

**Abjection of the Female Body in *The Cutting Room*  
and *The Bullet Trick*: the Contemporanization of the  
Patriarchal System**

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## **Abstract**

The aim of this thesis is to discuss two of the works written by Louise Welsh, *The Cutting Room* (2002) and *The Bullet Trick* (2006), using Gothic and feminist criticism in order to back my hypothesis that the depiction of female bodies as abjects that the author makes in these novels has a direct correlation with current mechanisms, such as pornography, prostitution and sex trafficking, which result in the contemporization of the patriarchal system in our culture. In other words, the novels refer to normalized cultural practices through which the apparently uprooted patriarchal order has managed to perpetuate its control over women. The first two chapters are devoted to the exploration of the theoretical framework. The thesis starts with a brief account of the historical relationship that Patriarchy has had with the female body, and then, after defining the concept of abjection, which is later utilized to refer to the treatment of the female body in our sexualized society, it presents the current state of affairs and divergent feminist views regarding this topic. The second chapter, which deals with the Gothic and its conventions, explores concepts related to the genre, such as its founding myth, male Gothic and female Gothic, and attempts to provide revised, more thorough definitions of such terms. Then, using this framework we embark in the critical analysis of the corpus which allows us to support our initial claim that the current instances of female bodily abjection are instrumental in perpetuating patriarchal power and, at the same time, to uphold the validity of the long-contested female Gothic as a critical category.

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## Introduction

The terms 'sexualization' and 'mainstreaming' are used to describe the ways that sex is becoming more visible in contemporary Western cultures. This takes a range of forms. Pornography and other sexually explicit media representations are much more accessible than before – often only, as many commentators point out, 'a mouse click away' (Attwood xiii)

The status of women in society has changed significantly throughout history. Traditionally confined to their homes, even the strongest women used to be subjected to male dominance, exerted either by their fathers and/or husbands. This situation started changing towards the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century when feminists of the first wave fought for female access to the public sphere, which was tangibly manifested in the right to vote (Kroløkke and Sørensen 3-7). Once in the twentieth, feminists found themselves fighting against new forms of inequality and subordination. The classification we will use henceforth to refer to feminism in the 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> centuries is the one proposed by Kroløkke and Sørensen. During the revolutionary 1960s and 1970s, a new wave of feminism, generally characterized by the "women's liberation movement" (7), started a series of protests against the standards of beauty imposed on women underlain by the idea that conceived of female appearance as being more important than female actions and thoughts (8). With the advent of globalization, the position of women in the world also changed. In spite of the apparent equality of opportunities for men and women, new threats to female integrity continue to proliferate in the global village. Triggered by these variations, a third feminist wave mostly "concerned with new threats to women's rights in the wake of the new global world order" appeared in the 1990s (17). In spite of the major differences among the three waves, since the emergence of the first one to our days, feminists have been trying to uproot the dictates of patriarchy from women's lives. The seemingly divergent feminist views have attempted to release females from the patriarchal grip since the beginning of their activism. Despite their efforts and due to the mutating characteristic of the oppressive system, the patriarchal system has been historically able to find new mechanisms to continue to exert control on females.

Currently, our culture is undergoing a general process of loss of privacy. Virtual spaces such as *Facebook* or *Twitter* are loaded with people's personal information that can be accessed by just clicking on somebody's name. This general tendency to make

the private public has been of great interest for many researchers who have been trying to theorize about it. Authors such as Attwood and Walby coincide on the fact that many activities which used to pertain to people's private lives are now becoming widely publicized and, therefore, changing their original status quo. Other researchers such as Dworkin, Jeffreys, Paul and Russell, just to mention some, directly focus on the perniciousness attached to this trend, which can range from the innocent sharing of a third party picture in your personal *Facebook* account to the indiscriminate dissemination of sexually loaded content involving a third party. These practices, commonly known as 'mainstreaming' (Attwood xiii), might pass as natural due the frequency they have in our society; however, they are highly detrimental not only for the women whose bodies are being exposed, but for females in general. Numerous Amanda Todds<sup>1</sup> suffer the humiliation of having to see their naked bodies circulating in social networking websites and face the resulting alienation from society, which most of the times has irreversible effects. In the present work we will explore the current process of sexualization in order to argue that it is in this tendency that the ancient institution of patriarchy has found the means to perpetuate itself and surmount the obstacles that the gains of feminism had been able to pose in its way. Due to the literary orientation of the program for which this work will be submitted, our aim will be to use this socio-critical approach for the analysis of two novels in which the abjection of the female body becomes central for the contemporization of the patriarchal system.

The novels chosen for this work are *The Cutting Room* and *The Bullet Trick*. They were both written by Louise Welsh, a Scottish writer with a relatively short-lived career, but a promising future. After her debut as a novelist in 2002 with *The Cutting Room*, Welsh started gaining increasing recognition in the literary sphere, obtaining several awards such as the *Crime Writers' Association John Creasey Memorial Dagger* and the *Saltire Society Scottish First Book of the Year Award* immediately after the publication of her first book in 2002; the *Robert Louis Stevenson Memorial Award* and the *BBC Underground Award* in 2003; as well as the *Stonewall Book Award* (US), the *Scotland on Sunday/Glenfiddich Spirit of Scotland Award* and the *Corine Internationaler Buchpreis: Rolf Heyne Debutpreis* (Germany) in 2004. Apart from the novels chosen for this work, Welsh has written *Naming the Bones* (2010), *The Girl on*

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<sup>1</sup> Amanda Todd was a fifteen-year-old girl from Port Coquitlam, Canada, who committed suicide on 10<sup>th</sup> October, 2012, after letting the world know about the reasons behind her decision in a video she had posted to YouTube a month before. In the video she recounts how she acceded to the demands of a stranger, whom she had met online, and flashed her chest which was photographed by the man, who later sent the picture to everyone she knew. As a result, she was bullied both online and at school and the man continued stalking her, even after she moved several times. The whole situation made her turn to drugs, alcohol and finally take her life after several suicide attempts. (Elam)

*the Stairs* (2012) and the novella *Tamburlaine Must Die* (2004). She is also author to numerous reviews, articles, short stories and theater plays ("Louise Welsh").

The selection of the novels later analyzed is based on the fact that, despite their differences, they both deal with the vulnerability of female bodies in the face of social structures of male power, and raise the issue of female bodily abjection as a means of male control. The work has been divided into two chapters which provide the theoretical framework, two chapters in which the novels are analyzed, and a conclusion. In chapter one, we will begin with a definition of the term patriarchy and later explore the different mechanisms that this institution has utilized to leave its imprint on the female body throughout history. Then, we will turn to the exploration of the concept of *abjection*, initially coined by Julia Kristeva in her *Powers of Horror*, and later adopted by authors such as Judith Butler (3) and Krauss (as cited in Tyler 86), which will provide the theoretical background to support our view that current forms of female abjection are instrumental in the perpetuation of patriarchal power. Finally, we will explore different instances of current female bodily abjection, such as pornography, prostitution and sex trafficking, taking into account two opposing feminist positions on the issue: the liberal and the radical points of view, and trying to take a third critical stand.

In chapter two, we will turn our attention to the literary genre that will be used as the framework for the critical analysis of our corpus: the Gothic. Initially, we will provide a brief account of the origins of this genre, which, since its appearance in the late eighteenth century, has served to voice social anxieties of different historical periods. After introducing the genre, we will focus on the concept of *myth* used by Guillén (qtd. in DeLamotte 5) to refer to the unifying principle behind a genre, and take it as a starting point for a critical examination of the *Gothic myth* as developed by Eugenia DeLamotte and Anne Williams. Once we offer an alternative conciliatory definition, we will attempt a definition of the female Gothic, focusing on the differences that have historically existed between this subgenre and its male counterpart. As the final point in this section, we will look at the most characteristic set of Gothic conventions, which will later contribute significantly to the development of the following chapters, not with the purpose of reducing our analysis of the novels to a mere listing of the Gothic conventions they present, but because we consider that their use constitutes an essential part in the production of meaning in Louise Welsh's works.

Having devoted the first two chapters to the construction of the theoretical framework, in chapters three and four we attempt a critical analysis of the two novels written by the Scottish novelist. After a short introduction to the plot, both chapters are organized under four subheadings, each corresponding to one of the conventions

previously explored, which we consider of central importance for the interpretation and construal of the significance of the works. In the end, we will bring this thesis to a close with a final concluding chapter.

## **Chapter 1**

### **Patriarchy and Feminism**

#### **Patriarchy and the treatment of female bodies through history**

Standards of beauty describe in precise terms the relationship that an individual will have to her own body. They prescribe her mobility, spontaneity, posture, gait, the uses to which she can put her body. They define precisely the dimensions of her physical freedom. And, of course, the relationship between physical freedom and psychological development, intellectual possibility, and creative potential is an umbilical one. (Dworkin, *Woman Hating* 104, emphasis original)

The term patriarchy may be interpreted in different ways since it may be used to strictly refer to the system which had its origins in Greek and Roman law, or it may be considered in a more general sense as the various methods used over different periods of history to exert male control over both women and children. Patriarchy, in its narrowest sense, was brought to an end during the nineteenth century when civil rights were granted to women (Lerner 239). However, the word patriarchy in its wider sense will be considered here, so as not to oversimplify the complexity of the concept or ignore the variety of forms which this system of oppression has taken to perpetuate itself up to the present (238-239). Patriarchy, therefore, will be defined as a long-lasting institution which has adapted and transformed its methods of female oppression in order to counterattack the gains of the different waves of the feminist movement. Many of the mechanisms which are currently at work in our society are based on the objectification, maltreatment and dehumanization of female bodies. Considering the contributions made by Kristeva, Butler and Krauss, we will use the term abjection to refer to these processes, which will later be explored in detail. Consequently, the current abjection of female bodies can be considered to be an instrument for the contemporization of the patriarchal system.

It is difficult to state when the patriarchal system originated since its institution was a long process which lasted over 2500 years, beginning approximately three millenniums B.C. (Lerner 8). What is not difficult to assert is that since its genesis to the present day, the sustenance of this system has been closely linked to male dominance of female bodies. In early cultures, women's bodies were legally considered to be men's property – belonging to the father first, and to the husband after marriage. Thus, men appropriated women's sexual and reproductive capacity, and were even entitled to



take legal action against sex offenders if their daughters or wives were abused given that rape was regarded as “property damage” (Weitz 3).

Probably based on their entitlement to their daughters and wives’ bodies, for centuries, men adopted different customs which proved detrimental to women’s physical and mental health. Such is the case of the ancient Chinese practice known as footbinding. Beginning in the 10<sup>th</sup> century, and lasting for over a thousand years, the Chinese started imposing this torturous process on their girls; the dreadful practice consisted in applying a piece of cloth around the young woman’s bent toes – except for the big one – and the heel in order to bring them together as close as possible. The procedure was repeatedly performed for a period of three years during which “toenails grew into the skin; the feet were pus-filled and bloody” and “often the big toes fell off” (Dworkin, *Our Blood* 99). This painful process, which literally made girls walk “on the outside of their toes” and also produced the malformation of “the thighs and buttocks”, was based on the misconception that it improved “the folds of the vagina” causing men to “feel a supernatural exaltation” during intercourse with these women. As a result, those who did not undergo such an ordeal and, therefore, had normal-size feet were considered to be “monstrous” among Chinese men, even if their feet were completely healthy – in contrast with the smelly and even rotten bound feet of their counterparts (Dworkin, *Woman Hating* 104-105).

As for Western civilization, two ideas were adopted as the basis of female inferiority: their “devaluing in relation to the divine”, and their incompleteness and defectiveness as explained by Aristotelian philosophy. The emergence of Hebrew monotheism, and the resultant existence of a covenant between the male God and humanity, placed women in a disadvantaged position as they could only enter the holy community with God through maternity. This idea was later emphasized by Aristotle, who considered the subordination of women as “natural” since they were seen as deficient and damaged beings who, as a result, could not hold the same social position as men (Lerner 10). According to Aristotelian thought, men resulted from those embryos which could develop completely, whereas women were the product of underdeveloped fetuses, a belief which continued to be popular until the eighteenth century.

The misconception that women were the result of deficient pregnancies, combined with Christian interpretations which regarded them as “a constant danger to men’s souls”, sustained the massive execution of “witches” in Europe and America for about four centuries (Weitz 4). Generally the accusations against the victims of the witch hunts were unfounded, and most women were charged with “degeneration” which resulted from their alleged sexual engagement with the devil, their involvement in

orgies and the bewitchment of males (Federici 190). Few of the victims were in fact sorceresses and used magic to protect people from becoming sick, help them in sentimental matters by casting love spells or assist them by causing some kind of maleficence on their enemies (Horsley 700). However, many of the so-called witches were just wise women who had absolutely no connection with magic (703). Such is the case of “folk healers and diviners” (711), most of whom were condemned for learning about herbs and their uses – both as killing and healing substances – and for applying their knowledge to various medical practices such as midwifery and the treatment of different illnesses. At the time, although some men were accused of witchcraft, they were generally thought to be exempted from falling into the category of “witches” because of Jesus’ sacrifice on the cross, which was supposed to have ensured male salvation (Dworkin, *Woman Hating* 130).

By mid-eighteenth century, women continued to find themselves in a disadvantageous position as little had changed both legally and socially. William Blackstone’s *Commentaries on the Laws of England* documented the spirits of the times and claimed that “the very being or legal existence of the woman is suspended during marriage or at least is incorporated and consolidated into that of her husband under whose wing, protection and cover she performs everything” (1: 430). According to this same document, although the husband was no longer allowed to “beat his wife severely”, as opposed to what the “old law” dictated for she “may now have security of the peace against her husband”, he could “give his wife moderate correction...in the same moderation that a man is allowed to correct his servants or children” (1: 432). In spite of the legal changes, which showed some improvement in the way husbands were to treat their wives, wife beating persisted and was considered to be acceptable until well into the twentieth century (Weitz 35).

A little more than a century after Blackstone published his *Commentaries*, Charles Darwin would reinforce the belief in the inferiority of women asserting that they were weak and incapable of evolving by nature. In *On The Origin of Species*, he stated that males needed to evolve in order to access reproduction, since only the fittest males would be able to successfully procreate after struggling with other “unsuccessful competitors” for “the possession of the females” (73). According to this view, men were continually involved in a process of perfecting themselves; whereas women, who did not need to fight for males, were deprived of the “special weapons, confined to the male sex” being unable to fully evolve. Furthermore, he asserted that because of the stress inherent in reproduction, women lacked the necessary energy to develop physically and mentally and were, therefore, emotional and driven by their passions. The popularity of these ideas justified the exclusion of women from the public sphere at

the time, not allowing them to vote, access higher education or practice a profession. The seriousness of the issue was such that those women who rebelled against the social restrictions imposed on them, or got depressed because of these constraints were treated with hysterectomies, oophorectomies or clitoridectomies; in other words, they were gratuitously mutilated. Unfortunately, this mentality was not exclusive of the nineteenth century in view of the fact that between the 1950s and 1980s many unnecessary surgeries were performed. Even if procedures such as episiotomies, cesarean sections, hysterectomies, and radical mastectomies were not precisely used as treatments for mental disorders, when performed unnecessarily, they can be regarded as abusive practices on the female body (Weitz 169).

In response to another kind of physical abuse, the US court penalized spousal abuse in 1962 for the first time. Although with this verdict it was made explicit that husbands are not entitled to hit their wives, the situation for those women who sought protection against domestic violence was still extremely difficult. Even nowadays, many of the women who are victims of their husbands' violence are afraid to denounce this kind of mistreatment and secretly continue tolerating it. Regarding an even more serious crime such as marital rape, it was not until the 1980s that it began to be penalized. However, prosecution is still rare due to the difficulties women encounter when trying to prove they did not consent to sexual intercourse (Weitz 260).

Beginning in the 1970s, a novel tendency regarding the social expectations about what the ideal female figure should be started to emerge. This trend meant – and still means – that women are to spend their lifetime exercising, starving and/or undergoing cosmetic surgeries if they want to meet the imposed standards of beauty, for it is almost impossible to naturally achieve the required Barbie doll-like style. Due to this current fashion, there has been a boom in all kinds of treatment to improve our appearance, and even to prevent nature from taking its course. Some examples are the “face exercises” recommended by the beauty expert M. J. Saffon to “erase frown lines, smooth the forehead, raise hollow cheeks, banish crow’s feet, and tighten the muscle under the chin” (as cited in Bartky 134). The conviction that we need to look perfect is such that even those programs that claim to be helping people to fight obesity in order to prevent serious health complications are now offering one of their contestants a free breast surgery – her fourth in a list of five surgeries after losing a lot of weight – intended to “improve her self-esteem” (“Jenny se operó”). In addition to *the* requisite for success: the need to be “painfully thin but muscular and buxom” at the same time, women are still being labeled as incapable of behaving “rationally”. If we are still in our fertile age, this incapability is attributed to the premenstrual syndrome;

whereas in those women who have undergone menopause, the inability is ascribed to the postmenopausal hormone deficiency (Weitz 9).

All the situations described above constitute forms of domination of the female body which, to a greater or lesser extent, have contributed to the adaptation and perpetuation of the patriarchal system. However, the contemporary patriarchal structure is not just limited to the prescription of female ideal body size or shape due to the fact that, unfortunately, our society is plagued with instances of abjection of the female body in comparison with which the current standards of beauty count as absolutely innocent.

### **Abjection: a definition**

The term abjection was coined by Julia Kristeva in her *Powers of Horror: an Essay on Abjection* (1982) to refer to the process a child needs to undergo in order to become autonomous. According to Kristeva, a violent process of abjection is necessary for the child to attain separation from his mother, who continues haunting him in order to prevent the dissolution of the initial bond (Horner and Zlosnik, "Daphne du Maurier" 287). However, the abjection of the mother is the first one of many since, for Kristeva, human beings experience numerous abjections through which we reject aspects of the world which cause us "repugnance" or threaten our sense of self, in other words, we are repulsed by what "disturbs identity, what does not respect borders, positions, rules", such as "the skin on the surface of the milk", bodily fluids such as blood, sweat, feces, and ultimately "the corpse, the most sickening of wastes" (Kristeva, *Powers of Horror* 4). As Kristeva points out, all subsequent abjections are re-enactments of the primal separation from the maternal, which explains why in her opinion "matricide is our vital necessity, the sine qua non condition of our individuation" (Kristeva, *Black Sun* 38). Therefore, this standpoint renders the maternal as something that "cannot take up a subject position" which entails the risk of regarding violence against maternal bodies as acceptable (Tyler 85).

This same concept is crucial to the work of Judith Butler on gender and sexual identity. However, her account differs significantly from Kristeva's since, for Butler, abjection is not a reaction of our body which initially generates as a psychic process, but a category of socially excluded bodies. As Butler explains, social norms prescribe ideal subjects, creating at the same time social spaces in which "abject beings", who do not qualify as subjects, inhabit (Butler 3). Therefore, "the abject" is everyone that does not comply with the dominant ideology, which means that they become, as a result,

“subject to social punishments” (Lennon). Consequently, the abject becomes essential for the constitution of the subject since it defines its limits by designating the “‘unlivable’ and ‘uninhabitable’ zones of social life” (Butler 3). In other words, it exemplifies what the subject should never be.

Having discussed the positions of Kristeva and Butler, we will agree on the fact that abjection, which is defined in the Merriam-Webster Dictionary as “a low or downcast state: degradation”, is socially constructed through a number of practices the dominant groups exert on those who do not conform to their standards. It is also necessary to say that the use of violence, disgust, hate and dehumanization is inherent in its implementation. As Krauss explains it, the term abjection refers to the segregational practices with a dehumanizing effect on people within modern states which “strip people of their human dignity and reproduce them as dehumanized waste, the dregs and refuse of social life” (as cited in Tyler 86).

In spite of the fact that many theorists believe that the patriarchal system has disappeared due to the achievements of the different waves of feminism, it should be noted that the changes in the position of women in our society evidence not its disappearance but a change in its forms and degree, and, as it was stated before, that contemporary forms of abjection, more precisely the abjection of female bodies, are instances of the permanence of patriarchy. According to Walby, this is due to the shift there has been “from private to public patriarchy” (24) in the sense that women are no longer exclusively oppressed within the household because, having gained access to public sphere, they now have to struggle with segregation and subordination which are collectively implemented. Walby argues that contemporary patriarchy consists of six different substructures – paid employment, household production, culture, state, violence and sexuality (24). The focus of this work will be on only two of these structures, violence and sexuality, since our main concern is the way in which female bodies are abjected in order to serve patriarchal purposes.

### **Female abjection in our times**

As it was previously stated, with the gains of the different waves of feminism, the status of women has been significantly modified. The achievements of first-wave feminists were particularly important because they allowed women access to the public sphere, whose exclusivity had been previously granted to men. Together with the rights to vote, and the opportunity to access higher education, buy and sell property or end a marriage, women became legally emancipated from their patriarchs – either their

husbands or fathers (Walby 188). Later, during the 1960s and 1970s, second-wave feminists noticed that in spite of their admission to the public arena, they were still facing a great number of inequalities. As a result, they started campaigning against injustices such as unequal pay, sexual discrimination, and domestic violence. Consequently, several pieces of legislation were passed in United States and Britain which would protect women and children against these problems (Hughes), at least in theory.

This second wave occurred during a period when social demands and revolutions were commonplace. Since then, the so-called “sexual revolution” and, more precisely, issues related to female sexuality have been a source of great debate among feminists. On the one hand, liberal feminists support it rejecting the restraining moral standards which prevailed during the 1950s and proclaiming their sexual liberation (McElroy, *Sexual Correctness* 5). These feminists, who view sexuality as a source of pleasure, started to take a special interest in any consensual sexual practice that would provide satisfaction as a result of this revolution. Consequently, they began to engage in casual sexual relations, consume pornography and even turn to sadomasochism. On the other hand, those belonging to radical feminist groups, who consider that sexuality is the source of male domination over women, have taken an active stand against sexual liberation. For these women, sexual practices rooted in a male-dominant society can be anything but pleasurable for women; therefore, they deem promiscuous sex, pornography, and even heterosexuality – among many other practices – dangerous and supportive of male violence against women (Ferguson et al. 107-109).

These positions seem to be limited since both of them focus on the aspects of sexuality which they see as problematic, therefore ignoring other elements which might be used to counterargue their views. Although it is true that in most cultures there is still a marked difference between what is expected from women and from men, to say that women are barred from deriving pleasure from their sexual practices, and proclaim the need to expose our bodies in order to fight and defeat social repression would be to border on extremism. In addition, we would be going to the other extreme if we were to side with radical feminists who believe that there is the need to “destroy... culture as we know it” (Dworkin, *Our Blood* 48) because all its institutions are irremediably harmful for women. This would entail ignoring all the social struggles in which women have been engaged and their resulting achievements; since as Dworkin – together with other radical feminists – sees it:

Under patriarchy, no woman is safe to live her life, or to love, or to mother children. Under patriarchy, every woman is a victim, past, present, and future. Under patriarchy, every woman’s daughter is a victim, past, present, and

future. Under patriarchy, every woman's son is her potential betrayer and also the inevitable rapist or exploiter of another woman (20).

Nevertheless, it is necessary to acknowledge that there still are abundant expressions of patriarchal dominance and oppression, and that they mostly – although not exclusively – coincide with the abjection of female bodies. In other words, it can be argued that patriarchy is still in force, and that it is palpable in the way practices such as pornography, prostitution, rape, battery and trafficking degrade and dehumanize the bodies of millions of women around the world. Thus, we will now explore these forms of abjection and argue why they are considered to be instances of the contemporization of the patriarchal system.

### **Pornography**

Feminist perspectives on pornography are contradictory since each of the aforementioned groups emphasizes a different aspect when condemning or defending it. The radical view equates pornography with degradation and exploitation of women; whereas liberal feminists and a third position, known as “pro-sex feminists”, agree on the fact that it is a liberating practice which women are absolutely free to choose or reject. Moreover, they consider women have the right to do whatever they wish with their bodies (McElroy, “A Feminist Overview of Pornography”). The differences between these opinions will be better understood after looking at the definitions of pornography they propose.

Radical feminists always attach an element of perniciousness to their definitions of pornography. When taking, for example, the one Dworkin suggests in her book *Pornography: Men Possessing Women*, it is noticeable how she tries to thwart any attempt to rid the concept of violence and harm by resorting to the etymology of the word:

The word *pornography*, derived from the ancient Greek *porne* and *graphos*, means “writing about whores” . . . .

The word *pornography* does not mean “writing about sex” or “depictions of the erotic” . . . or any other such euphemism. It means the graphic depiction of women as vile whores. In ancient Greece, not all prostitutes were considered vile: only the *porneia*.

. . . The methods of graphic depiction have increased in number and in kind: . . . the status . . . of the women depicted is the same . . . [It] does not have any other meaning than the one cited here . . . Whores exist only within a framework of male sexual domination. Indeed, outside that framework . . . the usage of women as whores would be impossible. (199-200).

For Dworkin, there is nothing like well-intentioned pornography since any piece of pornographic material is synonymous with the portrayal of despicable women. In this view, the idea implied in the production and use of pornography is that women in general want to be maltreated and abused, and that any use of violence against women is acceptable. This is also evident in Russell's definition of it as "material that combines sex and/or exposure of genitals with abuse or degradation in a manner that appears to endorse, condone, or encourage such behavior" (2-3). It is clear that terms like domination, degradation, submission and abuse are inseparable from pornography for radical feminists.

Liberal feminists, on the other hand, believe that pornography is just a victim of bad reputation because anti-pornography feminists use the lowest-quality examples as representative of the genre which, in their opinion, includes all kinds of productions – from D. H. Lawrence to the cheapest slick magazine. Pornography for them is "the explicit artistic depiction of men and/or women as sexual beings" (McElroy, *XXX: A Woman's Right* 51), and they defend it on the grounds that it is a way of promoting women's freedom. They state that by censoring pornography women are being denied their sexual liberty – together with their right to question the established roles – and that this reinforces their subordination (125-145). What these feminists present as their strongest argument in favor of pornography is basically an anti-censorship movement, since they continually stress the need to defend the freedom of speech of those producing and consuming pornographic material.

In accordance with the radical feminist point of view, we regard pornography as a form of abjection of the female body, which always implies some degree of subordination and violence. The fact that in every piece of pornographic material women are dispossessed of their bodies makes it a form of abjection, since once the material is produced, their bodies are trapped in the photograph or film, and there is no possibility for the woman to regain control over it – independently of the fact that she might have willingly posed for it or not. However, a distinction must be made between different types of pornography, from the softest productions to the most appalling samples of snuff material, and the degree of violence each one involves.

It is undeniable that our culture has undergone a process of sexualization and pornographization of the public sphere. TV shows promote erotic dances and almost-naked "celebrities" to sell their low quality programs. Their ratings soar thanks to the pole dancing night or because some showgirl is going to perform a striptease (Sirvén). It is also common to see fashion collections such as Versace's "Bondage", or advertisements for famous designers in magazines like *Vogue* which are highly sexual and degrading for women. Menacing men, almost-naked women, chains and buckles



have become everyday resources for the haute couture business. It seems as if, whatever the product, an inviting naked body needs to be used in order to make a profit. Unfortunately, due to the proliferation of pornographic shows and advertisements in the media, there is a tendency to regard these instances of abjection as natural or normal.

When considering pornography in its strictest sense, this industry has increased the amount of cruelty and degradation involved in its products. With the advent of what is known as hardcore porn, sadomasochism and brutality have become commonplace. As Dworkin argues, the abjection of the women who appear in this kind of material contributes to the creation of the fallacy that women enjoy being mistreated:

Some people say that pornography is only fantasy. What part of it is fantasy? Women *are* beaten and raped and forced and whipped and held captive. The violence depicted is true. The acts of violence depicted in pornography are real acts committed against real women and real female children. *The fantasy* is that women want to be abused (*Letters* 11).

What makes matters worse is that the abjection of these women is extendable to every woman, which increases its seriousness because it might be taken as adequate and desirable. Another reason why pornography is deemed here as a form of abjection is that it somehow dismembers the bodies it portrays. Very often these bodies are partially depicted and these body parts are turned into sexual objects. The partial depiction of bodies deprives women of their integrity as human beings for the intended message is that the part being shown is useful whereas the rest can be discarded (see Brownmiller, Susan *Against Our Will*).

However, to strictly adhere to the radical point of view would be to ignore their misandrist tendency. These feminists believe that heterosexuality is another instrument of subordination since men need to mistreat and dominate women in order to enjoy sexual activities; in Dworkin's words, "erotic pleasure for men is derived from and predicated on the savage destruction of women" (*Letters* 21). For her, all men have their sadist side and they inevitably maintain a reciprocal relationship with pornography which "trains" them "to despise women, to use women, to hurt women" and, at the same time, owes its existence to their contempt for women (23). Although it is true that pornography is a form of abjection through which men exert control over female bodies, and that, as a result, it constitutes an instance of the contemporization of the patriarchal system, not all men are part of this system of oppression. Consequently, heterosexuality is *not* a patriarchal institution, because it allows women the possibility of choosing to love a man and maintain a heterosexual relationship without necessarily becoming his victim.

There is yet a third case of abjection which, because of its brutality, exceeds the limits of pornography: *snuff*. According to the *Cambridge Dictionary Online*, a snuff film is “a violent pornographic film in which one of the actors is murdered”. This form of abjection, from which some audiences derive pleasure, verges on the unimaginable. The idea that a person can enjoy watching – not to mention filming – the murder of a person can only emerge from some sort of deviance, from extreme hatred. Dworkin traces the appearance of snuff films to 1944 when the Nazi Minister of Propaganda ordered to film the trial and murder of several generals who had attempted to assassinate Hitler (*Life and Death* 96). Although snuff films are generally taken as urban legends, probably because of their unthinkability, there have been testimonies of women who could escape from “a man who attempted to make snuff films...[and] wanted to torture, murder, and, of course, film [them]” (Dworkin, *Letters* 21).

### **Prostitution and Sex Trafficking**

It is impossible to use a human body in the way women’s bodies are used in prostitution and to have a whole human being at the end of it, or in the middle of it, or close to the beginning of it. And no woman gets whole again later, after. (Dworkin, *Life and Death* 141)

Prostitution and sex trafficking are two other forms of abjection which are closely related to pornography. The two of them interrelate, overlap, and their boundaries become blurry to the point that sometimes it is difficult to tell one from the other. These two forms of abjection are synonymous with violence, despise, degradation, abuse, harm and, of course, controversy. The two main positions on the issue of prostitution are similar to the ones previously presented on pornography since prostitution activists claim to be “sexually liberated women who are being harmed by the feminist theories and policies that claim to protect them” (McElroy, “Prostitutes, Anti-Pro Feminists” 337), whereas radical feminists argue that it originates in the subordination of women and always involves some degree of abuse (Jeffreys 1-13).

Given that in the present work prostitution is taken as a form of abjection, it is necessary to make a distinction between freely chosen and forced prostitution. Some women are prostitutes by choice and they take responsibility for that. They have founded organizations such as COYOTE (Call Off Your Tired Old Ethics) in order to fight for their rights, especially because they do not see themselves as victims of an oppressive patriarchal system and criticize feminists for erroneously trying to speak and act on their behalf (McElroy, “Prostitutes, Anti-Pro Feminists” 337-341). Seen in this light, these women do not constitute instances of abjection; they decide to become

prostitutes and for them there is nothing wrong about their occupation, except for the prejudices people hold against them. The following excerpt of the poem “The ‘Whore’ Word” shows that the oppression they have to face comes not from the activity they choose to make a living but from other people’s derogatory labeling:

“You’re a whore,” is a dagger you drive through my heart  
 as you pound into my psyche that name..  
 You equate everything that I ever thought good- with that word  
 which you spit out like venom - to show me how awful I am.  
 But I ask you, please tell me, just what is a whore?  
 A whore says what she thinks and she thinks for herself...  
 She’s independent and feisty- so what? Is there more?  
 Why does it frighten you so to know I’ve a mind of my own  
 and don’t need your permission to live or to love or to be?  
 And what if I tell you  
 I don’t care anymore if you call me a whore...  
 What will you call me now?

(Almodovar)

There are, however, numerous cases in which prostitution is not the result of individual preference, but it is directly exerted on prostitutes by multiple agents; these are the instances in which women are victims of the abjection of their bodies. It is in these situations when women are used, abused, and then discarded; they are emptied of their own dignity; they are abjected. These women are either coerced by the people who profit from their subjugation or by the lack of better means of subsistence. Usually women from poorer areas, from the same or a different country, are tempted by “deceptive promises” of high incomes and better living conditions; others are just deprived of their freedom by trafficking networks. Due to the brutality involved in this activity, the victims suffer both physical and psychological disorders; very frequently, they are drugged by their exploiters or choose to turn to drugs consumption in order to survive the “pain and humiliation” (Jeffreys 76).

The subordination of these prostitutes is directly connected with what has come to be known as “sexual tourism” and the trafficking of women for such purposes. Unfortunately, in the last few decades, there has been a great development of this activity which is obviously sustained by powerful organizations that adhere to extreme patriarchal principles of male supremacy. In addition to the places men traditionally used to attend looking for occasional sexual encounters, the sexual tourism industry has increased the offer of such “services” by setting up tourist resorts for men who “as individuals or in groups travel for fun, on business, for sports events or political assemblies” and temporarily buy these women as leisure. These men are frequently powerful people from developed countries who make use of women from poorer parts

of the world – either by travelling abroad or by attending places where trafficked women are held captive (Jeffreys 112). Sexual tourism is obviously possible because exploiters and traffickers can operate with absolute impunity, even if their crimes come to light and they are tried for them.

The traffic in women functions as the supply system par excellence since through it exploiters can obtain slave labor in exchange for which they will earn millions of dollars. Sometimes, these unscrupulous men take advantage of women in need by offering them nonexistent positions and later enslaving the victims and placing them in debt bondage. Other times, women are simply kidnapped and forced into prostitution. All these women are trapped in criminal networks where violence, rape and drugs are common ways of abjection used to reinforce their subjugation. Consequently, these women are highly traumatized and even if they can regain their freedom they will never “get whole again” (Dworkin, *Life and Death* 141).

As we have discussed in this chapter, patriarchy is a long-lasting system which has changed with time and adapted to the spirit of different epochs, always finding a way to somehow perpetuate its oppressive nature in spite of women’s efforts to put an end to their disadvantaged position in society. Throughout history, patriarchal forces have been able to ameliorate the effects of the emancipation of women by modifying their oppressive mechanisms and surmounting the obstacles posed by female social achievements. The different adaptations of the patriarchal grip have always been related to the submission of the female body, and, therefore, current forms of female abjection, such as pornography, forced prostitution and the trafficking in women, are instruments for the contemporization of patriarchal power. It is interesting to stress that there have been divergent feminist views on these patriarchal instantiations, and that both liberal as well as radical opinions carry their criticism to extremes by highlighting the aspects which adhere to their convictions, and ignoring those which might undermine their set of beliefs.

In the next chapter we will turn our attention to a literary genre which for centuries has given voice to cultural anxieties, especially those emerging from patriarchal oppression: the gothic.

## Chapter 2 The Gothic

### Origins

The term Gothic, which is undeniably characterized by its ambiguity and heterogeneity, has been used to designate a vast array of literary works, the first of which was Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* published in 1784. In spite of the great literary diversity the Gothic has come to encompass, it is still possible to find and describe the reasons why these works are said to be part of the same genre. Some authors, however, warn us against the temptation to restrict our analysis of the Gothic to a mere "shopping-list approach" (DeLamotte 5). Therefore, we will attempt an account in which, not only the most common set of Gothic conventions, but also other defining aspects, such as its origins, the foundation of its myth as well as its implications, will be covered.

Due to the fact that Gothic derives from the word Goths, the barbaric tribes which attacked and contributed to the disintegration of the Roman Empire between the third and fifth centuries, the term has always been suggestive of barbarism, chaos and convulsion (Punter 7). However, in the eighteenth century the characterization of the Gothic as uncivilized and brutal was contested by the view that the old Germanic tribes constituted "the site of a true national, democratic and civilized heritage" (4), which was based on their significant contributions to the system of government. Ever since this dispute arose, the Gothic has hosted a constant rivalry between the barbaric and the civilized, in which the former persists in transgressing the boundaries the latter intends to impose by "abjecting" anything that seems dangerous for its integrity. Therefore, the tug-of-war between social restrictions and uncivilized excess has remained central to the Gothic (5). As a result, Gothic tales have sought to expose the trespasses that constitute a threat to cultural stability and values.

Although Gothic transgressions have mutated and adapted to different historical periods, the purpose of these characteristics has remained unaltered. Lurking supernatural beings, infamous characters and stifling settings are presented as continuously jeopardizing social order (Botting, *Gothic* 1). Shifting from the eighteenth-century wicked aristocratic figures onto nineteenth/twentieth-century urban villains (4),

and later on, to twenty-first-century cyber criminals, Gothic authors have always managed to express the deepest social anxieties of every epoch. The systematic exposure to the consequences that ensue from the transgression of “social and aesthetic limits” reaffirm the importance boundaries and rules have in the construction of social order (5).

### **The genre and its myth**

As we have seen, the Gothic is a term usually equated with ambiguity because it denotes concepts, such as those of civilization and barbarism, whose contradictory natures generate constant tension between them. This lack of clarity is not only inherent in the word Gothic, but also in the terms that critics have used to refer to this tradition, since there is a clear lack of agreement on the word that should follow it. The expressions “genre”, “mode”, “tradition” and “complex” are among the most commonly used companions the Gothic has been assigned by different authors, but all of them have failed to embrace the totality of it (Williams 23). In spite of the controversy surrounding this subject, and since we will only focus on the literary aspect, more precisely on its fiction, we use the word Gothic as a modifier of *genre*.

It is important to remember DeLamotte’s suggestion, and avoid reducing our account of the Gothic to a mere “shopping list” of conventions (5). This tendency, which was very popular among critics for a long time, failed to answer deeper questions about the motivations Gothic writers had when they decided to use such conventions. In response to this weakness in this kind of approach to the Gothic, other critics have addressed the issue and embarked in the difficult task of trying to unveil what Claudio Guillén has termed the “myth” behind the genre:

. . . [It] involves a sense, ‘independent of any particular work, of the theme as a whole.’ . . . It is ‘an essential situation or significant structure derived from the works themselves,’ which consists of two groups: a first circle that deserves the name of the genre . . . and a second circle that belongs in the broader sense, ‘failing to include some characteristics of works in the inmost circle’ but nonetheless exhibiting certain ‘indispensable’ traits. (qtd. in DeLamotte 5).

In other words, Guillén suggests that the myth acts as the organizing principle of a genre, and that, within the group it designates, there are works which remain more faithful to the myth (“inner circle”), while others, which can still be considered to belong to the same genre, do not completely embrace the underlying principle, and leave out some of its characteristics.

Having defined *myth* and discussed the implications its identification has for the construction of a genre, we now need to direct our attention to the exploration of the *Gothic myth*. Different authors have tried to approach this task being unable to reach complete agreement on the issue; however, the various positions tend to overlap. In *Perils of the Night*, Eugenia DeLamotte argues that questions about the delimitation of the “boundaries of the self”, and the identification of the “other”, as well as the anxieties that result from these processes constitute the defining characteristics of the genre (viii). These common denominators, she further explains, are conveyed through the strategic use of language, which consistently utilizes a set of conventions whose ultimate purpose is the materialization of such anxieties (14). Although Gothic works almost usually evidence the presence of these elements, other critics have deemed DeLamontte’s view insufficient since it leaves some important aspects unattended.

One of the critics to disagree with this account of the Gothic myth is Anne Williams who believes that “*the Gothic myth is the patriarchal family*” (23, emphasis original). From this perspective, Gothic literature is not only concerned with the boundaries of selves, in general, but most precisely with the selves who hold positions of power in the patriarchal system. As a result, anything that might constitute a threat for this long-established system of power is regarded as the “other” and, consequently, synonymous with evil. Seen in this light, due to the fact that the Gothic myth is the male-centered system par excellence, the concept of “otherness” is directly connected to the female. Thus, “the wicked” female is one of the main sources of jeopardy for the stability of “the good” patriarchal order (22). However, it is not the only one since other dangers like “the unconscious”, the “Orient” or the “uncivilized” (19-20) may destabilize the dominant system.

Although these two standpoints on the Gothic myth are not identical, they do share some common principles and are, therefore, reconcilable with one another. In comparison with DeLamotte’s view, Williams’ is more specific but both agree on the fact that “the other” is a ghostly figure which arouses the deepest fears and anxieties in individuals, consequently impairing their integrity. Even though the first one of these views seems to become vague at some points, when equating the Gothic myth with *the patriarchal family*, Williams’ is not deemed to be more definite. Hence, we advocate for the integration of these two “suggested myths” due to the possible illuminating effects that may result from their assemblage. In the next section, we will consider how the combination of these elements, associated with different gender-specific perspectives has an active role in the configuration of what has come to be known as *male and female Gothic*.

## Female and male Gothic

So long as women do not have complete equality with men, there is a case for the sort of special focus that teaching Female Gothic allows (Horner and Zlosnik, "Female Gothic" 117).

The expression female Gothic was first used by Ellen Moers in her book *Literary Women* to refer to any "work that women have done in the literary mode that, since the eighteenth century, we have called the Gothic" (90). However, the coinage of this term, as well as the simplistic definition that Moers provided, aroused great controversy among critics since whether male and female Gothic should be considered as parts of *the Gothic* as a whole, or if they are two completely different genres is still open to question (Punter 278). After exploring some of the characteristics generally attributed to these variations of the Gothic, we will return to the concept of 'the Gothic myth' and argue that male and female Gothic belong to the same genre since their foundations rest on the integration of the "suggested myths" discussed in the previous section. Additionally, we will examine what differentiates male Gothic from its female counterpart, which is basically the author's ability to combine the "suggested myths" in various ways in order to serve specific purposes.

Little more than a decade after Moers referred to it for the first time, the value of the female Gothic started being contested, and, consequently, it stepped into the limelight of literary criticism (Wallace and Smith 3). Originally, critics believed in the existence of a direct correspondence between this category and the authorial gender of a work. Both 'characteristic' female and male plots were unquestioned, and in combination with the author's gender determined if a work belonged to one variety of the Gothic or the other. Accordingly, works regarded as male Gothic, the first of which was *The Monk* by Matthew Lewis, were those where a defiant male protagonist seeks to violate social taboos usually confronting major institutions such as "the law, the church and the family" (Punter and Byron 278). These texts, consisting mostly of violent and sexually-loaded accounts, tend to portray fragile women who perish in the hands of a sexual deviant. Another feature of such works is that they lack "narrative closure" even if punishment is finally inflicted on the villain, especially because of the dearth of elucidation of supernatural events (278).

Antithetically, the female Gothic, initially typified by Radcliffe's *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, deals with the life of a woman who is tyrannized by a powerful male figure (Horner and Zlosnik, "Female Gothic" 112). In this kind of story, the heroine is held captive in some sinister place where her life is at risk. Her confinement in this threatening setting, together with the heroine's - as well as the reader's - inability to



explain the course of events, usually result in a story brimming with suspense (Punter and Byron 279). The female Gothic, eventually ends after the supernatural is clarified and the protagonist returns to a safe environment where, after marriage, she lives 'happily ever after' (Wallace and Smith 3). Thus, this distinction between female and male Gothic, which started as descriptive, but would later continue to prescribe the elements that a work should contain in order to qualify as an exemplar of any of these two categories, was deemed insufficient because all the works which failed to mirror the traditional typology were consequently excluded from critical accounts (Horner and Zlosnik, "Female Gothic" 112-113; Wallace and Smith 5).

This rigid characterization of the male and female plots was used in conjunction with psychoanalytical approaches to study and theorize about the Gothic. Depending on the author, some of these theories focused, for example, on a woman writer's necessity to create a doppelganger, which was regarded as the expression of the author's "split psyche" (Wallace and Smith 2), in her struggle for the "search of her *self*" (Gilbert and Gubar 609, emphasis original). Other authors preferred to turn to Freudian views on "the myth of Psyche" (Williams 149) in an effort to find some common denominator in works labeled as female Gothic. Although it proved to be more comprehensive than Moers' equation of the genre with the gender of the author, this tendency, which started in the 1970s, only remained central until the 1990s when some critics considered it necessary to find alternatives to psychoanalysis in more historically-informed readings (Horner and Zlosnik, "Female Gothic" 112-113; Wallace and Smith 2-4).

This reaction against the psychoanalytical approach to the Gothic in general, and the use of the term female Gothic in particular, was justified on the grounds of oversimplification. The magnitude of this position was such that, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, the female Gothic became the Cinderella of literary criticism (Horner and Zlosnik 113). Although authors such as Baldick and Mighall concentrated their efforts on trying not to sound so pessimistic about the subject, and closed their article "Gothic Criticism" saying that it is "both possible and reinvigorating to step outside the 'circles of fear and desire'" (227), they strongly argued against the validity of the category:

the construction since the 1970s of the predominantly universalising category of the female Gothic, as an embodiment of some invariable female 'experience' or of the archetypal 'female principle', leads straight out of history into the timeless melodrama in which (wicked) male Gothic texts always express terror of the eternal '(M)other' while (good) female Gothic texts are revealed to be—as Anne Williams claims—not just 'empowering' but 'revolutionary'. (227)

In spite of the controversial nature of the terms with which we have dealt so far, we adhere to the use of female Gothic as a valid critical category since it allows us to explore aspects that would otherwise be neglected. Gothic women are constantly in the throes of achieving a balance between their thirst for agency, on the one hand, and their need for love, on the other (Horner and Zlosnik, "Female Gothic" 114). Although such issues, which prove central to this kind of writing, are also on the agenda of non-Gothic writers, female Gothic fiction seems to be the most efficient means for authors to transmit the greater propensity for vulnerability women have as compared to men:

. . . Gothic fiction, in its traffic with fear, sharpens our sense of how women might be more vulnerable – physically, politically, socially, and emotionally – in certain situations than men (117).

Returning to the concept of the Gothic myth, and in addition to what Horner and Zlosnik have concluded, we can state that female and male Gothic are not to be considered as two separate things since both combine the concerns surrounding and emerging from “the boundaries of the self” with those related to the patriarchal system. The differentiation between male and female Gothic lies, therefore, in the way in which each of these aspects is addressed. In male Gothic stories the boundaries being threatened are those of powerful patriarchal figures and the menacing forces – most usually a daring woman – are punished for their impertinence. The female Gothic, on the contrary, describes how the boundaries which are in great peril are those of women, as well as those of other people usually occupying non-dominant positions within the structure of patriarchy – homosexuals, for example. However, so as to avoid essentialism, we must always remember that, as Horner and Zlosnik have argued after many years of extensive research, it is always necessary to situate each of these generalizations “within the historical and cultural moments” (115) in which the stories are produced.

After embarking on the task of trying to define the female Gothic, we can conclude that Moers’ work can be considered to be the cornerstone of this area of Gothic criticism in spite of its limitations. To this we can add that, although there has been a long-standing tug-of-war between the advocates of psychoanalytic views and those who, on the contrary, emphasize the need to historicize the study of the genre, it is crucial to aim for a more comprehensive vision of the subject. Furthermore, since we agree with the idea that any study of the Gothic should neither be limited to the analysis of a set of conventions, nor should it overlook its most salient characteristics, we will devote the following section to the exploration of Gothic recurring features.

## The conventions

. . . any discussion of female Gothic needs to take into account the fact that, as with any genre, once a certain set of conventions has been established, subsequent writers tend to experiment with and react against, rather than simply replicate, what they inherit. (Punter and Byron 281)

When reference is made to the word Gothic, there is an immediate reaction to relate the term to a fixed set of components usually known as Gothic conventions. As we have argued before, it is not advisable to reduce any study on the Gothic to a simple listing of its most defining characteristics. However, the fact that our research should not be limited to the mere enumeration of conventions does not imply they should be completely disregarded. Therefore, in the present section we will concentrate on the elements that will later aid us in the discussion of our corpus.

Very often an immediate connection is established between the Gothic and the haunted castle, especially because of the frequency with which this kind of setting was used in archetypal works such as *The Castle of Otranto* or *The Mysteries of Udolpho*. Nevertheless, this long-lasting tradition has portrayed a great number of settings all of which share several traits with the place originally chosen by Walpole and Radcliffe. Monasteries, mansions or theatres abounding with dark labyrinthine corridors, mazes, secrets passages and rooms, have often offered accommodation to terrifying Gothic tales. Whatever the chosen edifice, these places usually pose a number of paradoxes to both characters and readers. These places provide a rendezvous point where ordinary life events meet with the unexpected and supernatural. This dichotomy is taken even further when characters find in them protection from the menacing outside world and feel at the same time trapped and stifled within its walls (Punter and Byron 261-262). The fact that these impressive buildings are most of the time derelict conveys the inexorable, although not always immediate, decadence of “human grandeur” (262).

The mysterious setting is generally populated by a number of stock characters. The heroine in the Gothic is usually threatened by some sinister individual who tries to either control her or end with her life. As a result, the distressed woman spends most of the time escaping from the situations in which her life is at risk. The villain who stalks her tends to be a lascivious man with an inclination towards social transgressions, especially those related to the treatment of women (imprisonment, abuse, rape, violence). Thus, these stories generally portray a villainous patriarchal figure who sees females not as a place of jouissance but as the target of their mischievous deeds. The

fact that he is irresistibly attractive facilitates his manipulation of weaker characters (Punter, 9). Other typical Gothic characters are directly connected with the supernatural since monsters, ghosts and vampires are commonplace. Gothic monsters embody the ostracized elements of society. They clearly represent what is beyond the acceptable limits of humanity and their function is to “police the boundaries of the human” (Punter and Byron 263). Regarding ghosts, they usually function as a reminder of the disturbing family past. The characters in these stories are haunted by some terrible family secret which returns to plague their minds or bodies (Mighall 291). However, not always does this secret return in a spectral form since sometimes the “haunting” can be denoted by some disease the younger generations have inherited from their ancestors. The troubling family past usually acts as a source of conflict among different generations, the younger of which seem to have been left with the task of braving the curse of the previous ones (293).

Another distinctive element in Gothic stories is that there is a clear impossibility on the part of the characters and narrators to make sense of what happens around them. This is due to their ignorance about how the structures of power in which they are immersed work; in other words, these writings “represent the self as dissolved in a web of uncomprehended power structures” (Punter and Byron 273). As a result, characters, who make an effort to understand the logic of their world, end up being persecuted and abused without completely understanding the reasons behind their misfortunes:

. . . [the protagonist] attempts to locate the ‘something’ that, he suspects, ‘happened’ in the past – whereas we know as readers that it is something that is still happening, that will continue to happen, that is doomed to repetition, to secrecy and disavowal (Punter and Byron 274).

Thus, these wanderers of remote places – or of more contemporary versions of the Gothic setting – are constantly surrounded by excessive violence. Whether it is set in a medieval castle or in a twenty-first century corporate building, the story makes its way to the remotest nooks of the place where its darkest secrets lie, and it shows us that, in these secluded, spots dreadful practices which were nearly obliterated manage to endure. The history of the Gothic is a history of tales of abuse, generally of women but some other times of children and people who are in vulnerable social positions. These victims are subjected to all sorts of abusive behaviour in the hands of powerful figures – most usually, although not always, a male figure. By placing these events in distant or inaccessible settings, the Gothic attains a high level of defamiliarization of

brutality which allows readers to take distance from these atrocities, in spite of the fact that they may be happening right around the corner (288):

[the] Gothic . . . ceaselessly incarnates precisely the material which it claims to be banishing, and in doing so provides us with a kind of secret history of what goes on beneath the veneer of culture (289).

This systematic exposure to transgression and the resulting feeling of revulsion produced in the readers can be considered to be an effective instrument for the reassertion of social values and limits and a call for their restoration when they have been disregarded (Botting, *The Gothic* 5).

Having explored the way in which the forces of patriarchy have ceaselessly committed all sorts of violations of women's bodily integrity through history in the first chapter, and devoted the second chapter to how the Gothic broaches issues of social transgressions in general, and those concerned with the female body in particular, we are now in a position to use these sessions as our framework for the discussion of the two novels written by Louise Welsh chosen as our corpus: *The Cutting Room* and *The Bullet Trick*.

### **Chapter 3**

#### **Abjection and the Gothic in *The Cutting Room***

In *The Cutting Room*, Louise Welsh utilizes Gothic forms to explore instances of female abjection which are prevalent in our society. However, as Punter and Byron put it, she does not “simply replicate” typical Gothic elements but “experiment[s] with and react[s] against” (281) them in order to achieve a final product which challenges the conventional female Gothic “formula”, and adheres to its principles at the same time (cf. Horner and Zlosnik 117). In other words, in this novel Welsh makes use of the transgression and fear entailed in Gothic stories to expose the pervasiveness of different kinds of female bodily abjection as current incarnations of patriarchal power.

The novel tells the story of Rilke, an unsuccessful Glaswegian gay auctioneer who accidentally turns into an investigator as a result of his discoveries at the McKindless’ residence. When Mr McKindless, a wealthy aristocrat, dies unexpectedly, his elderly sister asks Rilke to take care of the valuation and clearance of her brother’s belongings, and to personally rid the attic of his possessions. Once he discovers that the secluded room contains a vast collection of pornographic material, he embarks in an investigation triggered by his need to test the authenticity of three of the photographs he finds, which becomes an uncontrollable obsession.

#### **Rilke’s whereabouts**

*There was a crooked man and he had a crooked house.*  
(Welsh, *The Cutting Room* 3)

The story takes place in contemporary Glasgow but, in spite of the historical period during which it unfolds, there is a prevailing intrusion of the past. The first time Rilke sees the McKindless residence, which is located in one of Glasgow’s “green leafy suburbs” (2), he stresses the fact that it looks different from the rest of the neighboring buildings since it has not been modernized like the rest. Once he enters the place and meets Madeleine McKindless, the dead man’s sister, he confirms that it seems as if this house belonged to another epoch; the McKindless are a wealthy family whose mansion abounds in valuable antiques. Besides being delighted by such a precious display, Rilke is intrigued by the absence of personal objects reminding of or informing

about the person who has just died. All he can find is an old picture of the man at an early age which makes him feel uneasy: "His eyes looked at me piercing, frozen. I shivered" (8-9). This finding, together with the lack of Roderick personal belongings, anticipates that there is something cryptic about the man.

The second time he visits the house he does it in the evening, and the darkness combined with the quietness the porters had left behind increase the mystery around the place. The further he walks away from the front door, the more mysterious the house grows. The mystery gets to its summit when he finally reaches the attic, which must have been an unreachable place for the elderly man since the ladder to access it "was folded against the ceiling". Here Rilke is able to find all the objects that "reveal [McKindless'] interests" (9), which will plague him from that moment onwards (17-19). Of the lot of pornographic material hidden in the room, he is particularly shocked by a Japanese netsuke depicting an orgy, and three pictures which show a woman before and after she is apparently murdered for sexual pleasure.

The first of the pictures shows two men, whose faces cannot be seen, dressed as monks, and a naked woman, who is only wearing a silver bracelet. They are in what looks like a basement. The woman's hands and feet are tied to a bench and some spikes are cutting into her skin. At the same time, the monks are turning a wheel which tightens the rope around her limbs in order to stretch her body. There is an expression of anxiety reflected in the woman's pupils as well as in her gasping mouth. The second picture shows the same naked woman, whose stomach and thighs have been whipped, lying on a wooden frame. Two ropes have been used to tie her: one digs into her flesh, around her ankles, calves and knees, and the other misshapes her breasts coiling around them three times. Her unfocused pupils, her lax head, her deep inaudible scream, and the blood running from the cut in her throat give her a horrifying appearance. The last of the pictures shows a mummy-like woman who has been wrapped in a sheet, except for her feet. She is still on the wooden boards and she has a gag tied around her mouth (35-36). After uncovering the mystery around McKindless personality, Rilke is determined to learn what lies beneath the pictures, and sets off on a quest starring darkness and perplexity.

The fact that the McKindless' residence looks as if it belonged to a different historical period not only adds to the suspense in the story, but it also contributes to the defamiliarization of the atrocities that it hides. The effect that this process of estrangement produces is twofold since, on the one hand, it evokes abusive practices which seem to pertain to a long-lost patriarchal society, but, at the same time, it is indicative of the perpetuation of such practices "beneath the veneer of culture" (Punter and Byron 289). Welsh constructs a mansion that is hardly consonant with the rest of

the neighborhood since it is the only house which has not “been turned into small apartments” (2). By recreating an atmosphere that is reminiscent of a period in which the role of women was markedly restricted, the author suggests that some of the oppressive tendencies characteristic of that time still prevail in our culture.

As the story progresses the setting mutates and, because of the aspect it takes, this transformation cannot be regarded as a good omen; in addition to this, the presence of a murky past grows stronger. During his search Rilke goes to several places all of which seem to share a few defining features: darkness, concealment and perversion. In the first of his visits, Rilke goes to a behind-the-times “basement record shop” (66), which is actually the cover-up of a sex shop. When he arrives he realizes he is at the right place because of its neglected appearance; it is the kind of place giving the impression that its owner “didn’t want any customers” (66). As misleading as his apparent line of business, is the information Rilke obtains from Trapp, the store owner, since he assures that the photographs Rilke shows to him are not authentic (73). However, this unscrupulous profiteer offers a large amount of money for the pictures because “[t]heir age, their lack of provenance, invokes a certain frisson that enhances their value” (74). We later learn that he does so in order to prevent Rilke from advancing on his inquiry.

Despite his inexperience as an investigator, Rilke is perfectly aware of the fact that places like Trapp’s shop are aimed at people “whose tastes are difficult to satisfy” and that this, in particular, is one of those “little shops away from the main drag, hidden palaces of strange delights” (63). Nevertheless, he continues with his exploration of the underworld of pornography. As the story advances, the existence of a parallel secret world, which was initially suggested through the juxtaposition of the McKindless’ house and the surrounding modern apartments, becomes more noticeable and entrapping for the protagonist, to such an extent that his own physical appearance is affected as his involvement with the criminals grows.

Danger reaches its peak when Rilke arrives at the bookstore owned by two antagonistic brothers: the pornographer and the religious fanatic. Here the devout member of the Kirk leads him through a “maze of windowless rooms . . . where spiders rule and paper moulders in dungeon darkness” (168). Through their labyrinthine journey Rilke can perceive a sense of menace: “we seemed to be descending” (171). However, he proceeds and is eventually able to escape unscathed from a murder attempt. His advance into these buildings is a clear sign of his increasing involvement with the “international flesh bandit[s]” (112). The impending danger attached to his connection with the outlaws is also signaled by the persistence of bad weather. The rain starts the first time Rilke enters the McKindless’ residence (10), changing from



oppressive heat indicating an “approaching storm” (63-64), through “the usual fine drizzle” (168), to a “rain [that] grew more urgent” (190) during the course of the story. The adverse weather conditions only cease after a week, when the mystery is elucidated and Rilke is finally relieved: “[a]t last the bad weather had broken. The air was crisp and fresh, the sky a cloudless Tyrolean blue” (285).

### **The disturbing secret**

‘Miss McKindless –’ I couldn’t stop myself – ‘there are some disturbing things in that attic.’

‘I don’t doubt it’ – she didn’t blink – ‘and I want them destroyed’ (203)

In this novel, both Rilke and Miss McKindless are terribly disturbed by something that happened in the past, and, although it is not clear from the beginning, as the story develops we learn that the source of their perturbation is the same: Roderick McKindless’ illegal activities. After promising Miss McKindless that he will be discreet about what he finds in the family attic, Rilke realizes that something must be wrong with the woman since “she was selling her heirlooms too fast, too cheap” (8), but decides to do the clearance all the same. As time passes and he makes progress in the investigation triggered by his findings, Rilke’s apprehension about Mr McKindless’ deeds grows. His increasing fear is evidenced the moment he sees a picture of the man when he declares that McKindless’ “dark eyes stared malevolently from the past . . . [and that] had [he] met this man, [he] would have known [him]self in the presence of evil” (39).

Rilke is as haunted by this mysterious story as the old lady but their intentions are evidently different. In spite of his natural “spectral aspect” (16), he is so affected by the case that, after three days, he can hardly recognize his own reflection in the mirror where he sees himself as “a troubled specter” (167). His uneasiness becomes deeper when he is around the McKindless’ house, where evil seems to dominate even the trees surrounding it: “[a]ccusing fingers of branches pitching in the wind, pointing towards the house, towards the man at the window, me” (195). The tension he feels is such that despite his desire to uncover the mystery, he hesitates to do it:

What I had been avoiding was the truth. Like a child hesitating before a keyhole, I wanted to discover hidden secrets, but was frightened that the knowledge, once gained wouldn’t be to my liking and could never be lost. Accentuating the fear was a delicious anticipation, the thrill of terror, before the plunge. It was the thrill that scared me most. (226)

The change of appearance is a definite sign of Rilke's internal transformation. He is able to recognize the presence of evil in his interior because he is thrilled by the thought of what he might find in the hidden room, and this recognition terrifies him. The source of Rilke's dread is this slight inkling of a split between the guy who wants to do justice to the woman in the photographs and the one who might enjoy the perversion in them: his very own version of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde (167).

Miss McKindless, on the other hand, has a completely different attitude toward the distressing prevalence of her brother's secret. At the very beginning, she hints that she is rather uneasy about the clearance of the house, and more specifically of the attic. However, being aware of the fact that in the attic Rilke will find objects that will reveal her brother's involvement with "questionable people" (203), she is determined to have everything destroyed. Her purpose is to put an end to the episode of her brother's life in order to do, once again, what she did during his whole existence: protect him. When Rilke insists that maybe they should not burn the contents of the attic, she gets upset and admits that she is absolutely conscious of what she is doing:

'. . . As he grew older his misdemeanours became more complex, but I continued to do my best to shelter him from their consequences. . . Somewhere something went wrong. . . How could I abandon that child?'  
 'And you'll protect him after death.'  
 'After his death. After mine I suspect there will be little I can do.'  
 The short speech had taken it out of her. (204)

We learn from the way she gets flustered every time Rilke tries to deter her from destroying Roderick's collection that she has been burdened with its presence all these years and that its destruction is a way to end with the source of her misery. Only by erasing her brother's heirlooms, will she be able to reverse the family curse. She finally finds relief in death before Roderick's legacy disappears and, as she anticipates in her "short speech", it is impossible for her to continue protecting him after her decease. Later in the story the two-fold meaning of her words becomes evident because we learn that her brother was not dead and that by having his possessions auctioned, she was trying to help him gather his little fortune to facilitate his flight.

### **Roderick McKindless, his kinks and associates**

I wondered how long it was since the old man had been able to climb the stairs. How many evenings had he sat below thinking of these images, teasingly out of reach, reassembling centuries of cruelty from memory? (228)

As we argued at the beginning of the chapter, in this story Welsh is able to defy Gothic stereotypes by creating an interesting blend of the so-called male and female plots. Although there is a powerful male figure who is engaged in all kinds of violations and abuses, the protagonist is an empathetic gay auctioneer who has to suffer several inconveniences after getting involved with McKindless and his gang. However, Rilke never meets Roderick McKindless in person; instead, he is haunted by the presence of the wicked villain throughout the novel. Since McKindless is apparently dead during most of the story, he can only be perceived as a spectral presence, with the exception of two appearances he makes: first when he pretends to be the family gardener, Mr Grieve (198), and, later, as a corpse lying on Anne-Marie's floor after he has tried to murder her (276). Nevertheless, as his investigation advances, Rilke encounters a more real, yet diffuse, corporate villain, of which McKindless is a constituent.

Rilke's first encounter with evil takes place at the old man's residence while he is doing the clearance. Here he gets a first glimpse of his "ghost" when he accesses the private office at the top of the house. Although his first visit does not completely reveal the kind of obsessions that occupied McKindless' mind, he can anticipate that there is something perverse about the belongings that the old man has left behind: "Here was the private man. The personality I had missed below stairs, confined to the attic like a mad Victorian relative" (20). As time passes, Rilke's involvement with McKindless' world becomes more intense since, as he tries to learn more about the old man and his mysterious pastimes, he starts mingling with people of dubious reputations and is forced to move around different threatening environments.

Initially, he tries to obtain information by contacting a foreign pornographer, Trapp, who describes McKindless as a sadistic collector. During their meeting Trapp sounds dismissive and stresses the fact that he "meet[s] many people with dubious morals, but . . . very few psychopaths" and that is why he "do[es] not think these photographs are authentic" (73). Although this man discards the idea that the photographs might be *snuff*, he tries to dissuade Rilke from going ahead with his search by offering him a considerable amount of money for the pictures. His attitude undoubtedly reveals that he knows more than he is willing to confess and that he is hiding information about McKindless because unveiling the dead man's wrongdoings would be to discover his own illegal activities. The real purpose behind Trapp's relaxed attitude in the face of Rilke's inquiry is fully exposed when Derek, his assistant, provides more compromising information that contradicts Trapp's casual tone and increases his connection with the case:

‘This was taken a long time ago, but it’s him right enough. The dirty wee bastard.’

. . . ‘A valuable customer?’

‘Spot on. Well, to be honest I don’t really know [him] . . . he comes in and I’m banished to the front shop while they get on with business in the back. Suits me fine. (82)

Later in the story, Derek shamefully admits having worked with Trapp in the making of a pornographic film, in which a woman was not willing to participate. Apparently, she was one of the many slaves for whose trafficking and exploitation Trapp was responsible, and this movie was only one more example of the different kinds of abuse to which women like her were subjected (235). This confirms what Leslie, Rilke’s transvestite/dealer friend, tells him about Trapp’s illegal business, and shows that he is not exaggerating when he warns Rilke to stay away from these people:

‘Trapp’s a ponce. . . . I don’t know the scale of his operation, don’t want to know. *Sirens* is just the tip of the iceberg. He’s also involved in several massage parlours cum brothels – no pun intended – and he has a couple of amusement arcades.’

‘Amusement arcades? Money laundering?’

‘Possibly. That and boys. . . Ponces are always into drugs. Good means of control’ (111)

Rilke’s confusion about McKindless’ world increases during the course of the search, which was initially triggered by his need to discover if the pictures were genuine, since it acquires a new dimension when he realizes that there is more to McKindless’ past – and present – than a simple collection of pornographic books and photographs. Consequently, he is gradually trapped in the criminals’ network, and he becomes so involved that his own existence is put in danger.

His visit to Steenie and John Stevenson’s store indicates the degree to which he has been able to penetrate the underworld. Here, he is almost killed by the religious fanatic because he believes that Rilke is part of McKindless’ gang. After failing in his attempt, he can only provide little more information about the man than what Rilke already knows: his brother, who “was never bad, never until he met that man” (182), provided McKindless with his very special books. When Rilke finally talks to John, who is evidently one of McKindless facilitators, he refers to the “reprobate” as somebody with “specialist tastes” (187). This man is obviously referring to McKindless’ fondness not only of hardcore pornography but also of some more sinister pastimes. This information, combined with what Madeleine later tells Rilke about her brother, sharpens his aptitude to start understanding the kind of activities in which McKindless used to engage, and the dimensions of the enterprise all these men share (204).

However, the picture is not complete until Rilke receives more information from Anne-Marie, a woman who makes a living by posing half-naked to be photographed by the members of her camera club, and whom he meets through Derek. Anne-Marie's testimony confirms that McKindless has an unconventional sexual taste (217). Even though he only asked her to pose in a corpse-like manner during this private session (218), he is capable of more morbid practices: tying, cutting, and maybe killing a woman. In other words, this sinister man takes pleasure in the abjection of female bodies. Despite her disgust at the memories of the event, Anne-Marie confesses that McKindless had a power that was extremely difficult to resist (219), even if it was bordering on torture:

‘ then he said “How much to cut you?” . . . it was almost as if he had hypnotised me. I was disgusted with myself. I get like that sometimes. . . “A small cut, hardly a scar. Let the pain that cuts away the pain diffuse your senses.”’ (220)

Anne Marie's reaction to McKindless' behavior is quite unconventional, since instead of trying to escape from the pervert, she admits experiencing some kind of pleasure in the process of her own body's abjection. After many years of engaging in this kind of macabre practices, the man clearly knew how to seduce his victims to avoid their resistance.

All these pieces of information work together to portray McKindless as an old unprincipled scoundrel who not only finds pleasure in deviant practices, but also profits from them. However, the story tells us that Rilke is not fighting against a single villain, but a corporate one. McKindless and Trapp are just two members of the larger scenario constituted by organized crime and, as Inspector Anderson puts it in the novel, “. . . these guys are not just in it for the money. . . They make a commercial business out of a sexual obsession” (251). The search for McKindless' past leads Rilke to the discovery that this group of criminals is still working and that their illegal organizations are highly unlikely to be dismantled. The perils posed by his search prove that these structures of power not only attack and abuse the boundaries of women but also those of other people whose views oppose the dominance of patriarchal thought.

Apart from dealing with the wrongdoings of a male transgressor and being packed with accounts of female abuse, *The Cutting Room* also lacks narrative resolution as in the plot typically identified as male Gothic. In spite of McKindless' murder at the hands of Anne-Marie, which can be considered to be his punishment for his misdeeds, we know that the implications of crimes such as trafficking and enslaved prostitution are so far-reaching that it is almost impossible to be optimistic that these

instances of abjection may be eradicated. As Rilke reflects in one of the last chapters of the novel, “History tells us why things are the way they are. It shows the constancy of human nature” (271). However, we must argue that this novel should be considered as an instance of the female Gothic since it deals with different ways in which the boundaries of female characters, as well as those of other characters in disadvantaged social situations, are at risk because of the constant threat that powerful males represent. In the next section we will have a close look at the way in which Welsh’s women are portrayed as objects.

### **The women**

We were slaves. Every day from eleven in the morning until twelve at night we were on call. Sometimes the men would hurt us bad. . . . When the police rescued us . . . I couldn’t feel happiness . . . The last bit of me died before they arrived. (283)

Several victims are depicted in *The Cutting Room* but all of them have something in common: they all experience abjection at the hands of psychopathic villains. These women are all different in nature but they are similar in the sense that they are unable to avoid succumbing to powerful structures incarnating contemporary versions of patriarchal thought. For the purpose of supporting this view we will consider four of the female characters in Welsh’s novel: Miss Madeleine McKindless, the woman in the photographs, the author of the final transcript and Anne-Marie.

Previously, we referred to Madeleine’s devotion to her lascivious brother and how she is determined to do anything within her reach to guard him. Evidently, she has strained to do so during her whole life since she admits having protected him while they “were growing up”, and she keeps doing it towards the end of her life (204). This woman, whose attitude reveals a deep love for her sibling, becomes a key element in her brother’s cunning plan: she is to sell all his possessions so that he can retire “in style” (199). Of course this fiendish plan carefully formulated by Mr McKindless does not take his sister’s feelings into consideration. As he acknowledges when he talks to Rilke – while pretending to be the family gardener, Mr Grieve – he plans to flee “away to the sun” after receiving “a wee nest egg” (199). The woman who has been his lifelong faithful companion is to be used in order to obtain the money, and then she will be discarded. Although she only intended to be protective, her eagerness to prevent Roderick from getting punished ever since he was a child must have constituted a restriction to her brother’s freedom of action; therefore, the old man’s plan also intends

to liberate him from the burden his sister has constituted all these years. In the end, her unconditional surrender to his demands results in her utmost abjection: death. What in the eyes of the world happened as a result of “old-fashioned devotion” (205) was in fact the consequence of a lifetime of submission under patriarchal authority.

Another instance of female bodily abjection is the woman in the pictures. This woman, whose identity will remain unknown, was evidently dispossessed of her own body as it happens to all the women whose bodies are portrayed in any sort of pornographic material. Regardless of the fact that the pictures might have been real snuff or simply “some kind of weird construct” (80), they were taken with some sinister purpose in mind. The woman in them was tied, cut, dug into, stretched and mummified, and whether it was done to satisfy some wild fantasy or to profit from them in some other way, she was unquestionably dehumanized, dispossessed, abjected. A more dreadful example of bodily abjection is that of the woman filmed by Derek under Trapp’s command. We know from Derek’s statement that she was being raped and this atrocity would be perpetrated and, consequently, she would continue to be abused, as long as the video was played. Guilty as Derek felt, he was in no position to help her because somehow he also was a victim of Trapp’s wickedness:

‘I’d begun filming when I realised the woman didn’t want to be there. Tears streaked down her face. She was crying without making a sound. . . She was foreign. . . I felt like I was killing her.’ (235)

The evil that rules these men’s lives becomes more explicit the last time Rilke inspects the attic. This time he finds a vast array of sadistic books whose pages are filled with death (228). They do not simply depict naked women but corpses, which reveals the man’s beastly desires. He refers to the author of *A Description of Merryland* (1720) as “[a] man not satisfied with looking up women’s skirts . . . took the object of his desire apart” (228), a description which is perfectly transferable to McKindless and associates. The whole collection was impregnated with death and dissection; McKindless’ was a library built up from perversion and psychopathy.

These women, as well as all the others who fell prey to McKindless and Trapp’s organization, are given voice in the transcript the police hands to Rilke at the end of the novel. This woman’s declaration explains the several ways in which innocent women were mistreated by this group of bandits. They took advantage of women in need by deceiving and then depriving them of their freedom. Not only did they inflict grievous bodily harm on them but also irreparable psychological damage (281-283). Their enslavement generated high profits and satisfied the fiends’ cruelest fantasies at once:

to be these women's masters and ceaselessly impose their will on these female bodies.

Of all the victims, Anne-Marie is probably the most controversial case. When she makes her first appearance in the novel she is depicted as independent, self-assured and above all endowed with the ability to use men's sexual appetite to generate an income. Safeguarded by her rules and her brother Christian, her life is never jeopardized until McKindless persuades her to pose for him in private. Once she accedes, she realizes she has made a terrible mistake and she is terrified by the man's macabre ways. She confesses that his fiendish manners are difficult to resist but she manages to remain unharmed. However, the obstinate pervert returns to accomplish his deed which is to stab her. Probably due to his physical feebleness she can finally prevent "the final cut" by killing the man (271-276). Although Anne-Marie is able to utilize the urge her clients have to objectify a woman's body for her own benefit, she is incapable of avoiding her own victimization. She exposes her body to the obscenity of those who still see the female body as something despicable, as the abject that must be obliterated.

In this chapter we have seen how in *The Cutting Room* Welsh exploits several elements blurring the limits between what was traditionally considered as male or female Gothic. She takes the alleged male plot and recreates it in order to deal with a female issue: the abjection of female bodies at the hands of traffickers, pimps and perverts. This social concern, which is the most serious of all the consequences resulting from the general process of sexualization and pornographization undergone by our culture, is effectively depicted through the use of Gothic conventions among which death is the common denominator. All of the components in the novel embody it as one of their defining characteristics. Rilke frequently reminds us that he has a cadaverous appearance and that people call him names like "Cadaver, Corpse or Walking Dead" (2) behind his back. The McKindless residence is described as "deathly still" (16) and full of shadows. The pornography the old man was fond of depicts corpses rather than women since they look "languid", with "unfocused eyes" and "slack mouths" (218). McKindless' body smells of "corruption and decay" (276). Death is the unifying motif; in other words, the setting, the hero, the villains and the victims are all pierced by a deadly presence which reminds us of the ultimate purpose of bodily abjection, whether intentional or not.



## Chapter 4

### Abjection and the Gothic in *The Bullet Trick*

*The Bullet Trick* exposes extreme forms of abjection which are closely connected with the darkest side of human nature. In this suggestively Gothic tale, Welsh displays a mix of performed as well as real sadistic demeanors which reveal the recurrence with which pleasure is derived from violence-loaded forms of entertainment. The use of a disjointed narrative, which jumbles fragments of events which happened in different places at different times, adds to the confusion resulting from a storyline in which there are no definite heroes, villains or victims. Undoubtedly more ambiguous than Welsh's previous novel, *The Cutting Room*, *The Bullet Trick* foregrounds the dangerous recurrence of female bodily abjection, evidencing in this way the contemporization of patriarchal power.

The story, which takes place in three different cities, Glasgow, London and Berlin, tells us about a Scottish "mentalist and illusionist" (3) called William Wilson, Edgar Allan Poe's famous character's namesake, who shares with his predecessor not only his name but other troubling traits. Welsh's Wilson is finding it hard to make a decent living out of his performances and, as a result of his constant risk of default, decides to take the job his agent offered him at a Berlin cabaret (55). The trip suits him perfectly because, the night before the offer comes along, he is accidentally involved with some people who could cause him trouble. The problem is that after a club owner, Bill Noon Junior, and his partner, Sam, ask him to steal a sealed envelope, which contains blackmail material, from inspector Montgomery, both suspiciously die and he is unable to hand them the mysterious envelope (56). Once in Berlin, he meets Sylvie, an American dancer with whom he starts having an affair, and Uncle Dix, the man who lives with her and who apparently moves in a murky world (101-120). Shortly after they have met, Dix suggests that they should do business together and create an act in which William is to shoot Sylvie in front of an anonymous audience who is "willing to pay a lot of money to see [him] play Russian roulette with a live woman" (291). In spite of the fact that William thinks the plan is "sick" (176), he accepts, probably believing that his life cannot get worse than it already is. The moment when he participates in the bullet trick is the beginning of his worst nightmare because he apparently kills Sylvie during the act (345-346).

### Three cities, same darkness

'This is a bad place, son; Sodom and Gomorrah had nothing on London. Land of bloody heathens.' (86)

There was a sound of voices from the mouth of the alley, a couple of youths walked towards us and I realized the madness of what we'd been about to do. One of them said something to Sylvie as he passed and she answered him back in a short guttural phrase that made me think of Glasgow. (189)

The three places where the story develops are depicted as dark and full of constant menaces. These characteristics are apparently not inherent in the cities themselves, but in the particular environments around which William moves, and in the people with whom he gets involved. Chronologically speaking, the story of William's doom starts in London after performing in a "support act to a pair of lap-dancers" (8) at a club in Soho. At this place, which is a rather run-down smoky bar which smells of "alcohol, testosterone and sweat" (22), he is awarded custody of the mysterious envelope and forced into a narrow escape through a "dark and damp . . . steep set of stairs leading downwards" (53). The darkness of the club suggests that both its owner, Bill Noon Junior, and the inspector who is being fêted there, James Montgomery, are shady characters. In addition, the secrecy of the passage through which William has to escape to avoid being killed can be regarded as a metaphor of what will happen to him later in the story: he will have to "go through" the secret that Montgomery and Noon Senior have been hiding for almost thirty years in order to unveil it and be able to "escape" unscathed.

When William's agent comes up with the job offer in Berlin, the conjurer hesitates to accept it probably guided by his instinct for self-protection. Eventually, we learn that he is not wrong when he is suspicious of the offer (55) since the prospects for a better life do not get any better in the German capital. Once there, he starts working at a derelict cabaret whose only remnant of the majestic building it once was is the ceiling featuring "mouldering grey" "plaster cherubs" and a central "damaged rose" from which a good number of cracks spread (58-59). In this uninviting setting William meets an equally creepy character: Sylvie, whose sinister appearance matches the eerie atmosphere and anticipates that there is something obscure about her. At this point, William notices that he "should never have chosen her for [his] dupe" (71); however, the power she has over him is stronger than his acknowledgement of the threat that she represents. As the story develops and William starts frequenting Sylvie and her Uncle Dix, the setting only turns darker. Although we can cast a glance at a brighter side of Berlin nightlife (104), our protagonist keeps journeying through

backstreets that make him think of “ghost ship[s] travelling through the night, sails slapping against the squall” (104). The fact that, in a city as full of life as Berlin, our characters choose to walk along deserted backstreets indicates that they are not habitués of the places common people usually visit, which can be considered as a doom-laden prediction of their future. The apartment William’s new friends inhabit is yet another element that speaks of their own obscurity and decadence, which William evidently chooses to ignore (107), maybe because he is as debauched as his new acquaintances. These two unrighteous individuals influence him to embark on a business that finishes with William spending his last Berlin day dumped in a warehouse, which smells of “a cemetery ready for custom” (317), after he has shot his dancer friend:

The warehouse was huge and empty, a transitory space where things were stored then moved on, where women were shot then disappeared and shattered conjurers stood and wondered what to do next. (347)

The fact that William ends his days in Germany in such terrible conditions does not happen randomly since the settings these people regularly frequented were a clear omen of the fate that awaited them.

Of the three cities, Glasgow is the place where William sinks into a period of severe depression, but is later able to come out and put an end to all his miseries. After holding himself in confinement for about a month because he is afraid that the police will arrest him for Sylvie’s murder, “the walls of [William’s] room started their old trick, shifting until they took on the proportions of a coffin” (47). The metaphor he uses to describe the experience of his captivity is extremely appropriate because by facing this period of self-inflicted imprisonment he has stopped living; he is buried alive. This same sense of imprisonment is inevitably attached to Wilson’s character as a result of the existing intertextuality between Welsh’s novel and Poe’s short story. The uneasiness of Poe’s main character which is alluded by the old labyrinthine school, “a locality . . . where [he] recognize[d] the first ambiguous monitions of the destiny which afterwards so fully overshadowed [him]” (1: 419), also defines William Wilson the conjurer and forces him to live in a state of constant evasion.

The frequency with which the conjurer finds himself forcing his way through narrow passages, creepy backstreets and dark drinking dens is a clear reminder of the way in which Poe’s character wandered around Europe trying to escape his restraining doppelgänger (1: 434). Similarly, unable to cope with his somber past, the main character in *The Bullet Trick* moves from Glasgow to London, to Berlin and back to Glasgow and seeks refuge in low-quality pubs whose gloom functions as a hideout and

encourages him to become “a sailor on drink’s high seas” (77) instead of fostering his need for self-improvement. Unlike his namesake who manages to enjoy periods of personal liberty, Welsh’s Wilson is absolutely incapable of experiencing the relief he is seeking since the source of torment lies in himself, which leads him to utter moral downfall, evidenced in the moment when he “snuggled up beside a corpse” (153) on the littered river banks (135).

Another difference between Poe’s character and Welsh’s Wilson is that the latter is able to emerge from the disaster his life has become with the help of his old buddy John and his wife Eilidh. The building chosen to feature the grand finale of a year of misery is the old Panopticon, where he is going to perform in front of a crowd at a benefit organized by Eilidh. Strategically, the conjurer aims to drag Montgomery, who has handcuffed him during his “pre-performance drink” (323) in order to force the return of the photograph, to the battered venue, which he knows is the perfect place to intimidate and expose the blackmailer:

. . . a long room overhung on its left and right by high wooden balconies . . . the building’s eaves showed through its fractured ceiling . . . Two more Victorian mannequins, a man and a woman, stood silhouetted in the gloom of the balcony. . . . ‘Give me the bloody heebie-jeebies they things. . . . I bet there’s a few ghost stories about this place.’ (303-304)

As they walk toward the old theater, the cheerful atmosphere created by the Saint Patrick Day’s celebrations already signals the forthcoming favorable change in William’s life (331). After locking the man up in a wooden box during the show, William makes the inspector confess to his participation in Gloria Noon’s murder (334-337). Maybe inspired by the idea of panopticism as developed by Foucault (200-228), Welsh transforms the old Glaswegian theater in Montgomery’s worst nightmare. As in Bentham’s ideal prison, at the Britannia Panopticon Music Hall, the retired inspector is unable to escape his sentence and his declaration is witnessed not only by William, but also by the people he has summoned. In this eerie place, where “he is seen, but he does not see” (200), James Montgomery’s involvement is unveiled in the presence of his wife, the victim’s sister, and Inspector Blunt, who arrests him “on suspicion of murder” (Welsh *The Bullet Trick* 343). The building is so effectively daunting for Montgomery that when Sheila talks to him from the balcony, where she has been standing between the ghostly mannequins, he believes it is Gloria’s ghost that is speaking. In such a ghostly place, Uncle Monty is at last haunted by his own malevolence. After William Wilson elucidates the mysteries that had been disturbing him and stops getting involved with people of dubious reputation, the doom and gloom that seemed to characterize these cities disappears offering a beacon of hope.

### **Skeletons in the closet**

The past is like an aged Rottweiler. Ignore it and it'll most likely leave you alone. Stare into its eyes and it'll jump up and bite you. It was no more than coincidence that an old face came out of the darkness, but it felt that by living half in the past I had invoked old times to slip from the shadows. (77)

The role of the past in this story is essential since two terrible secrets are the cause of William's misery. However, the non-linear narrative keeps them closely guarded until the last three chapters and, as the story develops, the enigma grows together with William's despair. The first of the problems starts when William steals the envelope from Montgomery at his own peril (38-39). The fact that the contested envelope, which contains a map with "a small red biro ring around a lakeside portion of a country park" and a picture which portrays James Montgomery and Bill Noon Senior "at the edge of a lake" holding a copy of "that day's newspaper" (99), remains in his possession triggers his persecution. The proof that both men were guilty of Gloria's disappearance is a secret that they have been guarding for the last thirty years and is now coming back to complicate Montgomery's present. So far, he has been able to protect his reputation as a respectable policeman; however, his disturbing past returns when William Wilson realizes he is an evildoer. William could have made the envelope disappear to avoid trouble, but due to Montgomery's cruelty and harassment he starts an investigation which sends the retired inspector to jail. This justice-seeking side of the conjurer is reminiscent of Poe's William Wilson, not of the main character in the short story but of his doppelgänger and namesake, whose purpose in the tale is to deter the mischievous narrator from his "profligacy" (1: 428).

Montgomery's secret is in direct relation to William's misfortunes. Wilson considers that this story, which did not have anything to do with him, "caused [him] a lot of grief in Berlin" and "[i]n a way it was responsible for everything that had happened there" (99). However, this is not completely true since full responsibility for his despair rests with himself. William's inability to stay out of trouble is also evocative of Poe's main character. There is, however, a marked difference in the attitude of the homonyms towards their own disruptive behavior. Poe's Wilson admits that, although he would like people to be able to justify his characteristic "turpitude" by thinking that "in some measure, [he was] the slave of circumstances beyond human control" (1: 417), he has always been "the master of [his] own actions" (1: 418). Welsh's character, on the other hand, is incapable of accepting his own dark side and blames the

circumstances for it. It is evident that in Berlin he mingles with inconvenient people and accepts Uncle Dix's proposal driven by greed and lack of discernment:

'Come on, dear,' her voice shook with the effort of calm. 'Why don't you show them your William Tell act?'

And I realised that the die was cast. I *had been tempted* with money and performance pride but something worse than humiliation would happen if I rejected the challenge now. (345, my emphasis)

His thoughtlessness leads him to put his own life at risk and imposes the intolerable burden of Sylvie's apparent death on his shoulders. The fact that he has supposedly killed Sylvie is the reason why William becomes paranoid afterwards. Even though he tries to escape, he is prisoner of his own self. William Wilson's present, in both Poe and Welsh's versions, is stained with his past and that is why he tries to seek redemption.

### **The conjurer, the cop and the drifter**

' . . . And you like the torture stuff?'

'No,' I grinned. 'No, it's all for the act. . . . I'm not into pain.'

. . . 'Not for yourself perhaps, but you chop women in two, stick them full knives then shoot them. . . . So as long as it's pretend that's OK?' (236-237)

As we stated at the beginning of this chapter, it is difficult to determine whether some of the characters in the novel are villains or victims, while some others have no chance of being delivered from evil. When considering the protagonist, we directly come to the conclusion that his life has been a fiasco and, leaving aside his determination to pursue a career with very poor prospects, this seems to result from the fact that he has fallen victim to some mischievous people whom he has met over the past year. However, the touch of sadomasochism and macabre humor that his shows tend to include reveals there is in him a propensity for perversion, which shows that he is in great part responsible for his own fortunes. When Dix suggests that the only reason why some people enjoy the show William and Sylvie have prepared is that he pretends to "cut her open" (176), the conjurer is upset by the comment and refers to the idea as "sick" (176). Yet, they continue presenting an act in which he saws Sylvie up, then forces swords through a coffin where she is locked up, and finally fires at her (229-230). This routine evidences that Zelda's assertion is substantiated when she affirms that what William does is to reveal his darkest side – even if he refuses to accept it and takes offence at her comment (236-237).

Later in the story, his agreement to participate in the bullet trick, whether he is motivated by the money, lack of prudence or his taste for morbidity, increases his responsibility for his grim fate. In spite of his negative reaction when he is initially presented with the bullet trick proposal, William is tempted since the money he is offered could solve most of his problems. When Sylvie notices a hint of excitement at the offer, he tries to conceal his feelings but she cannot be deceived:

‘I watched your face when Dix said he’d found someone who wanted us to perform a special show.’

It was true; Dix’s news could solve my money problems but it was more than that, it was a chance to perform, to go out on a high rather slinking back to Britain with my tail between my legs. (295-296)

Although he knows that it is a dangerous performance he thinks only of himself and how Dix’s plan could help him put an end to years of being a failure. At the same time, the unwise decision he makes is partly guided by his recklessness. He impulsively complies with his friends’ request, notwithstanding the fact that both Sylvie and Dix ominously exhibit deviant behaviors. Finally, his participation in the bullet trick also confirms that, through the abjection of Sylvie’s body, he seeks to emerge from his otherwise constant condition of failure. Although he denies it, this attests the existence of a streak of depravity in him. His perversion is later ameliorated by the remorse that fills his days due to Sylvie’s supposed murder, but it is all the same an intrinsic quality of his self.

Returning to the implications attached to Welsh’s choice of name for her main character, we can state that the conjurer’s darkest traits are accentuated by the proper noun he has been assigned. The greatest difference between the two characters is probably that in Poe’s tale William Wilson is fully aware of his maliciousness, and he has no intention of quitting his misdeeds in spite of the warnings his antagonist repeatedly issues (1: 425); whereas Welsh’s Wilson is continuously tormented by the fact that he has committed a crime. In other words, in Poe’s story Wilson’s double is the clear embodiment of his superego, while in Welsh’s tale this role is played by Wilson’s own conscience. However, the conjurer and Poe’s main character are essentially the same with the difference that the former is unable to see the shadow in which the latter so overtly takes pride, and, as Von Franz explains, he is “ashamed of those qualities and impulses he denies in himself but can plainly see in other people (174).”

Another contradictory character is Inspector James Montgomery. From the very beginning he is presented as the villain who wants to profit from other people’s misfortunes. As the story unfolds, and he continues pestering William, his crookedness

becomes unquestionable. Apparently, he associated with his lover's husband in order to kill her, then married the victim's sister and, after his accomplice disappeared, he started blackmailing Noon's son. However, nothing is very clear about this story since Monty's final confession differs significantly from Bill Noon Junior's version of events. According to the inspector, he was accidentally engaged in Gloria's murder, since "all [he] did" (342) was assist Noon with the disposal of her corpse. If we consider his testimony and his allegation that Noon Junior "wanted to torture" (339) him, and that is the reason why he organized the party at the club, where he met William, Montgomery seems to have been victimized:

Thirty years with that hanging over me, never a day, an hour even, when I didn't think of it. . . . A big party, the whole squad, strippers and me sitting with evidence of the crime that ruined my life and could still send me down, burning a hole in my pocket. (339)

Maybe Noon Junior invented his own version of the story in order to avenge his mother's death, and Montgomery fell prey to his fiendish plot. Nevertheless, the inspector is additionally condemned by his own actions since he never shows compassion for his wife. Sheila, who met him during the course of Gloria's murder investigation, has unceasingly suffered and hoped for the clarification of her sister's murder. In spite of knowing this, Montgomery has lied to her for more than thirty years and their relationship has always been founded on deception, which can lead to the conclusion that he is as guilty as Noon.

The last of our questionable male characters is Uncle Dix. Unlike William and James, from the moment he appears in the story his odd behavior invites suspicion. The kind of relationship this man maintains with Sylvie is not clearly stated. It is obvious that they share a rundown apartment and take drugs; as for the rest, we can only deduce that he profits from the different kinds of jobs she might be able to do. When William meets him for the first time and asks him about his occupation, Dix avoids giving details and answers a rude "I mind my own business" (113), which coheres with his "unkempt and unwashed" appearance (109). Obviously, the only reason why he shows genuine interest in William's job is because from the moment they meet he envisions that he could make use of William's abilities to win some easy money. In accordance with his personality, he disregards the fact that he has just met the protagonist, and tentatively suggests the nature of the proposal he has in mind: "there are a lot of bored rich men in the world, you find a trick to entertain them . . . then you'll collect big money" (117). Due to William's refusal to accept his vague proposal he continues insisting, and, as time passes, his cruel intentions become more evident. Dix is so determined to persuade William to comply with his request that he is not deterred



by the fact that William considers his plan to be “sick” (176). Dix is a scheming opportunist who knows of William’s desperation and is ready to appeal to his worse nature in order to make him do the bullet trick:

‘I don’t know, it’s too weird. Who are these people?’

‘Weirder than what you do normally?’ Dix’s voice was soft, coaxing and I realized that I believed he would be able to sell the trick. ‘What does it matter who they are? Sometimes it’s better not to know these things. It’s a lot of money. It could solve all your problems. . . .’ (291)

Apart from William, Sylvie’s body is the other essential element for the trick. This woman, who at times seems to be extremely liberal, accepts to expose her body for Dix’s benefit. Although the story never reveals much about their strange relationship, it can be inferred that Dix has a great ability to manipulate her. Although she knows about the risks that the performance poses and is terribly frightened when William points the gun at her, she accedes to Dix’s request all the same. His control over her will be perpetuated by the number of videos of the macabre show he keeps after that night. Even if Sylvie decides to stop taking part in his obscure business, her body will be trapped in the movies and available for countless replays. Evidently, Dix’s plan would not be possible without the submission of the other two characters: William is to shoot Sylvie’s naked body, and Dix is to profit from their performance without much effort. He is a chancer who is able to perfectly combine his skillfulness to manipulate other people with his own need for money in a macabre plot.

### **Two wives and a dancer**

Sylvie was somewhere on the other edge of darkness. . . . My poor victim looked magnificent. She wore a long silver robe that shimmered against the light; sparkles flashed from hair dark as coffin wood and her lips were painted a blood-red black that invited no kisses. (321-322)

Challenging once again the traditional Gothic inventory of characters, some of the women Welsh chooses for this story are of an ambiguous nature since in spite of being victims of wicked patriarchal individuals, they reveal a lot of self-determination or manipulative skills. Nevertheless, it is impossible to generalize about the three female characters we will consider here because they substantially differ from each other. While the two sisters, Gloria and Sheila, are strong women who try to stand up to their husbands’ abusive behavior - even if they are not completely successful -, Sylvie seems to happily comply with Dix’s desires and even to act as his ally. In addition, in

spite of the differences between them, Gloria and Sylvie are comparable to each other in that they both suffer the abjection of their bodies in the hands of an oppressive patriarchal figure.

Of these three female characters Sheila is the one to whom we can refer as an absolute victim. After thirty years of living with the grief caused by her sister's disappearance and the lack of clarification on the case, she discovers that she has also been a victim of Montgomery's treachery. During all these years she believed that her husband, whom she met while he conducted the investigation of her sister's case, was a good man who had tried to help her overcome the sorrow at her sister's loss. However, he is a despicable liar who never told her about his affair with Gloria, not to mention his involvement in her disappearance. In spite of his professed love for Sheila, he has made a point of deterring her from learning more about her sister's fate, regardless of her urge to at least soothe the pain caused by her loss:

'My husband's always said that they never shut cases like Gloria's'  
 . . . 'I know it must still be very painful to talk about Gloria's disappearance even after all these years. Are you willing to give me a brief interview?'  
 . . . 'I'd walk barefoot into Hell to get my sister back, or even just to find out what happened to her.' (256-257)

Montgomery has abused her confidence all this time and will confess only because William has laid a trap for him. Although Sheila's body is not battered, she will never be able to recover from the psychological damage her deceitful husband has inflicted upon her.

Unlike Sheila, her sister Gloria is physically abused to such an extent that neither her cruel husband nor her infamous lover show any respect for her body after her death. Whether she died accidentally or not will never come to light, but what is learnt about her life and the circumstances under which she died is enough to know that both men acted in bad faith. Bill Noon was a brutal man used to "throw[ing] his weight around" (259) people both at his work place and at home. In spite of his abusive behavior he found a way to keep Gloria by his side because he "wouldn't have let [young Billy] go so easily" (260), and she was certainly not willing to abandon her son. Thus, Gloria continued enduring the pain implied in her decision to stay with her husband, and tried to ease it by looking for affection in a lover, who proved to be no better than Bill Noon, and formed an alliance with him in order to avoid being implicated in her death. Even if Gloria's death was accidental, a fact that will remain a mystery, Montgomery acted as a coward by assisting Bill to "dispose of her body" (342). Gloria was a victim of two scoundrels who, being unable to control her thoughts and feelings, used their strength to abject her body to the extreme.

The last of our female characters, Sylvie, is the strangest of the three because she is a fusion of victim and *femme fatale*. Sylvie knows that William is attracted to her and uses her charm to take advantage of him. First, she seduces him to be able to get a job and later persuades him to use his “magical” abilities to deceitfully obtain money. Even though they have an affair, she never shows genuine interest and all she wants to do is to fool William into doing the bullet trick:

‘William,’ Sylvie shook her head as if mortally disappointed. ‘You’re just as bad as the rest of us.’ She squeezed my waist as she pressed past me towards the hallway rubbing her groin briefly against mine. (297)

However, she is additionally fooling herself because she is acting under Dix’s command to help him obtain the money he needs to cancel his debts. It is in this process that she becomes both Dix and William’s victim. She is the star and target in the trick. Her enforced participation is suggested in the preliminary show, when she walks naked around the stage before Dix straps her against a board (322), and later evidenced by the “terror [which] suddenly shadowed her face” (345) the moment William is ready to shoot her. Both Dix and William participate in the abjection of her body that is the means through which they are able to control her. Dix makes her expose her body in front of an anonymous degenerate who is willing to pay a great amount of money to witness her murder and he will continue to profit with the videos of the episode (361). As a result, each time a depraved mind enjoys the movie starring naked Sylvie on the verge of death, the abjection of her body will be recreated. Regarding William, although the purpose that he had in mind when he decided to participate in the show was to earn a good reputation and raise his self-esteem, his active role in the abjection of Sylvie’s body is unavoidable. He knows that they do not have the opportunity to check the place before the act and he is aware of the risks they are running (295). All the same he proceeds, dressed in a macabre skeleton costume, to shoot his lover’s naked body. This act of violence serves the purpose of asserting the power of these men over Sylvie, and shows that, in spite of their disadvantaged social position, they can still find a way to abject, and therefore control, the female body.

To conclude this chapter it is worth noticing that destabilization is the general principle in *The Bullet Trick*. It is through the destabilization of Gothic stock characters and the use of a fragmented narrative technique that Welsh is able to successfully deal with some controversial issues such as good and evil, the concentration of social power and the persisting social relegation of women. As we have argued before, *The Bullet Trick* presents us with a number of ambiguous characters which do not easily

qualify as heroes or villains. The protagonist's default lack of success is evidently inherent in his human condition. Although William moves to different places in the hope that he will leave an unfortunate life behind, he is haunted by the unwise decisions he has made in the past and their severe consequences. It seems as if the stigma of his name was stronger than his will to lead a respectable life. Not until he decides to stop getting involved in murky affairs is he able to find relief. His decision to literally "turn the corner and start to walk towards [a decent pub]" (363) is a clear metaphor for his determination to start afresh.

This ambiguity, also present in other male characters like Montgomery, governs the life of the women in the novel. Even if Sheila, Gloria and Sylvie are depicted as strong women who strive for what they want, they eventually succumb to the prevailing methods of patriarchal control. With the exception of Sheila, who is psychologically manipulated by her husband, these women are victims of bodily abjection. Since the men responsible for their victimization are incapable of accepting that these women can lead an independent life away from their tutelage, they resort to abjecting their bodies in order to perpetuate their control over them. Gloria bears the brunt of abjection; she dies – whether accidentally or not – and her body is treated as life's reject when it is slipped into a lake (355). As a result of their horrid proceedings, both Montgomery and Noon form "a union forged in blood and taboo" (356). Sylvie's life, on the other hand, will be reduced to the re-enactment of the bullet trick and other forms of abjection orchestrated by Dix. Even if at some point she chooses to abandon the tyrannical relationship that links them, she will continue to be abjected every time one of the videos starring her naked body is watched. The abjection of the female characters, more specifically of Gloria and Sylvie's bodies can be regarded as an indicator of the existent social tendency to make use of different forms of female bodily abjection as a means to uphold the principles that for centuries have allowed the perpetuation of the patriarchal system.

## Conclusion

As the title of the present work initially suggested, our main aim was to explore the way in which Welsh addresses current forms of female bodily abjection, which are instrumental in perpetuating patriarchal power, in her novels *The Cutting Room* and *The Bullet Trick*. We consider that Welsh's literary contribution is of paramount importance since it deals with issues that are highly controversial among feminists who have sought to defend the interests of women for over a century and who still have not been able to reach an agreement on whether mainstreaming, pornography and prostitution are beneficial for them or not. Additionally, we consider that the use Welsh makes of Gothic formulas and conventions in the novels chosen for this work is particularly significant since she appropriates them in order to challenge the implications that generally arise from their utilization.

As we have seen, ever since the patriarchal system was instituted, female bodies have had to tolerate different forms of oppression, a situation which seems to have been ameliorated with the passing of time. Different feminist movements have played a decisive role in granting women their gradual emancipation; however, there are matters about which these groups have antagonistic views. Issues such as pornography and prostitution have been considered from points of view which are so divergent that these practices might be regarded either as liberating or excruciating depending on the feminist stand that one chooses to take. Thus, whereas liberal feminists believe that pornography and prostitution are key to put an end to the female domination maintained by men throughout history, radical feminists, at the other extreme, argue that they amount to mechanisms that make male supremacy over women possible – it should be noted that in this group's opinion any kind of heterosexual relationship is oppressive in its nature, and that they consider that men in general pose a menace to women (Dworkin, *Our Blood* 20).

In our view, the process of sexualization and overexposure of female bodies which is currently taking place in our culture has little, if anything, to do with the liberation of those women whose bodies are openly exposed on television or other technological devices, the internet and in advertisements. We believe that the manipulation of overly sexualized materials together with more serious practices such as forced prostitution and trafficking of women are instances of female bodily abjection, as discussed in chapter one. These tendencies, which according to some pro-sex

groups are liberating and beneficial for women, are inevitably enslaving in nature for those who are being dispossessed of their bodies. However, far from wholeheartedly agreeing with radical feminists, we consider that there exist other possible ways in which women can engage sexually with men without having to relegate themselves or tolerate their own abjection in the face of male power.

Closely connected with this view is the fact that we have chosen the Gothic as framework for our literary analysis of the novels. This genre, which has since its appearance dealt with problems arising from the exercise of power within the patriarchal system, provided us with excellent elements to approach the treatment of the aforementioned issues in Welsh's works. As we stated before, Welsh challenges the standards of the genre since she takes the formula traditionally considered as "male Gothic" to refer to the dangers to which women and other non-dominant figures are exposed in a society which claims to have rid of the oppression generated by the patriarchal system. In order to do so, in *The Cutting Room*, Welsh adopts the so-called "male Gothic plot" with Mr McKindless as the strong male figure, whose purpose in life seems to be to derive pleasure from the abjection of female bodies, and creates a story full of violence – mostly sexual – in which the mistreatment of women is so intrinsic to the society that, even after the villain's death, there are no prospects that the problem will disappear, which is reflected in the narrative's lack of closure.

Something similar happens in *The Bullet Trick* where Welsh refers, no longer to sexually oriented businesses such as pornography, prostitution or trafficking, but to more violence-loaded instances of abjection. In this novel, where two different storylines converge, we see how manipulative male characters – Bill Noon, James Montgomery, Uncle Dix and the anonymous spectator – seek to constrain the "monstrous" females who are perfectly capable of exercising their agency, and who need to be restricted so that these men can retain absolute control over them. Due to the women's ability to act and think for themselves, these men resort to abjecting their bodies through diverse mechanisms as the only possible method of control. These forms of abjection, which sometimes are staged but some others are real sadistic demeanors, are the only means these men have to continue to exert their power over these women. *The Bullet Trick* addresses not only the issue of domestic violence as a instrument of female control, but also the more subtle prevalence of violence-loaded forms of entertainment which comprise an amalgam of tactics that form the modus operandi of prevalent patriarchal forces.

We consider that Welsh's choice is challenging since, in spite of using the long-established "male formula", her novels do not adhere to the principles that traditionally lay behind it. Instead, she uses it to concentrate on an existing social problem which

has come to be overlooked due to the sexualization of our culture. In other words, Welsh uses the “male” storyline, not to deal with the dangerous females who present a threat to male figures and are, therefore, disciplined because of their daring behavior, but to show that our society still accommodates practices which endanger the boundaries not only of women but also of other people in neglected social positions – as is the case of Rilke in *The Cutting Room* or William Wilson in *The Bullet Trick*. Consequently, Welsh goes beyond the dictates of conventions and asserts that the abjection of female bodies cannot be softened or justified, and that practices such as pornography and prostitution can only operate as instruments for the perpetuation of the patriarchal system, which seeks to contemporize itself through their use. The lack of resolution in *The Cutting Room*, and the state of social compliance depicted in *The Bullet Trick* in terms of the regularity of female bodily abjection as a form of entertainment and female control entail that there is little prospect for an improvement as long as the processes of sexualization and normalization of “slight” instances of bodily abjection continue expanding in the global community.

Apart from the effective use of the traditional “male plot” that Welsh makes, her implementation of the most salient Gothic conventions adds to the transgressive message of the novels. In both stories, the somber setting stalks the characters’ lives reminding them of a murky past from which they cannot possibly escape. Additionally, the fact that the stories are populated by a series of Gothic stalk characters which fail to respond to some of their most essential characteristics is not accidental. Strong independent women meeting the same fate as the most vulnerable female characters, combined with the significance that the past has in the stories, directly add to Welsh’s interpellation of the current sexualized tendencies. Even those apparently liberated women, such as Anne-Marie and Sylvie, who use their bodies as a means of control over male characters, end up succumbing to the desires of these powerful men. The fact that the male (anti)heroes, Rilke and William Wilson, are also afflicted by the workings of the villains, accords with the concentration of power in the hands of very few individuals, which characterizes institutions such as the patriarchal system.

Having discussed the significance of Welsh’s novels from a standpoint which encompasses both Gothic and feminist criticism, we are in a position to discuss the implications that the present work has for these fields. Once again, we consider that this thesis attests to the validity of the female Gothic as a critical category, in spite of the negative criticism to which it has been subjected in the works of authors such as Baldick and Mighall (discussed in chapter two) and despite the long-lasting unpopularity with which it has been stigmatized in the literary sphere. It also argues against the inadequate views which characterize the female Gothic as too limited,

basing their judgment on a past during which the Gothic was restricted to psychoanalytical interpretations, and it stresses the necessity of contextualizing any critical analysis so as not to overlook important contributions that will definitely arise from the consideration of its social and historical backgrounds. In accordance with these thoughts and aligning with such prestigious advocates of the female Gothic as Horner and Zlosnik, we believe that this category constitutes an inexhaustible repository for the study of feminine realities. This is particularly important since tendencies like mainstreaming or political correctness tend to present us with a make-believe equality between men and women which keeps stalking female integrity and might have harmful effects if they are naturalized.



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