

Domestic noir in Anglo-American Literature

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In order to highlight the contribution of Literature to the study of Domestic Violence, this essay will reflect on the relevance of some Anglo-American literary works, integrated in the Domestic Gothic or *Domestic Noir*, a subgenre of the psychological thriller, distinguished by the peculiarity of representing a woman in danger as its main character. The family can be the most commonly considered luminous space of harmony, affection and quiet domesticity, but everything can turn upside down whenever this stereotype is reversed drastically. The so-called *domestic noir*, a new genre popularized in 2013, deals with these dualities, demonstrating that gothic fiction has always been interested in family conflicts and domestic violence in its most varied forms, turning them into sources of terror so relevant to our time.

Keywords: *Domestic Noir*, domestic gothic, domestic violence, Anglo-American literature

From the early days of more traditional English Gothic, we have always been accustomed to reading fictions where helpless women are persecuted by villains and various types of male predators who endanger pure maidens and innocent young people. Examples of these stories appear in the novels of Horace Walpole, Anne Radcliffe, Bram Stoker, etc. However, only later will a subversion of this type of fiction begin, gradually transforming these villains into the very husbands of these women who they should protect in the space of their domesticity, which often also becomes both a physical and psychological space of enclosure, imprisonment and torture. These kind of novels belong to a genre, which Ellen Moers called “Female Gothic” in *Literary Women* (1976), defining it as the work that women writers had done in the Gothic mode since the XVIII century, and where “fantasy predominates over reality, the strange over the commonplace, and the supernatural over the natural” (Moers, 1985, p. 9). In fact, there are several differences between male and female Gothic, especially in terms of plot patterns and narrative conventions as David Punter observes in *The Gothic* (2006), where he highlights the idea that female Gothic differ essentially in the ways their authors represent the relationship of the protagonists to the dominant Gothic spaces depicted, concluding that “female Gothic more typically represents a female protagonist’s attempts to escape from a confining interior” (Punter, 2006, p. 278). Also important will be to notice that these narratives evolve with time, because the more traditional scenes of women trapped and pursued have suffered certain transformations. Nowadays the focus of attention has been the fears and anxieties the heroine experiences in her journey to conquer power in a patriarchal society, or in her search for an absent mother. Another interesting characteristic of Female Gothic narratives is that they emphasize suspense rather than horror,

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and to understand the events the readers depend totally on the protagonist's point of view, which reveal some hidden truths and go against the most common beliefs and convictions.

One of the first fictions, which reveals the false and apparent image of domestic happiness, is "The Yellow Wallpaper" (1899) by Charlotte Perkins Gilman, where inadequate treatment of postpartum depression reduces the woman to a totally alienated and demented being diagnosed with "a temporary nervous depression—a hysterical slight tendency" (Gilman, 1996, p. 87), a diagnosis common to many women at that time. Prevented from working and writing, because they are considered pernicious practices that would aggravate the disease, the narrator of this tale concludes that, due to traditional medicine and patriarchal power of the time, all the stimuli that would affect her creative potential, which inevitably leads to a fatal psychosis, are taken from her: "It is the strangest yellow, that wall-paper! It makes me think all the yellow things I ever saw—not beautiful ones like buttercups, but old foul, bad yellow things" (Gilman, 1996, p. 97). The fact that the woman protagonist was forbidden of expressing herself through writing, shows a very common belief, in the 19th century, of considering writing, reading, and thinking inadequate to "female characteristics". At that time, the literary power was on the paternity side, and Literature was not the business of a woman's life. A woman that attempted to use the pen was seen as an intrusive and presumptuous creature who dared to cross insurmountable boundaries. The traditional female activities were cooking, nursing, needling, knotting, etc. Writing was essentially a male tool, inappropriate and alien to women. As Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, in *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1979) concluded there was a group of nineteenth-century woman writers who felt their lives were very similar to those of their Gothic heroines in their difficulties to be free from the influence of the male literary canon, living in an enclosure without any possibility of escape (2000, p. 94). Like the woman character, in "The Yellow Wallpaper," these women writers were limited by patriarchal definitions of their sexuality. This female narrator can thus represent the writer's *alter ego*, and, like a madwoman in the attic, she contaminates the patriarchal home with her creative madness.

In the end, she imagines that there are women crawling behind this wallpaper, assuming she is one of them and ending up stepping several times on the inert body of her husband, who falls passed out on the floor, terrified to see his wife acting like an irrational and savage being. In fact, he himself had created this being by enclosing her as a caged animal that finally acquires a form of liberation, exclaiming: "I've got out at last" (Gilman, 1996, p. 102). Presenting a first-person narrative and constructing itself from entries in a diary that the narrator secretly preserves due to the required prohibition, this tale has been regarded by feminist critics as a condemnation of the retrograde and hegemonic methods of medicine practiced in the 19th century, stereotyping and reducing women to mere beings circumscribed and enclosed in the so-called "domestic sphere", without decision-making power or control of their destiny. United by a practice of writing where they still manage to preserve the consciousness of themselves and their acts, there is a deep identification between the author and the narrator. Especially if we still add that Gilman wrote an article where she presents the reasons that led her to write this short story which was published in October 1913 in *The Forerunner Magazine*, with the title "Why I wrote the Yellow Wallpaper". In this article, the author begins by saying that after the publication of the tale in the *New England Magazine*, a Boston doctor had said that reading this text would be enough to lead anyone crazy. Gilman also noted that a Kansas doctor considered it the best description of incipient insanity that he had never read, wondering if he himself would be part of this story. However, the author's most important revelation, in this article, was to

confess that she herself had suffered a depression, having consulted a reputable nervous disease specialist who recommended only rest, advising her to live a domestic life, to have only two hours of intellectual life a day, and never to touch the pen, brush or pencil again. Having followed these advices, Gilman confesses to have been very close to a total mental breakdown. After writing this short story, the author sent it to the doctor who almost drove her crazy, but only years later he admitted to his friends that he had changed the treatment of neurastheny after reading "The Yellow Wallpaper". The author thus achieved her main objective, because as she stated: "the real purpose of the story was to reach Dr. S. Weir Mitchell, and convince him of the error of his ways" (Thraillkill, 2002, p. 528). Gilman's tale reached its purpose of showing not only the negative effects of certain medical treatments of women depression in the 19th century, but also the dark aspects of an apparently happy family home subordinate to patriarchal power. Using some very creative family metaphors, this gothic narrative explored darkness with reference to typical familial structures where individuals are persecuted by private anxieties, which led Dani Cavallaro to conclude: "while the aristocratic, barbarian Gothic is supposed to embody women's oppression by presenting its female characters as captives of aristocratic male persecutors, it is the bourgeois home itself that does its best to devalue women by confining them to the claustrophobic environment of supposed civilized housing" (2002, p. 142).

Common to this type of narratives will always be the relationship that is established between the familiar and non-familiar space they represent. In Gothic, what is familiar easily becomes an evil space, of hauntings and demonic possessions, where crime and domestic violence often reveal perverted relationships. As the home is traditionally considered a luminous space of harmony, affection and quiet domesticity, everything becomes more terrible when this stereotype is dramatically reversed. The so-called domestic noir genre, a term popularized in 2013, deals with these dualities by exploring aspects related to the Freudian concept of *heimlich* (familiar, secret, hidden) and *unheimlich* (the unfamiliar and the strange). The familiar home turns into something unfamiliar, that is, a space where hidden secrets come to the surface with the most terrible consequences, because it is a place haunted by spectres of domestic violence, incest, crime and even the paranormal. We find a remarkable matrix of this black domesticity in Daphne du Maurier's *Rebecca* (1938), adapted to the cinema by Alfred Hitchcock's famous version. In addition to this, there are other examples in English-speaking literary production such as *The Elementals* by Michael McDowell, *The House Next Door* by Anne Rivers Siddons, *A Head Full of Ghosts* by Paul Tremblay, *Before Going to Sleep* by S.J. Watson, *Into the Darkest Corner* by Elizabeth Haynes, and more recently *The Girl on the Train* by Paula Hawkins. Domestic Noir will thus be a subgenre of the psychological thriller, which is distinguished by the peculiarity of the main character being a woman. Almost always a woman in doubt, who sinks more or less into paranoia and finds herself in situations where her life and/or mental balance is threatened. Another interesting aspect to consider is that often these stories are written in the first person, which gives access to intimacy, hidden feelings and, therefore, to what destroys the boundaries between objectivity and subjectivity.

After the short story by Charlotte Perkins Gilman, one of the most original examples of this type of narrative in American Literature is *The Haunting of the Hill House* (1959) by Shirley Jackson. It is a novel of black domesticity with a relatively simple but very disturbing plot. The narrative focuses on a group of paranormal phenomenon researchers who conduct experiences in a haunted house, which affects their behavior, relationships and mental stability. But Jackson's work goes far beyond this, as it represents a haunted and terrible space where

the protagonists and the reader themselves feel constantly adrift, trapped in a nightmare between dreams or fantasy and reality. As the plot progresses, this cleavage increases, this being an effect reinforced by Jackson's excellent clear prose that draws very effectively the dizzying and disorienting effect of a misaligned architecture on its inhabitants. The house as a haunting place, where an ancestry of terrors experienced by past generations threatens its construction, becomes a metaphor for the very psychic division of the beings that inhabit it, recalling Edgar Allan Poe's tale, "The Fall of the House of Usher" (1839), where a familiar curse affects the mind of the central male character suspected of a crime provoked by an incestuous relationship. In fact, we can consider this American author as a precursor of this kind of fiction in the 19th century, being "The Black Cat" (1843), a good example of domestic Gothic. In this short-story we can find a male character whose violent and perverse impulses are exacerbated by the effect of alcohol, causing the death of the female figure, whose corpse is hidden by walling, where a black cat takes refuge, and whose disturbing meows denounces the crime committed.

In fact, Hill House is presented as a dark place early in the narrative, introduced by the famous opening sentence referring to its sentient and incubation powers of an ancient and resident evil inside:

No live organism can continue for long to exist sanely under conditions of absolute reality; even larks and katydids are supposed, by some, to dream. Hill House, not sane, stood by itself against its hills, holding darkness within; it had stood so for eighty years and might stand for eighty more. Within, walls continued upright, bricks met neatly, floors were firm, and doors were sensibly shut; silence lay steadily against the wood and stone of Hill House, and whatever walked there, walked alone. (Jackson, 1984, p. 3).

Like Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper," the potential of this fiction consists in the power of observation of the central female character, Eleanor, a troubled woman with ambiguous behavior. The house functions as an evil echo of her unfortunate past, configuring itself around her as a great dangerous animal from which she becomes its prey. Her mental dissolution is expressed through an inner monologue that moves subtly from delight to fear and to a disconcerted and seductive love ending in a terrible awareness of the inescapability to a fatal fate.

Moving from an older fiction to a more contemporary one, we can also refer to the example of *Rose Madder* (1995), a novel by Stephen King that addresses the effects of domestic violence that the author had already dealt with in novels such as *It*, *Insomnia*, *Dolores Claiborne*, *Needful Things* and many others. In this case, King relies on Greek mythology. In the prologue, which takes place in 1985, Norman, Rose Daniels' husband, beats her when she is four months pregnant, which causes her an immediate abortion. Revealing a fragile resistance, Rose initially decides to abandon Norman, but she quickly gives up the idea because he is a policeman specially designed to find people, besides having a violent temper, having recently been accused of raping a black woman. Throughout the narrative, the relationship with a work of art of special powers will contribute to a progressive liberation of this woman from the menacing and obsessive power of a pathologically violent husband.

In an even more contemporary perspective, we can mention the works, *Sharp Objects* (2006) and *Gone Girl* (2012), by Gillian Flynn, one of the many authors who, like Paula Hawkins, Elizabeth Haynes, Karine Giebel and B. A. Paris, have resumed interest in domestic Gothic novels, giving the genre the new designation of Domestic Noir. With its complex plot, *Gone Girl* is a dark narrative with an unreliable narrator, which had a big impact on audiences, especially after the film version of David Fincher (2014). Although this novel had become a bestseller, one should not underestimate the quality of *Sharp Objects* (2006) and *Dark Places* (2009) for their visceral violence and ambiguous characters. The author's first novel, *Sharp Objects*, offers a brilliantly designed

contemporary conception of traditional American Southern Gothic. The narrator, Camille, is a dysfunctional reporter, traumatized by the dark secrets of her upbringing, being forced to return to her hometown. Camille's relationships with her severe mother, unable to show her affection, but who loves her half-sister, Amma, is deeply dysfunctional, hidden by misunderstood horrors and troubling intimacies. Camille is also haunted by the death of Marian, her younger sister, an old terror resurrected by the shocking murder of young people which she reports in her article. But as Camille narrates her journey to the heart of the darkness of family secrets, the darkness of the house reactivates its self-destructive impulses. As the moist heat rises, the home becomes a trigger for the central female character to self-mutilate, while inscribing words on her skin that reveal her mental agitation. As with Shirley Jackson's works, this writing is also evocative and fascinating, as can be seen at the end of the fourth chapter of *Sharp Objects*:

Thoughts and words captured where I could see and track them. The truth, stinging, on my skin, in a freakish shorthand. Tell me you're going to the doctor, and I'll want to cut *worrisome* on my arm. Say you've fallen in love and I buzz the outlines of *tragic* on my breast. But I was out of places to write, slicing myself between my toes - *bad, cry*—like a junkie looking for a last vein. (Flynn, 2006, p. 53)

It can therefore be concluded that this is a memorable, unpleasant and disturbing fiction. Regarding the impact caused by this work of Gillian Flynn, Stephen King made a very insightful observation, which the author did not fail to include in one of the editions of this novel: "...after the lights were out, the story just stayed there in my head, coiled and hissing, like a snake in a cave" (Flynn, 2006, p. 3). It is this peculiar and haunting quality of this fiction that connects *The Haunting of the Hill House* and *Sharp Objects*, although they are very different works in other aspects.

Conclusion

All these narratives, associated with the genre of *Domestic Noir*, subvert and question our own conceptions of domesticity by portraying homes and family homes so particularly *unheimlich* that they writhe and vibrate with their hideous secrets. As Anne Williams well concluded in her introduction to *Art of Darkness—A Poetics of Gothic*, titled "Gothic's Fiction, Family Fictions", there is really no doubt that Gothic novels are, above all, family novels (Williams, 1995, p. 1). In all these works, Domestic Gothic always has the important function of representing domestic violence as one of the main sources of terror in nowadays society, never seeking evasion in escapist narratives, but rather alerting us to new hidden dangers, and abuses in certain apparently harmless and peaceful family contexts.

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