting points out that a contradiction remains here: 'where bourgeois convention demands the happiness of closure and stability, in romance nothing is allowed to settle' (Botting, 2006:277). The consequences of this contradiction expose two systems of morality which oppose and ultimately annihilate each other: one upholds the values of the species and the society, sustaining bourgeois norms with the emphasis on marriage, family, property and their requisite reproductive practices; the other is a literary and artistic morality, which is tied to passionate ideals imbibed from fiction and film. The two morality systems are essentially irreconcilable, since passion and marriage pull in opposing directions: the latter, in popular culture, as Botting writes, 'is caught up with the demand for 'perpetual distraction', for excitements, thrills, gratifications to stave off boredom; it must 'devise fresh obstructions' in order that desiring can continue.' (Botting, 2006:277)

Twilight does supply its hero and heroine with anguish and suffering momentarily, particularly during the period in the second novel when Edward and Bella separate for a period of months. But Botting's argument that the settled couple should realistically possess and lose the intensity of desire, becoming banal and sterile in routine repetitions and daily proximity, remains unacknowledged and ignored. Any attempt at unifying passion and marriage - as bourgeois romantic conventions demand - contributes to the breakdown of desire's intensity. *Twilight's* conclusion (in its fourth book, *Breaking Dawn* (2008)) ignores this reality. It may well be a truism that one cannot retain the passionate intensity of romance without its darker side, nor can one tame it or homogenize it - 'it constantly demands something in excess of habit, convention and norm - some dark Thing' (Botting, 2008:21). But Meyer, in the Mills & Boon/Hollywood tradition, deliberately sets out to undermine, or at least ignore, the truism.

Twilight perpetuates the myth of romantic union even more completely than most Mills & Boon exercises. It encourages the reader to become a dupe of the myth: the *Twilight* reader becomes, in Botting's words, 'the "disordered shopper", a being sustained in alternation between abject inidentity and fantasised fulfilment, a condition that depends on lack ... in a pattern of desire, consumption, evacuation' (Botting, 2008:26).

The problem with the idea of Low Fantasy YA Gothic fiction as adequate terrain for exploring male perspectives on romantic relationships, then, perhaps lies in the notion of romance itself. The categorisation of adolescent love and sexual relationships as "romance" is a distortion of

the realities that surround them, after all, and it is this chimera that must be addressed. Alternatively, if we do accept the Oxford dictionary definition of romance as ‘a feeling of excitement and mystery associated with love’, then there is no denying that the typical adolescent experience of love usually involves exactly that.

Anne Rice’s *Interview with the Vampire* (1976) is significant in our discussion of the Low Fantasy YA Gothic novel as a locus for exploring male perspectives of romance, given its literary invention of the vampire as male protagonist doubling as romantic figure: the overwhelmingly ubiquitous archetype of today’s YA paranormal romance fiction. Louis de Pointe du Lac also serves as the novel’s first-person narrator, and even qualifies as a young man (before he becomes a vampire), as well as inhabiting a decidedly Low Fantasy environment, wherein he announces himself as the story’s intrusion to a boy-reporter at the novel’s opening. Crawford says of Rice:

Her *Vampire Chronicles* are not romances, and their plots generally evolve around matters other than the development of love relationships between her characters; but they are deeply *romantic*, full of obsessive, centuries-long, usually homosexual love affairs between beautiful, powerful, aristocratic vampires ... Unlike ... the vampire lovers of subsequent romance fiction, Rice’s vampires are not straightforwardly redeemed by romantic love; but the significance and centrality of love and eroticism in their stories sets them strikingly apart from the cruel, loveless vampires of earlier popular fiction, reconnecting them with the Byronic tradition of Gothic hero-villains who are monstrous in all things save the purity of their love. (Crawford, 57:2008)

Rice’s depiction of vampirism resembles a youthful male version of the erotic wish-fulfilment proffered by Meyer’s *Twilight* books. Her vampires, like Meyer’s, are powerful as well as divinely beautiful and they express feelings of romantic desire, as well as deep emotional turbulence. The locations of their trysts are likewise beguiling. But Rice’s vision of Louis and the vampire Lestat as male protagonists is distinctly non-binary - in terms of their attractiveness and homoeroticism. Louis allows himself to be “taken” by Lestat and subsequently experiences endless feelings of guilt mixed with hints that he might occasionally be enjoying the newfound power it has given him, which provides an allegorically perfect

evocation of the adolescent sexual experience for male and female readers. But the notion of Louis as an outsider is diluted in its monstrosity, despite his remorse and existential anguish, because he is an *attractive* outsider, physically and in terms of reader empathy. Many male (and female) adolescents may identify with Louis' loneliness and turmoil - he initially labours under the belief that he and Lestat are the only vampires in existence, and, as such, qualifies as a monstrously marginalised and feminised other. *Interview with the Vampire* is a cross-cutting text that addresses male and female, and its popularity with young readers is highlighted by its frequent placement as YA in bookstore shelves. Furthermore, by giving Louis a voice with which to tell his story so eloquently, the book provides a perfect space for male adolescent readers to explore perspectives on romance, sexuality and the plight and delight of the non-binary outsider.

Interview with the Vampire's view of romance represents the polar opposite of *Twilight's* escapist happy ending, providing insight into the notion of eternal love and desire as an illusory condition destined to fade with time, and which does so: the reality of desire's short-term nature is driven home by the "realities" of the protagonist vampires' immortality.

The intention behind *How to Hear Ghosts* has not been to write a romance novel but its portrayal of a romantic relationship between two sixteen-year-olds merits discussion. The standard elements of paranormal romance, including the archetype of a vulnerable female encountering a Byronic dangerous male, were dismissed outright. The decision was made to develop a YA Gothic novel that would portray adolescent romance in a way that would invert the traditional gender norms. The idea that the narrative's romantic relationship would offer the type of escapism associated with *Twilight*-style paranormal YA fiction was similarly discarded before writing the initial draft. Instead, the narrative aimed for a portrayal that would more closely mirror genuine teenage experiences. As Botting asserts, Romance shies away from the intricacies of daily life and 'thus frames reality with fantasy' (Botting, 2008:18). This is evident in Edward and Bella's relationship in *Twilight*. In contrast, Ollie and Hannah's relationship in *How to Hear Ghosts* endeavours to root a work of fiction in a tangible reality, embracing rather than shunning life's complexities.

While *Twilight* provides the paranormal Young Adult readership with a “happy ending” narrative of the kind criticised by Botting, *How to Hear Ghosts* employs a more open-ended romance storyline. This approach aligns with the real-life teenage experiences of romance and desire, a tactic also used by Rachel Caine in her debut novel, *Glass Houses* (2005).

Chloe Germaine notes, ‘Children’s Gothic Romance troubles existing criticism that casts Romance as a conservative and limiting force, constraining Gothic excesses and constraining a feminist impulse towards freedom from patriarchal ideologies’ (Germaine, 2018:112). *How to Hear Ghosts* does not structure the Gothic against Romance but shows them as interdependent. Its youthful romantic relationship arises from a mutual fascination with the paranormal.

The idea that paranormal romance YA fiction operates as a conservative, limiting force, stifling feminist urges towards emancipation from patriarchy is contested by the novel’s portrayal of a romantic relationship that abandons the field’s binarized tropes. In this narrative, the male protagonist initially finds his feelings for the female lead character unreciprocated. This is a deviation from the traditional YA Gothic romance framework. Here, the male character displays emotional and volatile behaviour at various points, while the female protagonist assumes a position of control.

Hannah broke our embrace, smiling with the kind of indulgent smile someone’s mum might give to a tearful toddler at the school gate.

‘Oh,’ I said. ‘Hey, I normally don’t start crying like this til they’ve shown me the bill. Do you fancy dessert? Coffee?’

‘Nah.’

‘But they’ve got sticky toffee pudding.’

‘Very sophisticated.’ She grinned. ‘Nah, I’m stuffed.’

‘Fancy going out tomorrow night then? On a date?’

‘Cold shower time, Boss,’ she said. ‘How much is *this* scenario costing you anyway?’ (Griffiths, 2023:109)

The female protagonist is further empowered in this portrayal by virtue of possessing the attendant aura of mystery and enigma typically associated with the Byronic male character in conventional paranormal romance narratives. The fact that the protagonist, who pieces together a gradually evolving jigsaw of information regarding the backstory and character of the female lead in a manner typically used to assemble the Byronic hero's backstory through the eyes of the traditional paranormal YA heroine further subverts the Gothic Romance tradition.

The depiction of romance in *How to Hear Ghosts* counters the negative evaluations applied to paranormal romance and its portrayal of adolescent sexual relationships by eschewing the habit of merely rewriting tropes from eighteenth-century Gothic thrillers and mass-market Romantic fiction. *How to Hear Ghost* seeks to harness the affective power of desire as theorised by Benedict Spinoza. As Chloe Germaine explains, 'In Spinoza's *Ethics* desire expresses a foundational human essence, or *conatus*, that propels the subject to active self-dependence and self-affirmation. Spinoza's desiring subject is positively self-determined, a nomad propelled by an "ontological force of becoming" (Germaine 2018:6)'. This formulation of desire informs *How to Hear Ghosts*' assertion that romance promotes agency rather than passivity in its indulgence of desire: the novel's narrative positions the Romantic protagonist in an active role, contrasting with the passive mode commonly linked to the traditional Mills & Boon heroine. The argument that Romance is chiefly concerned with 'a story whose central vision is one of total surrender' (Germaine, 2018:105) is countered by *How to Hear Ghosts*' positing of the romantic protagonist not as a passive object, but as an active agent. Ollie pursues Hannah Phillips, albeit clumsily, and ultimately wins her heart. However, their first kiss and the reciprocation of her feelings are initiated by Hannah, suggesting she is the orchestrator of events.

The idea of Romance reading as a 'compensatory act' (Radway, 1991:97) is further subverted by the narrative's romantic plot, which spurs Ollie towards discovery, action and transformation. Prompted by Hannah, he unravels the truth behind his uncle's deceit, aligning with Spinoza's model of desire that drives the subject towards active self-reliance and self-validation. Ollie epitomises Spinoza's concept of desire as an 'ontological force of becoming'

because *How to Hear Ghosts* is fundamentally a coming-of-age story concluding with Ollie's recognition of his newfound autonomy, free from his uncle's oppressive influence.

To employ a male protagonist's perspective on a romantic relationship within a YA Gothic setting, it became essential to seek inspiration from alternative genres, given the absence of such a tradition in the YA Gothic domain. The character of Louis in *Interview with the Vampire* is, after all, inhuman and therefore exempt. The conventional portrayal of romantic or sexual relationships involving young adult characters in Gothic fiction largely encompasses narratives detailing the progression of relationships between a human and an immortal protagonist. Unlike *Interview*, these narratives often abide by Romantic Fiction tropes, with the notable exception that both hero and heroine are living human beings. Rachel Caine's Morganville Vampires series (2006-2022) is a notable deviation from this norm.

Caine's *Glass Houses* (2006) echoes *Twilight*'s premise of "teenage girl goes to new town, encounters vampires, and has paranormal adventures." As Crawford writes,

Its complexity and brutality are worlds away from *Twilight*'s dreamy fantasy of wish-fulfilment ... It resembles a Young Adult version of early *Anita Blake*, full of institutional corruption, exploitation, squalid moral compromises and sudden bursts of violence. It also takes the radical step of pairing its heroine romantically with a human, rather than a supernatural creature, which is almost unheard of elsewhere in the genre. (Crawford, 2014:231)

Indeed, it is Caine's 'radical step' that differentiates the Morganville Vampires series from the plethora of *Twilight*-inspired paranormal YA fiction that has saturated the market in the twenty-first century. This distinction is particularly evident in its authentic romantic relationship. Claire Danvers, a teenage university student, slowly develops romantic feelings for her roommate, Shane, even in the presence of their alluring supernatural landlord. Shane, a unique choice for a romantic lead, is variably labelled as a 'slacker' and a 'nerd' and talks readily of his sexual failures, displaying a preference for gaming and chilli dogs over heroics or securing stable employment.

Shane was concentrating on the video game selection, bare feet propped up on the coffee table. Without looking directly at Claire, he asked, “You want to see something cool?”

“Sure,” she said. She expected him to put a game in, but he dumped it back in the pile, got up off the couch, and padded up the stairs ...

The second floor was quiet, of course, and dimly lit; she blinked and saw Shane already halfway down the hall. Was he heading for her room? Not that she didn’t have a crazy hot picture in her head of sitting on the bed with him, making out ... and she had no idea why that popped into her head, except that, well, he was just ... yeah. (Caine, 2006:106)

Such a stark departure from the classic dangerous Byronic male love interest trope is nearly unimaginable. While Claire and Shane’s burgeoning romance has many parallels in Young Adult fiction and romance, Gothic YA literature offers no similar precedents. The supernatural character, Michael Glass, who more fittingly meets the criteria of the romantic/paranormal hero, only accentuates Shane’s unfitness for the role of romantic lead. When Shane and Claire eventually confront their feelings for one another, their first kiss evolves naturally from their established friendship. This progression, having experienced several ordinary false starts as roommates, is refreshingly genuine.

“I’m going to miss you,” he whispered, and she leant back to look up at him again.

“Really?”

“Yeah.” She thought - really thought – that he was going to kiss her, but just then, she heard Eve call, “Shane!” and he flinched and pulled back, the old Shane, the cocky Shane, was back. “You made things exciting around here.”

He loped off down the hall, and she felt a pure burst of fury.

Boys. Why were they always such dumbasses? (Caine, 2006:269)

Claire and Shane’s relationship remains the only example of a naturalistically and realistically rendered romance in YA Gothic fiction. Subsequent writers of paranormal YA literature have

avoided following Caine's lead, although the relationship between Ollie and Hannah in *How to Hear Ghosts* is heavily influenced by Caine's naturalism. Deprecatory banter and witticisms are frequent, especially in Hannah's quips and criticisms directed at Ollie, and the friendship at the core of their romantic feelings for each other is emphasised.

“PREGNANT HESITANCY” AND THE REPRESENTATION OF MENTAL ILLNESS IN YA GOTHIC LITERATURE

The negative portrayal of mental illness has long been a convention in Gothic literature. “Madness” is traditionally exploited in Gothic Horror narratives and portrayed in ghoulish ways that are intended to thrill and horrify. Authors of Gothic fiction often utilize mental health issues as a plot device rather than as a means of understanding or exploring neuroatypical behaviour. The human who has a finite understanding of the secret reality of the world around them and who, after encountering an otherworldly entity, loses all sense of reason is a favourite horror trope. Such norms were easy to maintain during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, thanks to the era’s primitive psychiatry and social stigma attached to mental illness. But Gothic horror narratives that situate madness as a byproduct of otherworldly forces do so at the expense of minimizing the reality of mental illness. Madness in a variety of Gothic narratives others the characters in such a way that their “insanity” seems to have fantastical rather than realistic sources: the character’s madness is represented as an anomaly and there is often an underlying notion in the narrative that alludes to the idea that the madness comes about because of an external force, as is often the case in H.P. Lovecraft’s Cthulhu Mythos stories. According to Cheyne, characters in Gothic and Horror fiction ‘are frequently monstrous perpetrators of evil acts or vulnerable victims ... Both types of representation work to evoke fearful affects’ (Cheyne, 2019 :27-28).

Such unrealistic and sensationalised representations result in stereotyping and help to marginalize neurodivergent individuals who struggle with such issues. The presence of madness in Gothic literature *per se* is a long-established tradition. Our use of the term “madness” is, however, no longer satisfactory, or credible as a means of defining mental health issues in the twenty-first century. Elizabeth Brewster writes that ‘the relationship between literature and mental health is attracting increasing prominence with the rise of the medical humanities, but as the history of the sciences of the mind demonstrates, the term “madness” lacks conceptual and clinical precision’ (Brewster, 2008:148). There is clearly a need, therefore, to improve the representation of neurodivergent characters and showcase their individual experience. Unfortunately, as Cheyene contends:

Much of the critical work published on representations of disability in the last two decades has sought to move beyond reductive discussions of disability representation in terms of negative imagery or stereotypes, or has aimed to recuperate texts or specific representations previously dismissed as problematic. Horror's representational habits, however, have largely barred the genre from this recuperative programme, reflecting 'the assumption that works of horror fiction and film dealing with corporeal difference almost inevitably reflect and reinforce the prevailing 'hegemony of normalcy.' (Cheyne, 2019: 32)

The aim of Horror and the Gothic is often to provoke terror, which perhaps explains the reluctance of its writers to abandon the way in which they approach madness and the fear of it. The present awareness and understanding of mental health issues has even managed to permeate to the Horror genre, however, especially in its YA incarnation, and the importance of representing mental illness adequately, even if the theme is not deeply explored, is regarded as paramount. In Patrick Ness' *A Monster Calls*, thirteen-year-old Conor O' Malley struggles to cope with the consequences of his mother's terminal illness, as well as a relentless bout of school bullying. He responds with displays of uncontrollable violence and at one point the reader is left wondering whether the titular monster is real, or a figment created by Conor's mental deterioration. Readers are therefore forced to contemplate the *real* pressures that lie behind male adolescent mental health struggles.

Michael Cart states that the positive attributes of Young Adult literature include its capacity to help readers foster 'understanding, empathy and compassion by offering vividly realised portraits of the lives - exterior and interior - of individuals who are unlike the reader' (Cart, 2016:1-3).

In her book on the representation of mental illness in Young Adult Literature, Kia Richmond quotes a 2016 interview with author Chris Crutcher:

The power of good, realistic Young Adult fiction is its capability to give voice to the reader, and to make connection: to allow the reader to experience situations and imagine her - or

himself in them ... out of that power comes the opportunity for readers to look at life through different eyes and gain empathy for the plight of others.

(Richmond citing Crutcher,2016:2)

Still, with the advent of the Internet and improved access to information and entertainment venues, beliefs about mental illness are being shaped by popular culture in the twenty-first century in novel and widespread ways. Popular culture channels (e.g. television, film, magazines) and online platforms (e.g. YouTube, Facebook, Instagram) often feature stories, news and images that portray people with mental illnesses negatively, contributing to persistent stigma (Cheyne, 2019:23)

In terms of achieving my project's aim of constructing a Low Fantasy YA Gothic novel that will serve as a locus for exploring adolescent male mental health issues, it seemed important, therefore, to portray my young male protagonist's mental health difficulties as accurately as possible. Indeed, it seemed that the YA Gothic fiction field had behaved with a degree of collective irresponsibility in neglecting to provide such a portrayal. The significant increase in mental health problems among young adult males suggests that such neglect represents a grave oversight.

In *How to Hear Ghosts*, sixteen-year-old Ollie Quinn begins secretly taking anti-depressant medication, prescribed for his uncle, rather than for him, because he believes it will provide an emotional support to help him cope with his mother's death. He initially assumes that it will numb his emotional pain, preventing him confronting his loss. Upon experiencing what he believes to be aural hallucinations - a known side-effect of the drug - he initially panics but then becomes eager to take the medication again. This is because one of the voices he hears reminds him of his mother. This psychological reliance on the drug can be classified as a substance-related and addictive disorder.

It seemed logical for Ollie to experience depression after his mother's death. The compounded effect of this by the illicit use of anti-depressant medication appeared a useful narrative device, providing a potential reason for the emergence of the spectral voices that are tormenting Ollie's psyche. In other words, the portrayal of mental illness was initially

designed for inclusion as a plot device. The tactic of employing an unreliable or potentially mentally ill narrator or protagonist to infuse a ghost story with ambiguity (and added threat) is well-established, with a notable example being Henry James' *The Turn of the Screw* (1898).

Tzvetan Todorov refers to a period of hesitancy in stories of the fantastic, where the protagonist 'hesitates, wonders (and the reader with him) whether what is happening to him is real, if what surrounds him is indeed reality' (Todorov, 1973:24). In James' *Turn of the Screw* this question remains unanswered and its "hesitancy" phase is never ending, at least for the reader. Ollie's experience of ghost-voices might provide an ambiguous hook and a sense of hesitancy to the storyline, I believed. Is he hearing voices from beyond the grave or is he merely deluding himself with drug-related hallucinations? The question seemed pertinent to the extent that I wrestled with the possibility that Ollie *might* eventually turn out to have been hallucinating at the story's climax. After much deliberation, a rational explanation for the ghostly voices became less appealing and appeared to deviate from the project's original intent, which was primarily to craft a work of purely paranormal fiction. The more I explored the idea of Ollie as a drugged and delusional character, the more the story rested solely on the hook of "is he or is he not hallucinating?" Consequently, the narrative increasingly revolved around anti-depressant medication and the health, safety and moral issues surrounding it. This was not the work of fiction I had initially set out to write, and the challenge of penning a YA paranormal novel with a male protagonist seemed to recede as I further delved into the realm of anti-depressant medication.

My dilemma found resolution in my decision to depict Ollie gradually coming off antidepressants early in the story and then having him hear the voices again while experimenting with recordings of Electronic Voice Phenomena during a time when he was *not* medicated. Bestowing these voices with objective or external reality in this manner appeared far more compelling than the rather pedestrian notion that Ollie might have been hallucinating throughout.

However, even after choosing a paranormal explanation for the voices, the prospect of Ollie enjoying perfectly satisfactory mental health throughout his trials and tribulations seemed unrealistic. Grief and his subsequent decision to resort to strong (unprescribed) antidepressant medication, albeit briefly, would, I believed, inevitably lead to disaster. The

research on young adult mental health and illness, which I had commenced before deciding on the paranormal nature of the voices, thus retained its importance. While the voices Ollie hears are of a supernatural origin, his mother's death has plunged him into depression, and the pills have further unsettled his mental equilibrium. It seemed crucial that the portrayal of such a mental state should be accurate and adequately researched, especially while portraying a young person who suffers such difficulties and inhabits a text intended for scrutiny by young people, some of whom may themselves be experiencing similar problems. The responsibility of the writer of such a novel lies in ensuring such a portrayal is as accurate as possible and faithful to the reality of the scenario.

The drug I mention in *How to Hear Ghosts* as Vocine is a figment of the author's imagination. Its side-effects are also fictional, but the phenomenon of auditory hallucinations aligns with the side-effects observed in certain real anti-depressant drugs, especially when consumed illicitly without discretion, as Ollie does before the novel's commencement and in its second chapter.

The precedent of depicting mental health issues in YA Gothic literature piqued my interest during the creation of *How to Hear Ghosts*. While the portrayal of mental health challenges via fictional characters is common in other YA fiction, it is less frequently explored in Gothic YA tales. My research did not reveal any exploration of this in a text featuring a YA Gothic male protagonist, save for Patrick Ness' *A Monster Calls* and Andrew Michael Hurley's *The Loney* (2014). A recurring theme in Hurley's work, and the other text discussed here - was that each utilised their portrayal of mental illness as a means for introducing hesitancy, which was then employed to highlight a central theme of the narrative.

The depiction of mental health difficulties in Gothic YA fiction often serves as a narrative strategy for constructing the Todorovian sense of hesitancy associated with Intrusion Fantasy, as defined by Mendlesohn (2008), wherein the protagonist and the reader undergo a period of uncertainty concerning the reality of the paranormal intrusion that has introduced itself into the story's "real-world" setting. The tactic of using this hesitancy itself as a device for embedding a specific theme into the paranormal YA text has been utilised by Andrew Michael Hurley and Amy Lukavics (in *The Loney* and *Devils unto Daughters* (2015) respectively) and by

the present writer (in *How to Hear Ghosts*) so that the hesitancy serves a purpose beyond mere narrative function.

The idea of imbuing hesitancy with theme is a development that does not emerge in Todorov's work. As Rosemary Jackson contends, 'in common with much structuralist criticism, Todorov's *The Fantastic* fails to consider the social and political implications of literary forms. Its attention is confined to the effects of the text and the means of its operation' (Jackson, 1981:6). Jackson insists on the necessity of extending Todorov's approach 'from being one limited to the *poetics* of the Fantastic into one aware of the *politics* of its forms' (Jackson, 1981:6). The idea of pregnant hesitancy emerges with the observation that some YA Gothic writers are aware of hesitancy's political dimension and use it accordingly.

While the depiction of mental illness in male protagonists of paranormal YA fiction may be limited, the portrayal of "madness" in female protagonists is frequent. Amy Lukavics' *Daughters unto Devils* (2015) is set in the American North-West of the nineteenth century. It narrates the tale of sixteen-year-old Amanda Verner, whose family, driven by a harsh winter, moves from their mountain cabin to the vast prairie in search of refuge and a new home. Amanda hides a pregnancy, the result of a secret liaison with the town's post-boy, who promptly deserts her. Her dread of parental discovery propels the initial half of the narrative. Amanda's history of mental health issues is subtly hinted at: during the previous severe winter, her cabin fever-induced visions were of 'seeing the devil in the woods' (Lukavics, 2015:7). Her unreliability as a narrator is established from the outset, setting the stage for a Todorovian period of hesitancy. Upon reaching their new home - an expansive cabin deserted by its prior inhabitants - the Verners find its interior awash with blood. Tales of the land being cursed and men slaughtering their families in psychotic episodes are rife. Amanda soon realises the Verners' new dwelling is a hub of paranormal malevolence, but this revelation comes post her traumatic miscarriage. The resultant guilt and shame lead her to question whether the haunting sights and sounds she encounters stem from the land's inherent evil or from the concealed "sins" burdening her conscience.

Daughters unto Devils employs Todorovian hesitancy not just as a mere storytelling tool. Amanda's depiction during her bout of cabin fever, plagued by visions of '*claws, and the bloody footprints in the snow, and the devil who knew my sins*' (Lukavics, 2015:9), points to a mental

illness exacerbated by the stifling authoritarianism of nineteenth century patriarchy, replete with its Biblical chants and Old Testament decrees. The portrayal of Amanda's father, who dismisses the existence of his daughter's illness, resonates with an oppressively antiquated puritanical stance.

"It *won't*," Pa says and hits his fist on the table suddenly, causing Ma to jump. "Now, I've told you all plenty of times, and after this it is no longer up for conversation – everybody needs to forget about last winter. All of you continue to draw out the misery instead of choosing to recognize that the Lord blessed us all with survival. We could so easily have lost Ma and Hannah, but we didn't."

He is purposefully leaving me out of it, just like the few other times he has tried to have this talk with us. Ma and Emily look uncomfortably into their laps. I realise that Pa may never treat me like he did before the storm again. It's been months, and he still refuses to acknowledge my incident.

Is he ashamed? Or is he afraid? (Lukavics, 2015:50)

The sense of oppression and intimidation brought on by Pa's overbearing presence is accentuated by the confinement and compactness of the family's living quarters. The reader is thus introduced to Amanda's father in unmistakably suffocating terms ('Pa's snores cut through the cramped blackness of the cabin') which contrast jarringly with the nature-based imagery of familial freedom that exists beyond the cabin ('A family of deer graze around the trees nearby, slurping up the cold, dew-soaked grass that blankets most of the mountainside' (Lukavics, 2015:20).

Amanda's (and the reader's) subsequent hesitancy weaves in hunting sounds and the cries of infants, which might either be supernatural in origin or manifestations of her distressed psyche. The reader's experience mirrors the ambiguity found in Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *The Yellow Wallpaper* (1892), which, according to Allan Lloyd Smith, presents, 'a powerful

expression of the Gothicism inherent in the experience of patriarchal society' (Lloyd Smith, 2012:174).

Lloyd Smith further posits, 'The perception of women's situation ... created a further reach of Gothic, written by women and containing a sense of their own fears and oppression' (Lloyd Smith, 2012:174). While Amanda's prolonged period of hesitancy culminates in the realisation of an undeniable paranormal evil in the Verners' new abode, Lukavics has already deployed the Todorovian principle to underscore the aforementioned sentiments of female trepidation and subjugation. Regarding *The Yellow Wallpaper*, Lloyd Smith asserts 'The shadows of patriarchy ... fall across these works of American Gothic and direct its shape toward a concern with social and political issues as well as toward an agonized introspection concerning the evil that lies within the self' (Lloyd Smith, 2012:174). This critique seamlessly aligns with Lukavics' novel, even though the latter's protagonist has tangible experiences of the supernatural, whereas in *The Yellow Wallpaper*, the ghostly occurrences ultimately emerge as figments of the narrator's imagination.

Lukavics clearly has a penchant for the use of "madness"-induced hesitation in her work, as is made clear by her subsequent Gothic novel, *The Women in the Walls* (2016), wherein she again adopts it as a strategy. In this narrative, young Lucy Acosta, raised in a Victorian mansion by her aloof father (who bears notable resemblances to the patriarch in *Daughters unto Devils*), finds herself entangled in a string of disappearances and believes she can discern her missing aunt's voice echoing from the mansion walls. While the supposed haunting is eventually affirmed as genuine with Lukavics maintaining the suspense until the novel's culmination - the theme of mental illness-induced hesitancy (given Lucy's propensity for self-harm) coupled with oppressive patriarchy persists. This sentiment is so powerful that Lukavics pays homage to Charlotte Perkins Gillman's *The Yellow Wallpaper* on more than one occasion:

Vivid wallpaper surrounds me, its Victorian pattern strangely eerie in the shadows, reaching, as if I'm making my way through a tangle of invisible vines that are trying to keep me away from the back end of the house. (Lukavics, 2016:44)

Unlike the nameless protagonist of *The Yellow Wallpaper*, however, Amanda Verner overcomes her mental health trauma near the story's climax. A prevailing trope in the Horror/Gothic narrative is for the reader to witness a character's realisation of the existence of something beyond reason and the character's subsequent spiral into madness. This doesn't happen in Amanda's case: Lukavics subverts the norm and Amanda accepts the story's evil as real, fights it, and even takes ultimate responsibility for the management of the family, supplanting her father's role. The portrayal of her mental health disorder and its resolution suggests an overthrow of patriarchy. One is left to consider how a similar representation - and adoption of pregnant hesitation - might have worked to transform the Low Fantasy YA Gothic novel into a site for exploring mental health issues had the protagonist been male.

The portrayal of religion's oppressive influence is a common theme in many contemporary paranormal YA novels. Lukavics uses it in *Daughters unto Devils*, illustrating its efficacy as one of patriarchy's principle tools (- for example, in the way Amanda mentally recites the commandments she has broken whilst contemplating the punishment she will receive for it from her overbearing father). Andrew Michael Hurley's *The Loney* (2014), meanwhile, portrays religion as a basically uncouth vehicle for the enactment of human atrocity.

The status of *The Loney* as a YA text is debatable, as is its classification within any genre. Julie Myerson remarks, 'sometimes, gobbling up the adventures of two teenage boys in a windswept old house full of secrets, I felt I was teetering on the brink of ... tipping right over into Famous Five territory' (Myerson, *The Observer*, 23 Aug, 2015). Indeed, the ongoing plot mystery and the emergence of an overtly hostile group of local men (accompanied by a vicious dog) who accost the two boy protagonists early in the story and detain them towards the conclusion, recall tropes familiar from Enid Blyton children's tales. Similarly familiar is the understairs cupboard from which the young narrator frequently eavesdrops on the adults' confessions to their priest, thus intensifying the suspense.

Set on a 'wild and useless length of English coastline' somewhere in the north-west, it is narrated by fifteen-year-old Tonto, who, along with his older brother, Hanny, accompanies their parents, a Catholic priest and an assortment of church congregants on an annual pilgrimage: every year they stay at an old house that is set in the 'dead mouth of a bay that filled and emptied twice a day' with treacherous (and frequently fatal) tides that 'could come

in quicker than a horse could run' (Hurley, 2015:5). The pilgrimage's objective is to visit a nearby shrine, in the hope that Hanny, afflicted by what appears to be a mix of profound learning difficulties and muteness, might find healing. This year's pilgrimage, however, is overshadowed by a mystery surrounding the death of the previous year's priest and a puzzling, locked room in the cottage. The presence of unfriendly locals amplifies the enigma, further compounded by the nearby residence of a detached couple and a heavily pregnant girl in a wheelchair. When the boys stumble upon a derelict mansion and encounter the girl, Else, inside, the Gothic tension heightens, especially after discovering a shattered statue of Christ in the inexplicably locked local church. The enigmatic room is later identified as a former medical quarantine for terminally ill children. One evening, Hanny ventures out to meet Else. Tonto follows, only to be intercepted by the group of men. They confess to having individually been plagued by various ailments but claim to have found cures through arcane rituals, suggesting an affiliation with ancient deities reminiscent of H.P. Lovecraft's lore. They drag the two boys to the mansion, and in the ensuing confrontation, Hanny is shot in the thigh. However, his injury seems to be mystically transferred to Else's newly born infant, miraculously restoring him. With Hanny's sudden ability to speak, his family erupts in religious gratitude. In a twist, Tonto eventually discloses that it was Hanny, not the dark magic practitioners, who was responsible for the infant's death. He admits to altering the narrative to shield his elder brother. Throughout this portrayal, *The Loney* illuminates the concealed human monstrosities thriving beneath fervent religious dogma, while its insinuation of dark forces firmly position it within the Gothic genre.

Most pertinent to the present discussion of mental health representation and hesitancy is *The Loney's* portrayal of Hanny, the sixteen-year-old sibling who becomes the object of the book's pilgrimage. Hanny's condition is described in deliberately vague terms (and may amount to Selective Muteness) but Hurley uses it to spotlight the religious naivety and extremism of Hanny's mother. The arcane practices of the locals is juxtaposed ('Late in the night, I heard far-off voices. Shouting. Whooping. Like a war dance ... As I'd lain there in the dark, I had been convinced that the voices were coming from the woods' - Hurley, 2015:68). With the banality of the evil and ignorance visited on Hanny by his Christian mother, she attempts to forcibly starve her son in the hope of a miracle cure ('She had Hanny tipped back over the sink, her fingers inside his mouth' - Hurley, 2015:73).

Hanny's condition stimulates religious discussion between the narrator and an ineffectual priest, which serves to highlight the book's representation of his "mental illness" as being chiefly a question of faith:

"Do you think it makes Andrew unhappy? Not being able to talk?"

"I don't know. It doesn't seem to."

He considered this with a deep breath and then spoke.

"Look," he said. "I don't know if Andrew will get better in the way you want him to. That's up to God to decide. All you can do is pray and put your trust in Him to make the right decisions about Andrew's happiness. You do still pray, don't you, Tonto?" (Hurley, 2014:76)

The fact that Tonto doesn't pray any longer throws the first seed of doubt into the book's cynical perspective on religious faith. What is more, the reaction of those around Hanny soon becomes the central focus of the book's representation of Hanny's "illness" and the happiness of others is exposed as the paramount concern.

Hurley's intention is to use the boy's illness to cast light on the religious faith of those around him. Indeed, Hanny's own emotional portrayal (as the previous extract indicates) is generally one of calm equilibrium and contentment, and Hurley again uses the trick of juxtaposition to contrast it with the obsessive religious desperation of his mother, who zealously searches for heavenly clues and signs to assure herself that the pilgrimage will be a success. Her insistence that the pilgrims should adhere to strict and rigid routines of prayer 'to give a structure to the day' indicates the extent of her fragility.

"Well, everything's on the table, Father," she said. "We'll wait for you to say grace."

“Oh, don’t let me stop you, Mrs Smith,” he said. “I might be a wee while getting all this oil off my hands.”

“All the same. I think we’d rather do things properly, Father, even if it means eating things cold.”

“As you wish, Mrs Smith,” he said, looking at her with a curious expression.

I’ve thought about that look quite often as I’ve been getting all this down. What it meant. What Father Bernard had let slip just at that moment. What he really thought of Mummer.

A line of dominos, spinning plates, a house of cards. Pick a cliché. He had realised what I’d known about Mummer for a long time – that if one thing gave way, if one ritual was missed or a method abridged for convenience, then her faith would collapse and shatter.

I think it was then that he began to pity her. (Hurley, 2014:179)

Hurley’s juxtaposition of Hanny’s mental condition with the fanaticism of his mother raises the question: *Who is mentally ill here?* The question serves as supplement to Hurley’s portrayal of the Christian faith as an endorsement of bestiality and child abuse - underscored by Father Wilfred’s relentless victimisation and physical assault of one of his own altar boys ‘because I love him’ as the priest maintains - which adds up to a depiction of the religion itself as a cultural and institutionalised form of mental illness.

Hanny’s own “illness” is treated by the Church in a series of horrific failed attempts at a miracle cure. When the cure eventually arrives, it does so through the dark occult forces summoned by the unfriendly locals, further undermining Christianity’s potency. Once again, Hurley’s representation of Hanny’s mental illness serves as a medium to critique the inadequacy of Christian fervour, which is the true theme of the book. The representation of mental illness in *The Loney* chiefly concerns the mistaken perception of its observers. Their view of the illness is shrouded in ignorance, superstition and the prioritisation of their own emotions over the young person experiencing the condition. Moreover, Hanny proves to be more astute than his devoted family acknowledges. He displays cleverness, cunning, and resourcefulness when eluding them to meet the girl of his dreams, feigning sleep or illness when seeking to evade

them. This highlights their lack of empathy and their failure to acknowledge his inner world. They have commodified him under the guise of their professed empathic and benevolent religious beliefs.

How to Hear Ghosts also employs the concept of mental illness to accentuate the disorientation and estrangement of a teenage male protagonist who is grieving and concurrently grappling with the agony of loneliness encapsulated by Germaine's 'ontological force of becoming' (Germaine, 2018:6). Oliver Quinn parallels Hanny and Amanda in that he inhabits a YA Gothic/paranormal narrative. In it, a potentially unreliable narrator (whose credibility is compromised by a depiction of unstable mental health) undergoes a prolonged phase of thematically pregnant hesitation. In each case, the hesitation serves its ideological role for the respective writer: Hanny's muteness and its subsequent cure serve to ideologically undermine the Christian faith when darker forces appear to grant him a *real* miracle cure; Amanda's "madness" symbolises the subjugation she faces within a domestic patriarchy akin to that borne by Charlotte Perkins Gillman's protagonist; Ollie's recuperation from his ailment and hesitation aligns with Germaine's idea of 'nomadic subjectivity', presenting a 'line of becoming', which discredits the deceptions of his guardian-uncle and the deceptive sanctuary presented as a familial home. This concept of thematically pregnant hesitation is fundamentally confined to the structure of an intrusion fantasy. However, it is a technique through which the portrayal of mental illness in YA Gothic literature might be employed by writers to accentuate their work's theme.

The motif of nomadic subjectivity is triggered by the state of homelessness, which in *How to Hear Ghosts* then evolves into a scepticism regarding the protagonist's guardians. Indeed, the homelessness exists as a call to adventure for Ollie and precipitates a number of transformative encounters that add up to a 'line of becoming' that 'affords all the positive possibilities suggested by nomadic philosophy' and also 'resists the cozy restitution associated with children's literature' (Germaine, 2018:2). The transformative nature of his odyssey endows Ollie with refined understanding of himself as a non-binary entity, enabling him to be "entered" by the Uncanny, yet remain adaptable and competent at the narrative's end. Both *How to Hear Ghosts* and *Devils unto Daughters* showcase the potentialities ingrained in Gothic narratives, particularly given that Ollie and Amanda emerge from their phases of mental illness

as dominant, proactive characters. Therefore, the idea of the YA Gothic novel as a transgressive text that 'inculcates a questioning and rebellious subjectivity' (Germaine, 2018:4) is locatable beyond the traditional notion of YA literature as a form of mere pedagogy. What is more, the concept of pregnant hesitation offers possibilities for the Low Fantasy YA Gothic novel in terms of presenting the theme of adolescent male mental illness as more than a mere plot device.

GOTHIC HEROINES IN FRIDGES

The purpose of the present critical study is to open new lines of inquiry regarding the construction of cross-cutting Low Fantasy YA Gothic texts that can serve as a locus for adolescent male concerns. Hopefully, they will serve this function through the challenges they provide to the tradition's gendering norms. These lines of inquiry aim to benefit not only the pursuit of academic study but also writers practicing their craft in the genre of YA Gothic fiction. In this chapter I will highlight the creative process involved in writing such a novel. This chapter represents an exercise in creative-reflective practice: it is a critically reflective study of the creative process itself, and will locate various obstacles, hurdles and problems that emerged during the writing of *How to Hear Ghosts*.

While this exercise might seem straightforward in theory, the actual creation and structuring of a cross-cutting Gothic text focusing on masculine identity and its concerns proved challenging. This resulted in various gendering tendencies becoming evident to me during the novel's development, to the extent that anxieties about the silencing and oppression of female voices, common in feminine Gothic narratives, seemed as relevant as in the original Radcliffean thrillers. The most evident tendency in this respect lay in the masculine tradition of "fridging".

The term "fridging" is a colloquial abbreviation of "Women in Refrigerators" (or WiR), a narrative trope identified by the American comic-book writer Gail Simone (Simone, 1999 *Women in Refrigerators.com*). It refers to story events wherein female characters are injured, raped, killed or depowered to either stimulate protective traits among the story's audience and its hero, or to serve as a plot device to advance the story arc of a male protagonist. Simone coined the term and used it as a name for her website, which lists examples of the trope in superhero comic-book fiction and analyses why these plot devices are used disproportionately on female characters. (It refers originally to an incident in an issue of a *Green Lantern* comic (*Green Lantern* Vol.3#54, 1994, written by Ron Marz, in which the hero of the magazine's title finds his girlfriend has been killed by a supervillain and stuffed into a refrigerator.) Simone's list of fictional female characters who have been 'killed, maimed or depowered' in ways that treat the female characters themselves as mere devices that benefit a male character's

motivation and plot development, rather than as fully developed characters in their own right, has been circulated, achieving notoriety in comic book circles.

Hindsight has since been used to nominate milestone instances in superhero comics' fridging history, and Marvel's flagship title *The Amazing Spiderman*, which featured the murder of the main character's girlfriend, Gwen Stacy (in issues #121-122) has often been awarded prescience. According to some accounts from Marvel staff, the character's death originated from a business strategy, which was intended to pave the way for a romance between Spiderman and his more renowned love interest, Mary Jane Watson, who had garnered greater popularity among readers. Fija Callaghan maintains that 'In the literary world, the death of Gwen Stacy was considered a shifting point in the comic book medium as a whole because it was the first truly great, cataclysmic failure that had been seen on the page' (Callaghan, "What is 'Fridging' in Fiction Writing?" – Scribophile.com). However, this viewpoint is challenged when considering the sustained popularity of the comic and story, still frequently mentioned on numerous fan websites as among the most esteemed sagas or continuous storylines in comic book history. The profile and sales of *The Amazing Spiderman* surged notably after Gwen Stacy's murder. Gwen remained a focal point in the title as the main character grappled with the guilt stemming from his inability to rescue her. (This sharply contrasts with other instances of fridging in superhero comics, such as DC comics' *The Flash*, (issue #270) where the titular character's wife, married to him for two decades, was slain and immediately forgotten in the subsequent issues, lost amid the frantic schedules and hubbub that accompanied combatting each month's supervillain.) Notably, recent film adaptations that include the Gwen Stacy character have avoided depicting her murder.

'While the woman plays an integral part in the narrative, in terms of characterisation, the focus is on the trauma of the man, not what the woman has experienced,' as Dr Miriam Kent argues (Kent, *Guardian* 21st September, 2018:4). Simone has attracted continual criticism from male comic book enthusiasts. Nevertheless, despite the fridging debate that has erupted since 1999, numerous male writers accused of adopting this technique claim to have been oblivious to the phenomenon.

Before penning *How to Hear Ghosts*, I was unaware of WiR. After submitting its initial draft to a professional (male) proofreader, this remained the case. Only when submitting the novel's

revised draft to another professional (female) proofreader who voiced her dissatisfaction with the portrayal of three female characters in the story, did I become alarmed, opting thereafter to concentrate on their development. As I revised the manuscript, online research conducted for this thesis made me cognisant of the fridging practice, and I recognised its pertinence to my authorial approach.

One might contend that the principle female character in *How to Hear Ghosts* is Ollie's deceased mother, Miranda, whom the reader never encounters - much akin to DuMaurier's *Rebecca* (1938), where the reader never meets the eponymous deceased woman. In the early drafts of the novel submitted for proofreading, Miranda is inadequately conceived. Receiving feedback from the proofreader and revising the manuscript myself, it was evident that her character is sketchily portrayed, primarily serving as a plot mechanism to bestow upon Ollie the requisite distress and agony to drive his actions. The legitimacy and believability of Ollie's motivations might be disputed, especially when a reader struggles to empathise with Ollie's pain due to the utter lack of emotional depth or development in his mother's personality.

The objective of the ensuing revision of *How to Hear Ghosts* was to enrich Miranda's character, notwithstanding her absence from the text, and to more convincingly convey Ollie's sense of loss. However, it became evident that my intention to centre a male character within the narrative to address teenage masculine issues in a YA Gothic work had inadvertently resulted in almost a patriarchal oversight of Miranda and other female characters in the novel. Their roles, (and even Miranda's demise) merely seemed to serve the purpose of advancing Ollie's narrative arc.

Upon discovering the concept of fridging and recognising it in my own writing, my primary concern became avoiding its pitfalls in subsequent drafts. I endeavoured to delve deeper into Miranda's past life (though without recourse to flashbacks, which proved disruptive both descriptively and dramatically, interfering with the pacing and the established narrative style emanating from Ollie's first-person perspective). Indeed, I had to virtually create Miranda's character and history due to her glaring absence and lack of development. Instead of employing her merely as a plot tool, Miranda and her mysteries remained integral to the narrative.

I looked closely again at the holiday photos on the screen: myself in shorts, a beatific smile, my forefinger curled cheerfully into an obscene gesture; Mum, red hair carelessly pulled up and pony-tailed, her laugh blowing in beach breeze, her eyes open wide because she always blinked at the last minute on photographs and she was trying not to blink. I remembered how she used to sing in the kitchen: Taylor Swift - "Shake it Off". She always insisted she was the English teacher who gleaned more inspiration from Taylor than in Jonathan Swift. I asked once what was so great about Taylor's inane lyrics: "*The fakes 're gonna fake or whatever, and I'm just gonna shake it off,*" and she said it was a philosophy worth living. I wondered, then as I do now, whether she meant to shake off the "liars and dirty cheats" of the world in the song, like my dad, or the weirder things that were going on inside her own head. (Griffiths, 2023:89)

A significant shift in the storyline arose following my enlightenment about the fridging phenomenon. The initial premise of *How to Hear Ghosts* did not allude to the Quinn family's inherited mediumistic prowess. In fact, it was during a consultation with my supervisor that she proposed the idea of presenting Ollie as authentically psychic, as opposed to being deluded due to his covert use of anti-depressant medication. While I had initially resisted this perspective, upon realising that I had inadvertently employed fridging, I resolved to not only flesh out Miranda's character but also to bestow both her and her son with psychic capacities. Concurrently, I maintained the portrayal of Dominic Quinn's deceit, accentuating his motivation's root in envy and solidifying his role as a patriarchal foe. I speculated that such an approach could reintroduce the theme of male dominance and the suppression of female voices, reminiscent of earlier Gothic works, but contextualised within a modern twenty-first century backdrop. This thematic reintroduction appeared particularly relevant, given my own inadvertent endorsement of it.

It should perhaps be mentioned at this point that the unfavourable reaction of the female reader of *How to Hear Ghosts* (regarding the inadequate portrayal of the novel's three female characters) was not shared by male proofreaders; indeed, any such issue went entirely undetected. I decided to follow this second proofread with a third (by another female proofreader), though it transpired that Miranda Quinn was not the only female in the story to be poorly portrayed.

The character of Hannah Phillips, Ollie's love interest and investigative collaborator, is portrayed inconsistently throughout early drafts of the story pertaining to her behaviour and motivation. Despite her interest in the paranormal, she oscillates between humouring Ollie in his belief that he has experienced paranormal phenomena and assuming he's delusional and possibly mentally ill. The root cause of this initial inconsistency boiled down to the mechanical nature of Hannah's inception as a character. Her initial *raison d'être* had simply been to serve Ollie as a source of romantic and emotional turmoil so that his exclusively male viewpoint could be explored regarding the development of a young adult sexual relationship: as Moruzi & Smith point out, 'Romantic plotlines are especially significant in texts aimed at Young Adult readers since they enable an exploration of sexuality and sexual desire' (Moruzi et al, 2021:9). She also provided the audience with a source of doubt regarding Ollie's sanity, which would theoretically provide ambiguity and increase tension in the story, especially at its climax where the reader would hopefully be fearing for Ollie's sanity because of the possibility that the ghostly messages he's received might turn out to be illusory. His uncle's threat of having him sectioned under the Mental Health Act might therefore be given added force.

The inevitable result of creating female characters who exist solely to amplify a male protagonist's narrative arc in this manner, in this instance, results in a female character appearing underdeveloped, even to the point of manifesting inconsistent behaviour. For instance, a scene near the climax at Miranda's grave, where Ollie endeavours to connect with his dead mother, sees him joined at the cemetery by Hannah. Her primary function was to heighten the dramatic tension of the scene by furnishing a perspective and audience to underscore Ollie's peculiar conduct. Yet Hannah's subsequent reprimand and emotional turmoil appeared contradictory in the scene's original depiction, considering her prior reservations about the endeavour's prudence (which logically might have deterred her from attending altogether). The insights from my proof-reader perhaps encapsulated the situation's predicament aptly: "Hannah often seems to exist just for Ollie, when she needs to feel whole and present in her own right." This flaw is typical of male-authored narratives and mirrors the inconsistency highlighted in Gale Simone's *WiR* website.

In a similar vein, upon reviewing the manuscript, the portrayal of Marsha Haines, Dominic Quinn's cunning business manager, struck me as somewhat superficially antagonistic (described as a "cartoon baddie" by my proof-reader with ruthless precision). For someone

instrumental in establishing Dominic Quinn's burgeoning enterprise, her threats of sectioning Ollie to thwart him in his attempt to expose Dominic's fraudulence seemed overly callous given her earlier portrayal, to the extent that the inconsistency seemed jarring following a subsequent read-through. As with Miranda and Hannah, Marsha's character had been oversimplified and reduced to little more than a plot device. In Marsha's case, it was eventually deemed necessary to make her character and motivation more complex, and the revelation towards the end of the novel that she harboured unrequited love for Dominic served to bolster and justify the ruthlessness with which she reacts towards Ollie's threat.

None of the novel's male characters have received the kind of criticism directed at my female characters. Equally remarkable is the observation that the concept of fridging remains unfamiliar to several published writers of YA fiction accused of employing it, despite its being a major topic of discussion since 1999. Rhett Reese, the screenwriter of *"Deadpool 2"* remarked in the wake of allegations made against his film script, 'It really didn't even occur to us. We didn't know what fridging was' (*Vulture*, Feb. 2018:16).

This revelation, perhaps more than any other, has led me to consider that the craft of novel-writing ought to be seen as a joint venture. The inclusion of an editor or proof-reader is imperative, serving as a feedback mechanism, especially when trying to steer clear of any gendered bias.

Fija Callaghan asserts that fridging, propelled by Hollywood's fervent pursuit of converting superhero narratives into cinematic marvels, is increasingly prevalent in contemporary fiction. She states, 'it's one of the most pervasive and unfortunate tropes to barrel through 20th-century literature and film' (Callaghan, *"What is 'Fridging' in Fiction Writing?"* – Scribophile.com). Addressing the challenge of circumventing this unwelcome narrative device hinges on the writer's familiarity with the concept. As Callaghan elucidates,

... if a mild-mannered man sees his wife get murdered at the beginning of a book, and her death sets him on a journey of vengeance and self-discovery, we would say that the wife has been "fridged". That's because in this example, the only reason for including the wife character in the first place is to create an inciting incident for the husband protagonist's story.

(Callaghan, *"What is 'Fridging' in Fiction Writing?"* – Scribophile.com)

Callaghan's answer to the problem of fridging echoes my own. 'As writers, we should always strive to make sure our supporting characters are real and human as possible. Fridging means these characters haven't been developed enough, and they're only included as set pieces in service to the plot' (Callaghan, "What is 'Fridging' in Fiction Writing?" – Scribophile.com). The conclusion we might reach is that this should be a matter of basic good practice in the craft.

A fear of killing off female characters in superhero comics has become pervasive in recent years as a result of Simone's initial protestation. The question has suddenly become pertinent: when and how do we know whether the killing off of a female character constitutes an act of fridging? As Callaghan maintains: 'The contention around fridging comes not from the fact that there's a dead body in your story, but from the fact that these characters exist only as plot devices' (Callaghan, "What is 'Fridging' in Fiction Writing?" – Scribophile.com). In other words, the female character's sole purpose in the story is to support another character. They lack goals, agency, and personal motivations of their own. Callaghan argues that any character's death should be a natural progression emerging from their characterizations, though the frequently arbitrary nature of death's intrusion argues against this. In any case, I decided to tie Miranda's death to her character, so that she foresees her death in the book's penultimate chapter.

The current tradition of fridging in male-centric adventure tales is not novel, particularly when considering the femme fatale archetype originating from American "hard-boiled" crime fiction of the 1930s. This inspired Ian Fleming, rendering him its most celebrated exponent. Regularly, Fleming dispatches characters in his James Bond collection, ostensibly to serve as a narrative catalyst - most notably, executing Bond's spouse in *On Her Majesty's Secret Service* (1963). However, 007's most disdainful declaration, 'The bitch is dead' (Fleming, 1953:209) at *Casino Royale's* end, arguably encapsulates the depth of Bond's (or his myriad Bond Girls') character evolution.

Continuing her argument, Callaghan states, 'Complex and nuanced character development is key to avoiding flat, empty fridging tropes in a story. If your dead character goes up to heaven and someone asks what their life was like, they should be able to say something other than "I

was the hero's girlfriend" (Callaghan, "What is "Fridging" in Fiction Writing?" – Scribophile.com). Thus, it should be possible for a reader to identify the character's goals and objectives independently of the fact that they have a close relationship with the main protagonist.

The first noteworthy instance of fridging in the canon of great English Literature is, perhaps, represented by Bertha Mason, the madwoman in the attic of *Jane Eyre* (1847), revealed as Rochester's first wife. It may be argued that Bertha (who is never given a three-dimensional life of the sort enjoyed by Rebecca in Du Maurier's re-write of the same story) serves as a mere plot device in Charlotte Brontë's Gothic Romance, and the brief account of her character comes from Rochester himself in a classic example of patriarchal silencing of female voices:

Jane, I will not trouble you with abominable details: some strong words shall express what I have to say. I lived with that woman upstairs four years, and before that time she had tried me indeed ... her vices sprang up fast and rank: they were so strong, only cruelty could check them ... What a pigmy intellect she had, and what giant propensities! How fearful were the curses those propensities entailed on me! (Brontë, 1847:270)

The blatant use of Bertha as a plot device designed to stand between Jane and Rochester's marital bliss (and thereby develop the arc of their characters by galvanizing them with suffering) is evident in the lack of humanity and characterisation she is granted. The idea that a female writer of Charlotte Brontë's stature might instigate such a notorious example of fridging seems ironic, of course. But Lisa Appignanesi writes, 'Mightn't such creations also be an indication of the psyche of the artist as a young nineteenth century woman?' (Appignanesi cited in Gilbert and Gubar, 2020 edition: xiii) The idea of a woman as an inconvenient and expendable object would hardly have represented an anomaly even in the psyche of the era's foremost female authors. The attempt to try and excuse such a trope by identifying it as a norm in the twenty-first century seems patently ludicrous, however.

Callaghan continues, 'One of the biggest problems with fridging is that once a character has been literally or figuratively killed off, they tend to disappear from the story – in other words,

they've lived out their usefulness' (Callaghan, "What is "Fridging" in Fiction Writing?"). It therefore becomes necessary to keep the character present and impactful throughout the plot (as with DuMaurier's Rebecca). In certain genres it is possible to keep a dead character present by continuing their story. An example of this is provided by Neil Gaiman in his epic fantasy *American Gods* (2001), wherein the book opens with the hero learning that his wife has recently died. At first glance, the incident resembles a textbook example of fridging, except that the character's wife doesn't disappear into the mists of memory; instead, she goes on an undead journey in an attempt to reclaim her life. Gaiman repeats this feat in *Anansi Boys* (2005) where a woman is killed off in order to further the villain's story but becomes a ghost attempting to navigate her new state of existence and process it before she can move on.

The character Maeve Livingstone in *Anansi Boys* holds a relatively peripheral role, making it plausible to perceive her merely as a plot tool, primed for fridging. Yet, when Gaiman introduces Maeve, he furnishes readers with adequate backstory and unique traits, albeit briefly, creating an immediate and unforeseen bond:

Maeve Livingstone had been a young dancer when she met Morris, and had always towered over the little man. They had adored each other. (Gaiman, 2005:170)

Maeve appears only once more before meeting her demise at the hands of the book's antagonist. However, her reaction is both unexpected and courageous. Because she does not act passively at her moment of death, she sidesteps the fridging trap:

'You little shit!' she said, and she kicked him. Maeve had good legs and a powerful kick, but she and her attacker were at close quarters.

Maeve's foot connected with his shin, and she reached for the hammer he was holding. Graham Coats smashed out with it; this time it connected, and Maeve stumbled to one side. Her eyes seemed to unfocus. He hit her again, squarely on the top of the head, and again, and again, and she went down. (Gaiman, 2005: 233)

Furthermore, Maeve's death is not the conclusion of her story: she transitions into a ghost, navigating her new existence as tenaciously as any living character:

Maeve Livingstone was in pain. She was sprawled on the floor. She woke, and her hair and face were wet and warm, and then she slept, and when next she woke her hair and face were sticky and cold. She dreamed and woke and dreamed again, woke enough to be conscious of the hurt at the back of her head ...

I'm so cold, she thought, and knew that she was awake once more. The pain, though, had subsided. All things considered, thought Maeve, she felt pretty good. (Gaiman, 2005:274)

Admittedly, achieving such a narrative twist is more straightforward when working within the bounds of fantasy. Nevertheless, it remains feasible to bypass the fridging trope by crafting detailed, multifaceted characters that resonate as genuine individuals rather than mere setpieces or cinematic props. Such depth not only holds profound emotional significance for readers but also stands as a benchmark of 'good practice' in creative writing.

CONCLUSIONS

Kate Ferguson Ellis posits that the Gothic genre has predominantly functioned as a medium for exploring contemporary female apprehensions, challenges and identity issues since Ann Radcliffe's ascendancy in the 1790s. She notes, 'Radcliffe's heroines, exposed repeatedly to sights and sounds that mobilize their 'sense of evil', finally succeed in their struggles to find explanations which ... was ... essential to the idea of a rational heroine whose suffering is temporary, which is, I would argue, her legacy to the genre' (Ferguson Ellis, 2012:461).

The above quote applies itself to the raison d'être lying behind the writing of *How to Hear Ghosts*, though my novel's purpose is to chart similar *male* concerns and anxieties in a contemporary Gothic text. In the midst of writing *Ghosts* I came to the conclusion that Oliver Quinn is, if anything, a fascinating twenty-first century descendant of the Radcliffean heroine described above.

The inversion of the protagonist's gender, transforming heroine into Radcliffean hero in *How to Hear Ghosts*, represents a unique manoeuvre in contemporary Low Fantasy YA Gothic fiction. The inversion is intended to blur the boundary between "masculine" and "feminine" that has divided much of Gothic literature and its readership since the eighteenth century. Twenty-first century readers are hopefully served well by the creation of a new *kind* of YA Gothic novel, one that explores adolescent male themes while appealing to male and female readers alike.

The inclusion of certain adult horror novels in this appreciation has reflected my own inspiration as a writer. The "masculine horror" tradition, however, has been largely ineffective as a site for exploring the central concerns that my novel explores, and has generally relegated themes of adolescent romance, male mental health and changes in male identity to a subservient position - if it mentions them at all - beneath the prioritised status enjoyed by spectacular violence and adventurous, sensationalistic content, hence the aforementioned need for a new *type* of YA Gothic novel.

Radcliffe's penchant for explaining the supernatural elements in her fiction in a rational manner suggests her oeuvre holds no place in a discussion on Low Fantasy YA Gothic fiction.

This supposition ignores Ferguson Ellis' apposite and all-encompassing definition of the Gothic protagonist as a human being who 'struggles to find explanations', however, 'a rational heroine whose suffering is temporary.' Oliver Quinn stays true to the Radcliffean notion of a protagonist who encounters "feminine terror" characterised by obscurity and indeterminacy of the kind found in *The Mysteries of Udolpho* - only the character's gender is inverted. Furthermore, Ollie solves a Radcliffean supernatural mystery by uncovering its non-paranormal explanation (despite his own psychic abilities).

The "feminine terror" in *How to Hear Ghosts* is given further Radcliffean aspect via the deployment of Gothic literature's vococentric soundworld. The use of disembodied voices as a narrative device *and* a tool for constructing obscurity and ambiguity belong in the Radcliffean tradition. *How to Hear Ghosts'* use of feminine terror to create a cross-cutting text only succeeds in blurring YA Gothic fiction's gendering norms when we recall that the novel is intended as a platform for exploring adolescent male concerns. The response to my initial queries, as presented at the start of this thesis' Introduction, is that gendering practices in the contemporary YA Gothic genre, where young male protagonists are under-represented, do have detrimental repercussions. Specifically, they fail to depict the noticeable surge in mental health challenges faced by young adult males since the turn of the millennium, just as they fail to accommodate male perspectives on adolescent romance and the shifting nature of twenty-first century male identity itself. The possibility of subverting these gendering norms to create a Low Fantasy YA Gothic novel that serves as a locus for adolescent male concerns is clear, however.

I believe that my portrayal of a young male protagonist with mental health issues does not sufficiently address the glaring absence of such portrayals in YA Gothic fiction, particularly since the mental health issues faced by my teenage protagonist were eventually unveiled as paranormal in origin. However, the depiction of a character in the genre undergoing such challenges is likely to aid in diminishing the stigma associated with mental health concerns in young males. This, as Kia Richmond's research indicates (and similarly to Lukawicz's portrayal of Amanda in Lukawicz's *Devils unto Daughters*), furthers the existing discourse on female mental health. The traditional portrayal of mental health difficulties and neurodivergent individuals in Gothic fiction generally involves othering the neurodivergent character with the intention of horrifying the reader. Such opportunistic sensationalism usually insists that

'madness' has originated in an external source, such as the sanity-shattering cosmic horrors presented in H.P. Lovecraft novellas. *How to Hear Ghosts* moves beyond this, as does Patrick Ness' *A Monster Calls*, which precedes *Ghosts* in its portrayal of a bereaved adolescent experiencing mental health difficulties, and bears testament to the efficacy of the Low Fantasy YA Gothic novel as a locus for exploring and discussing male adolescent mental health concerns.

Moreover, the incorporation of mental illness as a story ingredient, which this thesis has underscored as an effective method for enabling a stage of 'thematically pregnant hesitation', serves to promote a Low Fantasy YA Gothic novel's central theme. Whether it is Lucawikz's critique of patriarchy or Hurley's condemnation of extreme religiosity, this revelation might be beneficial to other genre writers wishing to express their themes - and perhaps deepen their portrayals of teenage mental health problems in the process.

How to Hear Ghosts does serve to explore adolescent romance from a male perspective, serving male readers as Paranormal Romance serves its female audience, though it jettisons the escapist view of romance and avoids Vampire Romance's Mills & Boon-style binarized tropes in the process. It replaces the Byronic male-vampire romantic lead trope with a focus on male vulnerability and inverts the 'helpless female' cliché with an empowered female character. Again, *How to Hear Ghosts* is preceded in this pursuit of a naturalistically portrayed Gothic teen romance by Rachel Caine's non-supernatural love affair in *Glass Houses*, but, as with Ness' portrayal of adolescent male mental health issues in *A Monster Calls*, Caine's is a gauntlet that other YA Low Fantasy Gothic writers have generally failed to pick up.

The uncertainty that Ollie feels in his relationship with a member of the opposite sex is only one aspect of the anxiety that accompanies the changing nature of twenty-first century male identity reflected in *How to Hear Ghosts*. This changing nature is also reflected in the novel's representation of the male YA Gothic hero, which has been subverted to the extent that it transcends gender polarities as surely as Kit Morley does in *The Angel Stone*. Ollie adopts the mantle of the "vulnerable child" Gothic hero provided by Simeon and Danny Torrance, which transcends gender polarities and is characterised by themes of disempowerment and otherness to the extent that he is likewise essentially "feminised", according to Cyndy Hendershot's definition of the term. Like Simeon, Danny and Kit, Ollie is a hero who has a

gender identity that blends or contains male and female elements, even down to allowing himself to be “possessed” – a traditionally female feature of the Gothic tale – thus reflecting the changing nature of contemporary male identity.

The Low Fantasy YA Gothic tradition in its post-*Twilight* phase is geared to act efficiently as a locus for female adolescent concerns. It would seem, however, that binarized gender norms exist within the tradition that currently prevent it from functioning in a similar manner for adolescent male readers. *How to Hear Ghosts* features a male protagonist who serves as a site on which adolescent males can partake of the genre and, as Richmond states, ‘see themselves on the page’ (Richmond, 2019:1). The Gothic novel’s origins as a ‘coded expression of women’s fears of entrapment within the domestic’ (Moers, 1976:91) have evolved and spread their roots so that Radcliffe’s aesthetic of terror has now been weaponised in *How to Hear Ghosts* to express young male fears.

Concomitantly, the trope of “fridging”, which I identified while composing my novel, would benefit from further investigation. This is especially pertinent given its growing significance in Hollywood scriptwriting and the prevailing lack of awareness among modern writers despite Gail Simone’s proclamation a quarter of a century ago.

Otherwise, the introduction of a male Gothic hero who possesses female qualities and an adolescent romantic relationship which doesn’t pander to YA Gothic stereotypes of ‘Byronic male’ and ‘helpless female’ can be viewed as strategic moves to craft truly inclusive Low Fantasy YA Gothic novels. This approach might not only expand the genre’s allure to young readers but also diversify the range of issues and themes that YA Gothic authors seek to convey. The emergence of inclusive YA Gothic narratives will thus undoubtedly serve as a valuable platform for the anxieties and preoccupations of all young adult readers.

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