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**HUMAN MONSTERS: EXAMINING THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN  
THE POSTHUMAN GOTHIC AND GENDER IN AMERICAN GOTHIC  
FICTION**

by

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**SUBMITTED TO SCRIPPS COLLEGE IN PARTIAL  
FULFILLMENT OF THE DEGREE OF BACHELOR OF ARTS**

**PROFESSOR KOENIGS**

**PROFESSOR MANSOURI**

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## Introduction

One of the key differences between the American gothic and the traditional English/Victorian gothic is the way supernatural themes and beings are represented in these genres. While the English/Victorian gothic deals with more explicit portrayals of fantastic beings, such as in *Dracula* or *Frankenstein*, the supernatural of the American gothic is less obvious and explicit; there may not be literal monsters like vampires because those beings are represented in a symbolic and often psychological manner through hallucinations. The monsters of the American Gothic are internal, and they rest within characters who are categorized as human, but steadily begin to show increasingly inhuman qualities as the narratives continue. In this way, American gothic fiction, in the time period of the 1800's, embodies a more posthuman sense of the gothic. Michael Sean Bolton, in his article "Monstrous Machinery: Defining Posthuman Gothic," writes that in the posthuman gothic, "the terror of the threat from the outside integrates with the horror of the threat from the inside. While a sense of terror arises from the external fear of being transformed into a machine-creature, a sense of horror emerges from the internal dread that the technological other already inhabits the human subject, that the subject is betrayed from within." (Bolton, 5). This technological other is also referred to in the article as "the monstrous other." Essentially, the posthuman gothic focuses less on general, apocalyptic destruction and more on a transformation, specifically of the body and mind. But, that mental transition into a nonhuman entity specifically sparks an internal horror rather than just terror; "terror expands the soul outward; it leads us to or engulfs us in the

sublime, the immense, the cosmic...Horror overtakes the soul from the inside; consciousness shrinks or withers from within.” (St. Armand, 3). The American gothic is characterized by internal transformations and paranoias, so this anxiety of this horrific other already existing within the subject acts as a link to the posthuman gothic. Specifically, these tensions reflect societal power relations and instabilities based on history and culture. In this thesis I will focus on the relationship between the posthuman gothic and gender to show how American Gothic fiction frames women specifically as this threatening, horrific other that can shake the patriarchal social order.

Bolton’s article works with a postmodernist, scientific framework that explores a transhumanist <sup>1</sup>relationship between technology and humanity. However, his general arguments and definitions of the posthuman gothic are not limited to cyborgs and robots. The core of his writings can also be applied to an older 1800’s American Gothic and the presence of internal and metaphorical transformations of the self that occur within it. The racial and gendered anxieties present within this era of American Gothic fiction reflect similar paranoias of change and power shifts that Bolton addresses in the context of technology. In the first few pages of his article, he contrasts the posthuman Gothic with the postmodern Gothic, stating that the postmodern Gothic predominantly fears an apocalyptic destruction of humanity as a whole, whereas the posthuman Gothic

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<sup>1</sup> Transhumanism is a movement dedicated to “the enhancement of human intellectual, physical, and emotional capabilities, the elimination of disease and unnecessary suffering, and the dramatic extension of life span” (Wolfe, xiii). A subgenre of posthumanism, transhumanism usually involves transformations of the physical human body using technology, with cyborgs being a common feature.

fears changes within societal structures and constructions of the self. He writes that “posthumanism can be defined as the investigation into what, if anything remains of the human beyond the disintegration of the liberal humanist subject in postmodernity...The source of dread in the posthuman Gothic lies not in the fear of our demise but in the uncertainty of what we will become and what will be left of us after the change.” (Bolton, 3). This approach to the posthuman Gothic is especially suitable to a setting that is not postmodern, such as 1800s American fiction, because there is less need to make distinctions between postmodern and posthuman Gothic. American Gothic fiction is not as concerned with apocalyptic scenarios, but rather with perceptions of the self and nuances of society, therefore allowing it to coincide well with the posthuman Gothic.

Bolton’s posthuman Gothic deconstructs the binaries of human and the monstrous other, and explores how they can become one in the same through various transformations, whether physical or mental. What Bolton does not mention is the Freudian uncanniness of this phenomenon, of how the familiar is also the unfamiliar. Once the uncanny is applied to Bolton’s posthuman Gothic, it is important to look beyond just technology and instead see the other as a more philosophical, metaphorical entity that exists within the human subject without literally changing the human body. Therefore, the nonhuman being rests in the shell of a human and maintains human appearance. The best way to see this example is to examine literary dehumanization and how it is used to uphold hegemonic societal standards by portraying marginalized people as monstrous others. In American Gothic fiction, the hegemony is a white patriarchy; the

anxieties at hand are that non-hegemonic groups, such as people of color and women, will threaten the current societal power structure and transform it by deconstructing the binaries of race and gender. Within literature, these marginalized characters are dehumanized through comparisons to animals, objectification, and deification all while still maintaining a human body. Thus, they represent this horror of the internal monstrous other inhabiting human vessels while threatening to change the dominant values and structures; if a hegemonic definition of human is white and male, then what will become of humanity if this definition is changed?

One way this fear manifests is in the authors' treatment of their male and female characters using posthumanist themes. In her article "Posthumanism and the Monstrous Body," Margrit Shildrick addresses the connections between posthumanism and societal views of the female body, but does not limit her arguments to the context of postmodern technology; she opens and extends the topic so that it becomes more generalized and applicable to a wider variety of literary movements and timelines. Shildrick does this by providing a new definition of the monster that continuously haunts both 1800s Gothic literature and postmodern works, in which the monster is not explicitly supernatural but instead manifests in the form of a marginalized group: women. She presents womanhood and femininity as "the non-subject other, the excluded, the embodied, the monstrous." (Shildrick, 1). She defines the term monstrous as "anything out of the usual course of nature" and states that monsters "show us the other of the humanist subject. It is the other who must be excluded in order to

secure the boundaries of the same, the other who is recognizable by the lack of resemblance...they speak to both radical otherness and to the always already other at the heart of identity” (Shildrick, 2). This definition fits well with Bolton’s analysis of the posthuman gothic, but instead of technology the monstrous other is femininity. The humanist subject, in this case, is the white human man who embodies patriarchal ideals of reason, binaries, and power. The humanist subject is the American Gothic hegemony, while the “other” is every idea and being that exists outside of these ideals of white masculinity. However, this humanist subject cannot exist without the monstrous other, because the other’s very existence is what defines the hegemonic subject. In this way, Shildrick expands on Bolton’s definition of the posthuman gothic in a way that illustrates a complex relationship between the subject and the other. Not only does the subject fear internal and societal changes the other can enact to deconstruct existing power structures and definitions of humanity, but the subject also relies on the other for existence and maintaining power. Without actively oppressing and othering women, men cannot maintain their positions of control.

Therefore, gender relations in American Gothic literature illustrate a struggle between humanist masculinity and women, who act as embodiments of the posthuman Gothic through their monstrous bodies. Edgar Allen Poe’s short story “Ligeia” and George Lippard’s novel The Quaker City position their female characters, Lady Ligeia and Mary Archibald, as inhuman from the very beginning. Though they undergo some transformations, these changes remain in the realms of the supernatural and monstrous, from objectified and deified



symbols to animals or fantastic beings. These characters are never given human subjectivity and remain in a perpetual state of the unknowable, often functioning only as vessels for the philosophical developments of the male characters. Ligeia and Mary never were human, nor will they ever become human. In contrast, the male characters, Poe's unnamed narrator and Lippard's Devil-Bug, represent a humanist conquering of agency over posthuman and othered influences. Poe's narrator is able to inadvertently dabble in unconscious ritual magic to revive Ligeia without actually losing his humanity. Devil-Bug, on the other hand, is able to transform from a monstrous and marginalized other back into a human. The male characters conquer inhumanity while the female characters are never afforded such agency. These narratives lend themselves to the theory that in the American Gothic, womanhood will always be inherently inhuman and beastly, without opportunities for transformation and redemption. However, female authors seem to change this idea and offer more nuance about feminine monstrosity. In her short story "The Yellow Wallpaper," Charlotte Perkins Gilman challenges the traditional posthuman Gothic narrative created by Poe and Lippard by arguing that female characters are not inherently threatening, inhuman beings; rather, they are forced into this monstrous role by an oppressive, patriarchal society. Gilman's interpretation connects with Shildrick's understanding of the humanist subject relying on the oppression of the "other" in order to maintain an existence of power. By being dehumanized, objectified, and othered, the female characters can be more easily controlled since they lack human agency. Without agency, male authors can better use them as tools to

further a masculine purpose and narrative. Gilman instead shows a version of the posthuman gothic in which a human woman is forcibly transformed into a nonhuman creature by misogynistic systems and masculine humanist ideals of science and reason.

## Theorizing the American and Posthuman Gothics

When one thinks of classic Gothic fiction, one might picture a novel like Mary Shelley's Frankenstein or Bram Stoker's Dracula. The Gothic as a genre arose during the Romantic movement, only using horror and fear to express similar themes relating to nature, selfhood, and embracing human passion. Fred Botting, a scholar of Gothic literature, writes in his book Gothic that

Gothic texts are, overtly but ambiguously, not rational, depicting disturbances of sanity and security, from superstitious belief in ghosts and demons, displays of uncontrolled passion, violent emotion or flights of fancy to portrayals of perversion and obsession. Moreover, if knowledge is associated with rational procedures or enquiry and understanding based on natural, empirical reality, then gothic styles disturb the borders of knowing and conjure up obscure otherworldly phenomena or the 'dark arts', alchemical, arcane and occult forms tied to a natural order of things as defined by realism, gothic flights of imagination suggest supernatural possibility, mystery, magic, wonder and monstrosity. (Botting, 2)

The Gothic acts as a reaction to the Enlightenment's reason, turning back to traditional mythologies and supernatural fantasies to express anxieties about an everchanging world, especially when rational knowledge and science is not enough. The Gothic disrupts one's perceptions of reality, morality, and temporality, as well as deconstructs the stability of selfhood by manifesting the insecurities of these themes, both internal and external, through seemingly supernatural means. According to Botting, Gothic fiction is characterized by its use of contradictions within the narrative and the work's rhetoric, meant to put both the characters and the reader in a place of tension with perception and misperception, understanding and misreading, and fancy and realism. This creates an ambivalence and ambiguity that make it possible for the plot's supernatural

events, both imagined and actual, to occur. Setting in the form of buildings such as old castles, mansions, and isolated houses are important elements of Gothic fiction because they embody that uncanny ambivalence, and allow for explorations of the connections between family lines, social status, and physical property. They become beacons of mystery, disturbing the domestic sphere by hiding darkness in their walls; “Conjoining ideas of home and prison, protection and fear, old buildings in gothic fiction are never secure or free from shadows, disorientation, and danger.” (Botting, 4). The Gothic also expands upon Romanticism’s idealization of nature, and instead presents a division between its domestic and dangerous forms; “Nature appears hostile, untamed and threatening: again, darkness, obscurity and barely-contained malevolent energy reinforce atmospheres of disorientation and fear.” (Botting, 4). Rather than being a beautiful force to form connections with, Gothic nature inspires terror in human characters precisely because it cannot be controlled, and thus creates a sense of powerlessness. In general, the Gothic as a literary genre manifests human fears and insecurities about self and society through macabre fantasy, questioning the boundaries of knowledge established in the reason and rationality of the Enlightenment.

As discussed in the introduction, the American Gothic specifically implements the core themes of Gothic fiction in unique ways cultivated by American history and ideologies. Particular cultural pressures have led to the development of a distinctly American subgenre of the Gothic, such as the violence and isolation of the frontier experience, a deeply Puritan past, anxieties

about popular democracy, fear of European subversion, class conflicts, and racial issues concerning slavery and Indigenous people (Smith, 4). The puritanism especially manifests in the literary portrayals of hell and rigid Christian morality, as well as conflicts relating to gender and women's power. Puritan histories were especially important in the development of a subgenre of the American Gothic known as the New England Gothic:

From the earliest days of the New England colonies, European traditions of the monstrous took root in the stony soil and flourished; narratives of the fall from grace of those settlers, of inbred families, cruelty, and generational hauntings combined nostalgia for a medieval or colonial golden age with the stronger belief that from the past come horror and evil...seventeenth-century Puritans came to stand in for the Middle Ages of the first Gothic Revival. History supports this view: by the nature of Puritan doctrine, early New Englanders shared a fear of the malevolent powers of the dead. Belief in a devil who delighted in tempting good Puritans led to witch-hunts and executions. (Crow, 140)

Puritan fears were distinctly based on European tradition, of literal monsters and hauntings, so because their anxieties are used as a motif by American Gothic writers like Poe and Hawthorne, puritan references serve as a link between the American Gothic and the Victorian Gothic. Moreover, the Puritan patriarchal culture and history of witch trials involves a view of women who do not fit within the required societal standards as dangerous monsters and witches that must be killed for their blasphemous existence. Because of the internally horrific nature of the American Gothic, the uncanny plays a vital role in its disruption of rationality, self-hood, and the domestic sphere. The "uncanny" is a term coined by Sigmund Freud referring to the duality of something being simultaneously homely and unhomely. He remarks that "the uncanny element is nothing new or strange, but

something that was long familiar to the psyche and was estranged from it only through being repressed (Freud, 145). Botting elaborates that the uncanny is “a disruptive return of archaic desires and fears [that] disturbs the familiar, homely and secure sense of reality and normality” (Botting, 11) and in the context of nineteenth-century Gothic literature, this leaves readers anxious and unsure about the boundaries and limits within the narrative, especially with the formations of reality and normality when complicated by psychological disturbance. This uncanniness creates a means of existence for the internal ghosts and monsters that plague the psychological transformations in the American Gothic. While the classic Victorian Gothic deals with haunted castles and monasteries, and literal supernatural monsters, the American subgenre narrows its focus onto “domestic unease and a psychological Gothic, with close relation to the uncanny and the ghost story...a product of the inconvenient absence of castles and the heavy footstep of the European past, but also no doubt a legacy of intense Puritan introspection and a relative 'thinness' of society and available 'usable,' past.” (Smith, 94). Having a simple house be the Gothic setting within the American form acts as another representation of insecurities about internal monsters and terrors, and furthers the homely/unhomely dynamic of the uncanny.

Another important aspect of the Gothic, both general and American, is its relationship to humanism. Because it was “born out of the immediate reaction to Enlightenment rationalism, the Gothic is no stranger to the exploration of the ontological states before, beyond and alongside the humanist subject and has always been aware that both the sleep and the dream of reason create monsters.”

(Heise-von der Lippe, 3). The Gothic and humanism rely on each other, as this intense rationality and reason create a need for passionate horrors to exist in the first place. But, as with the Gothic, it is necessary to understand what humanism is in the first place. The particular humanism that is presented as the Gothic's antithesis is rational humanism, which, according to Cary Wolfe, uses empirical science and critical reason to study the world, the place of humans within it, and how to establish morality without religious dogma and authority. Wolfe also elaborates that "Humanism entails a commitment to the search for truth and morality through human means in support of human interests. In focusing on the capacity for self-determination, humanism rejects the validity of transcendental justifications, such as a dependence on belief without reason, the supernatural, or texts of allegedly divine origin. Humanists endorse universal morality based on the commonality of the human condition, suggesting that solutions to human social and cultural problems cannot be parochial." (Wolfe, xi). Moreover, humanism works to create a very specific definition of what it means to be human. To be human, one must escape and repress the biological and evolutionary animal origins, as well as transcend "the bonds of materiality and embodiment altogether." (Wolfe, xv). But Wolfe also raises the issue of how these parameters for being human limit the moral scope of humanism, specifically in the case of discrimination towards nonhuman animals and the disabled, because it reproduces the same normative subjectivity that marginalizes and others those groups in the first place. That discrimination is not just limited to nonhuman animals and the disabled; it applies to any group that does not fit within the

perfect scope of rational humanism, so therefore it can expand to include gender and racial difference as well. Humanism has the intention of advancing human existence through science and rationality, but based on how “human” is defined in that context, it can actually be severely exclusive and limiting.

But, especially in the case of rational humanism, its Enlightenment roots place humanism in a Western hegemonic standard of white masculinity. When this type of humanist thought is allowed to define human existence and selfhood,

It is this humanist baggage which ties Western thought to an anthropocentric perspective often perceived as universal, even if, as Rosi Braidotti points out, ‘[n]ot all of us can say, with any degree of certainty, that we have always been human, or that we are only that. Some of us are not even considered fully human now, let alone previous moments of Western social, political, and scientific history.’ ...This kind of human(ist) privilege which allows us to maintain a belief system whose pillars have long been challenged. In fact, the posthuman does not exist outside of and unrelated to humanism and the human...The ‘post’ in ‘posthumanism’ does, consequently, not refer to an entirely temporal relation but rather suggests a close engagement with and a challenging of the critical paradigms of humanism...There is something distinctly disturbing about this necessary paradigm shift, as our posthuman predicament confronts us with the instability and ultimate unsustainability of our most basic ontological category--the human--and challenges the tenets of Enlightenment humanism in the process. (Heise-von der Lippe, 3)

Thus, rational humanism creates a conflict in which the only true definition of human is based on Western ideals that place whiteness and masculinity in a place of power. Marginalized identities of race and gender are therefore reduced to subhumanity. From this tension with humanism arises the posthuman. According to Wolfe, posthumanism rejects the various assumptions of human dogmas—anthropological, political, scientific—and takes the next step by attempting to change the nature of thought about what it means to be human. Posthumanism



also extends beyond physical, scientific parameters of the human condition; it constructs new understandings of the self, consciousness, and identity. While humanism aims to transcend animal origins to cultivate a more powerful, rational version of the human, posthumanism extends even further, looking beyond the constraints of the human mind and body altogether. It does not destroy the human per se, but rather questions the way the human “label” is defined and maintained. Posthumanism does not reject or surpass humanity, it “enables us to describe the human and its characteristic modes of communication, interaction, meaning, social significations, and affective investments with greater specificity once we have removed meaning from the ontologically closed domain of consciousness, reason, reflection, and so on. It forces us to rethink our taken-- for-granted modes of human experience.” (Wolfe, xxv).

Posthumanism, with its disruptions of reason and social human constructions, contains many similar characteristics as the Gothic. Gothic criticism is frequently concerned with the boundaries between life and death, and how undead creatures like zombies, ghosts, and other reanimated monsters express similar cultural anxieties as those evoked by the posthuman. But, these Gothic aspects of posthumanism are not always easily recognized because

from a normative perspective because it is the most truly Other aspect of the posthuman—the part signaling intersections of the heteronormatively male, white, ‘model human’ with all its possible Others—the female, the subaltern, the sexually different, the sick/disabled/prosthetically altered or enhanced, etc. The posthuman is scary...drawing on the uncanny...The posthuman, thus, makes us face our closets full of skeletons and madwomen in the attic in a rather Gothic manner—not as a literal ‘return of the

repressed' but by undermining and challenging familiar origin stories. (Heise-von der Lippe, 7-8).

From this connection between the Gothic and posthumanism arises a new literary perspective, the posthuman Gothic. As discussed in the introduction, the posthuman Gothic text is permeated with anxieties of the internalization of the Other. The posthuman Gothic explores posthuman themes of human decentering and disturbance through the lens of the Gothic's "negative aesthetics" that explore the margins and undersides of normative culture, and thus it can explore these unknown and monstrous territories without the constraints of humanist boundaries (Marks). The posthuman Gothic approach reveals how the Other is not only treated as inhuman, but as inherently monstrous because of its threat to the humanist, hegemonic mold of the human identity. But, the posthuman Gothic explores these monsters not as humans' polar opposites, but instead "makes us aware that the monstrous Other is not only lodged within, but an essential part of our (human) identity construction...The posthuman's decidedly uncanny connotations are rooted in the subject's incapability to abject its monstrous/posthuman features in the process of trying to establish a coherent identity narrative." (Heise-von der Lippe, 6). By using the Gothic figure of the monster to represent marginalized identities, the posthuman Gothic confronts hegemonic power structures and their internal anxieties about maintaining control. But, these Others, such as women for example, are not monstrous in themselves; instead they are subject to a "discursive construction of monstrosity" (Heise-von der Lippe, 2) in which that label of monster is forced upon them by the eyes of society, which defined otherness by its position of humanity.

But why apply the posthuman gothic specifically to the American Gothic; how is it different than connecting it to the Victorian Gothic? Anya Heise-von der Lippe uses the monster from Mary Shelley's Frankenstein in her descriptions of othering and marginalization within the posthuman gothic, and then expands upon this example to address larger, systemic power structures of whiteness and masculinity that determine which groups become the monstrous and subaltern. However, in her earlier quote she also addresses how much the posthuman Gothic involves the uncanny, repression, and "madwomen in the attic" (Heise-von der Lippe, 7) which are themes that closely coincide specifically with the American Gothic and its anxieties relating to Puritanistic approaches to gender and morality. The American Gothic does not involve literal monsters; the monsters are based on psychological horrors and fears of societal transformation from within. The American Gothic allows a clearer connection between posthuman monsters and the othering of marginalized groups by focusing on the mechanisms of the mind and thoughts of the characters; the monsters are based on perception, so there is more opportunity to ground them in societal views more so than if actual monsters like that of Frankenstein are involved. Moreover, by not having the monsters be literal like in the Victorian Gothic, the point that the label of "monster" is socially-constructed and imposed upon certain groups can be more clearly made.

## Ligeia's Monstrous and Uncanny Womanhood

In the introduction I presented Shildrick's theorization of how in regards to posthumanism, womanhood is seen as monstrous and "other" in relation to the masculine humanist subject. She elaborates that

The relationship between the (broken) body as other and the feminine as other, both in relation to the masculine subject is a highly complex one, but what it does seem to speak to is a deep and abiding unease with (female) embodiment...the masculine has been associated with the limit, the feminine with limitless, where that implies a failure of the proper, and unaccountability being the grasp of instrumental consciousness. Women's bodies, paradigmatically, and by elision, women themselves, exemplify an indifference to limits evidenced by such everyday occurrences as menstruation, pregnancy, lactation and such supposedly characteristic disorders as hysteria. Women are out of control, uncontained, unpredictable, leaky: they are, in short, monstrous. (Shildrick, 3)

These anxieties about women as unnatural and monstrous beings can be seen in Edgar Allen Poe's short story Ligeia, in which an unnamed narrator recalls his obsessive love for his wife, Ligeia, who later dies, and then after remarrying, his new wife Rowena also perishes; during the narrator's opium-induced haze, Ligeia is seemingly revived by possessing the other woman's corpse. Ligeia is an interesting figure because she exists in a perpetual state of the posthuman in that she is immediately branded as an inhuman other, and all details about her character are only conveyed to readers through the unstable recollections of the male narrator. Moreover, both in life and death, her ethereal and supernatural qualities turn her into the embodiment of the female uncanny. Poe uses this uncanniness to situate her as a Gothic being and to further dehumanize and objectify her until she becomes a monster. The female uncanny specifically

focuses on the “strangeness” of female characters that are haunted with repeated patterns of mysterious disease, death, and resurrection within Poe’s works. This uncanniness furthers Ligea’s position as a disruptive and threatening presence that creates an uneasiness, where she flits between the role of ethereal and angelic to horrific and monstrous within the narrator’s memories.

From the very beginning of the tale Ligeia seems to be a haunting presence; Ligeia’s origins are shrouded in mystery and uncanniness. The narrator states that “I cannot, for my soul remember how, when, or even precisely where, I first became acquainted with Lady Ligeia” other than only remembering that he met her in “some large, old, decaying city near the Rhine” (Poe, 569); he does not even recall her last name. The lack of true origin or full name seems to displace and almost dislodge her from the narrative. This displacement, combined with the image of the “decaying city” and the narrator’s remark that she “came and departed as a shadow” puts her on the fringe of existence, seeming more like a ghost than a living human. Moreover, her physical appearance furthers her position as inhuman and unnatural. The narrator describes “her marble hand upon my shoulder” and then states

In beauty of face no maiden ever equalled her. It was the radiance of an opium-dream—an airy and spirit-lifting vision more wildly divine...the skin rivalling the purest ivory...Here was indeed the triumph of all things heavenly—the magnificent turn of the short upper lip...and the color which spoke—the teeth glancing back, with a brilliancy almost startling, every ray of the holy light which fell upon them in her serene and placid yet most exultingly radiant of all smiles. I scrutinized the formation of the chin—and, here too, I found the gentleness of breadth, the softness and the majesty, the fulness and spirituality, of the Greek—the contour which the god Apollo revealed but in a dream, to Cleomenes, the son of the

Athenian...And at such moments was her beauty—in my heated fancy thus it appeared perhaps—the beauty of beings either above or apart from the earth. (Poe, 570)

Here Ligeia's beauty is otherworldly and divine; it is reminiscent of angels and Grecian mythology. She is like a Greek marble statue, a depiction of the idealized, perfect human form that is precisely inhuman because of its unattainability, making her beauty separate from the bounds of the earth. Though these descriptions are meant to praise and exalt her by promoting her superiority in the realm of the divine, she is also pushed further into an uncanniness where she is merely the personification of an idealized femininity. Though it is done in a complimentary manner, these descriptions objectify Ligeia by turning her into a work of art that can be manipulated and created, while the associations of her with the divine place her deeper within a place of the imaginary and fantastic, removing her realism and humanity.

This praising dehumanization then starts to veer away from portraying Ligeia solely as an idealized beauty, and begins to point out stranger, more sinister characteristics that slowly edge her towards a more monstrous existence. The narrator notes that “Yet, although I saw that the features of Ligeia were not of a classic regularity—although I perceived that her loveliness was indeed ‘exquisite’ and felt that there was much of a ‘strangeness’ pervading it, yet I have tried in vain to detect the irregularity and to trace home my own perception of ‘the strange.’” (Poe, 570). He continues by describing how that strangeness is especially present in her large, black eyes; “The ‘strangeness,’ however, which I found in the eyes was of a nature distinct from the formation, or the color, of the

brilliance of the features, and must, after all, be referred to the expression...How for long hours have I pondered upon it! How have I, Through the whole midsummer night, struggled to fathom it! What was it—that something more profound than the well of Democritus<sup>2</sup>—which lay far within the pupils of my beloved?” (Poe, 570). With her “strangeness,” Ligeia becomes a riddle that must be deciphered, and that challenge is an obsession for the narrator. With the context of the well of Democritus, solving the strangeness would allow him to obtain ultimate knowledge, rendering Ligeia into a symbolic puzzle and a vessel for his own self-fulfillment. However, the well of Democritus within Ligeia’s eyes also has an uncanny double-meaning because it implies that her expression contains an absence, a void, and ultimately an impending death. According to Elizabeth Bronfen, beautiful women in literature have always been connected to death because “beauty...includes death’s inscription because it requires the translation (be it fantasy or reality) of an imperfect, animate body, into a perfect inanimate image, a ‘dead’ figure.” (Bronfen, 62). Therefore, Ligeia’s death is inevitable because it would rectify her strangeness and would decipher the riddle of her eyes. That strangeness is what allows her to incarnate both the angelic and the grotesque, to act as a figure of the uncanny as she haunts the narrator’s memories as both living wife and shadowy ghost. Death would then make her completely inanimate and perfect, so that she could be a more malleable vessel for

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<sup>2</sup> Democritus was an ancient Greek philosopher whose ideas laid the foundation for the modern atomic theory, since he declared that matter can’t be destroyed, and space is an infinite and limitless void. Immanuel Kant references the bottom of the well of Democritus in his Critique of Pure Reason as an elevated allegory for attaining ultimate knowledge, since the well was supposed to be infinite. (Book Rags)

the narrator to control and understand. Death would no longer make her the anxiety-inducing feminine monster.

But, Ligeia does not remain dead, at least from the narrator's perspective. Elisabete Lopes argues that Ligeia is a shapeshifting vampire who possesses Rowena's body and resurrects herself as means to escape "the claustrophobic mental/physical space where she had previously been imprisoned by the narrator" (Lopes, 47) and Thomas H. Fick attributes Ligeia's revival and appropriation of Rowena's body as "her will to bodily presence" and as a form of revenge against the narrator who denies her physicality because "the woman's body is itself the object of dread and repulsion, the spirit an object of veneration that must be sustained even at the expense of the woman's life." (Fick, 88). I want to push back on these conclusions and argue that Ligeia's resurrection is a result of the narrator's willpower rather than her own. Poe's treatment of the narrator is interesting in that he has access to seemingly supernatural abilities without actually losing his humanity. Specifically, his powers he seems to acquire after Ligeia dies are those involving the ritual magic of necromancy and verbal utterance. Before her death, Ligeia's powerful will, intensity, and stern passion put her in a position of power over the narrator so that he resigns himself "with child-like confidence, to her guidance through the chaotic world of metaphysical investigation" (Poe, 572). As covered in the previous paragraph, Ligeia's death is a void and an absence that renders her, as a woman, into perfect and objectified inanimacy, therefore her former supreme will and passion no longer exists and the narrator can instead impose his own will onto her dead vessel self. For this



purpose, as implied by “metaphysical investigation,” the narrator has already begun his journey into searching for unnatural means to gain this control, and those powers are then granted to him during his marriage with Rowena. Though these abilities seem to push the narrator towards a posthuman existence, because as a man he fits within the approved scope of “human,” and his powers occur without his intention or knowledge, no real transformation occurs. The definition of human and human capabilities is slightly pushed, yet it is done in a way that almost seems to fit within the context of human transcendence via humanism.

Stephen Rowe, in his article “Poe’s Use of Ritual Magic in His Tales of Metempsychosis” states that “since the motif of the physical reanimation of the soul after death of the body figures so largely in Poe’s work, it may be illustrative to examine his acquaintance with the rituals of necromancy to ascertain if he deliberately made use of ceremonial magic in those tales in which metempsychosis is the central theme” (Rowe, 41). Because Ligeia’s resurrection is a classic example of this phenomenon, it is possible that Poe has imbued his narrator with indirect powers of ritual magic in order for him to revive his wife. Based on his 1835 review of William Godwin’s *Lives of the Necromancers*, a book containing detailed descriptions of divination, astrology, sorcery, necromancy, alchemy, and other forms of ritual magic, according to Rowe there is proof that Poe “had favorably read a scholarly account of the ceremonies used to invoke demons or raise the dead.” (Rowe, 44). Moreover, in 1836, Poe also reviewed Robert Folkestone’s novel *Mephistophiles in England; or, The Confessions of a Prime Minister*. This book also describes in detail the evocation

of demons, the significance of geometric forms in magic ceremonies, and Egyptian motifs in ritual magic (Rowe, 44-45). *Ligeia* was published in 1838, therefore based on elements of the short story, especially in the bridal chamber, it can be inferred that Poe was influenced by and implemented this necromantic ritual magic within the tale to raise *Ligeia* from the dead. The requirement of magical geometry and a magic circle can be found in the pentagonal room which is enclosed in a turret. There are Egyptian sarcophagi in each of the five corners of the room, the ceiling is vaulted, and the panels and draperies are inscribed with mystic figures; “they bore the appearance of simple monstrosities; but upon further advance, this appearance gradually departed; and, step by step, as the visitor moved his station in the chamber, he saw himself surrounded by an endless succession of the ghastly forms which belong to the superstition of the Norman, or arise in the guilty slumbers of the monk.” (Poe, 575). Moreover, the exact center of the circle is marked by both an incense-burning censer hanging from a chain with Lady Rowena’s bier placed just below it. It is in this magically-significant room that *Ligeia* is revived. By having the ritual magic embodied within the room and architecture, the narrator is able to maintain a certain separation and distance from it. He is not embodying this magic personally, rather it already exists in the space, so he is given the benefits of seemingly posthuman abilities without having to engage in a transformation himself, and he can maintain his humanity away from uncanny monstrosity. He has the luxury to indulge his internal monster to a small level without sacrificing any rationality or humanity.

The narrator is also given the power of utterance; when combined with the magical geometry of the bridal chamber and his opium-induced mental state, this ability makes Ligeia's resurrection possible. In the first part of the story, he relies on utterance in order to recall Ligeia's image from his memories as he investigates and obsesses over her symbolic meaning in his past. In the second portion, these utterances are connected more to his grief and feelings of loss. The details of the bridal chamber and Rowena's presence drive his memory back to Ligeia; "Now, then, did my spirit fully and freely burn with more than all the fires of her own...I would call upon her name, during the silence of the night, or among the sheltered recesses of the glens, as if...I could restore her to the pathway she had abandoned...upon earth." (Poe, 575). By calling her name even after her death, he is using his will to manifest her existence, and "he does restore her with the fictive power of language. The Force of fiction relies precisely on such a sense of the imagined world as if it were the world of experience." (Bieganowski, 180). After the descriptions of these utterances, the next paragraph states that "the Lady Rowena was attacked with sudden illness" (Poe, 575) and she eventually dies. By portraying these verbal utterances in the context of opium-induced grief within the magically geometric ritual chamber, Poe emphasizes the narrator's necromancy as inadvertent and unintentional. His willpower and manifestation kill his second wife, leaving free an empty shell that can be inhabited by the spirit of the first that he revives through his desire. But, if Ligeia's death transforms her into a perfect, pliable entity for his control and comprehension, why would he want to bring her back? Poe's technique of making

the narrator's necromancy inadvertent and maintaining his humanity implies that perhaps the resurrection was purely accidental. But, another interpretation is that even if the revival itself was unintentional, the version of Ligeia that the narrator craved and desired in his grief was a version not so monstrous and uncanny, who through death had been transformed into perfection. Perhaps the version of Ligeia the narrator tried to will into being was one where she maintained the physique of his attractions but with a controllable, less mysterious spirit without the former Ligeia's intensity, passion, and intellectual superiority. However, if that was his plan, it ultimately failed as the Ligeia that returns is arguably more monstrous than before since she has literally torn the barriers between life and death, and has reconstructed the connection of self, spirit, and body by occupying Rowena's corpse and transforming it into her own. Moreover, the fact that she shrinks from the narrator's touch (Poe, 579) implies that this even more grotesque Ligeia has even further escaped the narrator's control by regaining life through another's body, therefore separating herself from his mental hold even further. By rendering her into an undead creature, the narrator has pushed Ligeia into a deeper, marginalized monstrosity by compromising her human body further; the monster becomes both external and internal.

**Posthumanist transformations: who is allowed to regain their  
humanity?**

The next literary work to examine is The Quaker City or, the Monks of Monk Hall: A Romance of Philadelphia Life, Mystery, and Crime, written by George Lippard. Published in 1845, this book became the best-selling novel in the United States until the publication of Uncle Tom's Cabin in 1852. Lippard, a leftist and anti-capitalist, wrote this novel as a criticism of the hypocrisy of Philadelphia, which was known as "the city of brotherly love" but had become a breeding ground for the exploitation of the working class by the corrupt elite, and overall was seen by Lippard as a place that was contradictory to American freedom and democracy. The Philadelphia that Lippard creates and concerns himself with is a postmodern Gothic wasteland in which the depravity of its citizens threatens to bring it closer to an impending apocalyptic doom. But with his characters, Lippard takes a more posthuman Gothic approach, focusing on their internal anxieties about their human identities when confronted with the transformative space of Monk Hall. A secretive brothel and opium den hidden in the city, Monk Hall is a morally vacant and contradictory environment; it destroys standards of social normativity through debauchery while simultaneously upholding the hegemonic powers of its wealthier clientele. Monk Hall allows those who enter its chambers to transform into alternate, immoral, and almost inhuman versions of themselves, removing their images presented outside of its doors. This building, in the form of a seeming mansion, embodies a more traditionally Gothic space as its walls contain secrets of debauchery, corruption,

and excessive hedonism. Monk Hall acts as an extreme contradiction to the Philadelphia around it, which still embodies Puritan-based ideals of social behavior and propriety. A space of such contrast then forces the people who enter to deconstruct their senses of self, and undergo internal changes as Monk Hall suspends the rules of temporality, rationality, and morality formed in the external society. Two characters who display the effects of Monk Hall's transformative abilities on their own humanities are Mary Archibald, a young woman who is raped in the manor by the libertine Gus Lorrimer, and Devil-Bug, a criminal and murderer who manages Monk Hall.

Before delving into the characters themselves and their relationships to the posthuman Gothic, it is also important to examine the broader topic of the gendered modes of the Gothic, and how Lippard's novel specifically embodies the Male Gothic. Within Gothic literature women are often pushed into two roles: victim or predator. But in the Male Gothic, if we are to understand "predator" in a context of monstrosity, then the female characters embody both characteristics in a strange dichotomy where even if they are the victims of misogynistic abuse, their tempting sexual existence and potential for agency makes them inherently predatory even if it is not intentional. Essentially, it is a "victim-blaming" type of approach that absolves men of responsibility because the woman must ultimately be responsible for her monstrous temptation. In the Male Gothic, "rape is shown more directly than in the Female Gothic... woman is always on the verge of appearing unnatural, a monster of artifice. Or rather, for the male observer prone to lust, the fault is habitually projected onto woman, an accusation usually

couched in terms of her lack of ‘nature.’” (Nabi, 75). Lippard’s treatment of Mary in the book is characteristic of the Male Gothic in that she is reduced to the role of a rape victim and she is viewed by the male characters as “unnatural and artificial” because she is “kept in bounds by a psycho-sexual force, by a misogyny generally expressed as woman’s monstrous otherness, her ‘artificiality’” (Nabi, 75). This otherness makes her femininity a source of intrinsic fear, and thus male characters respond by objectifying, dehumanizing and trying to control her. Moreover, Lorrimer is a regular at the Monk Hall, which only exacerbates his libertine nature, and thus he has been transformed from just a human to an embodiment of the manor’s destruction of moral values. Mary, as a young virgin from an influential family, is the ultimate symbol of domesticity, ideal femininity, and stability; therefore, by defiling her, Lorrimer can symbolically also destroy the female-dominated domestic sphere and contribute further to Philadelphia’s destruction;

It was the purpose of the libertine to dishonor the stainless girl, before he left her presence. Before day break she would be a polluted thing, whose name and virtue and soul, would be blasted forever... While enchaining the mind of the Maiden, with a story full of Romance, it was his intention to wake her animal nature into full action. And when her veins were all alive with fiery pulsations, when her heart grew animate with sensual life, when her eyes swam in the humid moisture of passion, then she would sink helplessly into his arms, and—like the bird to the snake—flutter to her ruin. (Lippard, 109-110)

Lorrimer’s intentions are to completely destroy her, because once she has reached that full animal state of monstrous posthumanity, she will be shunned by society as a whole and her powers of temptation and desirability will be obliterated, therefore giving him full control. The epitome of this delicate, bird-like naivety,

Mary is described as lacking a “remarkable manifestation of thought, or mind, or intellect” and physically she is seen as “...a bud breaking into bloom, a blossom ripening into fruit, or what is higher and holier, a pure and happy soul manifesting itself to the world, through the rounded outlines of a woman's form.” (Lippard, 16). Even from the start, Mary is not granted full personhood; she suffers as an object of the narrative gaze. Mentally she is portrayed as naïve and dimwitted, while physically she is always compared to something nonhuman, such as flowers, fruits, and a symbol of a heavenly and holy purity. The line “outlines of a woman’s form” also illustrates the way that Mary often functions as just a physical shell of a person that plays the role of a metaphor for domesticity and religious purity. Mary lacks the reason and rationality that grant humanist agency, and Lippard’s rendition of the Male Gothic has imbedded her within artificiality.

Mary embodies both an idealized and pure femininity, but also is a symbol of temptation, a sexual purity that must be corrupted in the Gothic labyrinth of Monk Hall. Her virginity allows her social propriety and belonging, but after Lorrimer sexually assaults her, she loses any semblance of humanity completely, and she becomes an animal. Because she is sexually-tainted, her transformation into the full monstrous and predatory feminine is complete and fully others her. In this way, posthumanism and the transformation from human to nonhuman function to dehumanize and disempower her completely by turning her completely into the monster. She already was not seen as entirely human before, merely a symbolic object in a human-like body, but upon the rape even this is taken away as Lorrimer plays “with the animal nature of the stainless girl.”



(Lippard, 114). Even with the objectification, Mary's virginity and upper-class status kept her from being completely othered. However, sexual-defilement removes even that little bit of power from her. Lippard describes earlier in the novel that women have an intellectual nature; their animal nature is passive and must be awakened. He writes that if only this animalistic self is stimulated, with no attention to the intellectual, "...no devil crouching in the flames of hell is fouler than Woman, when her animal nature alone is roused into action—would man but learn and revere this fearful truth, would woman but treasure it in her inmost soul, then would never a shriek arise to heaven, heaping curses on the betrayer's head, then would never a wrong done to maiden virtue, give the suicide's grave its victim, then in truth, would woman walk the earth, the spirit of light that the holiest Lover ever deemed her!" (Lippard, 73). Once Mary has been defiled and solely this "animal nature" awoken, she loses the virtue that tied her to humanity and is no longer a symbol of purity. Instead, she becomes an animal, a creature of hell, and afterwards desires death and isolation, attempting to separate herself even from her brother, who is a tie to her past, more human life. Her posthuman transformation is not one that positively expands ideas of humanity, but rather, sends her into a depraved and miserable animal state. However, her storyline doesn't enact a greater political meaning; Lippard does not grant her a higher purpose in the novel, and simply uses her as a plot device to show the decadence of Monk Hall and its customers. But, from before and after this posthuman change, Mary has always been a pawn of outside forces, never allowed true agency.

Devil-Bug's transformation is the opposite of Mary's as he first is an animalistic and morally vacant being who seems to wholeheartedly embody Monk Hall itself. But, he is granted a transition to morality and humanity. He miraculously escapes posthuman monstrosity and otherness, and then he regains agency, family, and human identity. Devil-Bug is described as a physical representation of degeneracy because of his ugliness in both face and body; he is seen as almost supernaturally monstrous by other characters. He is "...a wild beast, a snake, a reptile, ...—anything but—a man." (Lippard, 106). Moreover, Devil-Bug himself states "I sometimes think, I was never born at all." (Lippard, 228). He doubts not only his humanity, but his very existence. His name alone invokes the image of a nonhuman animal combined with supernatural wickedness. His dehumanization, however, is a result of his socio-economic conditions and being raised as a destitute orphan. Unlike the elites who transform into these amoral beings within Monk Hall, Devil-Bug had already been corrupted by life itself through issues of class and criminality. However, because this dehumanization occurred before Monk Hall, the debauched transformative powers of the manor do not affect him the way they would the elite, like Lorrimer. Instead, the manor is where he regains his humanity through the discovery of family.

Monsters serve a useful social and regulative function distinguishing norms and values from deviant and immoral figures and practices. They give shape, moreover, to obscure fears or anxieties, or contain an amorphous and unrepresentable threat in a single image. But only as long as the boundaries separating virtue and vice, good and evil remain clearly delineated. In the context of monstrosity, the role of transgression, and the limits and excesses that it makes manifest, concerns both the delineation of boundaries

and the mechanisms--the norms, taboos, prohibitions--that keep them in place. (Botting, 9)

In Monk Hall, the boundaries between vice and virtue and good and evil are extremely blurred. Though Devil-Bug is monstrous and othered in the eyes of external Philadelphia society, within this building's walls he is not actually a posthuman Gothic monster because he does not need to enforce the boundaries of morality and propriety when they already do not exist in that space; there is no need for social regulation. But, he can only maintain this level of non-monstrosity within Monk Hall. However, through various deeds that adhere to a traditional, external moral system, he is able to also achieve humanity in Philadelphia as well. Devil-Bug saves Mabel from being sexually assaulted by Dr. Pyne, and while torturing the assailant discovers that Mabel is actually his illegitimate daughter. Family is an integral part of not only human existence, but also in representing the stable domestic sphere and American moral value systems. Devil-Bug is no longer an isolated creature, but rather does have actual kin. This discovery of a familial relation and overall saving Mabel from being defiled and raped is a pivotal moment in that it represents Devil-Bug's transformation from posthuman Gothic monster to human.

Nonetheless, this scene is also crucial because it shows that Devil-Bug has transformed by protecting virtue and domesticity, therefore upholding traditional values shaping the ideal American democracy in Lippard's perspective. This moment allows Devil-Bug to not only become human, but to also become a valuable prophet who can carry Lippard's larger intended philosophical and political agendas of critiquing the real-life corruption in Philadelphia. Readers are

given an intimate vision of Devil-Bug's internal psyche and his new prophetic role through his long, elaborate dreams of Philadelphia in 1950. In these nightmarish scenes, Devil-Bug is told that "there is no America now," (Lippard 388), meaning that Philadelphia's corruption has bled into the rest of the country and ravaged it. Class divisions have increased, democracy has bowed to a new monarchy and aristocracy, the American flag has been replaced by one bearing a crown and chain, and the working-class suffers as the elite continue to exploit them in this hellscape. But, a spirit warns him that "To-morrow will be the last day of the Quaker City. The judgment comes, and they know it not." (Lippard, 320). The corpses of the poor, in a moment of horrific chaos, are granted enough life force by "the God of the Poor" (Lippard, 383) to rise up and begin a violent battle with the rich, reaping vengeance on their murderers and exploiters. The refrain "WO UNTO SODOM" is repeated all throughout Devil-Bug's dream, emphasizing a religious punishment of the idolatrous and wicked city. As the battle rages on, the earth eventually collapses and takes the city down with it, almost as if into hell. This dream pushes Lippard's message that the only way to avoid Philadelphia's complete apocalyptic demise, corruption must be squandered with morality and proper religion as soon as possible. Devil-Bug is granted the knowledge of these prophecies and apocalyptic futures because he himself is a product of such reformation after regaining family and realizing that he, "the outcast of the earth, the incarnate outlaw of hell, had one friend in the wide universe; that friend his Creator." (Lippard, 339). Unlike Mary, he is not a mere plot device, but instead a deliverer of Lippard's criticisms of Philadelphia's

corruption and a driver of his political goals to fight the city's decadence. The significance of having Devil-Bug play the role of Lippard's prophet is that it blatantly displays Lippard's use of the Male Gothic. Mary's femininity makes it impossible to truly escape posthuman monstrosity, and once she is sexually-tainted her status as the monster is permanent. But, Devil-Bug is a man and is therefore allowed a degree of privilege that makes him capable of overcoming monstrous identifications thrust upon him to regain humanity.

## **Mental Illness and Forced Monstrosity**

In the previous two chapters we see narratives in which the female characters are always presented as nonhuman entities, and any transformations they undergo only function to push them even further from conceptualizations of humanity. But, in “The Yellow Wallpaper,” Charlotte Perkins Gilman offers a different perspective: women are not inherently monstrous, they are made to be so by patriarchy. Gilman’s short story is an example of the Female Gothic, which focuses on “women’s fears of entrapment within the domestic and within the female body.” (Nabi, 75). The Female Gothic creates a narrative where female protagonists are simultaneously victims and heroines, and “the actual source of danger threatening the heroine in female Gothic texts is eighteenth century patriarchal society, in which political, social and economic power lies with men.” (Nabi, 75). Gilman brings us back to the “discursive construction of monstrosity” (Heise-von der Lippe, 2) in which monstrous otherness is defined by its relation to humanity. This short story chronicles an unnamed narrator’s descent into madness due to her doctor husband forbidding her to partake in creative work or social activities as she struggles with what is now understood to be postpartum depression. Gilman sends a very clear message in the narrative that patriarchal oppression and masculine bias within science and reason is the cause for the narrator’s increased hysteria; she only becomes truly unstable after her husband refuses to recognize her agency as a human being, or to see her as more than an accessory. Because the story is from her point of view, readers are introduced to her as a woman from a humanist sense, capable of full reason and rationality

without supernatural pretext, and they only witness her husband's dehumanization of her through her observations. But, this means that readers also receive an intimate look into her mind, and see firsthand her mental demise as she is forced to become the monster.

One character who is important to examine is the narrator's husband, John, for he acts as a symbol of rational humanism influenced by the ideals of reason and science formed during the Enlightenment and renaissance humanism. In her immediate descriptions of John, the narrator states that "John is practical in the extreme. He has no patience with faith, an intense horror of superstition, and he scoffs openly at any talk of things not to be felt and seen and put down in figures. John is a physician, and perhaps—I would not say it to a living soul, of course, but this is dead paper and a great relief to my mind)—perhaps that is the one reason I do not get well faster." (Gilman, 792). She also notes that both her husband and brother are physicians "of high standing," so their opinions on medical subjects are seen as superior to all others, and therefore her serious struggle with implied postpartum depression is only acknowledged as a "slight hysterical tendency." (Gilman, 792). From these descriptions of John and how he is perceived in society, one can see that he exemplifies the definitions of rational humanism put forth by Wolfe in the first chapter. He is a beacon of objective rationality, and with his profession is given an intimate knowledge of the human body, which grants him an air of elitism over concepts not relating to concrete human existence and advancement. But, this sense of superiority also creates an intense ignorance and disregard to subjects not relating to "ideals of human

perfectibility, rationality, and agency inherited from Renaissance humanism and the Enlightenment.” (Wolfe, xiii). Because the narrator is a woman, her body is viewed as inherently foreign, not entirely matching the definitions of “human,” and so her concerns and pains are disregarded. As Shildrick states, the female body is monstrous, so it must be conquered with humanistic explanations and rationalizations. But, these solutions must be simplified because giving genuine treatment would only empower her with human agency and make it harder to keep her in a vulnerable, submissive, and weakened state. John also inhabits an interesting cooperation of humanism and Puritan ideals. Though rational humanism claims to surpass religious dogma and ideologies, it intersects with the ghost of Puritanism through patriarchal, masculine power. Medicine and science thus become scapegoats for John’s reduction of the narrator’s creative power. As a part of the New England Gothic, “The Yellow Wallpaper” contains references to the American Puritan history that remains a haunting presence which emphasizes female obedience to authority, and that authority belongs to the masculine human superior. After all, a woman with power who is not under the control of a man brings up the insecurities of witchcraft and Gothic demons. John tells her “that with my imaginative power and habit of story-making, a nervous weakness like mine is sure to lead to all manner of excited fancies, and that I ought to use my will and good sense to check the tendency.” (Gilman, 794). He tries to quell her creative talents and writing, which echoes similar abilities to the power of utterance, and therefore gives her witch-like qualities. Moreover, the



emphasis on “will” brings a biblical morality to the situation, that the narrator must resist temptation to write.

The narrator’s transformation into a monstrous other is represented through her gradual loss of sanity and reason; her madness is the monster in that it renders her incapable maintaining rationality even within her own mind. This anxiety about her mental health is seen in her relationship with the wallpaper of her bedroom. This wallpaper is “one of those sprawling flamboyant patterns committing every artistic sin. It is dull enough to confuse the eye in following, pronounced enough to constantly irritate and provoke study, and when you follow the lame uncertain curves for a little distance they suddenly commit suicide—plunge off at outrageous angles, destroy themselves in unheard of contradictions. The color is repellent, almost revolting; a smouldering unclean yellow, strangely faded by the slowly-turning sunlight. It is a dull yet lurid orange in some places, a sickly sulphur tint in others.” (Gilman, 793). The wallpaper’s pattern is nonsensical and unknowable. The references to destruction and death as a result of following the curves of the pattern foreshadows the demise of the narrator’s sanity and selfhood. In addition, she describes the pattern as an “artistic sin” and as committing suicide, therefore putting the wallpaper within the context of biblical hell in some ways, and this brings back those elements of Puritan mentalities. Though she is initially disgusted with the wallpaper, it still intrigues her and forces her to study it. Her relationship with the wallpaper is one of uncanny abjection. The abject refers to the human reaction, such as horror and

revulsion, to a threatened breakdown in meaning caused by the loss of the distinction between subject and object or between self and other.

The abject has only one quality of the object--that of being opposed to I. If the object, however, through its opposition, settles me within the fragile texture of a desire for meaning, which, as a matter of fact, makes me ceaselessly and infinitely homologous to it, what is abject, on the contrary, the jettisoned object, is radically excluded and draws me towards the place where meaning collapses...And yet, from its place of banishment, the abject does not cease challenging its master...A massive and sudden emergence of uncanniness, which, familiar as it might have been in an opaque and forgotten life, now harries me as a radically separate, loathsome...It is thus not lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection, but what disturbs identity, order, system. (Kristeva, 2-4)

However, despite the unattractive and unsettling nature of the abject, it also incurs a sort of jouissance, and this painful pleasure it creates is what allows the abject to continue existing. the wallpaper itself is a repulsive abjection to the narrator that eventually the narrator begins to embrace because of her fascination with it and its pattern. The approved societal self is clean, while the abject is filth, and this forms a divide between society and a certain nature; "the wallpaper, then, can be understood as the very type of 'filth,' the abject, expelled, non-object of desire in opposition to the approved clean self that finds itself in opposition to the excluded. What happens in Gilman's story is that the self identifies with the abject, the narrator finds herself in the figure she projects as trapped within the pattern of the wallpaper." (Smith, 99). The abject is another way of looking at posthuman monstrosity because like the Gothic monsters, abjection reinforces the boundaries of propriety, morality, and societal power structures. The abject is another form of the monstrous other.

This self-identification with the abject becomes the narrator's downfall, as it allows her to see the "woman" in the wallpaper. The narrator notes that her mental health is worsening as she mentions how she "[cries] at nothing, and [cries] most of the time" (Gilman, 796) and she begins to study the wallpaper's pattern more in-depth for longer stretches of time. Eventually she starts to notice a shape, "like a woman stooping down and creeping about behind that pattern" (Gilman, 797). At this point, the word "creep" starts to increase in repetition throughout the story, applied to many situations from the moonlight to the narrator's own feelings. But, the word is always consistently applied to the woman-like figure in the wallpaper. Completely absorbed by the wallpaper, the narrator is determined to discover the mystery of its pattern, and in a seemingly-hallucinatory sequence comes to the conclusion that "the front pattern does move...the woman behind it shakes it! Sometimes I think there are a great many women behind, and sometimes only one, and she crawls around fast, and her crawling shakes it all over. Then in the very bright spots she keeps still, and in the very shady spots she just takes hold of the bars and shakes them hard." (Gilman, 801). The woman in the wallpaper is not entirely human, and with her creeping and crawling is closer to a creature or fantastical animal. She is beastly, acting as the narrator's uncanny double and disrupting her sense of reality and reason. This woman seems to be imprisoned, staying passive in the brighter, more visible portions of the pattern but actively trying to break free in the darker areas. This echoes the narrator's own imprisonment, and how she must hide her writing and her anxieties from her husband and the rest of the household; her creativity is her

escape, and the denial of it is pushing her closer to the wallpaper than her writing which maintains her mental stability. This woman in the wallpaper is not just a random creature or hallucination; rather, she is the narrator's double. The woman in the wallpaper is a manifestation of the narrator's fears, mental deterioration, and darkness; she is the narrator's monstrous otherness projected onto the abject filth of the wallpaper. Though she has maintained rational, human agency internally despite her external treatment by her husband, the existence of the wallpaper woman signifies the approach of her mental transformation into the posthuman monster.

Eventually, the narrator does succumb to the imposed monstrosity of her place within society as she and her double in the wallpaper finally merge into one being. This union occurs when the narrator finally frees the monstrous woman by destroying her prison, the wallpaper; "I pulled and she shook, I shook and she pulled, and before morning we had peeled off yards of that paper." (Gilman, 802). The narrator and the wallpaper woman work together symbiotically in this scene, helping each other destroy their respective prisons as they begin to merge into one being. Her monstrous self is no longer an image trapped in a wallpaper pattern, it has entered her physical space and body. "One might lose reason and the clearly demarcated sense of self and world it sustains, but the loss might also entail the excitement of shedding the restraints of reason and being invigorated by passion." (Botting, 7); the narrator has given in to the *jouissance* of the abject wallpaper to become an abject being herself, a monstrous entity that is not just a mere object, but is a force that disrupts the construction of her previous humanity. Though the

transformation seems to be mental, it also manifests physically as she bites the corners of the bed and creeps “smoothly on the floor” (Gilman, 803). The narrator is consumed internally and externally by her societally-imposed posthuman monstrosity, and thus becomes more creature-like. Her fate is sealed in the final scene of the short story: “I kept on creeping just the same, but I looked at him over my shoulder. ‘I’ve got out at last,’ said I, ‘in spite of you and Jane! And I’ve pulled off most of the paper, so you can’t put me back!’ Now why should that man have fainted? But he did, and right across my path by the wall so that I had to creep over him every time!” (Gilman, 803). Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, in their book The Madwoman in the Attic, imagine this ending to be a type of triumph for the narrator. After all, succumbing to the madness gives her a sort of supernatural power that puts her in a position where she can creep over John and seemingly physically conquer him whereas throughout the rest of the story he was in a position of physical and societal superiority over her. They also argue that “John's unmasculine swoon of surprise is the least of the triumphs Gilman images for her madwoman. More significant are the madwoman's own imaginings and creations, mirages of health and freedom with which her author endows her like a fairy godmother showering gold on a sleeping heroine. The woman from behind the wallpaper creeps away, for instance, creeps fast and far on the long road, in broad daylight.” (Gilbert and Gubar, 91). The madwoman in the wallpaper is a figure that encourages a desire for freedom and escape from confinement, both in the literal room and gendered societal constraints. However, although insanity is a form of escape, is it truly a triumph for the narrator? On the contrary, from a

posthuman gothic lens, the narrator is a victim because patriarchal scientific institutions have forced her to succumb to that societally-imposed monstrous inhumanity via madness. Is it truly a triumph if the only way the narrator can escape patriarchal confinement is to give up rationality, intellect, and thus her humanity by becoming her monstrous self?

## Conclusion

The posthuman Gothic exists as a series of power struggles between a selfhood constructed by rational humanism and an internal monster that rests within, and these internal conflicts reflect larger-scale hegemonic power dynamics. In both cases, the dominant self or group in power cannot exist without the presence of the Other. This marginalized other, a monstrous culmination of fear, is both a threat and a necessity to a version of the human defined by rational humanism and Western white, masculine philosophy. Within the American Gothic, these tensions come alive in the form of psychological horror that more clearly links the monster to marginalized groups, like women.

The posthuman Gothic does not have to solely exist in the context of science fiction and technological anxiety. At its core this theory can be extended much further to examine human psychologies, and how disruptions of the binaries between life and death, and virtue and vice metaphorically reflect the underlying fears of a society with an imbalance of power, and the fragility of those overall power structures. Though this thesis fixated on the dynamics present within the literature and society of 1800s America and its specific type of Gothic, the psychological approach and examination of marginalization can also be applied to contemporary contexts without just thinking about cyborgs and scientific developments. Rather, like Gilman's woman trapped in the wallpaper, the posthuman Gothic could also potentially be used to assess the panoptic hyperviolence of systemic oppression that imprisons, both figuratively and literally, otherized people, and turns them into controllable monsters.

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