



LESBIAN GOTHIC: TRANSGRESSIVE FICTIONS

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The topic of my paper is a newly categorised form of fiction known as ‘Lesbian Gothic’. In fact it’s a form that I myself recognised and named. I investigate it in my book *Lesbian Gothic: Transgressive Fictions*, published with Cassell/ Continuum in 1999, and have explored it further in recent publications. My interest in it was motivated by noticing the number of contemporary lesbian novels and story collections structured on gothic motifs in the lesbian section of the Silver Moon feminist bookshop in London. Silver Moon was one of the most prominent of the bookshops that sprang up in the 1970s and 1980s in the UK in the wake of the feminist movement. Sadly now, like other such shops, it has been forced to close due to the recession and the rise of commercial chains.

As critics increasingly perceive, reference to same-sex female desire and erotic relations between women occurs in eighteenth and nineteenth-century gothic literature. In addition, Daphne Du Maurier in her 1930s novel *Rebecca*, and Shirley Jackson in *The Haunting of Hill House* published in 1959, wrote gothic fiction with lesbian resonances. However it was in the 1980s and 1990s, in the context of the lesbian feminist movement, that Lesbian Gothic emerged as a specific form. During this period Anglo-American writers moved from prioritizing realist forms of fiction, such as the ‘coming out’ novel and *bildungsroman*, to experimenting with the recasting of popular genres, some involving fantasy. Gothic fantasy is one form that attracted them. Novels and stories of this kind, while differing in narrative line, have features in common. They all employ gothic motifs and imagery as a vehicle to represent and explore lesbian sexuality and experience. Well-known motifs that they utilise include the witch and the vampire, as well as different forms of spectrality, including the ghost, the spectral double and the haunted house. Contemporary writers who contribute to Lesbian Gothic include the Scottish American writer Ellen Galford and the British Jeanette Winterson, Sarah Waters and Ali Smith. There are also the American Paula Martinac and the African American Jewelle Gomez. I’ll be discussing some of their fiction later.

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A question that people unfamiliar with Lesbian Gothic frequently ask is, why do lesbian writers choose to utilise Gothic? What attraction does the genre and its motifs hold? In fact, they hold a number of attractions. I'll explain the most significant.

To start with, gothic fiction has had, from its advent in the eighteenth-century, notable feminine / feminist associations. Some of the earliest contributors to the genre, including Ann Radcliffe and Mary Shelley, were women. The themes they treat have female relevance. The labyrinthine passages and castle vaults in which Radcliffe portrays her heroines losing their way have been interpreted by critics as symbolically representing, in an age when upper-class girls were often kept ignorant of sex, female sexuality and the body. The plot structure of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, with its brutal erasure of the female characters, is read by Mary Jacobus as representing an image of patriarchy and its tendency to suppress and even annihilate women. In addition, certain key gothic concepts and motifs, in particular the uncanny and the ghost, are metaphorically applicable to lesbian existence. Rosemary Jackson describes the uncanny, a concept discussed by Sigmund Freud and Helen Cixous, as expressing 'drives and desires which have to be *repressed* for the sake of cultural continuity'. Lesbian eroticism, regarded by hetero-patriarchal culture as transgressive, is one such desire. Jackson also examines the way in which the ghost story, a literary form cited by Freud as illustrating the operations of the uncanny, 'helps to make visible that which is culturally invisible' (69) such as topics that society regards as unspeakable and taboo. Topics of this kind include, of course, lesbian and male gay sexuality. It therefore comes as no surprise to find motifs with uncanny connotations, spectrality and the vampire in particular, infiltrating lesbian and queer theory. Terry Castle in her study *The Apparitional Lesbian* interprets the ghost as an image for lesbian invisibility and the secret, closeted life that lesbians have often been forced to lead. The theorist Diana Fuss in her collection *Inside/ Out* also employs spectral metaphors in discussing of lesbian and queer existence. She describes the way society attempts to suppress homosexuality by relegating the lesbian and gay man to the invisible domain of 'phantom other'. She also portrays homosexual and heterosexual economies co-existing uneasily in a form of mutual 'haunting' (p. 3). Sue-Ellen Case utilises the vampire, with its associations of transgressive sex, its secret night-life and victimisation as an image for lesbian transgression and eroticism. She states, 'The vampire is the queer in its lesbian mode'.

Another concept that connects gothic interests with lesbian is the cultural -political one of 'excess'. Just as the world of the supernatural and the uncanny that Gothic fiction treats is excessive to, and can disrupt, the rational, material world, so lesbian identification and desire, as Bonnie



Zimmerman writes, exceeds and is surplus to the conventional roles of object of exchange and specular other of man that hetero-patriarchal culture conventionally assigns to women. It can also prove disruptive.

Having indicated how gothic motifs furnish writers with a vehicle for representing lesbian sexuality and experience, I'll now briefly discuss some contemporary novels exemplifying the use of Lesbian Gothic. One of the earliest motifs to receive attention was the witch. Galford centres *The Fires of Bride*, published in 1986, on it. She employs it as an image for the lesbian feminist, foregrounding her links with women's community and her strength and ingenuity in challenging male oppression. She also utilises it satirically, to humorously critique female egocentricity and bossiness. In addition, Michele Roberts introduces the word 'coven' (a meeting of witches) as a synonym for the feminist consciousness-raising group.

The motif of the spectral infiltrated lesbian fiction slightly later, influenced by the discourse of feminist psychoanalysis pioneered by Luce Irigaray and Jacqueline Rose. Winterson's *The Passion*, a work of historiographic metafiction set in eighteenth-century Venice, is particularly rich in spectral imagery. As well as referring to the ghosts of family ancestors haunting the canals, Winterson gives her lesbian protagonist Villanelle a spectral double. Or this is how I read the mysterious woman with ghoulish green hair ornamented with a crown of rats' tails whom Villanelle meets when out rowing at night. The woman has made her home in a nook in a canal wall. She has an uncanny habit of materialising at crisis points in Villanelle's life. Villanelle associates her with 'the spirits of the dead' who haunt the city 'speaking in tongues'. She can be interpreted as a grimly parodic image of carnivalesque festivity or, alternatively, as the monstrous image that hetero-patriarchal society assigns to the lesbian. She also prefigures Villanelle's own isolated situation in the novel's concluding chapters.

Sarah Waters too structures *Affinity* on an aspect of the spectral. She sets the novel in Victorian London, focusing on the Spiritualist movement that flourished in the 1870s. She illustrates how the role of medium provides the working-class character Selina with a route to achieve upward social mobility – that is, until she comes a cropper and finds herself incarcerated in Millbank prison, accused of causing the death of one of her clients. Waters forges metaphorical links between spectrality and female same-sex desire. She utilises the spirits with which Selina claims to converse to represent lesbian invisibility. The jargononesque terms associated with the Spiritualist Movement, such as 'affinity', also assume lesbian import. Selina tells Margaret, the woman she claims to love, 'You are my own affinity'.



Spectrality is especially well suited to articulating ideas of lesbian invisibility and the capacity of lesbian desire to survive oppression and ‘return’ in the manner of the Freudian concept of the repressed. The vampire, in contrast, is employed to foreground the erotic, transgressive aspect of lesbianism. Anna Livia and the African American Jewelle Gomez both utilise it. They radically remodel the image of the vampire, replacing the bloodthirsty monster with a portrayal that is psychologically complex. They utilise it as a signifier of an alternative lesbian economy of erotic pleasure that they depict as more emotionally intense and fulfilling than its heterosexual counterpart. They also highlight the connections between sexuality and the body, exploring its boundaries, flows, and exchanges. Gomez in *The Gilda Stories* focuses on the vampiric network or ‘family’, investigating its connections with the alternative lesbian parenting formation. She also utilises the vampire to explore racial issues. The protagonist Gilda is black, and Gomez employs her vampiric longevity to examine the changing lifestyles of African American woman and the black community in the US. And, in portraying Gilda and her companions struggling to escape the clutches of the vampire hunters, she exposes the bigotry and acts of violence that lesbians and black people can encounter.

This discussion of Gomez’ recasting of the vampire motif brings me to the end of my discussion of Lesbian Gothic. Perhaps you yourself will be find time to continue exploring the fictionthat it comprises.

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TransgressiveFiction.info: author interviews, latest news, upcoming releases, and spotlights on some incredible recent... See more of *Transgressive Fiction* on Facebook. Log In. or. Create New Account. See more of *Transgressive Fiction* on Facebook. Log In. Forgot account? *Transgressive fiction* is a genre of literature which focuses on characters who feel confined by the norms and expectations of society and who break free of those confines in unusual or illicit ways. Because they are rebelling against the basic norms of society, protagonists of transgressive fiction may seem mentally ill, anti-social, or nihilistic. The genre deals extensively with taboo subject matters such as drugs, sexual activity, violence, incest, pedophilia, and crime. The genre of "transgressive Palmer, Paulina. *Lesbian Gothic: Transgressive Fictions*. London: Cassell, 1999. Print. Sedgwick, Eve Kosofsky. *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire*. New York: Columbia UP, 1985. Print. Signorotti, Elizabeth. "Repossessing the Body: Transgressive Desire in *Carmilla* and *Dracula*." *Criticism* 38.4 (1996): 607-32. Print. Stoddart, Helen. "The Precautions of Nervous People Are Infectious": Sherida le Fanu's *Symptomatic Gothic*." *The Modern Language Review* 86.1 (1991): 19-34. Print.