



# THE CONSTRUCTION OF THE GOTHIC HEROINE IN GEORGE A. ROMERO'S *NIGHT OF THE LIVING DEAD* (1968)

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## ABSTRACT

George A. Romero's *Night of the Living Dead* (1968) is considered a landmark film in the horror genre as well as being an example of a twentieth century Gothic text. This paper explores the film's construction of the Gothic heroine. Whilst *Night of the Living Dead* is the product of predominantly male creators, most notably Romero who co-wrote and directed the film, it utilises several conventions of the female Gothic genre. Barbara, the film's female protagonist, initially appears as a potential twentieth century equivalent to the female Gothic heroines of the past, but as the film goes on, she becomes more and more marginalised by the patriarchal confines of her own society. The film suggests that if Barbara were allowed more freedom to make her own decisions with regard to the terrifying situation in which she is placed, the likelihood of her survival would be increased drastically. However, the overbearing male characters refuse to relinquish their patriarchal urges and this leads to Barbara's inability to realise her own salvation. The paper argues that Barbara is unable to vanquish the creatures that attack her because she does not have the support structure, both physically and psychologically, to do so. She is not only a victim of the ghouls that exist at the boundaries of society, but also of the patriarchal structures that claims to be able to protect her.

*Keywords:* Female Gothic, George A. Romero, Patriarchy, Domesticity, Horror Cinema.

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The Gothic heroine has been fighting off monsters, ghosts, vampires, and ghouls from the genre's inception in the late eighteenth century right through to the contemporary examples being produced today. Despite the changing time-periods and cultural concerns, the Gothic remains as popular a genre today as it was directly after its initial inception. In fact, the genre has expanded its prevalence in contemporary culture. No longer is it simply confined to literature but pervades a wide variety of popular cultural forms such as cinema, television, and video games. Despite these evolutions in form, the genre is still remains populated with

heroines who all seek to escape the dangers of the real and supernatural world. The prevalence of these heroines is so apparent that a whole genre, the female Gothic, has grown out of the texts that priorities female characters. A notable example of a contemporary work that engage with the female Gothic is George A. Romero's film *Night of the Living Dead* (1968). The events that befall its female protagonist, Barbara, establish her as a heroine who structured according to traditional female Gothic tropes. She finds herself trapped both physically and psychologically within the confines of a patriarchal structure that ultimately leads to a level of danger she is unable to comprehend. With that said, the film also enacts a subversion of Gothic tropes in order to create its own distinct form of Gothic text. In past examples of the female Gothic genre the pursuer would often have been characterised by gender. The heroine is usually pursued by an antagonistic male figure. Although ghosts and supernatural apparition are often present, they do not present the greatest danger to the protagonist and are often explained away by the end of the narrative. The same is also partially true in *Night of the Living Dead*. During the course of the film, Barbara finds herself pursued by the undead—referred to by Romero himself as ghouls—and is forced to seek safety in an abandoned farmhouse that serves as the setting for the majority of the narrative. Although the ghouls are initially presented as the greatest threat to Barbara's safety, and are never explained through rational means, it is still ultimately the human male characters inside the farmhouse who are responsible for the events that lead Barbara into the greatest amount of danger.

## I. EVOLUTIONS IN THE FEMALE GOTHIC

In order to better understand how evolutions of the Gothic heroine took place in the texts that precede *Night of the Living Dead*, it is important to understand what is meant by the term female Gothic. Critics such as Ellen Moers, who coined the term "female Gothic," argued that it constituted "the work that women have done in the literary mode that, since the eighteenth century, we have called the Gothic" (77). Moers reading of the female Gothic encapsulates any text that has been produced by a female writer working within the Gothic genre. Several Critics have sought to build on this initial reading of the female Gothic including Kate Ferguson Ellis in *The Contested Castle* (1989); Diana Wallace and Andrew Smith in their essay collection *The Female Gothic: New Directions* (2004); and, more recently, Avril Hoerner and Sue Zlosnik produced an Edinburgh companion on *Women and the Gothic* (2016). In the introduction their collection, Wallace and Smith expound upon Moers' initial reading of the genre by arguing that "the female Gothic plot, exemplified by Ann Radcliffe, centralised the imprisoned and pursued heroine threatened by a tyrannical male figure, it explained the supernatural, and ended in the closure of marriage" (3). In these female Gothic works, women are centralised and become a vehicle through which the events of the narrative are presented. This placement of women as central figures represents a departure from earlier male Gothic which present a "masculine transgression of social taboos, characterised by violent rape and/or murder, which tends to resist closure, frequently leaving the supernatural unexplained" (Wallace and Smith

3). In these earlier male Gothic texts then, women are presented as object upon which men exercise their own transgressive nature, as opposed to the female Gothic in which the heroine's own thoughts and motives have the greatest significance in the text.

As the Gothic genre shifted into the twentieth century so too did the concerns and locations of these narratives. Texts such as Shirley Jackson's *The Haunting of Hill House* (1959) transport the Female Gothic from the earlier settings of crumbling castles and places the genre within a more contemporary setting. The narrative takes place in a large manor house within contemporary America. However, the focus on the female protagonist, Eleanor Valance, remains central to the novel's plot. As Clair Kahane notes, "Jackson dislocates me in typical Gothic fashion by locating me in Eleanor's point of view, confusing outside and inside, reality and illusion" (341). The novel centralises Eleanor's point of view and she becomes the character through which the narrative is reflected. Jackson's novel adheres to Anne Williams' definition of the female Gothic which "generates suspense through the limitations imposed by the chosen point of view; we share both the heroine's often mistaken perceptions and her ignorance" (102). The text uses Eleanor's perspective to present Gothic elements within its narrative, and the reader experience these Gothic tropes through the female protagonist. In contrast, Stephen King's novel *Carrie* (1974) utilises a narrator who "observes Carrie rather than allowing us to share her perspective" (A. Williams 103). King's novel encourages the reader to relish in the events that Carrie is responsible for whilst offering little insight into her true motivations or feelings. The reader is directed to the external consequences of the transgressive action, as is the case in earlier male Gothic works, rather than the internal psychological motivations of the woman, which serves as the generic basis for the female Gothic.

The proliferation of the Gothic into other mediums allowed for new forms of the genre to establish themselves. The influence of the Gothic is certainly visible in the horror cinema being produced in the late 1960s and early 1970s. These films often focused on the principle that "there is no escape from the encroaching violence in American society because the violence is in *us*" (Towlson, *Subversive Horror*, 12). Towlson goes on to note that as a country America was founded upon the killing of Native Americans and this violent past has remained a defining characteristic in American society. He also cites the horror of the Vietnam war as another source of American violence that served as a stimulus for these horror films. The images of Vietnam acted as a reminder of the human capacity for barbarism that still exists in contemporary society. For the filmmakers who witnessed these events, the horror genre served as a means to demonstrate their larger social concerns in a fictional genre, just as the Gothic was able to do in the late eighteenth century. Horror films, like the Gothic beforehand, played upon the social fears of an individual indulging violent urges within American society itself, rather than in the seemingly chaotic and primitive environments that exist outside of western culture.

The distinctions between the male and female Gothic genres can be found within contemporary horror cinema as well. The films that Towlson cites, specifically Wes Craven's *The*

*Last House on the Left* (1972) often present violence predicated by men against helpless women. Marie Mulvey-Roberts indication that the Gothic genre “mirrors in myriad ways the violations perpetrated against the female body which continue unabated today” (*Subversive Horror Cinema* 117) is certainly applicable to Craven’s film. Mulvey-Roberts reading of the genre is indicative of the ways in which Gothic texts reflect specific issues of misogyny and patriarchy within the society in which they were produced. The stimulus for the plot of *The Last House on the Left* is also marked by violation of women’s bodies, specifically the rape and murder of two teenage girls by a group of criminals. The film takes great pains to show the details of this attack through the lens of a voyeuristic outside perspective, in much the same way Wallace and Smith indicate that the male Gothic focuses on male transgressions against women in its own narratives. The viewer is voyeuristically encouraged to take pleasure in watching this act of brutality. These women’s experiences are used to entertain rather than encourage a condemnation of the physical and psychological trauma that they are being forced to endure, just as was the case in the earlier male Gothic texts.

## II. NIGHT OF THE LIVING DEAD AND THE FEMALE GOTHIC GENRE

*Night of the Living Dead* refuses to engage with the trope of having the strongest acts of violence be predicated purely towards women. The film centralises Barbara (Judith O’Dea) as the character through which the narrative premise is introduced. From the film’s outset, there is a focalisation of the female perspective which is essential to the female Gothic. The plot itself concerns a small mixed-gender group of survivors who all take refuge in the abandoned farmhouse after the recent uprising of the undead. Throughout the course of the film, neither the men or the women are presented as being in any less or more danger from these creatures. As *Night of the Living Dead* progresses, the survivors’ options become fewer and fewer as the number of ghouls increases throughout the narrative. It is this collective danger that ultimately causes the greatest level of threat from within the house as well. In this sense, the film actually engages the Suburban Gothic sub-genre that emerged in the twentieth century. As well as establishing an outside danger, the ever-approaching ghouls, the film also employs the Suburban Gothic idea that “one is always in more danger from the people in the house next door, or one’s own family, than from external threats” (Murphy 2). Bernice Murphy goes on to posit that in these texts, danger “invariably begins at home, or at least very near to it” (2). The film itself utilises both of these observations that Murphy makes on the Suburban Gothic. Barbara is threatened by both the physical dangers of the ghouls outside, and the patriarchal dangers posed by the two male leader inside the house. *Night of the Living Dead* indicates that it may be the external stimulus of supernatural horror that initiates the danger that the female heroine faces, but it is ultimately the flawed patriarchal structures within society that lead to her demise.

During the second half of the film tensions begin to arise between the two leaders of the group: Ben (Duane Jones), a young African American man who seeks refuge in the house after

his car is destroyed in the chaos occurring across the landscape, and Harry Cooper (Karl Hardman) a middle-aged White man whose family members have taken refuge in the basement of the house before Barbara and Ben even arrive there. The tension and arguments between these two characters allows them to dominate the group in terms of authority, whilst the other survivors—most noticeably Barbara—are afforded far less agency as a result. As the situation become more desperate and the house itself is revealed to be incapable of protecting the inhabitants, Ben and Harry continue to argue more violently over how best to deal with the situation. However, both men's inability to compromise ultimately leads to more danger for all of those occupying the house. It can be argued that, indeed, they resemble the tyrannical male villains of the female Gothic far more than they do heroes. The film engages with elements of the female Gothic mode in order to construct a female heroine, but it also utilises these elements to demonstrate the true patriarchal dangers that already exist for women within contemporary society.

### III. BARBARA: ESTABLISHING A FEMALE GOTHIC HEROINE

*Night of the Living Dead* quickly establishes the Gothic heroine trope during the opening of the film. Barbara and her brother Johnny (Russell Steiner) visit their father's grave where Barbara kneels and begins praying. Johnny, on the other hand, stands aside and begins to tease Barbara for her display of religious devotion. After a short pause, Johnny comments that praying belongs in church, to which Barbara responds, "I haven't seen you in church lately" (00:05:36). Johnny replies by suggesting that "there's not much sense in my going to church" (00:05:38). The film also takes advantage of the black and white colour palette in order to further contrast the personalities of the characters. The most evident features of Johnny's clothing are his black suit and black driving gloves. Barbara on the other hand is dressed in light colours, that appear almost white on the screen. The choice to dress Johnny in these dark colours immediately signals him out as a potentially evil antagonist in contrast to the purity that the white of Barbara's clothes. The two characters, at least to an extent, adhere to Maggie Kilgour's observation that Gothic novels revolve around "a battle between antithetical sexes" in which the male character who "wants to indulge his own will, is set against a passive spiritual female, who is identified with the restrictions of social norms" (12). Barbara is very much the conforming to the expectations of the society she lives in. She prays at the grave of a dead parent, and it is implied she regularly attends church. Johnny, on the other hand, rejects these religious social norms by expressing his desire to not attend church or pray for his dead father even if it is at odds with the dominant ideals of the culture. By presenting Barbara as a typically conformist, pure, and passive female from the outset, *Night of the Living Dead* is able to establish her very quickly as the Gothic heroine within the narrative of the film.

Barbara's position as the Gothic heroine is further solidified when she and Johnny first encounter a ghoul. After initially childishly mocking the ghoul, believing it to be a dishevelled cemetery visitor, Johnny runs away. Conversely, Barbara attempts to remain composed and

walk past the creature in a more refined and adult manner. However, upon attempting to pass the ghoul, Barbara is attacked by it. Johnny immediately pulls the ghoul away and attempts to fight it off. Meanwhile, Barbara escapes and—in an act of further passivity—watches as Johnny is killed. The ghoul then proceeds to pursue Barbara through the cemetery and to the sibling’s car, until she is eventually able to escape. Throughout the pursuit, the camera shifts focus between distanced long shots of the predatory, near animalistic actions and movements of the ghoul and close-ups of Barbara’s terrified face as she is subjected to this danger. Barbara is now being actively pursued by a true embodiment of the Gothic male character. The film depiction of the ghoul reduces the idea of the Gothic hero-villain as “moodily taciturn and violently explosive by turns” (Stoddart 112) to its most basic terms. The ghoul is initially so taciturn that it appears to be an old man wandering about the graveyard, and is unable to speak at all, before switching immediately to a mode of unprovoked violence at the mere sight of Barbara and Johnny. Barbara is now a heroine who is very much at the mercy of this villainous character pursuing her. Whereas her relationship with Johnny helped to establish her position as a typically passive Gothic heroine, it is with the introduction of this truly violent male ghoul that the framework for the Gothic narrative is fully established within the film.

The scene itself certainly presents the “focus on female suffering, positioning the audience as voyeurs” (A. Williams 104) that is indicative of the male Gothic. However, in Williams’s reading of the male Gothic, the narrative centralises the male attacker’s viewpoint as he pursues these female victims. This centralising of the male perspective echoes Andrew Tudor’s perspective on contemporary horror cinema which he states features a “continuing pattern of male domination of the genre’s central situations. Women have always featured as horror-movie victims” (127). Films more contemporary to *Night of the Living Dead*, such as Herschell Gordon Lewis’s *Blood Feast* (1963) or Bob Clark’s *Black Christmas* (1974) focalise the aggressive male perspective right from the outset. They both maintain the tropes that have been established through the male Gothic genre despite taking place within a contemporary twentieth century setting. The male perpetrator’s actions are focalised as a source of pleasure for the character, and the same feelings are therefore encouraged in the viewer. However, by making Barbara the focal point of this experience, *Night of the Living Dead* starts to blur the lines between male and female Gothic. Despite focusing on her personal suffering, these events are presented through Barbara’s eyes rather than that of the ghoul. Consequently, the sense of voyeuristic pleasure is weakened by through the film’s choice to focalise the victim, rather than the perpetrator. The viewer is forced to sympathise with Barbara, a central motif of the female Gothic mode, rather than take pleasure in her suffering, as is often the intention of the male Gothic.

#### IV. THE FARMHOUSE: A CONTEMPORARY FEMALE GOTHIC STRUCTURE

In order to escape this predatory ghoul, Barbara takes refuge in the abandoned farmhouse that serves as the main setting for the rest of the film. When Barbara moves through the house

and into the dining room, the film quickly cuts between the stuffed heads of animals on the wall. The sequence is accompanied by a sudden loud musical eruption in order to heighten the level of fear. Just as these animals have been hunted and killed by the former occupants of the home, the occupants are now being hunted by the ghouls roaming outside. In his reading of the film, Tony Williams notes that these images “symbolise a reverse world where humans change from being consumers to a hunted species facing consumption; humans now face becoming sustenance for zombies” (31). Whereas these trophies would typically represent the contemporary dominance of humanity over nature, *Night of the Living Dead* turns them into reminders Barbara’s own vulnerability and victimisation at the hands of the ghouls. It serves as a physical manifestation of Sigmund Freud’s famous definition of the uncanny or *unheimlich* as the intrusion of the unfamiliar when the familiar is expected. By recasting elements of domestic safety as dangerous, *Night of the Living Dead* engages with Gina Wisker’s argument that “[t]he uncanny, as a tool of the Gothic, reveals what is concealed and unexpected: those alternative versions of self, of relationships, home and family, which relate to everyday ‘reality’” (15). Specifically, the film reveals the alternative version of these hunting trophies as reminders not of human superiority but as representations of the vulnerability of all animals when faced with a more powerful predator.

Following this scene, Barbara climbs the stairs and the camera cuts to a close-up this time of a dead and rotting body lying on the landing. The corpse further reinforces the notion this is a space of great danger, rather than providing any sense of reassurance to Barbara. The house only serves to remind her of the danger that still exists outside and continues to pursue her. Within the context of the female Gothic, this entrapment was once limited to the “foreign, ‘ancestral’ location” (Davison 93), that has become ruinous over a long period of time. However, as the genre has developed throughout the twentieth century and beyond, this foreign and ancient location has now been replaced by the contemporary home of middle-class society that exists within the suburban Gothic mode. The film itself follows this course in its own presentation of the Gothic abode. Barbara’s imprisonment takes place in a setting that may not be totally familiar to her—she has never been to this particular location before—but still includes signifiers of the contemporary domestic space such as an oven, fridge, and cutlery draws. Through the equation of these familiar domestic elements with the ever-approaching danger from outside, *Night of the Living Dead* removes the potential safety that Barbara may expect to find in the house. Instead, the building is transformed from traditionally comforting structure into a source of terror. The film adheres Bernice Murphy’s definition of the Suburban Gothic in which terror no longer stems from the purely foreign or outside dangers, but from within the very locale that is supposed to shield the individual from these threats in the first place (2).

In terms of the external terror that Barbara faces, *Night of the Living Dead* subverts Kate Ferguson Ellis’s definition of the male Gothic. In her reading of these earlier texts such as Matthew Lewis’s *The Monk*, Charles Maturin’s *Melmoth the Wanderer* (1820), and Bram Stoker’s

*Dracula* (1897), Ellis notes that Gothic is preoccupied with “the failed home” from which “some (usually “fallen” men) are locked out” (ix). Ellis’s reference to these men being fallen is indicative of their exclusion from accepted society. As Ann Williams points out, in these texts “the hero/villain is an isolated overreacher [*sic*] punished for his hubris, his violation of the Law” (103). Characters such as Dracula and Melmoth are depicted as indulging their own attempts at immortality and are punished for doing so in their respective novels for these acts of transgression. This trope is even visible in the cotemporary Gothic. In her analysis of Clive Barker’s *The Hellbound Heart* (1986), Lucie Armitt indicates that in these contemporary Gothic texts, “suburbia [is] revealed as only deceptively cosy in structure, in actuality housing nightmares within its bounds” (65). It may be set in a more contemporary structure than *Dracula* and *Melmoth*, but *The Hellbound Heart* is still focused on an individual, Frank, who “looks to invent new ways in which sexual gratification can take him beyond the limits of mere pleasure” (Armitt 63). Frank’s desire to push the limits of sexual gratification again singles him out as transgressive within society’s norms. The transgressive and predatory male figure has now been allowed to enter the suburban, domestic space, but their characteristics remain strikingly similar to the predecessors who were still excluded from wider contemporary society.

As a text that engages with the female Gothic, the ghouls represent an extrapolation of the single tyrannical male figure—such as Dracula, Melmoth, and Frank—that Wallace and Smith state is central to the genre. Furthermore, the film also undermines Holly Blackford’s argument, which specifically cites Daphne Du Maurier’s *Rebecca* (1938) and Shirley Jackson’s *The Haunting of Hill House* (1959), that in “more modern Gothic literature” the heroine typically finds “the house embodied in the figure of not a villainous father or husband but a creepy servant, who seems to surface from the very walls and who largely works alone” (236–37). Although the villainous figure has changed, Blackford still notes that these antagonists “largely work alone” in their evil. In contrast, *Night of the Living Dead* removes the concepts of gender, class, or singularity from the equation. The ghouls do appear as undead men and women, but both genders of creature are depicted as equally vicious throughout the course of the film; their social position is irrelevant because they no longer occupy one. Furthermore, rather than working alone, as the film goes on an increasing number of ghouls represent a threat to Barbara’s safety. This ever-increasing mass of attackers outside of the house allows the film to enhance the level of terror surrounding her. Barbara is not threatened by a singular tyrannical male anymore, but a large mass of multi-gendered antagonists, unmotivated by anything other than a desire to consume—rather than take authority over—her body.

## V. BEN AND HARRY: THE PATRIARCHAL ANTAGONISTS

The film reinforces Barbara’s lack of escape routes from these aggressive creatures when she immediately tries to leave the house after witnessing the deformed corpse. As she reaches the door, she is prevented from leaving by an African American man named Ben, who will become the central male lead for the rest of the film. Ben forces Barbara back inside and takes



charge of the situation. Barbara, on the other hand, regresses into a state of shock, continually asking Ben “what’s happening?” (00:16:02). Ben then asks her if there are any more ghouls around to which Barbara replies “I don’t know” (00:16:29), repeating the phrase over and over until she reaches a state of near frenzy and collapses onto a nearby sofa. Ben has immediately attempted to take control of the situation and, although he appears to have good intentions, is already trying to assert patriarchal dominance over Barbara. In fact, when Barbara tries to leave for a second time, Ben strikes in the face. This causes her to faint and begin to enter the state of silence and passivity that she occupies for the majority of the film. Whilst this may appear initially to be for Barbara’s own safety, his willingness to use violence so quickly against her suggests an underlying patriarchal danger that may already be beginning to manifest itself towards Barbara through Ben. The film hints that Ben may not be a potential saviour for Barbara, but the tyrannical male figure that seeks to oppress her, as is the case for other heroines within the female Gothic genre.

As the narrative continues, Ben and Barbara discover several more survivors. These characters include Harry and Helen Cooper, a married couple who, along with their ghoul-bitten daughter, have taken refuge in the farmhouse’s cellar. The introduction of these characters, specifically Harry Cooper, leads to another strong male presence within the film. They are revealed to be hiding with a young couple named Tom and Judy, who have also escaped the events occurring outside. As these new characters are introduced, Barbara becomes less and less involved in the events taking place around her. She is not even able to ask the questions that she previously posed to Ben when they first met. Barbara’s state of shock and the internalisation of her trauma is an example of women in the male Gothic being “trapped by societies that will not recognize the heroine’s plight as caused by factors external to her, but instead blame that plight on the fact she is female” (Heiland 158). Heiland’s reading of the Gothic heroine argues that the main plight of these women stems from their gender. *Night of the Living Dead* indicates that this is also the case for the male characters within the film. Barbara’s earlier encounter with Ben, and the introduction of Harry lead to her being dismissed as ultimately incapable of acting her own interests. Instead, she is placed in a position of subservience to the aims of the male characters who surround her. The film introduces the concerns of the male Gothic genre, specifically the misogynistic treatment of women, into the plot in order to demonstrate the way in which even in contemporary society women are marginalised and ignored by patriarchal male figures.

In terms of 1960s American culture, Barbara’s character “would seem to support certain sexist assumptions about female passivity, irrationality, and emotional vulnerability” (Waller 283). Waller’s assertion echoes Kilgour’s characterisation of the passive female heroine in other Gothic texts. The film typecasts her into the vulnerable women role, who must be protected by strong assertive men. Stephen Harper counters Waller’s reading of the film by asking “[c]an Barbra [*sic*]—who is in shock after the death of her brother—be blamed for her passivity?” (3). Harper goes on to point out “the patriarchal domination of the house is

unremitting. Barbra [sic], in particular, is subjected to relentless abuse by the film's male characters" (3). In contrast to Waller, Harper argues that the combination of witnessing her brother's death and the strong male presence of the film prevents Barbara from taking a greater level of agency. His argument revolves around the position that anyone in this situation would react in a similar way to Barbara regardless of gender. However, all of the characters have also witnessed horrific events, and the film still chooses to present the most extreme response through the female character of Barbara. Furthermore, even Harper acknowledges the abuse that Barbara receives from the male characters. The film itself acknowledges the sexist tropes that exist within the contemporary society in which it takes place, but also appears to adhere to them in this respect. In spite of the fact that Barbara is presented as having the potential to become a true heroine, the film does not allow her the opportunity to do so as long as there are male characters around to dominate the discourse amongst the survivors.

*Night of the Living Dead* maintains this patriarchally dominated mode until the final act of the film, when the conclusion subverts the traditional ending of both the male and female Gothic. In his exploration of the genre, Fred Botting indicates that the traditional Gothic novel results in heroines/heroes returning "with an elevated sense of identity" (*Gothic* 7). The characters in these Gothic narratives are often threatened and entrapped, both physically and psychologically, but end the text with a stronger idea of their personal self than they had at the beginning. However, in *Night of the Living Dead* this heightened sense of self never occurs for any of the characters. In fact, Ben and Harry spend much of the film bickering and arguing with each other, so much so that by the time they come to any concrete decision it is too late for any of the survivors to escape. In his reading of the film, Jon Towlson argues that the ghouls are representative of "a society devouring itself from within" (Towlson, "Why *Night of the Living Dead*" n.p.). Towlson understands the ghouls to be reflection of the culture that they threaten to destroy with the film. These creatures are presented not as othering forces in the sense that they wish to invade and challenge social convention, but as reflective of the basest instincts that already exist within society. However, the same is also true of Ben and Harry. They too reflect a society that is populated with male characters so concerned with their own authority that they are willing to bring about the destruction of the foundational elements, in this case the domestic and familial structure, in order to achieve a sense of personal authority. This sense of self-reinforcement is so pervasive that it ultimately leads to all of the characters losing not only their own sense of identity, but their lives as well.

Through the negative depiction of these two arguing male characters the film satirises the patriarchal dominance of society through the tropes found in female Gothic narratives. These two dominating male figures are unable to compromise and help each other even in the face of mortal danger. As Ben and Harry continue to argue, the ghouls grow in number and even show signs of working together in order to achieve their ultimate goal. During an escape attempt late into the film, several of the characters attempt to reach a fuel line in a pick-up truck that will allow all of the survivors to drive away from the house. However, when the

ghouls see the humans, they immediately begin to collectively attack them. Rather than trying to assault each other in order to get to their victims, the ghouls remain focused on stopping the survivors. The implication being that they realise working together will give them the greatest chance of achieving their own goal. In his reading of the film, Robin Wood points out that “[t]he zombies attacks [...] have their origins in (are the physical projections of) psychic tensions that are the product of patriarchal male/female relationships or familial relationships” (103). Wood’s argument points towards two very specific forms of relationship that are present in the film, but as I have argued, there is also the patriarchal male/male relationship that forms the film’s greatest tension. Ben and Harry are constantly trying to confront each other in order to assert their own personal tyrannical views. The ghouls on the other hand have no understanding of these patriarchal hierarchies and are not restricted by them. The lack of mental ability to form such hierarchical structures is presented as actually better suited to working together equally than the apparently more psychologically advanced patriarchies of the human characters.

By having the escape inevitably fail, *Night of the Living Dead* further erodes the possibility that a return to the realities of the past is possible. As the characters around her continue to fight against each other, Barbara’s own hopes of survival are lost. In fact, the only other active contribution Barbara does make comes at the very end of the film. She briefly regains her cognisance during an attempt to help Helen Cooper. In these final minutes, Barbara resembles Radcliffe’s heroine, who despite displaying “a relative passivity in female attitude” does unlike the heroines “of Walpole, for instance, ... take the initiative in certain instances” (Tóth 25). Tóth acknowledges that the heroines are still relatively passive in Radcliffe’s and other female Gothic writers’ works, but they still display more agency than those in the male Gothic. This principle would be carried through into the later slasher films of the 1970s and 1980s with the advent of the “final girl” (Clover 35) trope. Female characters in films like John Carpenter’s *Halloween* (1978) and Sean S. Cunningham’s *Friday the 13<sup>th</sup>* (1980) are often the final survivors in these films, usually after defeating the antagonist themselves. The moment of self-elevation that Botting cites as crucial to the Gothic genre is achieved through this process of survival. Often these women end the film emotionally traumatised but also defiant in their refusal to return to the position of innocent victim that they appeared to be in the film’s opening.

*Night of the Living Dead* refuses to offer this same moment of revelation. Barbara’s attempt at one last act of autonomous bravery is what ultimately solidifies her total destruction, rather than the salvation afforded a traditional final girl. During this episode, Harry has been killed and Ben has already retreated, abandoning Helen to the ghouls. It is with this failure of patriarchal dominance that Barbara is finally able to act in her own interests, and the interest of another woman. In her reading of the Slasher genre, Carol J. Clover discusses the final girl’s “castration, literal or symbolic, of the killer at hand” (49). Though Ben and Harry are not the central villains here, at least not in terms of the physical threat to Barbara, they too are castrated symbolically by the abandonment of their patriarchal positions. Barbara, on the other

hand, begins to exhibit the features of the final girl in that she “specifically unmans an oppressor whose masculinity was in question to begin with” (Clover 49). Harry is always presented as a coward trying to hide rather than fight. He wants to stay in the basement locked away for the majority of the film, rather than actively attack the approaching ghouls. Furthermore, whilst Ben appears to occupy the opposing role to this cowardice, he too retreats when presented with the ghouls that threaten Helen Cooper. The implication being that once the male Gothic aspect of the situation has been removed, the patriarchal characters have been unmanned, the female Gothic is able to re-assert itself. Although it is too late for Barbara and Helen, there is still a suggestion that had this mode remained in place all along the characters may well have been able to survive and defend each other.

## VI. CONCLUSION

*Night of the Living Dead* inverts the typical narrative of the Gothic heroine. Even though Barbara has much in common with the female Gothic heroine, the film’s conclusion demonstrates the crucial difference between her, her predecessors, and those who would follow in her footsteps. Both early Gothic texts, such as Ann Radcliffe’s *The Italian* (1797), and horror films, such as John Carpenter’s *Halloween* (1978), typically end with “the destruction of threatening, unsanctioned otherness” which allows “cultural anxieties (the apprehension of a gap, a rupture or hole in the fabric of ordered reality) to be expunged and limits and values to be pleasurably reasserted.” (Botting, *Limits* 26). However, *Night of the Living Dead* indicates that it is possible to fight off the societal threat, but the issues will still exist even if the threat is erased. Barbara is unable to vanquish these creatures because she does not have the support structure, both physically and psychologically, to do so. She is not only a victim of the ghouls that exist at the boundaries of society, but also of the patriarchal structures that claims to be able to protect her. When she is isolated from these male-led influences after the film’s opening attack and in the film’s concluding scenes, her own need for self-preservation allows her to take on the role of female Gothic heroine. She is forced to take responsibility for her own escape from the threat with which she is faced. However, as soon as men begin to enact an influence upon her, her role as autonomous heroine is relinquished. Her immediate transformation into a catatonic state, simply following the instructions of the men around her, demonstrates the lack of agency that women are afforded within the film’s society. Not only is Barbara assumed to lack the ability to defend herself by those around her, but she also already assumes these things about herself. Rather than an active heroine, trying to save herself from destruction, she is forced into a position of death by the men who claim to know better.

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