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**Haunted domesticity in Gothic novels
and their adaptations**

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Chapter 1 – The origins of haunted domesticity

“Jane, be still; don't struggle so like a wild, frantic bird, that is rending its own plumage in its desperation.”

“I am no bird; and no net ensnares me; I am a free human being, with an independent will; which I now exert to leave you.”¹

This chapter and the subsequent sub-chapters will focus respectively on the condition of Victorian women shaped by the gender ideologies of the 19th century, which sought to confine them within the domestic sphere; then it will move towards an analysis of the dichotomy of the "Angel in the House" and its counterpart – the “monster” – a figure embodying female transgression, independence, and sexual autonomy, viewed as dangerous and destabilizing; lastly, the focus will shift towards the haunted house which serves as a powerful metaphor for the anxieties surrounding femininity and domesticity in the Victorian era. Domestic spaces were conventionally considered places of safety and virtue. However, in Gothic literature, they turn into prisons that shackle their female inhabitants; the trope of "haunted domesticity" mirrors the psychological and social condition of women, who are trapped into would-be sanctuaries that turn out to be sites of terrors. This subchapter will explore how Victorian literature used the haunted house to manifest the tensions between imposed gender roles, repression, and female autonomy. Through an analysis of the interplay between the Angel in the House, the monster, and the haunted domestic space, this discussion will explicate how the Victorian home grew into both a battleground and a symbol of female resistance.

¹ Charlotte Brontë, *Jane Eyre*. Penguin Classics, 2006, p. 340.

Chapter 1.1– The *angel* and the *monster*

Male authors have promoted, within centuries of literary tradition, two extreme and opposing images when representing women. In 19th century literature, the representation of women is largely made up by the dichotomous construct of the *angel* and the *monster* – two sides of the same coin. As stated by Gilbert and Gubar,

a woman writer must examine, assimilate, and transcend the extreme images of “angel” and “monster” which male authors have generated for her. Before we women can write, declared Virginia Woolf, we must “kill” the “angel in the house.” In other words, women must kill the aesthetic ideal through which they themselves have been “killed” into art. And similarly, all women writers must kill the angel’s necessary opposite and double, the “monster” in the house [...]. the images of “angel” and “monster” have been so ubiquitous throughout literature by men that they have also pervaded women’s writing to such an extent that few women have definitively “killed” either figure. Rather, the female imagination has perceived itself, as it were, through a glass darkly: until quite recently the woman writer has had (if only unconsciously) to define herself as a mysterious creature who resides behind the angel or monster or angel/monster image that lives on what Mary Elizabeth Coleridge called “the crystal surface.”²

The *angel*, pure, self-sacrificing and dedicated to the domestic space, is on one side; and the *monster*, representing female transgression, sexual power and destruction, is on the other. The way female writers expressed and perceived themselves was strongly impacted by this dichotomy, ultimately influencing their creative process. The archetype of the *angelic woman* has deep roots in Western literature, extending back to medieval traditions of courtly love and religious iconography. The Virgin Mary, the *Donna Angelicata* of *dolce stil novo* poetry, Dante’s Beatrice, and Petrarch’s Laura all embody this idealized vision of femininity – passive, virtuous, and existing primarily in relation to the male gaze. Through literature, visual arts and cultural discourse, this ideal was reinforced and promoted even in 19th century England. Pre-Raphaelite painters such as Dante Gabriel Rossetti visually immortalized the *angel woman*, and Coventry Patmore’s *The Angel in the House* (1854) brought to life the quintessential poetic definition of this Victorian ideal. A woman’s greatest purpose was to serve her beloved husband since “to please is woman's pleasure”, she must maintain a decorous

² Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination*. Yale University Press, 1979. pp. 60-61.

and heaven-like domestic sphere, she “loves with a love that cannot tire” and even if she were to suffer pain from her spouse, she “seems to think the sin was hers”.³ The bedrock of a true, perfect housewife is measured in her capacity to please and sacrifice herself for her husband, since submission and self-erasure are part of this ideal of femininity. Patmore’s poem had such an impactful influence that its ideology extended to society, shaping societal expectations of how women should behave within the domestic space and the duties they should attend to. The concept of the “angel in the house” wholly summarized a woman’s prescribed role as a devoted wife and mother.

In opposition to the *angel* stands the female *monster*, a figure that has long embodied male anxieties about female power, sexuality, and autonomy. This archetype has been present in Western mythology since ancient times: in Greek mythology, Circe was a sorceress able to transform humans into animals; Medusa, the man-eating creature who would turn to stone whomever looked at her; Lilith, the rebellious first wife of Adam, according to Mesopotamian and Jewish tradition. Christianity played a part into feeding this narrative as well by portraying Eve as the cause of the fall of man from Paradise and thus, as the cause of the original sin. If a woman was to reject her imposed role of passive femininity and her angelic side in order to pursue independence, she would be considered a monster. In the case of Lady Macbeth, she sought to attain violence and cruelty, considered to be a male prerogative:

"Come, you spirits
That tend on mortal thoughts, unsex me here,
And fill me from the crown to the toe top-full
Of direst cruelty! make thick my blood;
Stop up the access and passage to remorse,
That no compunctious visitings of nature
Shake my fell purpose, nor keep peace between
The effect and it!
Come to my woman's breasts,
And take my milk for gall, you murdering ministers,
Wherever in your sightless substances
You wait on nature's mischief! Come, thick night,
And pall thee in the dunkest smoke of hell,

³ Coventry Kersey Dighton Patmore, *The Angel in the House*, 1854.

That my keen knife see not the wound it makes,
Nor heaven peep through the blanket of the dark,
To cry "Hold, hold!"

Shakespeare, Macbeth, Act 1, Scene 5

Lady Macbeth explicitly rejects the nurturing qualities associated with womanhood, in order to align herself with violence and destruction. Her descent into madness and eventual demise reinforces the moral lesson that women who step beyond their prescribed roles are ultimately doomed. During the Romantic period, the female monster took on a new connotation, particularly in representations of the *femme fatale*. In John Keats's *La Belle Dame sans Merci* (1819), the eponymous character is a supernatural seductress who ensnares men with her beauty, only to leave them abandoned and suffering. She embodies both allure and danger, reinforcing the notion that female sexuality is a source of destruction:

I saw pale kings and princes too,
Pale warriors, death-pale were they all;
They cried—'La Belle Dame sans Merci
Thee hath in thrall!'

This construction of the female as both irresistible and fatal goes hand in hand with broader cultural anxieties about women's increasing social and sexual autonomy in the 19th century. The *femme fatale* was not merely a literary trope, but a reflection of latent fears within society regarding the current destabilization of gender norms.

The aforementioned dichotomy between the angel and the monster extends beyond the literary canon: cultural products like folklore and fairy tales reinforce the ideological structures that shaped gender perceptions and power dynamics. The virtuous, obedient heroines – such as Cinderella and Snow White – are rewarded for respecting their passive role, while their monstrous female counterparts – respectively, the evil stepmother and the evil witch – are punished for their cruelty. The evil queen in *Snow White* is a woman who wishes for eternal youth and beauty, her ambition is something immoral that should not be sought after, therefore she eventually transforms into a monstrous witch. In the Grimm Brother's version of this tale, she pushes herself to the point of consuming Snow White's heart and lungs in order to achieve her goal, aligning her with other human-eating figures of folklore. Because these narratives were ingrained into conventional knowledge, it was all the more evident that

only *good* women would conform to patriarchal expectations, while *bad* women were reproached since they sought power and defied societal norms.

As argued by Gilbert and Gubar, female writers must “examine, assimilate, and transcend the extreme images of “angel” and “monster” which male authors have generated” for them since, historically, they have been forced to define themselves in relation to these imposed images.⁴ The struggle to move beyond them and to construct a female identity that is neither entirely passive and obliging nor a destructive force is evident in many women writers’ works. Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre* (1847) offers a powerful critique of the *angel in the house* ideal through the character of Bertha Mason, the “madwoman in the attic.” Bertha embodies the female monster, yet she is also a victim of patriarchal oppression, locked away and dehumanized. Brontë thereby exposes the angel/monster dichotomy as a false construct, revealing how it merely serves to confine and control women. Similarly, later feminist writers like Virginia Woolf and Sylvia Plath put into discussion the suffocating nature of the angelic ideal and the destructive consequences it brought. Woolf argued in *Professions for Women* (1931) that women writers must “kill” the *angel in the house* in order to achieve creative freedom.

⁴ Gilbert and Gubar, 1979, p. 60.

Chapter 1.2 – The condition of the 19th century woman

The Victorian era in England (1837–1901) was a time of rigid social structures and deeply rooted gender roles: women were expected to embody the ideal of the “Angel in the House”, which depicted women as self-sacrificing, pure, and devoted entirely to their families and homes. Within this framework, a woman’s primary duty was to maintain a harmonious domestic sphere, acting as a moral guide for her husband and children while remaining largely excluded from the public world of work, politics, and intellectual pursuits, a strictly male prerogative. The social and artistic position in which 19th century women found themselves was of being both literally and artistically confined.⁵ They were secluded in what Gertrude Stein called the “patriarchal poetry”⁶: women were physically trapped in mansions constructed by men and artistically trapped by the literary male dominated world. However, it is most noticeable that a change of pace occurred right about this time, an “impulse to struggle free from social and literary confinement through strategic redefinitions of self, art and society”⁷. A female literary subculture was coming to existence, one in which women would contribute to each other’s works and convey their ideas, emotions and opinions on paper.

Historically, literary creations have been linked to male sexuality, reinforcing the idea that writing, reading and thinking were inherently male activities. According to Gerard Manley Hopkins, literary paternity is linked to divine creation: the author is the ruler of a fictive world, possessing a “phallic” imagination that penetrates and reshapes reality. This power extends to artistic expressions, and the act of writing is seen as an assertion of masculine power.⁸ Therefore, this begs the question: how could female authorship come to reality if writing is metaphorically and socially tied to a generative power exerted by men? Any attempts on the female part were seen as unnatural or even transgressive; critics further marginalized women, claiming they lacked the capacity for original thought or literary power, arguing that women’s writing lacked the “male thrust”⁹ necessary for great literature. It is also implied that women’s productions stem from emotions rather than actual intellectual power. Male writers who lose their ability to create are figuratively feminized or emasculated. Male authorship has traditionally “owned” female characters, while also limiting their autonomy; and just as men have the capacity to beget texts, they also “create” women in literature, often depicting them as passive or

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ E. S. Neel, ‘*The Talking Being Listening: Gertrude Stein’s “Patriarchal Poetry” and the Sound of Reading*’. *Style*, 33(1), 1999, pp. 88–105.

⁷ Gilbert and Gubar, 1979, p. 13.

⁸ Ibid, p. 48.

⁹ Ibid, p. 53.

constrained figures, metaphorically killing them into an idealized, controlled version of themselves. However, as it was mentioned before, women have found ways to assert themselves and to speak in their own voice in order to destroy the idealistic vision imposed on them by male writers. Mary Elizabeth Coleridge's poem *The Other Side of the Mirror* depicts the image of a female prisoner:

I sat before my glass one day,
And conjured up a vision bare,
Unlike the aspects glad and gay,
That erst were found reflected there—
The vision of a woman, wild
With more than womanly despair.

Her hair stood back on either side
A face bereft of loveliness.
It had no envy now to hide
What once no man on earth could guess.
It formed the thorny aureole
Of hard unsanctified distress.

Her lips were open—not a sound
Came through the parted lines of red
Whate'er it was, the hideous wound
In silence and in secret bled.
No sigh relieved her speechless woe,
She had no voice to speak her dread

And in her lurid eyes there shone
The dying flame of life's desire,
Made mad because its hope was gone,
And kindled at the leaping fire
Of jealousy, and fierce revenge,
And strength that could not change nor tire.

Shade of a shadow in the glass,
O set the crystal surface free!

Pass—as the fairer visions pass—
Nor ever more return, to be
The ghost of a distracted hour
That heard me whisper: - 'I am she!'¹⁰

The prisoner is trapped inside of the mirror/text, and though “not a sound/Came though the parted lines of red”, her suffering is undeniable and can be clearly felt. She can still exert authority over her own existence. The mirror acts as a metaphor reflecting how women should see themselves: not how they actually are, but as they have been artificially constructed to be in literature – as well as in reality – by the hands of men. As the woman gazes deeper inside her idealized reflection, she has a sudden epiphany: “I am she!”. ‘She’ is none other than an imprisoned, silenced self, trying to defy the male authority that confined her within such a claustrophobic space. In the final line of the poem, the speaker finally overlaps herself with the tormented reflection, acknowledging her true identity and overlooking the fictitious one imposed by the male gaze. As stated by Virginia Woolf, it is of utmost importance that women kill the aesthetic ideal that killed them in the first place into the role of the “Angel of the House”. In Coventry Patmore’s poem¹¹, women were merely relegated to the private, domestic sphere, while men were free to attend the public one and the civic duties that it entailed. Woolf aims to destroy such a bipolar division, but in order to do so, she must first relate what is the figure that torments her during her own writing:

I will describe her as shortly as I can. She was intensely sympathetic. She was immensely charming. She was utterly unselfish. She excelled in the difficult arts of the family life. She sacrificed herself daily. If there was a chicken, she took the leg; if there was a draught she sat in it—in short she was so constituted that she never had a mind or a wish of her own, but preferred to sympathize always with the minds and wishes of others. Above all—I need not say it—she was pure. Her purity was supposed to be her chief beauty—her blushes, her great grace. In those days—the last of Queen Victoria—every house had its Angel. And when I came to write I encountered her with the very first words. The shadow of her wings fell on my page; I heard the rustling of her skirts in the room. Directly, that is to say, I took my pen in my hand to review that novel by a famous man, she slipped behind me and whispered: ‘My dear, you are a young woman. You are writing

¹⁰ Mary Elizabeth Coleridge. *The Other Side of a Mirror*, 1908.

¹¹ Patmore, 1854.

about a book that has been written by a man. Be sympathetic; be tender; flatter; deceive; use all the arts and wiles of your sex. Never let anybody guess that you have a mind of your own. Above all, be pure.’ And she made as if to guide my pen.¹²

This ethereal figure is the quintessential manifestation of all those patriarchal norms internalized by women and should be therefore dismantled for them to achieve their own space in the literary world. Woolf feels there is both an internal and external pressure exerted onto women to “be sympathetic, be tender” and to “flatter; deceive; use all the arts and wiles” of the female sex. This struggle shows a constant tension between the artistic creation and societal expectations: a woman writer will never be truly free if she tries to conform to the image of the “angel”:

I turned upon her and caught her by the throat. I did my best to kill her. My excuse, if I were to be had up in a court of law, would be that I acted in self-defence. Had I not killed her she would have killed me. She would have plucked the heart out of my writing. For, as I found, directly I put pen to paper, you cannot review even a novel without having a mind of your own, without expressing what you think to be the truth about human relations, morality, sex. And all these questions, according to the Angel of the House, cannot be dealt with freely and openly by women; they must charm, they must conciliate, they must - to put it bluntly - tell lies if they are to succeed. Thus, whenever I felt the shadow of her wing or the radiance of her halo upon my page, I took up the inkpot and flung it at her. She died hard.¹³

The survival of the author’s authentic voice – as well as her ability to write critically and with intellectual depth – depends on the destruction of this idealized femininity. The angel’s very existence is a threat to the author herself, since she “would have plucked the heart out” of her writing. If Woolf, or any other woman writer, as she suggests, would have submitted to these expectations, she would have lost her ability to express what she thinks “to be the truth about human relations, morality, sex”.

¹² Virginia Woolf, *Killing the angel in the house: Seven essays*. Penguin, 1995, pp. 3-4.

¹³ Ibid, p. 4.

Chapter 1.3 – The haunted houses

The haunted houses have a deeper side to them than can be seen on the surface: they are an accumulation of fear, oppression and psychological distress. They can be interpreted as a reflection of the anxieties of a domestic confinement imposed onto the “Angel of the House”. Haunted domesticity is a concept originated from the overlapping of domestic spaces – conventionally associated with comfort, safety and femininity – and the Gothic tradition, showing how spaces that would normally put at ease its inhabitants can serve as sites of literal and metaphorical haunting. These spaces also act as a critique towards patriarchal control overshadowing women’s lives, which extends both in the real world and in the fictional one. The supernatural hauntings and apparitions used as a motif in the Gothic tradition become something more than just a trope to raise anxiety within the reader: they symbolize the psychological and social imprisonment that domestic life reserved for the women of the time.

Women were expected to be confined and dedicate their lives to household duties, while attending to the private sphere. The home, rather than a sanctuary, turned into a site of confinement. In literature, this confinement is physically represented by locked doors, maze-like corridors or decaying interiors, mirroring the inner psychological deterioration of the female protagonists. The concept of the uncanny conceptualized by Freud refers to the idea that something can be familiar and unfamiliar at the same time: in the context of haunted domesticity, homes turn into spaces where the boundaries between real and surreal, past and present, the self and the other, dissolve. The uncanny emerges as a psychological phenomenon that disrupts the boundary between fantasy and reality, evoking a profound sense of unease. There are three categories of uncanny as listed by Freud: firstly, the double, e.g. doppelganger, twins, ghosts, or the *déjà vu*; secondly, castration anxieties, e.g. the fear of female genitalia or the loss of eyesight; thirdly, uncanny feelings aroused by familiar or unfamiliar spaces, getting lost, and haunted houses.¹⁴ The feeling of the uncanny has been particularly strong since the 18th century, when private homes became important to middle-class life. The idea of the home as a safe, familiar place also created a deep fear of its invasion or disruption. Gothic fiction explores this fear, mirroring the anxieties about the changing gender power dynamics within and outside of the domestic sphere. Anthony Vidler describes the uncanny as a set of connotations, rather than as a clearly defined concept:

¹⁴ Barbara Creed, *The Monstrous Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis*, Routledge, 1993, p. 53

[...] sinister, disturbing, suspect, strange; it would be characterized better as dread than terror, deriving its force from its very inexplicability, its sense of lurking unease, rather than from any clearly defined source of fear an uncomfortable sense of haunting rather than a present apparition.¹⁵

Tzvetan Todorov distinguishes between two types of Gothic novel: the explained supernatural and the accepted supernatural. The first type takes place when the reader is given rational explanations for the supernatural occurrences that took place throughout the story, whereas the other one, through a form of suspension of disbelief, occurs when the reader ends up accepting the fantastic elements.¹⁶ The uncanny results from the inability to make a clear-cut distinction between these two types, and the reader is left in a state of uncertainty. For instance, Henry James' novella *The Turn of the Screw* (1898) never really gives a definitive answer: readers are unsure whether the ghosts are real or if it is all a figment of the governess' imagination, magnified by the eerie atmosphere of the manor. In "Das Unheimliche", Freud anticipates the discourse of the uncanny in literature: for a tale to be uncanny, it is essential that it employs realistic details in order to produce doubt about whether the supernatural elements are true or not.¹⁷ According to Gunning, the uncanny can be understood as a "reading position founded on a prolonged uncertainty about the nature of the fictional world."¹⁸ Haunted houses become a being with their own will, apparently turning into sentient creatures: rooms change their own appearance or disappear completely; echoes of past voices can be heard; things that weren't positioned in a certain way are completely rearranged. At the foundation of this phenomena, lay the concealed secrets and stories that took place within the domestic sphere. In James' novella, Bly is described as a beautiful, lavish manor, though its vast emptiness and the eerie lack of authority figures make it unsettling for the governess, who feels suffocated by it:

Was there a "secret" at Bly – a mystery of Udolpho or an insane, an unmentionable relative kept in unsuspected confinement? I can't say how long I turned it over, or how long, in a confusion of curiosity and dread, I remained where I had had my collision.¹⁹

¹⁵ Anthony Vidler, *The Architectural Uncanny: Essays in the Modern Unhomely*, MIT Press, 1992, pp. 22-23.

¹⁶ Tzvetan Todorov, *The fantastic: A structural approach to a literary genre* (R. Howard, Trans.), Cornell University Press, 1975, p. 56.

¹⁷ Freud Sigmund, 'The Uncanny' [1919] in: James Strachey (ed.): *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, Vol. XVII, Hogarth Press, 1999, pp. 218-252.

¹⁸ Tom Gunning, *Uncanny Reflections, Modern Illusions: Sighting the Modern Optical Uncanny* in: Jo Collins & John Jervis (eds.), *Uncanny Modernity: Cultural Theories, Modern Anxieties*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2008, pp. 69-90, p. 71.

¹⁹ J. Henry, P.G. Beidler, *The Turn of the Screw*. In P.G. Beidler (eds): *The Turn of the Screw. Case Studies in Contemporary Criticism*, Palgrave, London, 1995, p. 39.

The governess herself is projecting Gothic tropes onto Bly, comparing it to the *Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794), a novel that features a heroine trapped in an ominous castle. Bly is not just a grand manor anymore: it turns into a site of hidden horrors, the quintessential archetype of haunted domesticity. Moreover, the uncertainty regarding the actual presence of supernatural phenomena or whether the “visions” stem from the governess’ precarious psyche mirrors the fears of women confined to the domestic space: this environment can never truly be a place of security because it harbors the ghosts of oppression, repressed desires and unfulfilled lives. The ghosts that materialize themselves within the settings are more than mere supernatural entities: they represent injustices of the past, lingering traumas, or even, as it happens with James’ novella, the suppressed voices of women, silenced by the patriarchal structures that ended up destroying them. It’s commonplace for Gothic texts to represent female ghosts as figures moved by rage, revenge and unresolved sorrow: the specter of Mrs. Jessel is closely linked to sexual repression and gendered fears. It seems as if the home, being an entity of its own, “remembers” the injustices and atrocities committed within its walls.

The theme of madness is also very relevant to these types of stories, especially considering the psychological toll that domestic life has on women: many Gothic heroines, while struggling with the constraints of their own environment, experience a descent into madness. This condition is framed as hysteria or delusion by male authority figures, which perpetuates the historical medicalization of female dissent. Bertha Mason is locked away in the attic of Thornfield Hall: this is a literal confinement that takes place when women are considered too “mad” to be in contact with society. The damaging effects of domestic confinement and the overbearing control over female autonomy are laid before the reader: madness is not an inherent weakness or condition but rather serves as an act of resistance against the very system that seeks to control women’s bodies and minds.

As mentioned before, the domestic space is the primary site of uncanny events, and it occurs specifically for women since femininity was strongly tied to domesticity, to the detriment of the autonomy of women and consequently to the development of their identity. Vidler states that the house:

provides an especially favored site for uncanny disturbances: its apparent domesticity, its residue of family history and nostalgia, its role as the last and most intimate shelter of private comfort sharpened by contrast the terror of invasion by alien spirits.²⁰

²⁰ Vidler, 1992, p. 40.

The home was constructed as a place of stability, reliability and nostalgia by the male authors and theorists, and this codes the domestic space as necessarily female. It does not come as a surprise, as Doreen Massey points out, that men, who are the ones with the ability to leave home are also the ones that long to return to a nostalgic version of it, whereas women may not have such an idealized and sentimental view of the homestead.²¹ Male perspectives that portray home as an idealized place of safety, coziness, and nostalgia are countered by female authors and artists.

The separate spheres ideology rigidly divided the public and private spheres along gender lines, however it also extended into the domestic space which was split into male and female assigned rooms. In the Victorian era, homes would reflect these gendered divisions: certain rooms, such as the library or the study, would code as male spaces and others, such as the drawing room or the boudoir, as female spaces. A room's size, design and etiquette would reflect and reinforce both the gender and power dynamics within the household. In literature, the division of fictional spaces often served a structural role in shaping character interactions, actions, and plot developments.²² From a feminist perspective, analyzing the rigidity and potential transgression of these spatial boundaries is key to understanding the constraints imposed on women. During the Industrial Age, the conflation of women's bodies with domestic interiors became particularly pronounced, with the home symbolically representing the woman and vice versa: "the woman was seen as the embodiment of the home, and in turn the home was seen as an extension of her".²³ Advice literature and fiction of the time often depicted female characters whose physical traits mirrored their surroundings or who altered themselves to align with their domestic spaces. For instance, Jacob von Falke's *Art of the House* (1878) suggested that a woman should be "the noblest ornament of her ornamented dwelling."²⁴ Similarly, visual art, such as Childe Hassam's *Tanagra* (1918), depicted women literally blending into their interiors, further reinforcing this association.²⁵ As men became increasingly involved in economic activity outside the home, women's identification with the domestic sphere solidified, with home decor and female attire developing parallel aesthetic conventions: morning gowns complementing bright breakfast rooms, while evening wear echoed the rich tones of formal dining

²¹ Doreen Massey, *Space, Place and Gender*, Polity Press, 1994, p. 180.

²² Daphne Spain, *Gendered Spaces*, University of North Carolina Press, 1992, p. 115.

²³ Beverly Gordon, 'Woman's Domestic Body: The Conceptual Conflation of Women and Interiors in the Industrial Age', *Winterthur Portfolio*, Vol. 31., No. 4, *Gendered Spaces and Aesthetics*, 1996, pp. 281-301, pp. 281-2.

²⁴ Jacob Von Falke, *Art in the House*, 1878, quoted by Gordon, p. 283.

²⁵ Gordon, 1996, p. 283.

spaces.²⁶ Beyond aesthetics, this metaphor extended into cyclical maintenance tasks, comparing the upkeep of the home to the grooming and care of the female body. Bachelard's *The Poetics of Space*²⁷ draws a parallel between the nostalgic home and the maternal body, further reinforcing the association between femininity and domesticity. This conceptual merging of women with their homes not only reinforced traditional gender roles but also served to objectify women, reducing them to decorative elements within the domestic sphere and undermining their agency.

The Gothic is best understood as a mode rather than a genre, as argued by John Frow, since it transcends temporal and geographical boundaries while maintaining a set of shared motifs and conventions.²⁸ According to Frow, modes are extensions of certain genres beyond formal structures to a broader sense of 'tone'. From its roots, the Gothic has evolved across different literary and artistic forms, from Victorian melodrama to Edgar Allan Poe's short stories, from sensational novels to contemporary horror films and thrillers. At its core, the Gothic explores themes of irrationality, the transgression of moral codes, and the expression of repressed desires, often serving as a vehicle for social critique.²⁹ Haunted castles, spectral apparitions, virgins buried alive, mad wives in the attic are all motifs which can be employed for this very purpose: in the Gothic mode, the dominant ideologies, especially those concerned with female marginalization, are often challenged. The Gothic is always in dialogue with the fears and ideals of its time and, because of this, is able to reveal counter-narratives to socially established values.³⁰

Fred Botting argues that the Gothic expresses an "unconscious desire, a release of repressed energies and antisocial fantasies".³¹ It is interested in people, objects and practices generally considered irrational, immoral and fantastic.³² Because of this, female writers were able to write of the "unspeakable",³³ as stated by Anne Williams. Williams distinguishes between two different formulas of the Gothic – male and female – based on three levels: narrative techniques, assumptions about the supernatural, and plot structures.³⁴ Firstly, the female Gothic tends to generate suspense through

²⁶ Ibid, p. 286.

²⁷ Gaston Bachelard, (1994): *The Poetics of Space*, Beacon Press, [1957], p. 15.

²⁸ John Frow, *Genre*, Taylor & Francis, 2015, pp. 71-72.

²⁹ Maria Giakaniki, *Haunted Domesticity in Late-Victorian Women's Writing* in: Clive Bloom (ed.): *The Palgrave Handbook of Steam Age Gothic*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2021, pp. 299-318, p. 299.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Fred Botting, *Gothic: The Critical Idiom*, Routledge, 2013, p. 1.

³² Ibid.

³³ Anne Williams, *Art of Darkness: A Poetics of Gothic*, University of Chicago Press, 1995, p. 100.

³⁴ Ibid, pp. 102-104.

unreliable or limited narration, aligning the reader with the heroine's often distorted perceptions. On the other hand, male gothic employs an omniscient or multi-perspective narrative style, frequently integrating other modes of discourse into the main narrative, such as reports, scholarly materials or news coverage. Secondly, in the female formula supernatural elements are typically explained rationally, as psychological manifestations of the heroine's fears reflected by the environment around her, whereas in the male one, supernatural elements are often accepted rather than rationalized through suspension of disbelief. Thirdly, with the female Gothic the narrative usually concludes with a positive ending through a form of rescue or rebirth, often symbolized by marriage, whereas with the male Gothic the plot tends toward tragedy, ending in financial ruin, social decline, or death. As stated by Williams, the female Gothic:

[...] creates a Looking-Glass World where ancient assumptions about the male and the female, the line of good and [...] evil, are suspended or so transformed as to reveal an entirely different world, exposing the perils lurking in the father's corridors of power.³⁵

The employment of one formula or another by a writer shows that female and male fears and desires – “Gothic's twin fascinations”³⁶ – differ dramatically. Eugenia C. Delamotte argues that Gothic supernatural elements serve as metaphors for real socio-political fears: “social forces so vast and impersonal that they seem to have supernatural strength.”³⁷ The fear of the supernatural is the compendium of all those fears concerned with the overwhelming power of prescriptive gender roles and systemic oppression perpetuated by an oppressive patriarchal system in all fields of law, economy, religion, and education.

The Gothic narrative has the homestead as its main stage: initially represented by castles, the setting later evolved into the old mansion³⁸, particularly in American Gothic fiction, where older architecture is much rarer to be seen. These outdated structures symbolize a temporal, spatial and ideological separation from the past: “The pleasures of horror and terror came from the reappearance of figures long gone.”³⁹ The decaying home functions as a metonym for both architectural space and familial lineage where “political revolution, industrialization, urbanization, shifts in sexual and domestic

³⁵ Ibid, p. 107

³⁶ Carol Margaret Davison, *Haunted House/Haunted Heroine: Female Gothic Closets in The Yellow Wallpaper*, *Women's Studies*, Vol. 33, No. 1, 2004, pp. 47-75, p. 50.

³⁷ Eugenia C. Delamotte, *Perils of the Night: A Feminist Study of Nineteenth-Century Gothic*, Oxford University Press, 1990, p. 17.

³⁸ Botting, p. 2.

³⁹ Ibid.

organization, and scientific discovery.”⁴⁰ During the peak of Gothic literature, the separate spheres ideology – which idealized the home as a moral refuge – was at its strongest. Gothic novels subverted this idealization, exposing female entrapment within domestic spaces. This was particularly relevant as middle-class female readership grew because of this very idealization: their leisure time increased because of this ideology and eventually gravitated towards the Gothic genre.⁴¹

The uncanny in Gothic literature is often expressed through the resurfacing of past traumas or animistic belief, or a combination of both. In this context, the home becomes more than just an architectural structure – it exposes the patriarchal power dynamics built into it, and the homestead symbolizes female entrapment and subjugation.⁴² The Gothic home is not merely a collection of objects but a living entity, it is

[...] an experience [...] borne of its occupants conscious and (especially) unconscious desires, but also exceeds them, becoming in the process an independent property now integral to the architecture capable of implicitly influencing its occupant’s subjectivity.⁴³

The haunted house is a key element of Gothic fiction, shaped largely by 19th–century ghost stories that turned it into the motif it is today in the cultural imagination.⁴⁴ It is a textual and symbolic construct, riddled with ambiguity and its significance depends mainly on its social function. As stated by Edwards-Boon:

Gothic literature is not only architect but interior designer, replete with the horrid scenes, sounds and scents of gothic effect and affect. Architecture as a literary object undergoes an imaginative “renovation” as authors use these sites as vessel for social anxieties and transgressions.⁴⁵

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ellis Kate Ferguson, *The Contested Castle: Gothic Novels and the Subversion of Domestic Ideology*, University of Illinois Press, 1989, p. x.

⁴² Andrew Hock Soon Ng, *Introduction: The Subject of the House in Gothic Narratives* in Andrew Hock Soon Ng (ed.): *Women and Domestic Space in Contemporary Gothic Narratives: The House as Subject*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2015, p. 4.

⁴³ Ibid, p. 11.

⁴⁴ Alicia Edwards-Boon, ‘Journeys Through the English Haunted House’, in Clive Bloom (ed): *The Palgrave Handbook of Steam Age Gothic*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2021, pp. 125-142, p. 126.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

Gothic literature "redesigns" architecture, turning it into a vessel for psychological and social fears. Botting argues that "Gothic atmospheres – gloomy and mysterious – have repeatedly signaled the disturbing return of pasts upon presents and evoked emotions of terror and laughter."⁴⁶ Texts like Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* (1764) and Ann Radcliffe's *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794) used haunted spaces to juxtapose beauty with ugliness, order with chaos, countering the norm by depicting its opposite.⁴⁷ Highlighting what is considered ugly and evil fosters an unsettling effect on the reader⁴⁸; because of this, female authors appropriated this mode for their narratives of transgression and female Gothic became one of the most abundant sub-category of the Gothic. Edwards-Boon maintains that the haunted house is not only a Gothic *topos*, but it should be deemed as an archetype that groups together the literary, architectural and sensory characteristics of what one normally associates with a haunted house.⁴⁹ According to Emma Liggins, "haunting in its broadest form not only denotes the appearance of ghosts but a sensation of being troubled, discomforted and being trapped in the past."⁵⁰ Hauntings signify not only ghostly apparitions but also the emotional burden of the past, and homes are a repository of trauma – oppressive power dynamics and other forms of *Othering*, whether it be gender-, class-, or race related – that lingers within the domestic spaces and the people who inhabit them.

The haunted house motif is deeply embedded in both European and American literary traditions. According to Dale Bailey, haunted houses share a common set of characteristics across different genres, from Horror to Gothic. The house often has a sinister history – unpunished crimes, tragic deaths, or unresolved supernatural events. It has a distinguished, aristocratic name and is known locally for being haunted. Stories typically feature a middle-class family who initially doubts possible supernatural causations and is contrasted by a group of believers in the supernatural and/or an oracular figure who warns of impending danger. The plot revolves around a series of escalating supernatural events that isolate the family and eventually ushers them to the discovery of the origin of the spectral events. The story builds towards a climax, revealing the house's dark secrets, often culminating in either the family's escape and the house's destruction or, on the contrary, the house continues to exist.

⁴⁶ Botting, p. 1.

⁴⁷ Ljubica Matek, *The Architecture of Evil: H.P. Lovecraft's 'The Dreams in the Witch House' and Shirley Jackson's 'The Haunting of Hill House'*, CounterText, Edinburgh UP, 2018, pp. 406-423, p. 407.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Edwards-Boon, 2021, p. 127.

⁵⁰ Emma Liggins, *The Haunted House in Women's Ghost Stories: Gender, Space and Modernity 1850-1945*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2020, p. 7.

Some stories include a twist ending that portrays the cyclical nature of evil.⁵¹ Bailey also highlights several recurring thematic characteristics, including: class and gender conflicts, since the haunted house serves as a battleground for social power struggles, reflecting historical oppression or domestic entrapment; economic hardships forcing a family into a haunted house, which symbolizes how economic anxieties manifest as supernatural fears; the past haunting the present, where past sins, unresolved crimes, or personal guilt return to torment the living; the tension between rational skepticism and supernatural belief and the limits of logic in the face of the unknown; and lastly, the recurring nature of evil and the inescapability of past horrors.⁵² Aside from the aforementioned characteristics, the house is locally known to be haunted. It is usually situated in a remote site or surrounded by nature, therefore withdrawn from society, it has a history of abandonment and is even described as a living entity with anthropomorphic features.⁵³ While male authors have frequently used the haunted house motif, it has been especially significant for female writers. This is because the haunted house reflects women's identification with domestic spaces, as dictated by the separate spheres ideology. Female authors "inherited a series of themes and images of women victimized in their own homes"⁵⁴ and have used haunted houses to critique the restrictive domestic ideal, describing homes as places of oppression, confinement, and psychological terror. They explore themes of marital control, isolation, and gendered violence and subtly challenge the current patriarchal norms while still working within socially acceptable literary forms. Readers are invited to participate in the "semiological process of signifying the domestic space"⁵⁵ as a symbol of domestic oppression, where walls, locked doors, and hidden passageways embody the constraints placed on women's lives.

Spatial arrangements function as metaphors for emotional and psychological experiences: walls symbolize boundaries, both physical and psychological, they can represent the maternal body, the uterine walls, and skin. The walls symbolize the binary between inside and outside, in terms of public (outside) and private sphere (i.e., societal roles), but also the division between inner emotions and their external expression. Spaces affect individuals psychologically, as atmospheres from the outside seep into the mind; therefore, spaces are not just backdrop settings, but active forces shaping identity

⁵¹ Dale Bailey, *American Nightmares: The Haunted House Formula in American Popular Fiction*, Popular Press, 1999, p. 56.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Vidler, 1992, pp. 19-20.

⁵⁴ Lynette Carpenter and Wendy K. Kolmar, 'Introduction' in Lynette Carpenter & Wendy K. Kolmar (eds.): *Haunting the House of Fiction: Feminist Perspectives on Ghost Stories by American Women*, 1991, pp. 1-25, p. 14.

⁵⁵ Edwards-Boon, 2021, p. 127.

formation or destruction. Haunted houses become catalysts for conflict, leading characters towards a process of *becoming* (self-discovery) or *disappearing* (annihilation).

The uncanny in haunted houses is deeply connected to Freud's idea of repetitive compulsion ('Wiederholungszwang') – that is, the unconscious drive to repeat events or their circumstances again and again. Michelle Massé links these phenomena of repetition and trauma to the Gothic mode, arguing that Gothic literature helps reactivate and confront repressed trauma that, in Massé's terms, is referred to as the "unspeakable."⁵⁶ The unspeakable trauma in Gothic narratives is often the denial of female autonomy, a theme reflected in the restrictive domestic spaces that women inhabit.⁵⁷ Trauma in these stories is not necessarily a single event but a prolonged state of oppression that shapes and denies women's identities and coping mechanisms.⁵⁸ In Marital Gothic, a mode defined by Massé, female characters are trapped in oppressive marriages, and the use of repetition mimics the cyclical nature of women's oppression:

Repetition in women's Gothic mimes the claustrophobic circularity of women's real lives in that it shows the heroine, who must confront the same terrors repeatedly, doing the same thing over and over. In its presentation of multiple female victims Gothic romance also shows the same thing being done to women over and over; it suggests the inescapable victimization of Woman in general.⁵⁹

The descriptions of the house's design, layout and atmosphere have an ulterior motive: that of conveying attitudes towards domesticity, confinement and patriarchal control. Delamotte identifies the "female double immurement" in two contexts: first, in the domestic spaces as mothers, daughters and wives; second, inside themselves, referring to those parts of them that are not socially acceptable: being rebellious, angry and sexual.⁶⁰

As mentioned before, the domestic space is more than just a setting – it is a stage for repression, power struggles, and psychological displacement. The haunted house can be read as a symbol for the maternal body, particularly indicating the fraught relationship between mothers and daughters.

⁵⁶ Michelle A. Massé, *Gothic Repetition: Husbands, Horrors, and Things That Go Bump in the Night*. *Signs*, Vol. 15, No. 4, 1990, pp. 679-709, p. 681.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 686.

⁵⁹ Delamotte, 1990, p. 10.

⁶⁰ Eugenia C., Delamotte, *Male and Female Mysteries in The Yellow Wallpaper*, *Legacy*, Vol. 5, No. 1, 1988, pp. 3-14., p. 5.

Gaston Bachelard's *Poetics of Space* describes, in maternalistic terms, childhood homes, referring to them as replacements for the womb, enumerating various qualities normally associated with the maternal womb and applying them to the home: protection, warmth, nourishment, similar to a fetus in amniotic fluid. The house is a "human being's first world", a space that is "enclosed, protected, all warm", and inside of it the child is "bathed in nourishment".⁶¹ Bachelard's nostalgic view of the home, connotated only by a positive light as a comforting refuge in which children develop a sense of self and individual identity, contrasts starkly with feminist psychoanalytic theory of the house a source for the uncanny. Freud, however, links the uncanny to the womb in "Das Unheimliche", arguing that fears of being buried alive stem from distorted fantasies of "intra-uterine existence."⁶² Film scholar Barbara Creed demonstrates how horror films depict the womb as an uncanny space, metaphorically materializing it within the domestic setting:

[...] the womb is represented in the horror film in at least two main ways: symbolically in terms of intra-uterine settings and literally in relation to the female body. [...] These intra-uterine settings consist of dark, narrow, winding passages leading to a central room, cellar or other symbolic place of birth. [...] The symbolization of the womb as house/room/cellar or any other enclosed space is central to the iconography of the horror film. Representation of the womb as a place that is familiar and unfamiliar is acted out in the horror film through the presentation of monstrous acts which are only half glimpsed or initially hidden from sight until revealed in their full horror.⁶³

The haunted house is aligned with the womb, and they are both places of beginnings and an extension of the female body; it is also a site where dynamics of gender, repression and identity struggles play out.⁶⁴ In this way, the Gothic mode depicts the complex relationship between the mother and the daughter, but also between the wife and the husband, showing how women's identities are shaped (and haunted) by patriarchal control and maternal idealization. The house reveals itself as a powerful

⁶¹ Luke, Reid, *Endless House, Interminable Dream: Shirley Jackson's Domestic Architecture and the Matrophobic Gothic* in Jill E. Anderson and Melanie R. Anderson (eds.): *Shirley Jackson and Domesticity: Beyond the Haunted House*, Bloomsbury Academic, 2020, pp. 77-96, p. 80.

⁶² Freud Sigmund, 1999, p. 244.

⁶³ Creed, 1993, pp. 53-54.

⁶⁴ Creed, 1993, p. 55.

symbol: it gives a ghostly existence to the psychological and social constraints imposed upon women, transforming a seemingly familiar and nostalgic harbor into a site of gendered dread.

Chapter 2 – The Haunted Novels

In this chapter, the focus will be on the haunted dimensions of three novels which have already been briefly mentioned in the previous pages: *Jane Eyre*, *Wuthering Heights* and *The Turn of the Screw*. At the heart of this investigation lies a focal question: how can Gothic novels deploy haunting to articulate deeper complexities about gender, power, identity and transgression? The hauntings of these novels are far from being mere devices of horror; on the contrary, they are battlegrounds of negotiation of femininity, domesticity, and social order. By examining phenomena of the Gothic mode – such as ghosts, doubles, and mysterious voices – this chapter aims to explore how the genre reflects and challenges systems of power like patriarchy and social control, while also showing how the main characters resist (or try to resist) these forces.

The exploration begins with *Jane Eyre* by Charlotte Brontë, where the domestic space is portrayed as both a place of confinement and one that reflects the main character's hidden fears and traumas. The novel examines the idea of a divided female identity, especially through the contrast between the female “angel” and the “monster”. Bertha Mason, the “madwoman in the attic,” is not just an obstacle to Jane's love story but also represents suppressed fears about race, gender, and sexuality in Victorian society. As Jane moves through different homes, her physical journey mirrors her emotional and psychological growth, showing how buildings, gender roles, and social class work together to limit her freedom. The chapter also looks at how clothing influences identity and acts as both a way to control women and a silent form of expression. In the end, Jane's return to domestic life – symbolized by her marriage to the now-disabled Rochester – is seen as a complex compromise between her desire for independence and the pressures of fitting into a traditional, male-dominated society.

The investigation then moves on to Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights*, where the idea of the female “demon” is portrayed in a more atypical and unusual way. Catherine Earnshaw, the main character, does not follow traditional ideas of how a woman should behave. Instead of being gentle and proper, she is wild, unpredictable, and constantly changing. Her “demonic” traits aren't shown through physical appearance but are hidden behind a mask of politeness and performed behaviors within the house walls. This ability to change helps her fit into society for a while, but in the end, it leads to a breakdown of her true sense of self and to her consequent death. By looking at some of Mikhail Bakhtin's theories, I analyse how the novel includes many conflicting voices and styles of language, reflecting deeper struggles between those in power and those who are not: names, inheritance, and

identity are shaped by gender and performance. Through this lens, *Wuthering Heights* appears as a space of unresolved contradictions, one where the domestic is at once the site of containment and spectral persistence, and where love, language, and identity refuse to stabilize.

The third and final section discusses *The Turn of the Screw* and shows how Henry James creates uncertainty by using a female narrator that destabilizes the boundaries between the real and the imagined, the ghostly and the psychological. The central mystery – whether the ghosts are real or just in the governess's mind – becomes a metaphor for the deeper instability and limits placed on feminine subjectivity and how it is threatened by the gaze of male on-lookers. The novel can be examined in a way that highlights how the governess' voice is put under scrutiny and mediated through layers of male narrations, taking away authority and power from her claims even though she is the one relating the story. James' text can be used as a mirror reflecting Victorian fears surrounding female autonomy, sexuality, and narrative control over their own stories. The governess is stuck in a triptych of roles that were available to women at the time: the mother, the whore, or the lunatic. The governess' narration and her attempt to speak for herself end up emphasizing how difficult it is for women to be fully heard or understood in such a male-dominated system.

Together, these novels show how the Gothic mode – through its tropes of spectrality and confinement – can be used to explore the difficult, haunting experiences of women in the 19th century. The haunting in these stories is not something used merely for dramatic effect – it is a way of showing the inner conflicts and pressures women faced in those times. The haunted novel turns, in effect, into a haunted house: a building where repressed truths roam around its corridors, where the echo of female voices which were unjustly silenced reverberates inside rooms forever locked, and where specters filled with anger, desire and even madness return insistently to tear apart the hypocritical illusion of domestic harmony. As such, the Gothic continues to resonate not only as a genre of fear and fantasy, but also as a powerful tool for questioning the limits and possibilities of identity, agency and resistance.

Chapter 2.1 – Jane Eyre

“‘I am not an angel,’ I asserted; ‘and I will not be one till I die: I will be myself. Mr. Rochester, you must neither expect nor exact anything celestial of me – for you will not get it, any more than I shall get it of you: which I do not at all anticipate.’”⁶⁵

Often serving as a significant plot device, marriage is a key event within the Gothic mode: Horace Walpole’s *The Castle of Otranto*, for instance, opens and closes with weddings. However, Gothic marriages are typically disturbed by unresolved elements from the past that refuse to stay in the shadows; in Walpole’s novel, for instance, these shadows recur through the themes of incest and murder, consequently establishing a pattern for subsequent Gothic novels. Gothic husbands and wives frequently inhabit what Kate Ferguson Ellis defines as a “failed home” that has either “lost its prelapsarian purity and is in need of rectification, or else the wandering protagonist has been driven from the home in a grotesque reenactment of God’s punishment of Satan, Adam and Eve”.⁶⁶

Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre* falls into the first category; yet, by including a scorned, mysterious first wife – a Lilith⁶⁷ figure that expands upon Ellis’s allusion to Milton’s *Paradise Lost* and, consequently, to Adam and Eve – Brontë complicates the notion of the “failed home” by doubling the wife. Within the Gothic mode, the wife is split into two opposing parts contained within herself: the submissive, “helpmeet”⁶⁸ Eve and the assertive, defiant Lilith. Gilbert and Gubar expand on this polarized characterization into the angel/monster dichotomy⁶⁹, asserting that these archetypes are both forms of the same female sickness that lays under deconstruction.

The angelic wife is passive and weak but also suffers “from literal and figurative sickness unto death”,⁷⁰ an affliction that ultimately renders her weak or expendable; conversely, the monster’s sickness originates from her ambition and creativity – instead of passive, it is threatening and contagious, looming over the established social order. The angel must live and die nobly in order to

⁶⁵ Charlotte Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, Penguin Classics, 2006, p. 348.

⁶⁶ Kate Ferguson Ellis, *The Contested Castle: Gothic Novels and the Subversion of Domestic Ideology*. University of Illinois Press, 1989, p. ix.

³ Lilith is considered as Adam’s first wife according to Mesopotamian and Jewish tradition and has appeared in many different cultural contexts. In Goethe’s *Faust*, Faust and Mephistopheles encounter a “pretty witch,” and Mephistopheles says that the woman they see is “Adam’s first wife. Beware of her. Her beauty’s one boast is her dangerous hair. When Lilith wounds it tight around young men she doesn’t soon let go of them again” (lines 4206-11). A noteworthy feature of Bertha is her wild hair, which is “dark” and “grizzled”. (p. 387).

⁴ This description of Eve is from the King James Version of *Genesis* (2:18).

⁵ Gilbert and Gubar, 1979, p. 61.

⁷⁰ Ibid, p. 96.

help the husband's character development, and the monster must be killed or conquered by the man to restore harmony and pave the way for the angel. This dynamic, despite seeming like a contrast between the first and second wives, ultimately reveals a shared vulnerability; both figures are symptomatic of the female author's divided self, reinforcing the notion that they are bound to the same fate.

Jane Eyre explores deeply embedded anxieties surrounding class, colonialism, and patriarchal structures within an aristocratic English manor. Narrated from the perspective of the second wife, Jane Eyre recalls and retells her story of maturation in the tradition of what Heta Pyrhönen calls the "Bluebeard Gothic", which is "a specific variant of the Gothic romance that uses the 'Bluebeard' fairy tale as its key intertext."⁷¹ Similarly to Pyrhönen, Verena-Susanna Nungesser highlights the influence of *Bluebeard* on Brontë's work, noting that the novel is filled with "references to thresholds, doors, locks, and keys" and "the dark secrets of Edward Rochester [...] are bound to certain places: the long passage leading to the attic on the third floor, where Bertha Rochester is kept, is described as "a corridor in some Bluebeard's castle"^{72, 73} Thus, the Bluebeard Gothic of *Jane Eyre* revolves around the interaction between the second wife's journey of self-discovery and the manor, as she unearths the past that the patriarchal space entombs and that acts as a metonym for the othered wife. Through this narrative, Brontë manages to expose the fragility of the wife's position within the house, clarifying the complexities of female identity, power, and subjugation within marriage.

The novel follows a typical Gothic formula: a young woman, isolated and uncertain of her place in the world, enters an old, monumental house and encounters an older, mysterious man with whom she falls in love. However, the novel was received in a way that reveals its deeper palimpsestic nature. As noted by Gilbert and Gubar, many Victorian critics, while reading *Jane Eyre*, were disturbed "not so much by the proud Byronic sexual energy of Rochester as by the Byronic pride and passion of Jane herself, not so much by the asocial sexual vibrations between hero and heroine as by the heroine's refusal to submit to her social destiny".⁷⁴ As declared by Elizabeth Rigby:

⁷¹ Heta Pyrhönen, *Bluebeard's Accomplice: 'Rebecca' as a Masochistic Fantasy*, *Mosaic: An Interdisciplinary Critical Journal*, 38(3), 2005, pp. 149–65, p. 149.

⁷² Brontë, 2006, p. 166.

⁷³ Verena-Susanna Nungesser, *From Thornfield Hall to Manderley and Beyond: Jane Eyre and Rebecca as Transformations of the Fairy Tale, the Novel of Development, and the Gothic Novel*, in: *A Breath of Fresh Eyre: Intertextual and Intermedial Reworkings of Jane Eyre*, edited by Margarete Rubik and Elke Mettinger, 2007, pp. 209–26, p. 216

⁷⁴ Gilbert and Gubar, 1979, p. 338.

Jane Eyre is proud, and therefore she is ungrateful, too. It pleased God to make her an orphan, friendless, and penniless – yet she thanks nobody, and least of all Him, for the food and raiment, the friends, companions, and instructors of her helpless youth.... On the contrary, she looks upon all that has been done for her not only as her undoubted right, but as falling far short of it.⁷⁵

Ultimately, what horrified the Victorians “was Jane’s anger”.⁷⁶ The Gothic mode, characterized by rupture and disruption, provided Brontë with a space to explore this “rebellious feminism.”⁷⁷ Initially, Jane comes to occupy a very ambiguous position as Thornfield’s governess. Her first perception of the environment reflects the instability of her own identity. As Jane first approaches Thornfield, she describes the “long front of a house: candle-light gleamed from one curtained bow-window: all the rest were dark.”⁷⁸ To fully grasp the meaning of Jane’s initial image of Thornfield, it must be read alongside her past homes: Gateshead and Lowood. Gateshead, where the orphaned Jane lives with the Reed family, is where she first realizes her complex position within society. When John Reed physically attacks her by throwing a book at her head, she is reminded her place as an outsider and a dependant, and she retaliates with such a ferocity that renders her feral like a “rat” and a “mad cat” in the eyes of the observers.⁷⁹ As punishment, she is carried upstairs and locked in the red room, and she remarks that she “was a trifle beside myself; or rather *out* of myself, as the French would say.”⁸⁰ She is locked in what Gilbert and Gubar describe as a “patriarchal death chamber”⁸¹, where Mr. Reed, Jane’s father figure “breathed his last.”⁸² Jane experiences the first of many future bouts of disassociation. While considering ways of escaping imprisonment, Jane sees in a mirror a “strange little figure there gazing at me, with a white face and arms specking the gloom, and glittering eyes of fear moving where all else was still: I thought it like one of the tiny phantoms, half fairy, half imp.”⁸³ From the very beginning, Jane sees herself divided between the angel/monster dichotomy, and she goes on to experience the archetypical attribute of the monstrous woman, which Gilbert and Gubar define as “a third, even more terrifying” method of escape than starvation or flight: “escape through

⁷⁵ Quarterly Review 84 (December 1848): pp. 173-74, in Gilbert and Gubar, p. 338.

⁷⁶ Gilbert and Gubar, 1979, p. 338.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Brontë, 2006, p. 153.

⁷⁹ Ibid, p. 67.

⁸⁰ Ibid, p. 49.

⁸¹ Gilbert and Gubar, 1979, p. 359.

⁸² Brontë, 2006, p. 51,

⁸³ Ibid, p. 52.

madness”.⁸⁴ After seeing a strange light, Jane remembers that “my heart beat thick, my head grew hot; a sound filled my ears, which I deemed the rushing of wings: something seemed near me; I was oppressed, suffocated: endurance broke down; I uttered a wild, involuntary cry;”⁸⁵ and her reaction to this invasion of sensory stimuli results in her becoming unconscious and being transferred to the nursery. This moment foreshadows her later association with Bertha Mason, and all these experiences from Jane’s childhood will construct her identity of young, orphaned girl – the head trauma, mirrored images, and the physical/auditory panic – that inevitably becomes intricately tied to how she interacts with the surrounding environment.

Judith Leggatt and Christopher Parkes observed that, through the lens of Foucault’s panoptical carceral network, “Gateshead encloses Jane both physically and imaginatively, but she has normalized her situation to the extent that she only subconsciously realizes that she is incarcerated within the house itself.”⁸⁶ Jane internalizes this imprisonment so thoroughly that she does not immediately recognize her own state of confinement. Even after leaving the red room, while recovering in the nursery, the first thing she sees is “a terrible red glare, crossed with thick black bars. I heard voices, too, speaking with a hollow sound, as if muffled by a rush of wind and water: agitation, uncertainty, and an all-predominating sense of terror confused my faculties.”⁸⁷ She perceives the nursery’s barred windows and oppressive atmosphere as an extension of her captivity. Even if she has left the red room, Jane has already internalized this figurative prison of patriarchal enforcement; the monstrous part of herself is bound by the carceral network, and she is “continually held within the social order of the state [where] there is no marginal or liminal world to which dissidents can escape.”⁸⁸ After Gateshead, “a microcosm of the well-disciplined school”⁸⁹ is overlayed onto the red prison of rage in Jane’s time at Lowood. The red room’s symbolic prison is replaced by a more structured institutional discipline: Mr. Brocklehurst publicly humiliates Jane. During this punishment, she steps outside of herself again; she was placed on a stool “by whom I don’t know: I was in no condition to note particulars.”⁹⁰ As noted by Leggatt and Parkes, the carceral network is proposed by Foucault as the more civilized version of public, Early Modern punishments. Mr. Brocklehurst’s cruel

⁸⁴ Gilbert and Gubar, 1979, p. 359.

⁸⁵ Brontë, 2006, p. 54

⁸⁶ Judith Leggatt and Christopher Parkes, *From the Red Room to Rochester’s Haircut: Mind Control in Jane Eyre*. ESC: English Studies in Canada, 32(4), 2008, p. 169-88, p. 175

⁸⁷ Brontë, 2006, p. 57.

⁸⁸ Leggatt and Parkes, 2008, p. 171.

⁸⁹ Ibid, p. 178.

⁹⁰ Brontë, 2006, p. 114.

punishment forces Jane to tolerate the subtle internal regulation encouraged by his disciplinary counterpart: Miss Temple. Under her tutelage, Jane is encouraged to become the angel; after Mr. Brocklehurst is removed from his position of power, Jane “remained an inmate of its walls, after its regeneration, for eight years: six as a pupil, and two as a teacher.”⁹¹ Jane eventually adapts to this system and internalizes her subordination. Despite the fact that she is now willingly participating in upholding the patriarchal values of the carceral network, she still sees herself as a prisoner. She is met with imprisonment both as a monster and as an angel, therefore her plea is not for complete freedom but for “a new servitude”⁹², leading her to seek work in a different role: the governess.

Carolyn Vellenga Berman observed that “the governess at once marked and unsettled the boundary between the unpaid labor of middle-class wives and the paid labor of their servants.”⁹³ Jane, dressed in her plain yet refined Lowood attire that communicates both her cultivated femininity and her independence matured over experience, is neither a monster nor an angel, but rather the embodiment where the two collide into each other. She is educated, independent and salaried, yet she lacks the social privileges of marriage. As noted by Gilbert and Gubar, Brontë herself struggled with a similar identity crisis, as shown by her brief career as a governess and her use of a masculine *nom de plume*: Currer Bell. Both in her works and her own life, her femininity was always put under discussion; even her death remains subject to conflicting interpretations, from the tragic and romanticized tuberculosis⁹⁴ to hyperemesis gravidarum – “a pregnancy complication that was ascribed to neurosis and a rejection of her pregnancy and femininity.”⁹⁵ Since she had lived between all these kinds of realities of femininity, Brontë’s personal struggles and anxiety of authorship manifest in Jane’s anxieties about singularity and self-definition. As she arrives at Thornfield, Jane is housing within herself two warring identities, but she is also confronted by the architectural embodiment of her fractured identity. The manor, with its nebulous, looming darkness, symbolizes her internalized red room, while its illuminated, panoptical bow window functions as a reminder of the ever-watchful gaze of patriarchal authority that she is about to enter. In Kristeva’s terms, Thornfield becomes a repetition of the abject that is “the ‘object’ of primal repression [...] the ability of the speaking being,

⁹¹ Ibid, p. 138.

⁹² Ibid, p. 140.

⁹³ Carolyn Vellenga Berman, *Undomesticating the Domestic Novel: Creole Madness in Jane Eyre*. Genre, 32(4), 1999, pp. 267-96, p. 284

⁹⁴ For more on the romanticization of tuberculosis among authors and artists, see Susan Sontag, *Illness as Metaphor; and Aids and Its Metaphors*, New York: Doubleday, 1990

⁹⁵ G. Weiss, *The Death of Charlotte Brontë*, Obstet Gynecol., 78(4), 1991, pp. 705-8, p. 705

always already haunted by the Other, to divide, reject, repeat.”⁹⁶ Subconsciously, Thornfield acts as the ultimate threat to Jane’s already fragile equilibrium as governess. These parts of her are thrown away and externalized in the architectural manifestation that is Thornfield, and they will continue to divide until meaning reaches the point of homogeneity.

Jane Eyre explores the uncanny presence of the first wife, whose existence disrupts the patriarchal order of the home. As Jane spends more time face-to-face with these manifestations of the abject, she begins to experience an eerie connection to it, and becomes part of the sequence of signifiers that point to femininity. This series is further fueled when the narrative begins to mirror her bodily double, which turns the rejected, abject space into one of uncanniness. This variation becomes first noticeable in the imaginative expressions and fantasies of Jane, which increase exponentially as she spends more time in Thornfield. Karen Chase Levenson argues that in Brontë’s work “the domestic embraces the uncanny, without in any way defusing or transforming it,” and Brontë “severs affiliation between the gothic, with its secrets, terrors, and dreads, and the uncanny, which embraces estrangement, basks in unfamiliarity, and finds intrigue— even pleasure— in what is alien.”⁹⁷ Expanding on Levenson’s analysis by pairing the abject with the uncanny uncovers a more mutualistic relationship. Jane, for instance, soon after coming to Thornfield, begins to step outside of herself again as a way of coping with her confinement in Thornfield. Yet, this dissociation stems from a masculine desire for movement and change, which is in opposition to her previous abject feminine rage. Her “sole relief” from the restlessness and *ennui* “was to walk along the corridor of the third story, backwards and forwards, safe in the silence and solitude,” where she could “open my inward ear to a tale that was never ended – a tale my imagination created.”⁹⁸ As she is confined in a house that is erected upon her abject experiences, Jane starts to comprehend the ubiquitous and inevitable nature of enclosure and confinement that women face, which triggers the transfer of her anger from the abject, shapeless darkness that looms over Thornfield to the uncanny, physical form of Bertha.

Bertha Mason exists at the intersection of multiple forms of oppression and, just like the governess, is in a position of threat against the patriarchal order. As Berman points out, Bertha represents, at the same time, two threats to domesticity: colonialism and madness. Her ambiguous racial identity – described only as “Creole” – is never completely identified; she is positioned as neither fully

⁹⁶ Julia Kristeva, *Approaching Abjection*, in *Powers of Horror*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1982, pp. 1-32, p. 12.

⁹⁷ Karen Chase Levenson, *Brontë’s Domestic Uncanny*. *Victorians: A Journal of Culture and Literature*. Vol. 130, 2016, pp. 124-38, p. 128.

⁹⁸ Brontë, 2006, p. 170.

European nor fully Caribbean, but rather “becomes a more powerful synecdoche for the West Indies by encompassing Creoles of all classes – colonizers and colonized.”⁹⁹ This makes her a symbol of colonial instability: she is both English enough to be an aristocratic wife and “mad” enough to be repudiated as not-English, but as “other”. Like Jane, who exists between the roles of servant and gentlewoman, Bertha is “a necessary yet disturbing intruder” in the English aristocratic manor.¹⁰⁰ Therefore, Bertha and Jane occupy the same role in the home; as famously argued by Gilbert and Gubar, “Bertha, in other words, is Jane’s truest and darkest double,” a physical manifestation of Jane’s repressed desires and frustration.¹⁰¹

However, their connection cannot be reduced to mere psychological mirroring. Bertha’s racial identity intersects with her gender, which places her in an even more precarious position than Jane: Bertha is doubly threatening to the patriarchy and consequently aggravates the oppression she faces. While Jane acts similarly to how Bertha does at different times, Jane’s “whiteness” gives her privileges that are denied to Bertha. As she is Jane’s “dark double”¹⁰² and a woman of mixed race, Bertha embodies the most abject femininity for the English patriarchy; she behaves as the uncanny “not self” that Jane subconsciously projects her fantasies onto but – because of Jane’s identity as a white woman – can never completely come to reality.

Jane’s growing awareness of her limited position as a woman is accompanied by an increasing sense of connection to Bertha. She reflects on these limits while pacing the attic floor – the same way as the hidden yet eerily neighbouring Bertha does – and remarks that “it is thoughtless to condemn [women], or laugh at them, if they seek to do more or learn more than custom has pronounced necessary for their sex.”¹⁰³ After saying this, immediately Jane recalls “Grace Poole’s laugh: the same peal, the same low, slow ha! ha! which, when first heard, had thrilled me: I heard, too, her eccentric murmurs; stranger than her laugh.”¹⁰⁴ Gilbert and Gubar suggest that Grace Poole’s laughter – that is later revealed to be Bertha’s – “uncannily echo the murmurs of *Jane’s* imagination.”¹⁰⁵ Nevertheless, a closer reading of the laughter further amplifies the uncanny effect. Freud argues that the uncanny double “is accentuated by mental processes leaping from one of these characters to another – by which we should call telepathy –, so that the one possesses knowledge, feelings and experience in

⁹⁹ Berman, 1999, p. 270.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid, p. 284.

¹⁰¹ Gilbert and Gubar, 1979, p. 377.

¹⁰² Ibid.

¹⁰³ Brontë, 2006, p. 171. Emphasis mine.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

¹⁰⁵ Gilbert and Gubar, 1979, p. 367.

common with the other.”¹⁰⁶ Jane and Bertha’s minds are each other’s reflections through the murmurs, but Bertha’s laughter also hints at the fact that she *hears* and *responds* to Jane’s reflections. It functions as a telepathic acknowledgment: Bertha is not only aware of Jane’s thoughts but is also amused by them. By laughing at Jane’s musings, Bertha reinforces her active influence and acts as a reminder of the key limitation that Jane ignores: the female body.

Bertha, who never speaks in the novel, embodies the extreme consequences of female transgression. While Jane’s angelic relationship with Rochester is built on a meeting of the minds, Bertha – who is never quoted nor speaks for herself – represents the rejection of intellectualism in favor of bodily, monstrous desire. She is reduced to pure sensuality, a monstrous figure of desire. She is the madness of the red room and a living consequence of threatening the patriarchal structure, all at once. The very things that Jane abjected in her description of Thornfield are brought closer to her by Bertha. In this way, Bertha symbolizes both the threat of unchecked female passion and the fate that awaits women who challenge societal expectations of a patriarchal society. Ultimately, Bertha forces Jane to confront the reality that the Gothic home is not merely a setting but an active force of repression. The uncanny presence of the first wife reminds Jane that her own position is tenuous; the woman who came before her was not just an obstacle to be removed but a warning sign of what could happen should she, too, push too far against the confines of her role.

In order to explore the climax of this doubled relationship and Rochester’s confession, it is important to turn to another element of the Gothic home that Jane confronts at a turning point of the novel: clothing. Amy Montz, in her examination of clothing found in Victorian and Neo-Victorian novels, describe clothing as “the ‘getting dressed’ part of home.”¹⁰⁷ Yet the agency behind Jane’s outfit is uncertain: it is picked out for her specifically – this lack of control highlights how clothing functions as both a marker of feminine identity and an instrument of repression. This palimpsestic function exerted by clothing is acknowledged by Montz, who states that like romance fiction, clothing is “a so-called frivolous ‘feminine concern’ [...] because it is for women, by women, and about women and women’s concerns, both facilitating and curbing agency.”¹⁰⁸ This is most relevant especially because one of the most terrifying moments in the novel involves clothing, making it essential to

¹⁰⁶ Freud, 1999, p. 9.

¹⁰⁷ Amy L. Montz, *Fashion and the Female Gothic, or, What to Wear to a House-Burning Party*. *Women’s Studies*, 50(7), 2021, pp. 747-62, p. 748.

¹⁰⁸ Montz, 2021, p. 749.

analyze how garments are worn, what they represent, and why their removal or destruction is significant.

On the eve of Jane's wedding, she "dreamt" of "a woman, tall and large [...] I know not what dress she had on: it was white and straight; but whether gown, sheet, or shroud, I cannot tell."¹⁰⁹ While Jane's wedding dress is meant to be something that she can put on and then take off, Bertha is trapped in a perpetual state of being the forsaken bride, as a sort of marital gown/shroud hybrid, trapped as a bride but treated as a revenant. Jane never sees Bertha's face directly but catches her reflection in a mirror, the "dark, oblong glass"¹¹⁰ that reminds of the time she once saw a monstrous "imp" in the red room's looking glass. Like the "imp" Jane saw in the past, this spectral woman reminds Jane of a monster, this time "the foul German spectre – the Vampyre."¹¹¹ In contrast to the impish figure of Jane's childhood, however, this figure doesn't merely stares at her from the red room's small, cold mirror – instead, it actively destroys: Bertha wears Jane's veil, looks at herself for a moment before she "rent it in two parts, and, flinging both on the floor, trampled on them."¹¹² For Jane, this act is an externalization of her deepest fears about marriage and loss of autonomy. For Bertha, however, clothing symbolized her entrapment and, at the same time, serves as her primary, most powerful means of communication. The subconscious communication between Jane and Bertha that began in the uncanny space of the attic has ushered into Jane's conscious mind, and the physical aspect of their relationship is amplified through this eerie exchange of garments between the two Mrs. Rochesters.

When the wedding is disrupted by the revelation of Rochester's secret – that is, that Bertha is part of the living – Jane is brought to the attic to see her. The scene functions as a rough caricature of the red room from Jane's childhood: "without a window there burnt a fire, guarded by a high and strong fender, and a lamp suspended from the ceiling by a chain."¹¹³ The attic is a dark, windowless space in which Bertha is completely cut off from the outside world – an eerie version of Plato's cave, where meaning is derived from flickering shadows. Jane watches Bertha as she runs "backwards and forwards," and says that "What it was, whether beast or human being, one could not, at first sight, tell: it grovelled, seemingly, on all fours; it snatched and growled like some strange wild animal: but it was covered with clothing, and a quantity of dark, grizzled hair, wild as a mane, hid its head and

¹⁰⁹ Brontë, 2006, p. 375.

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹¹ Ibid, p. 376.

¹¹² Ibid.

¹¹³ Ibid, p. 386.

face.”¹¹⁴ At first glance, Jane struggles to determine whether the figure before her is human or beast. The only clear sign of Bertha’s humanity is her clothing, yet this very marker also confines her within patriarchal definitions – with Rochester’s mocking declaration after Bertha tries to attack him, “that is *my wife*,”¹¹⁵ which reaffirms how Bertha exists only as a symbol of marital and colonial failure. Jane’s reaction to Bertha’s plight is telling. She immediately understands that she cannot stay with Rochester, but she does not meditate on Bertha’s suffering any further. Instead, Bertha becomes an obstacle to her union with Rochester; she is a figure that must remain locked away while Jane tries to move forward. Jane can still escape as an option, but there is no place to escape towards for a woman like Bertha in nineteenth-century England: her fate is sealed, she is doomed to live as the unacknowledged, haunted past that torments the attic of the English aristocracy.

By choosing to leave Thornfield, Jane prioritizes her independence over financial security and romantic attachment. However, in doing so, she also abandons her anger and her uncanny double. The attic, which housed both her darkest emotions and her human counterpart, is left behind, and Jane moves toward a new life. Bertha, meanwhile, remains trapped in a meaningless cycle of movement, symbolizing the past that English aristocracy seeks to repress but can never truly erase. Jane’s escape grants her independence, but it comes at a cost. The fire of female rage, embodied by Bertha, is left to burn out in the attic. The Gothic home remains a space of repression, where unwanted histories – both colonial and feminine – are locked away rather than confronted.

Afterwards, Jane’s return to Thornfield is triggered by an eerie, supernatural moment – a telepathic call from Rochester. As she feels her “heart beat fast and thick”, which happens also when she disassociates, Jane hears Rochester’s voice call out to her three times. This deep, psychic connection compels her to reject St. John’s cold and passionless marriage proposal and seek out Rochester instead.¹¹⁶ Gilbert and Gubar interpret this telepathic call as “merely a sign that the relationship for which both lovers had always longed is now possible”, hinting at the fact that Bertha is no longer an obstacle to their union.¹¹⁷ Jane’s feeling rings true; when she reaches Thornfield, she finds it in ruins. Jane describes her feelings in an extensive metaphor about the wreckage:

A lover finds his mistress asleep on a mossy bank; he wishes to catch a glimpse of her fair face without waking her. He steals softly over the grass, careful to make no sound;

¹¹⁴ Ibid, p. 387.

¹¹⁵ Ibid, p. 388. Brontë’s emphasis.

¹¹⁶ Ibid, p. 536.

¹¹⁷ Gilbert and Gubar, 1979, p. 383.

he pauses – fancying she has stirred: he withdraws: not for worlds would he be seen. All is still: he again advances: he bends above her; a light veil rests on her features: he lifts it, bends lower; now his eyes anticipate the vision of beauty – warm, and blooming, and lovely, in rest. How hurried was their first glance! But how they fix! How he starts! How he suddenly and vehemently clasps in both arms the form he dared not, a moment since, touch with his finger! How he calls aloud a name, and drops his burden, and gazes on it wildly! He thus grasps and cries, and gazes, because he no longer fears to waken by any sound he can utter – by any movement he can make. He thought his love slept sweetly: he finds she is stone dead.¹¹⁸

This description, like Jane's stay at Thornfield, swerves abruptly off course, as the lover soon notices that his mistress is "stone dead". Reading this strongly physical, sexualized description along with Jane's deconstructive relationship with Bertha, Jane distances herself both from Bertha and Thornfield by associating them with the image of the corpse, yet she also seems to be mourning the lost possibilities Bertha embodied – the potential for rebellion, resistance, and alternative forms of female identity. Apart from Jane's metaphor, Bertha's factual death is deeply symbolic. Throughout her captivity, living in a shadowy, dark world, fire was one of the only links to civilization that Bertha was allowed to have in her attic. While she communicated with Jane through clothing, she talked to Rochester with fire; her decision to burn down Thornfield is her ultimate act of defiance, her final rejection of patriarchal control. In the end, rather than perish in the flames of her prison, she chooses to leap to her death, exercising the only agency left to her. This act highlights the two paths available to women in the Victorian era: compliance or destruction. Bertha embodies the extreme end of resistance, while Jane seeks a middle ground. By surviving and moving forward, Jane ensures her continued existence, but she also leaves behind the radical possibilities Bertha represented.

After Jane learns of Thornfield's destruction, she continues to Ferndean, where Rochester has retreated in physical and social isolation to recover from the loss of his hand and sight. The house, hidden deep in the woods, exists outside conventional society. Unlike the rigid, confining structures of Thornfield, Ferndean is intertwined with nature, providing a space for transformation. This isolation, combined with Rochester's physical disabilities and loss of status, together with Jane's plentiful inheritance, is what allows for the "marriage of true minds" that Jane always wanted.¹¹⁹

¹¹⁸ Brontë, 2006, p. 543.

¹¹⁹ Gilbert and Gubar, 1979, p. 387.

Rochester, now physically weakened and stripped of his former dominance, has been metaphorically “tamed,” while Jane, bolstered by her inheritance, enters the relationship as an equal. Jane then, when reflecting on her nuptial bond with Rochester, quotes Genesis, emphasizing that she is “ever more absolutely bone of his bone and flesh of his flesh.”¹²⁰ Because Lilith/Bertha has been exorcised, Jane assumes the role of Eve in a newly restored Garden of Eden. However, this apparent paradise comes at a cost. While Jane achieves love and stability, her former passions – her anger, independence, and desire for freedom – are subtly subdued. By no means does this argument intend to downplay Brontë’s monumental feminist narrative; *Jane Eyre* remains a long-standing feminist classic for a reason. Yet, it is important to explore and question the nuances of marriage when a character as independent as Jane ends her story with a husband. Leggatt and Parkes, for example, argue that “the key to understanding the ending is to see how Jane’s imagination has been reformed by the time she settles at Ferndean,” as below the apparent paradise, “the natural world has been coopted into the larger social sphere.”¹²¹ By marrying Rochester and civilizing the fallen, wounded man, Jane operates with the very same carceral network that shaped her struggles since the red room: the network goes from being claustrophobic to pervasive, omnipresent. By becoming aware of the threats Bertha posed to the patriarchy, Jane shies away from this loop of *différance* and goes for a role that is much firmer. She can exist peacefully – and productively, since she has a son – as the “helpmeet”, but she will never again be part of Bertha’s thrill of playing with fire.

Written in a period of intense social and legislative change – following the abolition of slavery – Brontë’s novel engages with a symbolic triangular dynamic: Adam (Rochester), Eve (Jane), and Lilith (Bertha). Through this Gothic framework, Brontë critiques and reimagines traditional femininity, challenging the roles available to women. However, while Jane finds love and fulfillment, her journey ultimately reinforces the constraints she once resisted. The novel’s conclusion suggests that true freedom might remain elusive, even for a heroine as determined as Jane.

¹²⁰ Brontë, 2006, p. 574.

¹²¹ Leggatt and Parkes, 2008, pp. 184-5.

Chapter 2.2 – Wuthering Heights

“I wish I were out of doors – I wish I were a girl again, half savage and hardy, and free... and laughing at injuries, not maddening under them! Why am I so changed? Why does my blood rush into a hell of tumult at a few words? I’m sure I should be myself were I once among the heather on those hills...”¹²²

Late eighteenth-century Gothic fiction constructs the female demon as a visibly transgressive figure with easily discernible grotesque, physical deformities and supernatural powers, serving as external manifestations of her inner deviance. Characters such as Carathis in *Vathek* by Beckford, who conducts alchemical experiments within her sinister laboratory of mutes and mummies, and Matilda in Lewis’s *The Monk*, whose expertise in witchcraft facilitates her demonic influence, exemplify a model wherein the monstrous feminine is defined in explicit opposition to prevailing eighteenth-century ideals of virtue and sensibility. In these early Gothic texts, the female demon’s aberrant mind needs to be reflected on her physical form. However, with the emergence of women writers such as Ann Radcliffe, the representation of the female within the Gothic mode undergoes a significant transformation. The difference between the Male Gothic filled with violence and the more psychologically oriented Female Gothic becomes increasingly obvious. As noted by Clemens, the rise of the Female Gothic in the 1790s signals a critical intervention by women writers and readers, who, while appropriating conventions of the Gothic mode, revised them to interrogate and explore gender roles.¹²³

In the early period of the Female Gothic, women writers blended two genres: on one hand they appropriated traditional Gothic tropes while, on the other hand, they integrated elements of the “novel of sentiment”¹²⁴. This combination aligned with the values of the emergent “moral elite” and the cult of sensibility found in the middle class, and in turn were in sharp contrast with the corruption of the aristocracy and the perceived savagery of the lower classes. While the Female Gothic reimagines the figure of the Gothic heroine and her narrative trajectories, Valdine Clemens notes how “[t]here is no overt questioning of the validity of the social system that serves women’s needs so poorly”.¹²⁵ The

¹²² Brontë Emily, *Wuthering Heights*. Oxford World’s Classics. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009, p. 149.

¹²³ Valdine Clemens, “Sentiment versus Horror: Generic Ambivalence in Female Gothic and Ann Radcliffe’s *A Sicilian Romance*.” *The Return of the Repressed: Gothic Horror from The Castle of Otranto to Alien*. New York: State University of New York Press, 1999, pp. 41-58, p. 41.

¹²⁴ Ibid, p. 42.

¹²⁵ Ibid, p. 50.

conclusions of these novels often reaffirm domestic ideology, reinforcing women's subordination within an idealized vision of private life. Clemens proposes the term "Sentimental Female Gothic" to describe this conservative iteration of the genre, distinguishing it from later, more radical publications. In response to the proliferation of female-authored Gothic fiction, male writers escalated the depiction of violence against women, participating in what Kari J. Winter defines as "a dynamic process of action, reaction, and counterreaction, a perpetual writing and rewriting" within the Gothic mode.¹²⁶ The flexibility of the genre thus enabled readers with various perspectives of femininity, evolving from traditional Gothic formulations, through the Sentimental Female Gothic's endorsement of gendered domesticity, and culminating in more transgressive models that incorporate the excesses of violence within the Male Gothic and issues concerning the domestic.

Emily Brontë introduces a new type of female demon within the Gothic mode. Following and analyzing Catherine's domestication reveals the importance of performative agency and how it facilitates the female demon's acceptance into a feminized, domestic sphere. The concepts of masculinity and sensibility are taken into consideration as well, since the female demon is guided by effeminate male figures that mediate her entrance into the domestic realm, only for her to be subordinated to the authority of more hegemonically masculine demon lovers. Drawing on feminist and Gothic theoretical frameworks, this chapter aims to argue that although the female demon's newly acquired skills of performance and transformation temporarily disrupts normative gender rules and boundaries of the domestic space, Brontë suggests that the demon's domestication will also be her demise.

By moulding existing literary forms – elements of the Gothic with nineteenth-century Realism – Emily Brontë constructs new perspectives on domesticity and femininity. As part of the second wave of the Female Gothic, *Wuthering Heights* reflects the genre's intensifying concern with the tangible fears and anxieties that women confront in their daily lives, including "confinement within the domestic space, their place within the family, the loss of their self-identity and the threat of male sexual energies".¹²⁷ Domestic reality becomes the real site of horror: these "material" conditions displace the traditional supernatural phenomena found in the Gothic mode. Within the domestic context, Catherine Earnshaw achieves a form of freedom through a process of mutability and

¹²⁶ Kari J. Winter, "Sexual/Textual Politics of Terror: Writing and Rewriting the Gothic Genre in the 1790s." *Misogyny in Literature: An Essay Collection*. Ed. Katherine Anne Ackley. New York: Garland, 1992, pp. 89-103, p. 93.

¹²⁷ Simon Avery, "Some strange and spectral dream': The Brontës' Manipulation of the Gothic Mode." *Brontë Society Transactions* 23.2, 1998, pp. 120-135, p. 122.

transformation. The Gothic heroines of this period no longer require the aid of supernatural forces to facilitate their transgressions; instead, they have inside of them the capacity to cross boundaries through performance and internal agency. The fluidity of genre embraced by nineteenth-century Female Gothic writers thus permits a broader range of representations of the ideal of femininity, while also enabling an exploration of the unstable margins of female sexuality, challenging and exceeding the social constraints imposed upon women.

The term “demonic” echoes Mary Russo’s theorization of the grotesque, which she defines broadly as any “deviation from the social norm”, a concept that is particularly significant given that “the female is always defined against the male norm”.¹²⁸ In *Wuthering Heights*, Brontë reimagines the female demon not as a figure marked by physical grotesqueness, but as one who has the ability to “shape-shift” in order to hide her true “demonic” self, while also roaming freely inside of the domestic space. Although initially resistant to domesticity, the female demon gradually recognizes the strategic advantages of gaining access into this space, using it as a protective guise. It’s important to note that domestication in *Wuthering Heights* is not mediated by a conventional maternal figure – entirely absent from the novel – but rather by a feminized male character such as Edgar Linton, who seeks to impose his own idealized perception of femininity onto Catherine. It is within this process of social conditioning that the female demon demonstrates a remarkable capacity for “shape-shifting”, performing accordingly to the expectations of society and her delicate, moralizing instructor. Brontë portrays this ability as both empowering and deeply destructive: while it is true that it allows Catherine to roam within the domestic realm, it simultaneously brings her to a profound loss of her authentic self, which is subsequently taken advantage of by her demonic counterpart, Heathcliff. The dissolution of the female demon’s identity takes place as a consequence of the female demon’s strategic dissembling and her transgressive exploration of the boundaries of female sexuality. Ultimately, Brontë’s narrative regresses toward the traditional Gothic tropes: Catherine is reduced to a spectral presence, a wandering spirit cursed by a masculinized, destructive power. In an effort to reassert social and gender hierarchies, Brontë retreats into the structures of the earlier Gothic tradition exemplified by Beckford and Lewis, thus reinscribing the female demon within a framework of punishment and containment.

The cult of sensibility in the eighteenth century sought to sensitize consciousness “in order to be more acutely responsive to signals from the outside environment and from inside the body [and] takes for

¹²⁸ Mary Russo, *The Female Grotesque: Risk, Excess and Modernity*. New York: Routledge. 1995, pp. 11-12.

its basis the increase of women writers and readers”, ensuing a gendering of sensibility.¹²⁹ This expansion of sensibility resulted in necessitating a moral code through which the middle classes could distinguish themselves from both aristocratic decadence and lower-class brutality. Sensibility thus plays a crucial role in the domestication of Brontë’s female demon. Catherine Earnshaw’s decline is precipitated by her encounter with the less threatening, feminized figure of Edgar Linton. Brontë’s decision to use Edgar as the guide who introduces Catherine to the culture of sensibility represents a significant example of gender reversal, a typical trope within the Gothic mode. Rather than adhering to the conventional pattern in which the heroine’s natural sensibility redeems a morally compromised male character, Brontë subverts expectations by depicting a feminized male character attempting to domesticate and morally instruct a transgressive female protagonist.

Similarly to the cult of sensibility, construction of masculinity required a strict adherence to codes that encouraged a delicate balance between excess and refinement. Edgar Linton has specific expectations concerning (idealized) femininity that Catherine is compelled to meet in order to access the refined, civilized world secluded within Thrushcross Grange. As explained by Hoeveler, Catherine’s decision to marry a feminized male figure is unlike the typical Gothic narrative in which the wild-spirited heroine is abandoned by her lover, who ultimately marries a virgin.¹³⁰ Instead, Catherine aligns herself with a “safely feminized man”,¹³¹ opting for a “safe” marriage, putting security over passion. However, Edgar’s inability to force Catherine into the domestic domain necessitates external intervention: the Lintons’ bulldog symbolically “drags Catherine kicking and screaming, into the other, proper world, with its other, proper husband”.¹³² Within this framework, the Lintons consider Catherine a “fetish..., a new object that they can shape into social conformity”.¹³³ Edgar’s bourgeois status demands the suppression of Catherine’s sexual nature, the refinement of her manners, and the civilizing of her appearance. Although Catherine “shape-shifts” successfully enough to be married to Edgar, the sustainability of her performance deteriorates upon Heathcliff’s return.

Excess in its different forms such as “over-exposure,” spectacle, and risk are the defining features of the female grotesque.¹³⁴ In Gothic fiction, the expressions of female sexual desire are “equally central

¹²⁹ G.J. Barker-Benfield, *The Culture of Sensibility*. Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1992, pp. xvii-xix.

¹³⁰ Diane Long Hoeveler, *Gothic Feminism*. Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1998, p. 191.

¹³¹ Ibid.

¹³² Ibid, p. 192.

¹³³ Ibid, p. 193.

¹³⁴ Russo, 1995, p. 53.

to the damnation of the individual”.¹³⁵ These elements of excess apply to Catherine Earnshaw, as Brontë moves away from the conventional representations of the female demon. The author focuses on Catherine’s childhood to emphasize her true nature of transgressiveness. From an early age, Catherine acts mischievously, consistently testing the limits of parents’ and Nelly’s patience: “[h]er spirits were always at high-water mark, her tongue always going—singing, laughing, and plaguing everybody who would not do the same... a wild wick slip she was—but she had the bonniest eye, and sweetest smile”.¹³⁶ Her behavior is initially dismissed as childish, but it actually hints at Catherine’s extreme side and at her latent, subversive tendencies. Furthermore, Catherine’s selection of a whip as a desired gift¹³⁷ “carries associations of domination and the outdoors”¹³⁸, suggesting something more than innocent, childish play. Together, these two moments illustrate Brontë’s construction of a new model of the female demon: a figure who is defined by a combination of independence, authority, and beauty. This reimagined archetype would continue to influence later nineteenth-century representations of deviant femininity, as seen in characters such as Lucy in Braddon’s *Lady Audley’s Secret*.

In *Wuthering Heights*, the female body is a site of continual transformation: it grows, bleeds, gives birth, submits, conquers, and ultimately diminishes. It is the battleground upon which the issues of femininity are violently worked out. Judith Butler’s theories can be applied to Brontë’s female demon: they concern the permeability of the body, the constructs of gender and how the unstable concept of femininity allows for competing notions on the female body and women’s place in society.¹³⁹ Complementing Butler’s theories, Mary Russo defines the female grotesque as “multiple and changing,” whereas the classical body is “static, self-contained, symmetrical, and sleek”.¹⁴⁰ In this regard, artifice and performance emerge as the female demon’s most powerful weapons. Catherine’s capacity to dissimulate results in her unstable and inconstant personality, whereas a character such as Isabella more closely aligns with the classical ideal of femininity, embodying the idea of the unchanging, classical body. A comparison of these two figures reveals that, although both women endure brutal physical violence – Isabella at the hands of Heathcliff, through sustained physical and

¹³⁵ George E. Haggerty, *Unnatural Affections: Women and Fiction in the Later 18th-Century*. Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1998, p. 173.

¹³⁶ Brontë, 2009, p. 73.

¹³⁷ Ibid, p. 67.

¹³⁸ Ellis Kate Ferguson, “Emily Bronte and the Technology of the Self.” *The Contested Castle: Gothic Novels and the Subversion of Domestic Ideology*. Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1989, pp. 207-222, p. 210.

¹³⁹ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New York: Routledge, 1990.

¹⁴⁰ Russo, 1995, p. 8.

psychological abuse – the consequences of such violence differ considerably. Unlike her demonic counterpart, Isabella's adherence to the classical feminine ideal precludes any kind of transformation or empowerment as the ones experienced by Catherine. On the other hand, the fluid, ever-changing body of the female demon allows her to transgress the boundaries of the domestic and the forbidden.

The eighteenth century saw the creation of the public and private spheres, a division that emerged from the ever-increasing separation of society from the state. This division helped the development of what Jürgen Habermas calls the "public sphere", in which individuals could engage in discussing public matters and developing a public opinion. Being part of the public sphere emphasized the distinction between "being" and "seeming," in order to differentiate the nobleman, who possessed the right to "seem," from the burgher, who has nothing and is merely compelled to "be".¹⁴¹ Alongside this, a reconfiguration of masculinity unfolded: working-class men increasingly mimicked the appearance and mannerisms of middle-class in an effort to gain the same type of respectability. Unlike the working-class men, however, women – who also aimed at public recognition – found it impossible to transform their bodies in order to appeal to the conditions of the public sphere. They remained largely confined to the private sphere, which itself became increasingly gendered feminine. Habermas traces this phenomenon through the growth of the reading audience, noting women's increased presence as both readers and writers, particularly in the Gothic genre. The woman writer plays a risky role, trying to balance between the public and private spheres, her participation masked by what Habermas defines as the "veil of mystery".¹⁴² Judith Butler further interrogates the role played by women's body in maintaining this exclusion from the public, whilst Patricia McKee highlights women's knowledge as a crucial factor in their marginalization. Within the private sphere, women's experiences remain inaccessible to public knowledge, relegating them to what McKee calls an "unknowable realm". Women fit into a realm disconnected from public knowledge, a place that "assumes characteristics of realms of obscurity discovered, or produced, by disciplines of knowledge".¹⁴³

¹⁴¹ Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*. Trans. Thomas Burger. Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1989, p. 13.

¹⁴² Ibid, p. 3.

¹⁴³ Patricia McKee, *Public & Private: Gender, Class, and the British Novel (1764-1878)*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997, pp. 4-5.

Catherine Earnshaw began to occupy the lawless, uncontrollable and mysterious realm of nature, since she was denied entry into the domestic sphere. Rejecting her role as a dutiful daughter, Catherine prioritizes power over her father's approval:

“Why canst thou not always be a good lass, Cathy?” And she turned her face up to his, and laughed, and answered, “Why cannot you always be a good man, father?”¹⁴⁴

Deprived of the “proper” education necessary to instill ideals of femininity and domesticity, Catherine's true nature flourishes untamed on the moors, a space Ellis describes as a “world untouched by man made gender divisions”¹⁴⁵. Yet Catherine's early displays of dominance and ambition suggest that she will fight to become something far beyond herself. From her childhood, she understands that she does not – and cannot – “fit into” the traditional domestic space, prompting her to search independently beyond the boundaries prescribed by society.

Performance is an essential mechanism through which the exploration of public and private spaces becomes possible, while at the same time exposing a variety of perceptions of femininity. Emily Brontë initiates *Wuthering Heights* by presenting the unrefined, natural disposition of her heroine during childhood, highlighting Catherine's wildness and resistance to conventional norms. Over time, however, and with the influence of the domesticated male figure of Edgar Linton, Catherine gradually comes to recognize that by practicing a disciplined practice of self-control, she can dissimulate her way into the domestic space that had been denied to her from birth. Persuaded by the tangible benefits of forsaking her wild ways and behaviors, Catherine fully embraces the performance of ideal femininity, which Chaplin describes as the imitation of the “language and gestures of sensibility”.¹⁴⁶ By performing on the outside according to the expectations of the domesticated man, Catherine is not only able to mask her true nature, but also to wreak havoc to the sanctity of the private sphere from the inside.

Catherine's literal – and symbolic – entry into the domestic realm is allowed by the firm grasp of Skulker, the Lintons' bulldog, whose attack forcibly extracts her from the wild moors into the refined environment of Thrushcross Grange. During her convalescence, surrounded by the opulence and lavishness of her new surroundings, Catherine undergoes a visible transformation which aligns her

¹⁴⁴ Brontë, 2009, p. 74.

¹⁴⁵ Ferguson, 1989, p. 213.

¹⁴⁶ Sue Chaplin, “Terror, Transcendence and Control in Ann Radcliffe's *The Italian* and Charlotte Dacre's *Zofloya, or The Moor*.” *Law, Sensibility and the Sublime in Eighteenth-Century Women's Fiction: Speaking of Dread*. Aldershot & Burlington: Ashgate, 2004, pp. 127-144, p. 138.

more closely with the domestic and the ideal feminine decorum. However, her intrinsic need to dominate requires her to shape-shift in order to secure her position within this new space. Upon her return to Wuthering Heights, she vividly demonstrates the success of this transformation: she has evolved from the “wild, hatless little savage jumping around the house” into a “very dignified person, with brown ringlets...and a long cloth habit which she was obliged to hold up with both hands that she might sail in”.¹⁴⁷ Nevertheless, Nelly Dean perceives Catherine’s “double character”,¹⁴⁸ noting that while it is true that Catherine performs the role of the refined lady at Thrushcross Grange, she reveals without shame her true nature at Wuthering Heights.

The dissonance between appearance and reality becomes apparent over time, when Catherine’s violent tendencies surface, shocking the delicate Edgar Linton because of the cruelty shown towards Nelly, Hareton, and ultimately Edgar himself, whom she strikes during a fit of rage.¹⁴⁹ Edgar’s horrified reaction warns Catherine that her excessive behavior has momentarily pierced the “veil of mystery” of her performance. Nelly’s admonition to Edgar “[t]o take warning and begone! It’s a kindness to let you have a glimpse of her genuine disposition”,¹⁵⁰ exposes Catherine for the female demons that she is, capable of manipulating appearances to conceal her true nature. Recognizing her mistake that might threaten her comfortable domestic position, Catherine is quick to make amends, appealing to Edgar’s sensibility by threatening to induce herself into illness,¹⁵¹ a strategy she later repeats when her plans to reconcile Heathcliff and Edgar are thwarted. It is ultimately because of her interaction with a feminized male figure such as Edgar that Catherine learns to deny her authentic self in favor of performing the ideal of femininity. However, her wild, transgressive nature remains incompatible with the tight boundaries of the domestic space, which will not be able to contain her for long.

Having internalized the “discipline of sensibility” under the guidance of her domesticated male instructor, the female demon becomes increasingly vulnerable to the influence of her demonic counterpart. As Chaplin observes, although Catherine initially performs the role of the heroine of sensibility for Edgar, she unconsciously reverts to the “language of sensibility”¹⁵² in the presence of Heathcliff. Catherine’s gradual assimilation into the domestic ideal and her marriage to Edgar make

¹⁴⁷ Brontë, 2009, p. 83.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid, p. 96.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid, p. 100.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid.

¹⁵¹ Ibid, p. 101.

¹⁵² Chaplin, 2004, p. 140.

her lose control over her demon lover: she has softened and is thus more susceptible to Heathcliff's destructive return. In this instance, the female demon experiences a dramatic loss of self, a consequence of the continual transformations and dissimulations she has been performing.

Concurrently, Heathcliff's own transformation fortifies his position. By improving his social class and masculine identity, he can exert a new-found authority over the now-domesticated and weakened Catherine. Heathcliff's ambiguous origins, emphasized by his dark complexion and gypsy-like appearance¹⁵³ "insists on a kind of radical indeterminacy for the foundling"¹⁵⁴. His mysterious disappearance and ensuing return signal a dramatic shift of his status. Significantly, Heathcliff opens up about the pressure he feels to transform himself according to Catherine's new expectations following her refinement at Thrushcross Grange, lamenting to Nelly, "I wish I had light hair and a fair skin, and was dressed and behaved as well, and had a chance of being as rich as [Edgar] will be".¹⁵⁵ Although his physical appearance remains unchanged, Heathcliff still manages to achieve success by elevating himself socially after leaving Wuthering Heights, coming back as a gentleman.

This symbolic "rebirth"¹⁵⁶ is just as obscure as his first appearance, yet now Heathcliff has managed to climb up the social ladder. His new image as the "self-made man"¹⁵⁷ aligns more closely with Catherine's romanticized ideal and positions him, at the same time, closer to his plan of exacting revenge against Hindley. Judith Butler argues that gestures, mannerisms, and appearances are "performative in the sense that the essence or identity that they otherwise purport to express are fabrications manufactured and sustained through corporeal signs and discursive means".¹⁵⁸ Heathcliff's transformation can be understood as a successful performance of masculinity and class refinement, making him the prince that young Cathy always dreamed he could be.¹⁵⁹ Catherine, upon his return, is struck by the profound change: "I was amazed...to behold the transformation of Heathcliff. He had grown a tall, athletic, well-formed man...A half-civilized ferocity lurked yet in the depressed brows and eyes full of black fire".¹⁶⁰ Unlike the overt spectacle surrounding the female demon's continuous metamorphoses, Heathcliff's transformation occurs offstage, and crucially, his

¹⁵³ Brontë, 2009, p. 41.

¹⁵⁴ John Allen Stevenson, "'Heathcliff is Me!': *Wuthering Heights* and the Question of Likeness." *Nineteenth-Century Literature* 43.1, 1988, pp. 60-81, p. 67.

¹⁵⁵ Brontë, 2009, p. 87.

¹⁵⁶ Stevenson, 1988, p. 68.

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid*, p. 69.

¹⁵⁸ Butler, 1990, p. 136.

¹⁵⁹ Brontë, 2009, p. 87.

¹⁶⁰ *Ibid*, p. 121.

performance of class and masculinity is not only accepted but rewarded, in stark contrast to the destabilizing consequences experienced by his female counterpart.

Heathcliff is able to shape-shift just like Catherine does, therefore he is associating himself with the “demonic” and socially deviant forces typically linked to the female grotesque. His successful transformation proves a significant limitation: although the female demon can perform and dissimulate her way into forbidden spaces, she ultimately cannot transgress all social and gendered boundaries. Catherine’s initial power has been weakened because of the extended exposure to the domestic space and the internalization of the culture of sensibility. What began as a conscious performance of ideal femininity gradually becomes ingrained in her identity, resulting in the loss of her original self. Through repeated crossings of social and gender boundaries, the female demon becomes unstable and increasingly dependent upon her metamorphosed male counterpart, whose influence ultimately leads to her downfall as a traditional Gothic monster.

By the end of Volume I of *Wuthering Heights*, Catherine cannot recognize herself anymore. Heathcliff’s return triggers a profound psychological crisis in Catherine, which becomes apparent in self-inflicted bouts of madness as she struggles to reconcile the opposing forces represented by Edgar and Heathcliff. When Catherine doesn’t recognize her own reflection in the mirror – which is confirmed by Nelly’s statement, “It was *yourself*, Mrs. Linton”¹⁶¹ – her complete estrangement from her domestic identity becomes clear. It is precisely this role as “Mrs. Linton” that Catherine can no longer accept. Heathcliff, who is well aware of the performative nature of her domestication, confronts her: “[y]ou teach me now how cruel you’ve been – cruel and false. *Why* did you betray your own heart, Cathy?... You have killed yourself”.¹⁶² Catherine’s disintegration of the self leaves her vulnerable, fully subject to Heathcliff’s power, and initiates her final transformation into the traditional Gothic ghost.

Catherine’s spectral fate is sealed through Heathcliff’s curse: “Catherine Earnshaw, may you not rest, as long as I am living!... I cannot live without my life”.¹⁶³ Catherine is put under a curse: she becomes earthbound, caught between worlds by the force of her demon lover’s will. Rather than transcending the mortal realm, as she once envisioned – telling Nelly she would be “incomparably beyond and above you all”¹⁶⁴ – she will roam the moors as a ghost. Though she is a spectral being, she still endures

¹⁶¹ Brontë, 2009, p. 147. Brontë’s emphasis.

¹⁶² Ibid, p. 181.

¹⁶³ Ibid, p. 186.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid, p. 180.

for the first time the physical violence which she had previously managed to elude. When Lockwood encounters her spirit, he grasps it violently: “I pulled its wrist on to the broken pane, and rubbed it to and fro till the blood ran down and soaked the bed-clothes: still it wailed”.¹⁶⁵ This moment illustrates Catherine’s final subjugation. No longer mutable or elusive, she is reduced to the traditional Gothic ghost: trapped within a static, passive femininity and subject to the patriarchal violence she once resisted.

The Gothic genre itself is characterized by its flexibility and dynamism, as it evolves from the traditional “Male Gothic” to the Sentimental Female Gothic, and ultimately to the more radical vision introduced by authors such as Emily Brontë. This mutability within the Gothic mode enables the emergence of a new form of the female demon, along with varying opinions of the ideal of femininity. In earlier Gothic narratives, the female demon is traditionally portrayed as a grotesque sorceress whose outward appearance reflects her inner corruption. However, in *Wuthering Heights*, Brontë reimagines the female demon: it is now a figure whose physical form no longer betrays her true nature; instead, she has the power of shape-shifting and use affectation to hide her true self, enabling her to conceal her inherent wildness beneath an affected veneer of domestic propriety.

This reconfiguration of the Gothic archetype coincides with Brontë’s broader strategy of subverting stable meanings, not only in character construction but also at language level and in narrative form. When readers are first introduced to the opening of *Wuthering Heights*, they are also introduced to a series of oppositions and contrasts: the Heights and the Grange, the Earnshaws and the Lintons, between 1500 and 1801, between misanthropy and amiability, heaven and hell. These differences are often the focus of critical analysis; however, it is crucial to consider the oppositions which are found in terms of language, not characters and locations. By applying Mikhail Bakhtin’s theories, it is possible to analyze the textual meaning of the novel too. Bakhtin’s theory of dialogism stated that nothing has meaning by itself, but only in relation to something else. The concept of heteroglossia, as found in the OED, is defined as “the coexistence of multiple language varieties within a notionally unitary national language, literary text, or other form of discourse; the language varieties (regional, social, ethnic, professional, etc.) that coexist within a notionally uniting dominant form.”¹⁰² For Bakhtin, language is never neutral but is always a site of ideological contest, shaped by relations of power and authority. In *Wuthering Heights*, Brontë stages a struggle between dominant and marginalized discourses. This struggle hints at the difference between those with privilege – the

¹⁶⁵ Ibid, p. 58.

dynastic patriarchs of the Linton and Earnshaw families – and those without privilege – the women and the orphans, in particular Cathy and Heathcliff.

The interplay of names and narrators in *Wuthering Heights* underscores the novel's preoccupation with masculine authority and the instability of identity, both within the text and in its publication history. Emily Brontë's decision to publish under the pseudonym "Ellis Bell" in 1847 initially reinforces patriarchal norms by masking female authorship with a seemingly male name. This choice is mirrored in the structure of the narrative, which begins with the male voice of Lockwood as the framing narrator. However, from a Bakhtinian perspective, this apparent centrality of male authority is destabilized in several ways. Firstly, the name "Ellis" is not exclusively male but androgynous, echoing the pseudonyms "Currer" and "Acton" adopted by Charlotte and Anne Brontë. Secondly, Lockwood's narrative authority is quickly subordinated to that of Nelly Dean, whose embedded storytelling comprises the majority of the novel. Brontë's manipulation of narrative voice thus introduces a polyphonic structure that undermines any single, monologic point of view, aligning with Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of dialogism in the novel.

This dialogic approach is also reflected in the onomastic strategies of the text. The name "Heathcliff" operates as both a singular forename and a surrogate surname, signaling the character's ambiguous social status as an orphan without paternal lineage—a condition that, in 19th century property law, aligns him more closely with the legal and economic vulnerabilities of women. Yet, the significance of this name is complicated by its reappropriation: it originally belonged to the Earnshaws' deceased son, suggesting an implicit right to inheritance. Moreover, the name "Heathcliff" echoes the physical environment of the Heights, much like Lockwood's explanation of "Wuthering" as denoting violent weather. These associations anchor Heathcliff to both the house and the elemental landscape, reinforcing his claim to power despite his outsider status.

The naming of Catherine further illustrates Brontë's critique of patriarchal naming conventions. The etched variations – Catherine Earnshaw, Catherine Heathcliff, and Catherine Linton – signal the first of Catherine's movements through different relational identities: from daughter, to lover, to wife. Yet, "Catherine Heathcliff" never legally materializes, existing only in Catherine's declaration, "I am Heathcliff," a moment of ontological fusion that prefigures both her psychic collapse and the thwarted union between herself and Heathcliff. This unfulfilled name resurfaces as a spectral signifier of disruption, haunting both family lines. In contrast, the second Catherine, Catherine and Edgar's daughter, undergoes an inverse trajectory: born Catherine Linton, she temporarily becomes Catherine

Heathcliff through marriage, and finally Catherine Earnshaw upon her union with Hareton. These shifts not only collapse generational boundaries but also enact a reversal of the social hierarchies initially imposed on the first Catherine. The overlapping names of mother and daughter render identity itself a contested site, as evidenced by Edgar's refusal to call his daughter by her full name, fearing the encroachment of Heathcliff's influence.

Heathcliff's project of self-fashioning through nominal power culminates in his conversion of a single name into a dynastic title. Initially defined by the lack of a family name, Heathcliff spends the latter half of the novel appropriating property, lineage, and social status through strategic marriages and the enforced circulation of his name. This transformation renders "Heathcliff" a potent, even threatening, surname—one that seeks to overwrite the names of both the Lintons and the Earnshaws. His revenge is completed not simply through inheritance or dominance, but through linguistic usurpation, reducing "Linton" to the subordinate status of a forename and thereby enacting symbolic castration upon the established patriarchal order.

The novel's preoccupation with names, meaning, and voice ultimately extends to metaphysical dimensions. As Heathcliff's material conquest reaches its end, his struggle shifts to the spiritual realm, where he seeks a reunion with Catherine in death, framing their love as a cosmic opposition between heaven and hell. The early scenes of the novel hint at this eschatological subtext, juxtaposing religious phrases such as "The Lord help us" with folkloric references to sprites and fairies. This tension is encapsulated in the figure of Joseph, whose rigid religiosity contrasts with the more ambiguous spiritualism of the moors. Such oppositions embody Bakhtin's theory of language as a site of ideological contestation: the sacred and the profane, the institutional and the mythic, all coexist in unstable dialogue. The metaphysical struggle is thus not confined to Heathcliff's quest but reverberates through the novel's treatment of identity, gender, and performance – especially as embodied by Catherine.

Brontë begins her novel by revealing the untamed spirit of her heroine during childhood. As Catherine enters the refined, civilized world of the domestic sphere, she is prompted—particularly through the influence of the feminized male figure of Edgar Linton—to adopt an artificial domestic persona. Her transformation is not merely social but metaphysical, reflecting the same spiritual dualism that characterizes Heathcliff's own journey. The existence of a double nature in the female demon allows her to navigate freely and undetected among the inhabitants of the domestic; therefore, she blends into the very space that tried to exclude her. However, the very same sensibility that enabled her

infiltration also renders her vulnerable at the hands of her demon lover. Catherine's eventual transformation into the more traditional Gothic demon occurs because of Heathcliff and his transformation: his destabilizing influence exposes and accelerates the female demon's inner fragmentation.

The powers of performance and metamorphosis grant the female demon with an unprecedented access to the domestic world; however, Brontë ultimately suggests that this process of assimilations might lead to her destruction. The author reverts to the conventional Gothic trope of the downfall following the female demon's transgressions, criticizing the limits of the idealization of the domestic space, and the lethal consequences of a femininity that is not natural, on the contrary, it is an artificial construct shaped through repression and artifice. Ultimately, the novel's cyclical structure is affirmed through its conclusion. The re-emergence of the name Hareton Earnshaw—carved above the entrance to Wuthering Heights and inherited by the final male character—symbolically restores the house to its original lineage. Yet this restoration is not a simple reversion but a synthesis. Hareton's union with the second Catherine represents a reconciliation between names, families, and narrative voices. Meanwhile, Heathcliff, the orphan and narrative interloper, exits the novel not as a defeated figure but as one who has redirected his ambitions from the material to the metaphysical. In this sense, *Wuthering Heights* is less a static opposition between chaos and order than an evolving dialogic space, where names, voices, and identities are constantly negotiated and never fully resolved.

Chapter 2.3 – The Turn of the Screw

I seemed to float not into clearness, but into a darker obscure, and within a minute there had come to me out of my very pity the appalling alarm of his being perhaps innocent. It was for the instant confounding and bottomless, for if he *were* innocent what then on earth was I?¹⁶⁶

Henry James wrote *The Turn of the Screw* at the behest of Robert J. Collier, who had recently taken over his late father's periodical, *Collier's Weekly*. Seeking to elevate both the literary quality and sales of the magazine, Collier commissioned James – by the time a recognized figure in the writing world – to produce a serial story. James undertook the writing of the novella during the autumn of 1897, completing the manuscript by the end of November that year. The work was subsequently published in twelve consecutive weekly installments in *Collier's Weekly*, spanning from January 27 to April 16, 1898. From the beginning, James wanted to bring out the serialized version in book form, and in October 1898 it was printed in two separate editions, one in England and one in the United States. A decade later, Henry James oversaw the publication of what is now referred to as *The New York Edition* of his collected works. James did make some changes, but they were minor: he did not rewrite any part of the story, and the small adjustments he had made were a few “tinkering” ones of punctuation, style and diction. The only one that could be considered a major change was that Flora's age was raised from six to eight years in the latest edition.¹⁶⁷

The Turn of the Screw has proven to be a chameleon text due to its capacity to accommodate a wide range of interpretive frameworks. Depending on who is reading it, the story can be seen as a Gothic tale reminiscent of Edgar Allan Poe, a romantic story in the mode of Nathaniel Hawthorne, or a realist work akin to the style of William Dean Howells. Beyond the literary context, it has also been interpreted through diverse theoretical lenses: psychoanalytic readings frame it as a tale of sexual repression, while moral and religious interpretations see it as an allegory of good versus evil; it has been viewed as a detective story focused on murder and deception, or as a social critique advocating for the improved treatment of children. Furthermore, scholars have deeply analyzed James's engagement with the scientific discourse of the time, especially on spiritual phenomena, either to confirm or to disprove certain beliefs. The novella has been read as both a reinforcement and a critique

¹⁶⁶J. Henry, P.G. Beidler, *The Turn of the Screw*, in P.G. Beidler (eds): *The Turn of the Screw. Case Studies in Contemporary Criticism*, Palgrave, London, 1995, p. 115.

¹⁶⁷ H. James, P.G. Beidler, *The Turn of the Screw. Case Studies in Contemporary Criticism*. Palgrave, London, 1995.

of the dominant social structures of the late 19th century. Ideologically, it has served as fertile ground for Marxist, feminist, and queer interpretations. The breadth and persistence of critical engagement with *The Turn of the Screw* is such that scholars often dispense with direct reference to either the author or the title in their analyses. Indeed, a phrase as oblique as “The Mysteries at Bly” is typically sufficient to signal that the subject under discussion is Henry James’s enigmatic novella.

The central critical debate surrounding Henry James’s *The Turn of the Screw* revolves around the actual existence of the ghosts – specifically, whether Peter Quint and Miss Jessel are external, supernatural entities or mere psychological projections of the governess’s disturbed mind. Are they liminal figures, coming back from the dead, only to return and haunt the living? Or are they projections conjured by a protagonist suffering from delusions? Are these apparitions a menace to the children, or do they exist only within the governess’ troubled mind? Scholar debate has been dominated by similar questions for over a century, with virtually every major study of the novella addressing, either explicitly or implicitly, this essential interpretive dilemma. Whether as a causal reader or as a critic, it is nearly impossible to engage with the text *without* adopting a position in the debate. This opposition between supernatural and psychological, haunting and delusional, has fueled countless essays and discussions and ended up elevating the status of what might have been just another ordinary story by James. A potentially minor work has instead found a place within the canon largely because of the constant quest for truth that it continues to foster. The two principal readings are so starkly different and mutually exclusive but both sides can agree on one common denominator: that *The Turn of the Screw* is a brilliant, successful work. Whether it is viewed as a wonderfully crafted supernatural story or as a penetrating exploration within the psyche of a governess, the novella is widely recognized as a triumph of narrative ambiguity.

In recent times, however, a third, dual, critical position has emerged: that *The Turn of the Screw* is *both* a ghost story *and* a psychological study. Exponents of this approach argue that the novella can simultaneously contain both of the views, and that its enduring power lies in its deliberate ambiguity. From this perspective, James’s narrative design allows for the coexistence of numerous, contradictory interpretations, encouraging readers to maintain multiple, even conflicting, views, without looking for an absolute truth. It is precisely this interpretative ambiguity that makes the story so compelling. The critical fascination with *The Turn of the Screw* is deeply rooted in its refusal to have a single, definite meaning. This openness not only accounts for its status as James’s most frequently read, taught, and discussed work, but also provides a rich platform for pedagogical engagement. Central questions – Can the governess be trusted? Is she sane? What is the narrative function of the prologue?

Are the children innocent or complicit? How does Mrs. Grose identify Peter Quint from the governess's description? How and why does Miles die? – continue to provoke debate and analysis. Issues such as sexual repression, coercion, and coded representations of homosexuality further deepen its interpretative complexity. In this context, the question of whether there is a “best” reading of the novella remains open, with many scholars embracing the view that its greatness lies precisely in its resistance to closure and in the multiplicity of plausible interpretations it contains.

The Turn of the Screw has frequently been described as the “small problem child” of Henry James's fiction.¹⁶⁸ For over half a century, the narrative has been at the center of a polarized debate, however, a different approach can be proposed, one that considers the text through the lens of gendered representation and subjectivity, as argued by Priscilla Walton.¹⁶⁹ The interpretative ambiguity that lies at the heart of *The Turn of the Screw* originates from questions surrounding the reliability (or unreliability) of its female narrator. This narrative uncertainty serves as a framework through which James explores the instability of feminine representation – the manner in which women are constructed within the text – and feminine subjectivity – the position from which a woman speaks. Far from being a straightforward expression of a female character's inner life, the governess's narrative is a male-authored simulation – a literary act of cross-gender ventriloquism that foregrounds the difficulties Victorian women faced in articulating their own experiences. The novella thus becomes not a woman's attempt at self-expression, but rather a man's effort to inhabit and narrate from a female point of view.

Henry James's typical narrative preferences do not include the use of a first-person narrative voice; in fact, he even stated in his Preface to *The Ambassadors* the faults and weaknesses in employing it.¹⁷⁰ The fact that James adopts this narrative mode in *The Turn of the Screw*, and does so through a female narrator, should not be left unnoticed. While it may appear coincidental, adopting a female voice certainly gives space for critical speculation on gendered power imbalances. The tension between the “I” of the fictional governess and the implicit “I” of the male author produces a dynamic interplay of power and voice. On one hand, James appropriates a feminine perspective to enrich the psychological complexity of the text; on the other, his male authorship ensures a level of authority that the governess, within the diegesis, can never fully possess. This narrative arrangement holds up

¹⁶⁸ Mark Seltzer, *Henry James and the Art of Power*. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1984, p. 66.

¹⁶⁹ Priscilla L. Walton, “‘What Then on Earth Was I?’: Feminine Subjectivity and ‘The Turn of the Screw’.” in Beidler, P.G. (eds.), *The Turn of the Screw. Case Studies in Contemporary Criticism*. Palgrave, London, 1995, pp. 253-268.

¹⁷⁰ James Henry, Preface to *The Ambassadors. The Art of the Novel*. Ed. R. P. Blackmur. New York: Scribner's, 1962, pp. 320-22.

a mirror to a broader cultural phenomenon: the historic privileging of male-written texts over those written by women. The use of male pseudonyms by female authors throughout the 19th century points to the fact that a story that bears the name of a man receives more respect and attention than a story bearing the signature of a woman; therefore, when James wears the “I” of the first-person narrator in *The Turn of the Screw*, his masculine authorship lends more credibility and authority to the story – a credibility that would not have been so readily afforded to a female writer engaged in the same activity. This way, the author can both utilize and critique the gendered hierarchies of literary authority. James simultaneously exploits the power imbalance by taking it upon himself to represent femininity, while also distancing himself from that very femininity because of his masculine signature. These dynamics are further complicated by the circumstances under which James obtained the story's inspiration.

In the Preface to the New York Edition of *The Turn of the Screw*¹⁷¹, Henry James traces the genesis of the novella to a story he heard during a visit to a country estate. The tale was relayed to him by his male host, who, in turn, had heard it from a woman. James states: “The story would have been thrilling could she but have found herself in better possession of it”¹⁷², thereby positioning the original female narrator – whom James had never met – as an inferior storyteller. Nevertheless, although “on the surface there wasn’t much”¹⁷³ to her story, that very story provided James with an opportunity to give to the woman’s story the depth he believed it lacked, therefore transforming what he perceived to be a narratively deficient tale into an accomplished work of fiction. These dynamics of narrative appropriation and authorial enhancement are mirrored within *The Turn of the Screw* itself. Just as James “eyed” and evaluated the narrative potential of the woman’s account, the unnamed narrator and Douglas similarly scrutinize and “eye” the governess’s manuscript before presenting it to the reader. The governess’s narrative is thus doubly buried – first by James, then by the internal narrators – ultimately reinforcing the marginalization of the female voice. When the governess is finally allowed to speak, her narrative “I” lacks the authority of both her author and the framing male narrators. As argued by Walton, the novella “effectively dramatizes the disenfranchisement of feminine subjectivity”¹⁷⁴ within a patriarchal literary framework.

It is crucial to examine the ways in which the feminine narrative subject – the “I” – operates as a mimicry of the masculine one. As feminist theorist Elizabeth Grosz notes, in a patriarchal system that

¹⁷¹ James, H., Beidler, P.G., 1995, pp. 117-24.

¹⁷² Ibid, p. 118.

¹⁷³ Ibid.

¹⁷⁴ Priscilla L. Walton, p. 255.

denies women a legitimate speaking position, the feminine “I” is necessarily displaced and deferred, a mere shadow of the masculine “I”¹⁷⁵. In this context, the female voice is not an autonomous subject but a derivative construct, shaped by male authorship. By interpreting a feminine voice, then, James does not merely represent a gendered narrative choice but underscores the broader cultural presumption that male authors are more competent at articulating female subjectivity than women themselves. This phenomenon aligns with psychoanalytic theories of subjectivity, particularly those advanced by Jacques Lacan, wherein the speaker’s identity is constituted in relation to the listener.¹⁷⁶ Within a patriarchal order, women are positioned not as speakers but as listeners – silent recipients of discourse whose existence validates male subjectivity. The subject/object distinction is fundamental to the structuring of desire: in patriarchy, the male subject is affirmed through his gaze upon the female object, who is rendered passive and watched, rather than active and watching. Thus, the act of narration – and the gaze it implies – becomes a site where gendered power dynamics are both represented and enacted.

In a patriarchal society, women are often denied both their own subjectivity and the desire to express it. Because women are seen as “lacking” power (devoid of the Phallus), they are often placed in passive roles, viewed more as objects than individuals and their own sexuality is denied. If a woman does express desire or shows signs of having her own voice, she is often criticized, silenced, or derided. This is because such behavior denotes her attempt to perform as a subject of discourse, and such a position cannot be granted to her by the patriarchal order, because it “requires her objectification in order to affirm the subjectivity of the male”.¹⁷⁷ *The Turn of the Screw* reflects this issue of feminine subjectivity – how difficult it is for a woman to be seen and heard as a true subject. The story begins inside of a country house where guests are sitting around a fire telling ghost stories. The prologue is “written” by an unnamed narrator and “read” by a man named Douglas, one of the guests. The story was told to him by a governess he knew in his youth; the governess, therefore, is presented not as a storyteller in her own right, but as a character in Douglas’s story. Her voice is filtered through two male narrators.

In Victorian fiction, prologues would rarely accompany a literary work; therefore, the use of a prologue raises the question of why her story needs to be introduced and validated by men. The answer lies in the social status of governesses during the Victorian era. As women in a complicated

¹⁷⁵ Elizabeth Grosz, *Jacques Lacan: A Feminist Introduction*. London: Routledge, 1990, p. 72.

¹⁷⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷⁷ Priscilla L. Walton, 1995, p. 256.

and often mistrusted position within the household, governesses were often seen as morally questionable, as discussed below. Because of this, the governess' story requires male endorsement to be taken seriously – an issue that continues to resonate in modern interpretations of the novella, particularly regarding whether she is a trustworthy narrator. The difficulties surrounding the figure of the governess in Victorian discourse are rooted in broader anxieties about single women and their sexuality, a sexuality that, according to Walton, “because it connotes desire, serves as a marker of subjectivity”.¹⁷⁸ Governesses, typically unmarried and often from a lower social class than their employers, occupied a precarious social position: they would be employed to act as maternal figures, and they were expected to embody the ideals of purity and virtue associated with respectable women. However, their unmarried status also rendered them potentially disruptive to the domestic order, as they could not be fully assimilated into the household hierarchy.

Victorian ideology tended to classify women into one of three archetypal roles: the mother, the whore, or the lunatic. A “respectable” mother figure was presumed to be asexual and pure, taking away from her any kind of sexual connotation; any expression of desire could shift a woman’s identity toward the disreputable categories of either the sexually aggressive “whore” or the irrational “madwoman”, highlighting the unfeasibility to accept the sexual side of femininity. As Mary Poovey argues in her analysis of *Jane Eyre*, the governess was caught in a sexual double bind, since she was meant to uphold middle-class ideals, yet her liminal position made her a potential threat:

That representations of the governess in the 1840s brought to her contemporaries' minds not just the middle-class ideal she was meant to reproduce, but the sexualized and often working-class women against whom she was expected to defend, reveals the mid-Victorian fear that the governess could not protect middle-class values because she could not be trusted to regulate her own sexuality. The lunatic's sexuality might have been contained, but the prostitute's sexual aggression was undisguised; to introduce either such sexuality or such aggression into the middle-class home would have been tantamount to fomenting revolution.¹⁷⁹

Poovey's observation highlights how the label “governess” could slip uneasily between the social identities of mother, whore, and lunatic. This ambiguity helps explaining why Douglas, in the

¹⁷⁸ Ibid.

¹⁷⁹ Mary Poovey, *Uneven Developments: The Ideological Work of Gender in Mid-Victorian England*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1988, p. 131.

prologue of *The Turn of the Screw*, provides a personal character reference for the governess before presenting her narrative. His testimonial and that of the narrator are meant to establish her credibility and moral integrity in advance, depicting her as a “reputable” woman, particularly since the governess takes on the role of narrator and thus occupies a position of discursive authority – a position traditionally linked with desire and subjectivity. However, this attempt to affirm her respectability is undermined by Douglas himself by drawing attention to her sexual attractions and by admitting his romantic interest in her. He introduces her by saying, “She was the most agreeable woman I’ve ever known in her position; she’d have been worthy of any whatever”¹⁸⁰, but then his audience clearly picks up on the sexual and romantic implications of his assertion, therefore he quickly feels the need to deflect the expected reactions of his listeners: “ ‘Oh yes; don’t grin: I liked her extremely and am glad to this day to think she liked me too’ ”.¹⁸¹ Douglas’ feelings for the governess lead the group of guests to speculate on their relationship:

“Well, if I don’t know who she was in love with I know who *he* was.”

“She was ten years older,” said her husband.

“*Raison de plus* – at that age! But it’s rather nice, his long reticence.” [...]

“The outbreak,” I returned, “will make a tremendous occasion of Thursday night”; and every one so agreed with me that in the light of it we lost all attention for everything else.¹⁸²

This exchange implies that Douglas’s admiration for the governess may compromise his objectivity, making him an unreliable judge of the character. His emotional investment raises doubts about the validity of the very endorsement he offers. Rather than protecting the governess from suspicion, Douglas’s affection subtly reinforces the very anxieties about feminine desire and credibility that he seeks to suppress.

Once Douglas introduces the governess by emphasizing his attraction to her, the focus of the conversation quickly shifts to her potential as a sexual being. The narrator speculates that: “‘She was in love’”, prompting Douglas to confirm this subtly by saying: “‘You *are* acute. Yes, she was in love. That is she *had* been. That came out – she couldn’t tell her story without its coming out. I saw it, and she saw I saw it; but neither of us spoke of it.’”¹⁸³ What remained unsaid in Douglas’s private

¹⁸⁰ James, H., Beidler, P.G., 1995, p. 23.

¹⁸¹ Ibid.

¹⁸² Ibid, p. 24.

¹⁸³ Ibid.

exchange with the governess is made explicit when he recounts it to the group, and the revelation of her romantic feelings clouds her credibility. The mere acknowledgment of her desire destabilizes the authority of her narrative before it even begins. Douglas further characterizes the governess in a way that emphasizes her youth, inexperience, and sexual vulnerability. He describes her as “a fluttered anxious girl out of a Hampshire vicarage”¹⁸⁴, entering her first work position. She is portrayed as easily impressed by her future employer, a man Douglas describes as “handsome and bold and pleasant, off-hand and gay and kind. He struck her, inevitably, as gallant and splendid”.¹⁸⁵ Furthermore, “she figured him as rich, but as fearfully extravagant – saw him all in a glow of high fashion, of good looks, of expensive habits, of charming ways with women”.¹⁸⁶ Describing the governess – although implicitly – as impressionable and infatuated, only reinforces her depiction as emotionally and sexually susceptible, which ends up undermining her reliability as a narrator. The reactions of Douglas’s listeners also suggest that they interpret his story in sexualized terms:

“The moral of which was of course the seduction exercised by the splendid young man. She succumbed to it.”

He [Douglas] got up and, as he had done the night before, went to the fire, gave a stir to a log with his foot, then stood a moment with his back to us. “She saw him only twice.”

“Yes, but that's just the beauty of her passion.”

A little to my surprise, on this, Douglas turned round to me. “It was the beauty of it.”¹⁸⁷

Douglas attempts to reframe the governess’ love as pure and asexual, insisting on the “beauty” of her passion; yet, his defense fails to convince his audience, as indicated by their responses. This depiction of the governess as young, nervous, and overwhelmed by love casts further doubt on her authority from the outset. Moreover, the prologue’s characterization of femininity is not only limited to the governess: other women are briefly present at the beginning of the story but soon disappear. Just before Douglas begins reading the manuscript, the group around the fire has become smaller:

The departing ladies who had said they would stay didn't, of course, thank heaven, stay: they departed, in consequence of arrangements made, in a rage of curiosity, as they professed, produced by the touches with which he had already worked us up. But that

¹⁸⁴ Ibid, p. 25.

¹⁸⁵ Ibid.

¹⁸⁶ Ibid.

¹⁸⁷ Ibid, p. 27.

only made his little final auditory more compact and select, kept it, round the hearth, subject to a common thrill.¹⁸⁸

Though the departure of the “ladies” is mentioned casually – even humorously – it serves to establish conventional stereotypes of women, who are seen as frivolous and easily dismissed. Their exit narrows the audience to a smaller, likely male-dominated group, whose anticipation mirrors that of spectators awaiting a show. The scene begins to resemble a voyeuristic setup – a kind of literary “peep show” in which the governess’s private thoughts and experiences become the object of male scrutiny. This dynamic is crucial: even before the governess begins her story, her subjectivity – her authority as a speaking “I” – is compromised. She is framed as an object of desire and speculation, her voice mediated through male narration and received by an audience primed to question her reliability. Her narrative is thus doubly filtered and doubly burdened – by both the prologue’s framing and the cultural anxieties surrounding women’s sexuality and speech.

The governess’s story, read aloud by Douglas and told in the first person, has already been trivialized by the way it was introduced in the prologue. When the narrative shifts from the unnamed male narrator’s “I” to the governess’s “I,” her voice feels less authoritative than her male counterpart. The earlier dismissal of female characters and the framing of the governess through Douglas’s eyes put her at a disadvantage when she takes on the “I” of the narrative. This delegitimization is part of what makes readers question whether she’s a trustworthy narrator. If the story is read as one about supernatural possession, the governess can be seen as a dignified, proper and asexual mother-substitute figure; but if it’s read as a story about madness, her expression of sexual desires is seen as proof of her instability. In either case, her authority depends on repressing her sexuality – even though desire is essential for her to act as a full subject in the story.

The male gaze established in the prologue continues to influence how readers interpret the governess’s story. Even while walking around Bly, she imagines a male figure watching her, essentially recreating that male gaze herself. This imagined gaze reflects both her internalized need for objectification – that is, to be seen and approved by a man – and her longing for the absent master of the house in Harley Street:

One of the thoughts that, as I don’t in the least shrink now from noting, used to be with me in these wanderings was that it would be as charming as a charming story suddenly to

¹⁸⁸ Ibid, p. 25.

meet some one. Some one would appear there at the turn of a path and would stand before me and smile and approve. I didn't ask more than that – I only asked that he should know; and the only way to be sure he knew would be to see it, and the kind light of it, in his handsome face. That was exactly present to me – by which I mean the face was – when, on the first of these occasions, at the end of a long June day, I stopped short on emerging from one of the plantations and coming into view of the house.¹⁸⁹

She doesn't actually see the master but instead sees a strange man on top of a tower. The man is described as "only peeping"¹⁹⁰, which reduces the governess's subject status to object of his gaze. At the same time, this moment reveals the sexual subtext of her psyche, affirming her desire for sexuality and subjectivity. The man, whom we later learn is Peter Quint, stands on one of two phallic towers that "were probably architectural absurdities, redeemed in a measure indeed by not being wholly disengaged nor of a height too pretentious, dating, in their gingerbread antiquity, from a romantic revival that was already a respectable past".¹⁹¹ Quint's posture was "very erect, as it struck me"¹⁹², which intensifies the sexual undertone of the governess's sighting, and implies that her desires might be potentially dangerous. The way gazes are used in the story reflects the governess's attempt to take on a more powerful, subject position. At first, she imagines herself being the object of approval of the master in Harley Street; later, Peter Quint takes on that same role by "peeping" at her, making her once again the object being watched. This dynamic is especially clear in the following scene:

He was the same – he was the same, and seen, this time, as he had been seen before, from the waist up, the window, though the dining-room was on the ground floor, not going down to the terrace on which he stood. His face was close to the glass, yet the effect of this better view was, strangely, just to show me how intense the former had been. He remained but a few seconds – long enough to convince me he also saw and recognized; but it was as if I had been looking at him for years and had known him always. Something, however, happened this time that had not happened before; his stare into my face, through the glass and across the room, was as deep and hard as then, but it quitted me for a moment during which I could still watch it, see it fix successively several other things.¹⁹³

¹⁸⁹ Ibid, p. 37.

¹⁹⁰ Ibid, p. 46.

¹⁹¹ Ibid, p. 38.

¹⁹² Ibid, p. 39.

¹⁹³ Ibid, p. 43.

At first, Quint is the one watching; but then, the situation changes when the governess takes his same position and looks through the window herself. In this reversal, she becomes the watcher. This moment is particularly significant because, as argued by film theorists, when a woman shifts from being watched (object) to doing the watching (subject), she begins to gain control. The gaze here becomes a symbol of power and sexuality. Mary Ann Doane states the importance of the female gaze in relation to cinematic representation:

“The woman with glasses signifies simultaneously intellectuality and undesirability; but the moment she removes her glasses, she is transformed into spectacle, the very picture of desire. Now, it must be remembered that the cliché is a heavily loaded moment of signification, a social knot of meaning. It is characterized by an effect of ease and naturalness. Yet the cliché has a binding power so strong that it indicates a precise moment of ideological danger or threat – in this case, the woman's appropriation of the gaze. Glasses worn by a woman in the cinema do not signify a deficiency in seeing but an active looking, or even simply the fact of seeing as opposed to being seen. The intellectual woman looks and analyzes, and in usurping the gaze she poses a threat to an entire system of representation”.¹⁹⁴

Doane emphasizes how important it is that the governess takes on the male gaze in *The Turn of the Screw*. By taking over Quint's perspective, the governess shows her desire to assume authority, one that had been traditionally held by men. However, her attempt is interrupted when her gaze is blocked by Mrs. Grose, the quintessential representation of maternal respectability. Symbolically, it could be argued that for the governess to claim her own subjectivity, she must first move beyond the conventional, patriarchal idea of what a “good” woman is supposed to be. The governess is caught between two female role models at Bly: Mrs. Grose, the respectable housekeeper and maternal figure, and Miss Jessel, the former governess who represents a sexually “fallen” woman. It is Mrs. Grose that warns the governess of the dangers in rejecting patriarchally inscribed roles by telling her just enough about Miss Jessel to suggest disgrace, without giving full details:

“What was the lady who was here before?”

“The last governess? She was also young and pretty – almost as young and almost as pretty, Miss, even as you.”

“Ah then I hope her youth and beauty helped her... Was she careful – particular?”

¹⁹⁴ Mary Ann Doane, *Femme Fatales: Feminism, Film Theory, Psychoanalysis*. New York: Routledge, 1991, p. 27.

Mrs. Grose appeared to try to be conscientious. “About some things – yes.”

“But not about all?”

Again she considered. “Well, Miss – she’s gone. I won’t tell tales.”¹⁹⁵

Miss Jessel’s (un)told story effectively depicts the portrait of the fallen woman. Mrs. Grose eventually confirms that Miss Jessel “*was* infamous”¹⁹⁶ and had a secret relationship with Quint, the valet: ““He did what he wished... With them all””.¹⁹⁷ Mrs. Grose goes on about Miss Jessel by saying: ““Poor woman – she paid for it!””¹⁹⁸ Her downfall came from submitting to him, but for the governess, the real “threat” isn’t submission – it’s usurpation. She isn’t just passively accepting her role; she’s stepping into a traditionally male space of authority by trying to act as the subject of the story. This challenge to gender norms is what truly makes her dangerous in the eyes of the society around her.

The governess’s struggle to establish a space for herself outside of the patriarchal boundaries is metaphorically played out in her struggle for the children. While she perceives herself as fighting the ghosts to save the children’s souls, she is also symbolically resisting the patriarchal definitions imposed onto women. She rejects the passive and ineffectual maternal model embodied by Mrs. Grose and distances herself from the overtly sexualized “whore” figure of Miss Jessel, as she attempts to replace the male authority represented by Peter Quint. Yet neither of these roles can aid her in her struggle to act as a subject: she cannot become Miss Jessel in Flora’s eyes, nor can she replace Quint for Miles. Though she resists association with Miss Jessel and the negative connotations of fallen female sexuality, she is ultimately unable to assume Quint’s role, since she is not a man and is unable to take up his position. She must act as a feminine subject; however, she does not have any viable model to follow. Flora becomes the site where these competing feminine roles clash: as a girl in the process of being schooled into womanhood, Flora is subtly positioned within this ideological struggle. One key passage features the governess seeing Miss Jessel while supervising Flora, effectively taking the position of the gazer. At this moment, Flora engages in a behavior that, as Edmund Wilson points out, could be considered a sexual one¹⁹⁹: “She had picked up a small flat piece of wood which happened to have in it a little hole that had evidently suggested to her the idea of sticking in another fragment that might figure as a mast and make the thing a boat”.²⁰⁰ This act is symbolically significant

¹⁹⁵ James, H., Beidler, P.G., 1995, p. 34.

¹⁹⁶ Ibid, p. 56.

¹⁹⁷ Ibid, p. 57.

¹⁹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹⁹ Edmund Wilson, *The Ambiguity of Henry James*, in: Wilson, Edmund, *The Triple Thinkers: Twelve Essays on Literary Subjects*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1948, p. 88-132.

²⁰⁰ James, H., Beidler, P.G., 1995, p. 54.

– it expresses a budding desire for feminine subjectivity as well as the fear that feminine sexuality raises in the patriarchy. The scene foregrounds the governess’s project: to carve out a space where female desires can be expressed, but Flora’s behavior is something that is typically denied to Victorian women. Furthermore, neither of Flora’s female role models can help her: Miss Jessel gave in to her desires and is seen as a whore, whereas the current governess, though she expresses sexual desires as a feminine subject, is patriarchally undefinable.

The tension culminates when Flora escapes to the lake, prompting a confrontation among all three female figures – alive and not. The governess faces Miss Jessel in an effort to symbolically reject the “whore” role Miss Jessel represents while also distancing herself from the asexual maternalism of Mrs. Grose. Yet the emotional and symbolic impact of the scene is felt most strongly in Flora’s transformation: once an innocent child, the governess sees Flora as “a vulgarly pert little girl in the street” whose “incomparable childish beauty had suddenly failed, had quite vanished. I’ve said it already – she was literally, she was hideously hard; she had turned common and almost ugly”.²⁰¹ Since the governess was not yet able to forge a place for herself in order to offer a third, possible role model to Flora, the only two viable ones are Mrs. Grose and Miss Jessel; hence, Flora rejects the unnamed governess and turns to the safety of the role models she already knows, crying to Mrs. Grose: ““Take me away, take me away – oh take me away from *her!*””²⁰² Mrs. Grose can provide Flora with a “safe” though limited role model, something that the unnamed governess cannot provide for the child because she has refused to comply to the patriarchal boundaries of womanhood.

Ultimately, because the governess cannot resume the role of a nurturing mother, Flora reimagines her in the only other familiar feminine role she knows – that of the sexualized female whore. Though Mrs. Grose withholds Flora’s exact words, she makes it clear that Flora has said “horrors” about the governess, suggesting that the child now views her through the lens of shame and impropriety:

“I’ve heard – !”

“Heard?”

“From that child – horrors! There!” she sighed with tragic relief. “On my honour, Miss, she says things – !”

“She’s so horrible?”

I saw my colleague scarce knew how to put it. “Really shocking.”

²⁰¹ Ibid, p. 99.

²⁰² Ibid, p. 100.

“And about me?”

“About you, Miss – since you must have it. It's beyond everything, for a young lady; and I can't think wherever she must have picked up – ”

“The appalling language she applies to me? I can then!”²⁰³

This moment emphasizes the governess's failure to provide a stable model of womanhood for Flora who now sees her as a whore figure. Situated between the roles of virtuous mother and fallen woman, the governess's categorization remains ambiguous. Her desire and assertion of subjectivity would normally cast her into the space of the whore, yet she refuses to give up her autonomy. This unresolved tension will culminate in her power struggle with Quint, the quintessential male subject of the story, for the possession of Miles.

After Mrs. Grose leaves Bly with Flora, the governess is left alone with Miles and tries to get him to confess why he was expelled from school. While the two discuss, Peter Quint reappears at the window: “Peter Quint had come into view like a sentinel before a prison. The next thing I saw was that, from outside, he had reached the window, and then I knew that, close to the glass and glaring in through it, he offered once more to the room his white face of damnation”.²⁰⁴ The governess tries to take away Miles from Quint, while also wrestling with the man's gaze, in an attempt of taking power back from him. As she pushes Miles to speak, she is constantly aware of the “peeping” coming from the window:

For there again, against the glass, as if to blight his confession and stay his answer, was the hideous author of our woe – the white face of damnation. I felt a sick swim at the drop of my victory and all the return of my battle, so that the wildness of my veritable leap only served as a great betrayal. I saw him, from the midst of my act, meet it with a divination, and on the perception that even now he only guessed, and that the window was still to his own eyes free, I let the impulse flame up to convert the climax of his dismay into the very proof of his liberation. “No more, no more, no more!” I shrieked to my visitant as I tried to press him against me.²⁰⁵

²⁰³ Ibid, p. 104.

²⁰⁴ Ibid, p. 112.

²⁰⁵ Ibid, p. 115-16.

The governess manages to break Quint's influence since Miles had "jerked straight round, stared, glared again, and seen but the quiet day";²⁰⁶ however, this "victory" is a hollow one: she cannot truly take Quint's place because female subjectivity is more than a mere imitation of male power. Her success only leads to Miles's death: "We were alone with the quiet day, and his little heart, dispossessed, had stopped".²⁰⁷ The end of Miles signals the end of the paternal lineage of Bly, since the governess' hopeless attempt to take Quint's place resulted in the death of the sole male heir. The ending represents the patriarchal anxiety ensuing from a woman's refusal to play her predetermined role, but it also emphasizes the need for a new way for women to define themselves. The governess tried to carve out a space for herself within a system that did not offer her many options. Without a model of feminine subjectivity to look up to, the governess tries to distance herself from the whore position in which she would normally be situated because of her sexuality, and decides to act as a male subject, unaware that her femininity prevents her from fully interpreting that role.

Whether James meant to highlight the challenges women face when trying to assert themselves, or to warn against them, the story makes it clear that the social structures of the time left very little room for feminine agency. Miles's death foreshadows the ways in which feminine rebellion can endanger the status quo. Ultimately, the governess, who tried to carve a place for herself outside of the triptych of patriarchal feminine roles – mother, whore, lunatic – is pushed back within the patriarchal boundaries. If the ghosts are to be considered "real", the governess might be seen as a protective mother like Mrs. Grose. If they are not, and her visions are to be considered mere delusions, there is only one conventional explanation for her behavior. If the "good mother" is embodied by Mrs. Grose and the "whore" by Miss Jessel, then the third role, the "lunatic" can only be embodied by the unnamed governess, confined again by the very system she sought to escape.

²⁰⁶ Ibid, p. 116.

²⁰⁷ Ibid.

Chapter 3 – Adaptation theory

Writing a screenplay based on a great novel [George Eliot's *Daniel Deronda*] is foremost a labor of simplification. I don't mean only the plot, although particularly in the case of a Victorian novel teeming with secondary characters and subplots, severe pruning is required, but also the intellectual content. A film has to convey its message by images and relatively few words; it has little tolerance for complexity or irony or tergiversations. I found the work exceedingly difficult, beyond anything I had anticipated. And, I should add, depressing: I care about words more than images, and yet I was constantly sacrificing words and their connotations. You might tell me that through images film conveys a vast amount of information that words can only attempt to approximate, and you would be right, but approximation is precious in itself, because it bears the author's stamp. All in all, it seemed to me that my screenplay was worth much less than the book, and that the same would be true of the film.

—Novelist John North in Louis Begley's novel, *Shipwreck* (2003)

Adaptations are everywhere today – in movies and TV shows, on stage, online, in novels and comics, and even in theme parks and video games. Their popularity is so obvious that some stories now explore adaptation itself, like the films *Adaptation* and *Lost in La Mancha*, or the TV documentary series *Page to Screen*. But adapting stories is not a contemporary idea; writers like Shakespeare and Goethe adapted older stories for new audiences centuries ago. Adaptation has always been a part of Western culture, proving Walter Benjamin's idea that "storytelling is always the art of repeating stories"²⁰⁸. Art is derived from art; and stories are derived from other stories.

Still, many critics in both academic discussions and journalistic reviews treat adaptations as secondary, derivative, or even culturally inferior, especially the translations of literature into films. They are defined as "betrayal," "deformation," "perversions," "infidelity," and "desecration" in Robert Stam's terms.²⁰⁹ Moving from the literary mode to filmic or televisual ones has even been defined as a move to "a willfully inferior form of cognition".²¹⁰ Though it might be deemed more or

²⁰⁸ Walter Benjamin, 1992, *The task of the translator*, In Schulte Rainer and Biguenet John, *Theories of translation*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992, p. 71–92.

²⁰⁹ Robert Stam, 2000, *The dialogics of adaptation*, In Naremore James, *Film adaptation*, New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2000, p. 54-76.

²¹⁰ Charles Newman, *The postmodern aura*, Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1985, p. 129.

less acceptable to adapt *Romeo and Juliet* into an opera or ballet – since they are considered a respected high art form – turning it into a modern movie, like Baz Luhrmann’s updated version of *Romeo + Juliet*, is often criticized. Supposing there is an imagined hierarchy of medium or genre, if a story is seen as being “lowered” by the adaptation, it will probably receive a negative response.

This negative attitude toward adaptations is not new. In 1926, Virginia Woolf commented on the novel art of cinema, disapproving of the simplification the literary work inevitably underwent when being transposed into film. She defined film a “parasite” and literature – which she saw as the true art form – its “prey” and “victim”.²¹¹ Yet she also admitted that film had the potential to express emotions in ways words could not, developing its own independent idiom: “cinema has within its grasp innumerable symbols for emotions that have so far failed to find expression”.²¹² Film theorist Christian Metz has argued that cinema “tells us continuous stories; it ‘says’ things that could be conveyed also in the language of words; yet it says them differently. There is a reason for the possibility as well as for the necessity of adaptations”.²¹³ The same applies to adaptations in opera, music, and dance. Adapters work with the same tools storytellers have always used: simplifying, expanding, reinterpreting, and connecting ideas. Similar to parodies, adaptations have a defining and clear relationship to prior texts, usually called “sources”. However, unlike parodies, adaptations tend to make this relationship openly shown.

One of the reasons why adaptations are often looked down on may be the old belief, especially from the Romantic era, that the “original” work and its author are more valuable than anything derived from them. This belief helped shape the idea that adaptations are less creative. Some, as argued by Robert Stam, believe that literature will always have axiomatic superiority over all other adaptations simply because it came first. This hierarchy also involves what he defines as iconophobia (suspicion of the visual) and logophilia (loving the word as sacred).²¹⁴ Others, on the other hand, may have a negative view of adaptations simply because they don’t match the expectations of fans, or because teachers prefer the original texts they are used to working with.

But if adaptations are really such inferior and secondary creations, why are they so common and growing in number? In 1992, 85% of Oscar-winning Best Pictures were adaptations. Adaptations also

²¹¹ Virginia Woolf, *The movies and reality*, New Republic (47), 1926, p. 308–10.

²¹² Ibid.

²¹³ Christian Metz, *Film language: A semiotics of the cinema*, Trans. Michael Taylor. New York: Oxford University Press, 1990, p. 44.

²¹⁴ Robert Stam, 2000, p. 58.

make up 95% of all the miniseries and 70% of all the TV movies of the week that win Emmy Awards.²¹⁵ One reason for this is that new media formats keep emerging, and they all need stories. Nonetheless, there must be some sort of appeal about adaptations *as adaptations*. As numerous theorists have argued, the pleasure of adaptation lies in its dual dynamic of repetition and variation. Audiences find satisfaction in recognizing familiar narrative structures while also experiencing novelty through altered contexts, themes, and forms. Rather than stripping a text of its cultural or aesthetic value, adaptations often retain and reconfigure its original aura.²¹⁶ Moreover, as John Ellis suggests, the “process of adaptation should thus be seen as a massive investment (financial and psychic) in the desire to repeat particular acts of consumption within a form of representation [film, in this case] that discourages such a repetition”.²¹⁷ In this sense, adaptations represent a paradox: they satisfy the desire to relive particular narrative experiences while operating within a representational form – film – that is structurally oriented against repetition.²¹⁸ At the same time, the financial appeal behind adaptation cannot be ignored. Historically, creators have turned to well-known narratives to minimize financial risk and maximize audience appeal. For example, 19th century opera composers often based their works on already successful plays or novels, while Hollywood and British television have long relied on canonical texts – what Ellis calls the “tried and tested”²¹⁹ – as a source of content with guaranteed cultural credibility.

This economically motivated reuse of narrative “properties” is particularly evident in contemporary transmedia franchises, where stories are reimagined across multiple platforms – film, television, theatre, video games, and beyond. The recent trend of “musicalizing” films into stage musicals (e.g., *The Lion King*) is clearly economically driven, leveraging brand familiarity to secure the audience’s interest. Similarly, spin-offs, sequels, director’s cuts, and video game adaptations all represent strategies of narrative recycling aimed at maximizing profit and expanding market reach. Large media conglomerates often own both the original content and the distribution channels, allowing for seamless cross-promotion and cross-platform exploitation of intellectual property.²²⁰ So why do

²¹⁵ Linda Hutcheon, *A Theory of Adaptation*, 2nd ed., Routledge, 2013, p. 4.

²¹⁶ Linda Hutcheon, p. 5

²¹⁷ John Ellis, *The literary adaptation*, Screen (23), 1982, p. 4–5.

²¹⁸ An adapted work must acknowledge its source while also transforming it to fit a new medium, moment, and audience. Exact repetition is neither possible nor desirable: the novel’s meanings are carried by prose techniques that do not map one-to-one onto cinema’s resources. In other words, the medium itself orients adaptation away from repetition: the camera must *show* what the prose can *tell*, and showing requires invention – restructuring events, compressing subplots, combining characters, and creating visual or sonic motifs to stand where paragraphs once stood.

²¹⁹ Ibid, p. 3.

²²⁰ Kristin Thompson, *Storytelling in film and television*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003, p. 81-82.

creators want their work to be seen as an adaptation? And what does it mean for something to be recognized in that way? These are important questions – ones that help understand the power and complexity of adaptations in today’s culture.

Studying adaptations *as adaptations* means recognizing that they are always connected to other, earlier works. As Michael Alexander describes, adaptations are “palimpsestuous” – that is, works that are perpetually haunted by their source texts.²²¹ If we are familiar with the original, we often notice its influence when we engage with the adaptation. Gérard Genette calls this kind of work a “text in the second degree”²²², meaning that adaptations are both created and received with reference to pre-existing works. This is why adaptation studies are often comparative in nature, although this does not preclude adaptations from being considered autonomous cultural artifacts. As stated by Walter Benjamin, an adaptation has its own aura, its own “presence in time and space, its unique existence at the place where it happens to be”.²²³

Crucially, to interpret an adaptation as such is to recognize its status as a “text” in Roland Barthes’ sense – a plural “stereophony of echoes, citations, references”.²²⁴ Thus, while adaptations are aesthetic works in their own right, their full meaning comes from the way they relate to the original text. This does not mean we should judge them by their proximity or fidelity compared to the original. For many years, critics focused on “fidelity” (how faithful an adaptation is to the source) but that approach is now seen as limiting. As George Bluestone noted, if an adaptation is successful on its own terms, the question of its faithfulness is not deemed as important.²²⁵ Rather than focusing on fidelity, contemporary theorists argue for a more nuanced understanding of adaptation as a dynamic act of reinterpretation and transformation. The reasons for adapting a work can vary: some may want to honor the original, while others may want to change it, criticize it, or make it more accessible to a new audience. Some adaptations do both – honoring and challenging the original at the same time, a tension that has been called “contested homage”.²²⁶

The term “adaptation,” in both common and academic usage, can mean many things. First, it can refer to the final product and to a deliberate and often extensive transposition of a recognizable source – such as a book turned into a film, or a historical event retold as a novel. This “transcoding” might

²²¹Elizabeth Deeds Ermarth, *Agency in the discursive condition*, History and Theory (40), 2001, p. 34-58, p. 47.

²²² Linda Hutcheon, p. 6.

²²³ Ibid, p. 6.

²²⁴ Roland Barthes, *Image—Music—Text*, Trans. Stephen Heath, New York: Hill & Wang, 1977, p. 160.

²²⁵ George Bluestone, *Novels into film*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971, p. 114.

²²⁶ Linda Hutcheon, p. 7.

also involve switching media (a poem to a theatrical piece), genres (a novel to an epic), or even perspectives, resulting in a new interpretation of the story. Second, as a creative process, adaptation entails reinterpretation and re-creation – an act that may be construed either as appropriation or as cultural preservation. Third, from the audience’s point of view, adaptation functions as a mode of intertextuality. Viewers and readers experience adaptations through the lens of their familiarity with the source material, generating meaning through repetition with variation. Consequently, adaptation may be succinctly defined through three interrelated aspects: (1) an acknowledged transposition of a recognizable prior work; (2) an interpretive and creative act of appropriation or salvage; and (3) an extended intertextual engagement with the original. Within this framework, adaptation emerges not as a derivative form, but rather as a derivative *that is not derivative* – a culturally and aesthetically distinct work that retains, reconfigures, and recontextualizes its origins.

In this way, adaptations are not simply copies or lesser versions. They are new works that both reflect and transform the original material. Fischlin and Fortier suggest that adaptation “as a concept can expand or contract. Writ large, adaptation includes almost any act of alteration performed upon specific cultural works of the past and dovetails with a general process of cultural recreation”.²²⁷ However, such a broad definition makes it harder to study adaptation in a focused way. A more useful definition sees adaptation as both a *process* and a *product*: this enables scholars to examine a wide range of adaptive forms, from films and stage productions to musical compositions, visual arts, comic books, and digital media, while still drawing critical distinctions. Short allusions, musical sampling, or fan fiction, for instance, may not meet the threshold of extended engagement necessary for classification as adaptations. Similarly, sequels and prequels continue a story so that it may never end, while adaptations are driven by the desire to retell an existing story through new perspectives and modalities. It is this impulse for both continuity and transformation that underpins the cultural and legal framing of adaptation as a “derivative work,” one that is based upon pre-existing materials but is “recast, transformed”.²²⁸ However, this seemingly simple legal definition conceals more complex theoretical implications: adaptation is a site where originality and repetition mix together, challenging the conventional notions of authorship and creativity.

A central challenge in adaptation studies lies in determining precisely what is “recast” and “transformed”. Legally, copyright protections apply to the specific expression of ideas, not to the

²²⁷ Daniel Fischlin, and Mark Fortier, *Adaptations of Shakespeare: A critical anthology of plays from the seventeenth century to the present*, London and New York: Routledge, 2000, p. 4.

²²⁸ Linda Hutcheon, p. 9.

ideas themselves. As noted by Kamilla Elliott, adaptations are heretical because they show that form (expression) can be parted from content (ideas) – something which both mainstream aesthetic and semiotic theories have denied.²²⁹ Adaptation exposes this tension by demonstrating how content – broadly conceived – can persist across significant formal transformations, thereby challenging assumptions about the inseparability of form and meaning. But what is the “content” that gets transmuted? Despite the frequent invocation of the “spirit,” “tone,” or “style” of a source text as essential qualities to be retained in adaptation, these concepts remain largely subjective and difficult to discuss or theorize. Nonetheless, most adaptation theorists agree that the story – comprising elements such as theme, plot, character, and setting – serves as the common denominator that is transposed across various media and genres. Yet, as discussed by Millicent Marcus, two opposing theoretical school of thought remain: a story “can exist independently of any embodiment in any particular signifying system or, on the contrary, it cannot be considered separately from its material mode of mediation”.²³⁰ In practice, however, although the latter is true for the audience, adapters often work from the assumption that narrative components can be abstracted from one medium and re-embodied in another, even if their material realization necessarily differs due to the constraints of different media that will highlight different aspects of a story.²³¹

Themes, in particular, are widely regarded as among the most adaptable elements. As stated by authors Louis Begley on the themes of his novel *About Schmidt* – when his work was translated to the screen: “I was able to hear them rather like melodies transposed into a different key”.²³² Similarly, many Romantic ballets and orchestral works based on Hans Christian Andersen’s tales rely on easily accessible themes such as quests, dualities of good and evil, or motifs of transformation, which lend themselves easily to cross-media translation.²³³

Characters as well can be transposed from one text to another and, as argued by Murray Smith, they also play a crucial role in audience engagement through mechanisms of recognition, alignment, and allegiance.²³⁴ While novels and theatre traditionally put at their centre psychological depth and character development, video games present a distinct form of engagement, allowing players to

²²⁹ Kamilla Elliott, *Rethinking the novel/film debate*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003, p. 133.

²³⁰ Linda Hutcheon, p. 10.

²³¹ Ibid.

²³² Louis Begley, *About Schmidt*, New York Times, Arts and Leisure (22), 2003, p. 1.

²³³ Linda Hutcheon, p. 11.

²³⁴ Murray Smith, *Engaging characters: Fiction, emotion, and the cinema*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995, p. 4-6.

“become” the characters and actively participate in narrative progress through decision-making and skill-based interaction.

Plot events and structural elements of the story (or the *fabula*) can likewise be transmediated, though they often undergo significant changes, and not only concerning the order of the plot. Changes in pacing, compression/expansion of time or focalization are the most common. In other occurrences, the point of departure or conclusion might be the one that gets completely revolutionized in adaptation. Further complexity arises when considering the *mode* of presentation – narration, performance, or interaction. With each mode, various things are adapted in different ways. Novels *tell* stories through a narrator's voice, describing, explaining, summarizing, expanding; the narrator has a point of view with the power to move through time and space and can sometimes even access the mind of the characters. In contrast, films and stage performances *show* stories via audiovisual performance experienced in real time. Though neither *telling* nor *showing* turns its audience into a passive position, these modes do not engage their spectators as viscerally as interactive media, such as video games and immersive environments do. These media enable a third mode: *participation*. Here, narrative unfolds not through observation alone but through embodied, kinesthetic engagement. This shift in mode reorients the adaptation process toward *world-building*, or the creation of *heterocosms* – fully realized alternative worlds with internal logic and coherence. In such cases, the material environment, rather than plot or character alone, becomes the primary object of adaptation. As pointed out by Marie-Laure Ryan: “The secret to the narrative success of games is their ability to exploit the most fundamental of the forces that move a plot forwards: the solving of problems”.²³⁵ Story is no longer the central element, although it still exists as a means towards a goal.

However, while visual and interactive media are adept at rendering external action and spatial environments – the “*res extensa*”, to use Descartes’ terminology – they often struggle to represent the “*res cogitans*”, or the space of the mind, so effectively conveyed by literature. The challenge of adapting inner consciousness remains a key limitation across most non-verbal or performative media, because when psychic reality is presented rather than told, it needs to be made manifest in the material world in order for it to be perceived by the audience.

Not all narratives are equally amenable to adaptation. Realist, linear novels with strong visual or dramatic elements – such as those by Charles Dickens, Agatha Christie, or Ian Fleming – are more

²³⁵ Marie-Laure Ryan, *Will new media produce new narratives?*, in Ryan Marie-Laure, *Narrative across media: The languages of storytelling*, Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2004, p. 349.

frequently (and easily) adapted than experimental or highly introspective works by authors such as Beckett or Joyce. When adapted, “radical texts are reduced to a kind of cinematic homogenization.”²³⁶ Melodramatic structures, in particular, have historically lent themselves well to theatric and cinematic adaptations due to their reliance on stark emotional binaries and visually expressive storytelling. In contemporary media, blockbuster franchises with rich diegetic worlds (e.g., *Star Wars* or *The Matrix*) are often reimagined as video games, where players can actively navigate and manipulate the adapted universe. Adaptation involves more than the replication of story content; it necessitates a reconsideration of which elements are most vital to the experience of narrative and how those elements can be reconstituted through different media forms and modes of engagement.

²³⁶ Mark Axelrod, *Once upon a time in Hollywood; or, the commodification of form in the adaptation of fictional texts to the Hollywood cinema*, *Literature/Film Quarterly* 24 (2), 1996, p. 201–8, p. 204.

Chapter 3.1 – A problematic definition

The term “adaptation” is a deceptively simple one, yet it is surprisingly hard to define, for it encompasses a multiplicity of processes and products. That is partly because it is used to denote both a *product* (e.g. a movie based on a novel) and a *process* (e.g. the creative steps taken to make that movie). Because of this complexity, some scholars have tried to coin new and better words, but none have really replaced “adaptation.” While the *product* may be more readily susceptible to formal definition, the *process* encompasses multiple perspectives, including artistic, cultural, and reception-oriented dimensions, all of which are essential to a comprehensive theorization of adaptation.

Adaptations are frequently conceptualized as deliberate and extended transformations of specific source texts, often compared to acts of translation. However, just like there cannot be such a thing as a literal translation, there cannot be a literal adaptation. However, the study of both has sustained a domination by “normative and source-oriented approaches”.²³⁷ These frameworks inadequately account for the systemic alterations required by media change. Any transposition, whether to another medium (*transmedial*) or in the same one (*intramedial*) always requires change – or what might be described in contemporary media theory as “reformatting” – and such reformulations inevitably result in both gains and losses.²³⁸

Though this seems like commonsense, in traditional conceptions of translation the source text’s authority is privileged, often casting adaptation in a subordinate or derivative light. Walter Benjamin’s essay *The Task of the Translator* altered this hierarchy, arguing that translation is not a description of a fixed nontextual meaning to be copied, paraphrased or even reproduced; rather, it is a dynamic engagement that reveals new dimensions of the original text.²³⁹ Contemporary theorists of translation, such as Bassnett, have extended this argument, stating that translation involves a transaction between languages and between texts and is thus “an act of both inter-cultural and inter-temporal communication”.²⁴⁰ This new meaning concerning translation is close to a definition of adaptation, too. In many cases, adaptation becomes an *intersemiotic* transposition; that is, a reconfiguration from one sign system (e.g., words) to another (e.g., images). Harold Pinter’s screenplay for Karel Reisz’s *The French Lieutenant’s Woman* (1981), for example, translates the self-

²³⁷ Theo Hermans, 1985, Introduction: *Translation studies and a new paradigm*, In Theo Hermans, *The manipulation of literature: Studies in literary translation*, London: Croom Helm, 1985, p. 7–15, p. 9.

²³⁸ Robert Stam, 2000, p. 62.

²³⁹ Benjamin Walter, 1992, p. 77.

²⁴⁰ Susan Bassnett, *Translation studies*, London: Routledge, 2002, p. 9.

reflexive narrative strategies of John Fowles' novel into a cinematic structure wherein a Victorian narrative is interwoven with a contemporary meta-narrative, thereby preserving and reformulating the original's thematic concerns through a new medium.²⁴¹

An alternative to this translation analogy is that of *paraphrase*. Etymologically, a paraphrase is a mode of "telling alongside" (*para*), and according to the Oxford English Dictionary, one of its first definitions was "a free rendering or amplification of a passage" that is verbal and musical as well. John Dryden is mentioned as defining paraphrase as a "translation with latitude, where the author is kept in view [...], but his words are not so strictly followed as his sense; and that too is admitted to be amplified."²⁴² This notion may describe best what was illustrated in Robert Nelson Jacobs and Lasse Hallström's film adaptation of E. Annie Proulx's *The Shipping News* (2001), where internal psychological states are rendered through cinematic devices such as visualized headlines, echoing the narrative's metaphorical language and interiority.²⁴³

This concept of paraphrase and translation analogies is also useful when considering adaptations of historical events or real-life figures into fictional or semi-fictional narratives. In such cases, the source text may range from authoritative historical documents to collective memory, and the form may range from "biopics" to "heritage" films, from videogames to television docudramas. The German television film *Wannseekonferenz* (*The Wannsee Conference*) is based directly on the minutes of the 1942 meeting that planned the "Final Solution to the Jewish Question". In 2001, a further adaptation for BBC and HBO was made by Loring Mandel called *Conspiracy* (2001). In these instances, talking about adaptations as "historically accurate" or not makes little to no sense: each adaptation constitutes a distinct interpretive act. Steven Spielberg's *Schindler's List*, for instance, cannot be directly compared to Claude Lanzmann's *Shoah*, as the former adapts Thomas Keneally's novel – a fictionalized retelling grounded in survivor testimony – while the latter engages with the Holocaust through oral histories. Each adaptation represents a particular historiographical perspective, and such adaptations are as complex as history itself.²⁴⁴

Adaptation is not solely a matter of textual transfer; it is a fundamentally interpretive act. The figure of the adapter functions simultaneously as interpreter and then creator, negotiating between fidelity to the source and the exigencies of a new medium. The nature of the medium for adaptation

²⁴¹ Linda Hutcheon, p. 17.

²⁴² Ibid.

²⁴³ Ibid.

²⁴⁴ Ibid, p. 17-18.

significantly shapes the interpretive process. Gombrich suggests through a useful analogy that if an artist is before a landscape with a pencil in hand, they will “look for those aspects which can be rendered in lines”; if they are holding a paintbrush, however, the artist’s vision of that same landscape won’t be anymore in terms of lines, but masses, instead.²⁴⁵ Therefore, an adapter trying to translate a story for a film and an opera librettist will be attracted to different aspects because of the medium they want to pursue. Adaptation, especially from long novels, often involves condensation, subtraction or contraction on the adapter’s part. By contrast, the expansion of short stories into feature-length films necessitates augmentation and expansion of the source material, often incorporating additional narrative elements to achieve dramatic coherence.

Furthermore, the adapter’s motivations to choose a particular story to transcode into a specific medium or genre are diverse. As mentioned beforehand, the aim might be to economically and artistically supplant the source works, or they might be paying homage or trying to contest the aesthetic/political values of the adapted text. These varying intents further complicate simplistic evaluations based on fidelity. Whatever the motive might be, from the adapter’s point of view, adaptation is an act of appropriating or restoring, and this always entails a double process of interpreting and ultimately creating something new. In this sense, adaptation aligns with the classical rhetorical tradition of *imitatio* or *mimesis* – what Aristotle saw as part of the intrinsic and instinctive behaviour of humans – which conceived imitation not as passive replication but as a generative and dynamic mode of creativity. In West and Woodman’s words: “*Imitatio* is neither plagiarism nor a flaw in the constitution of Latin literature. It is a dynamic law of its existence.”²⁴⁶ Adaptation, like classical imitation, is not mere copying; it is a process of turning the adapted material into one’s own. For both the novelty lays in what one *does with* the other text. Russell has argued that *imitatio* and *aemulatio* were inextricably linked; unsuccessful adaptations may not be such because of a lack of “fidelity” to the source text, but due to the lack of creativity and interpretive ingenuity that would make the text one’s own and, ultimately, autonomous.²⁴⁷

From the perspective of reception, if the receiver is already acquainted with the source text, adaptation is always intertextual. Audience members familiar with the source text inevitably engage in

²⁴⁵ Ersnt Hans Gombrich, *Art and illusion: A study in the psychology of pictorial representation*, New York: Panther, 1961, p. 65.

²⁴⁶ David West, and Woodman Tony, *Creative imitation and Latin literature*, Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1979, p. ix.

²⁴⁷ D.A. Russell, 1979, *De Imitatione*, In West David, and Woodman Tony, *Creative imitation and Latin literature*, Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1979, p. 1–16, p. 10.

comparative analysis, consciously or unconsciously, as they experience the adaptation. This is an ongoing dialogical process in the Bakhtinian sense, wherein the adapted text is compared with and against the original.²⁴⁸ French post-structuralist theorists such as Barthes and Kristeva have stressed the intertextual relation between individual works and an entire culture system, challenging the post-Romantic notions of originality and uniqueness. Texts in general are mosaics of citations that can be visible or invisible; so are adaptations, but with the addition that they are acknowledged as adaptations of *specific texts*.²⁴⁹ Audiences may often recognize that a work is an adaptation of different texts, embedded within a single adaptation. For example, later renditions of *The Thirty-Nine Steps* often draw upon both John Buchan's novel and Alfred Hitchcock's 1935 film adaptation, demonstrating how adaptation can involve numerous layers of intertextuality.²⁵⁰ In the case of *Dracula*, contemporary adaptations frequently allude not only to Bram Stoker's novel but to other earlier films and stylistic conventions of the past.²⁵¹

This phenomenon has been aptly described as “palimpsestuous intertextuality,” wherein texts show visible connections to their precursors and/or other works, creating a multilayered experience for the audience. These connections are also part of their formal identity as well as of what might be called their hermeneutic identity. This helps to silence the “background noise” of comparisons that audiences make from broad artistic or social similarities, keeping the focus on clear connections to specific texts.²⁵² Part of the pleasure (and frustration) of witnessing an adaptation is the familiarity developed through repetition and memory: Matthew Bourne's reimagining of *Swan Lake*, for instance, challenges classical ballet conventions through homoerotic and subversive choreography, prompting audiences to re-evaluate their intertextual expectations. No matter the spectators' response, their intertextual expectations about medium and genre are brought to the forefront of their attention.²⁵³

²⁴⁸ Robert Stam, 2000, p. 64.

²⁴⁹ Linda Hutcheon, p. 21.

²⁵⁰ Mark Glancy, *The 39 Steps*, London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 2003, p. 99-100.

²⁵¹ Linda Hutcheon, p. 21.

²⁵² Ibid.

²⁵³ Ibid.

Chapter 3.2 – Modes of engagement

A productive way to conceptualize adaptation is through a dual framework: as both a product and a process. This bifocal approach allows for a more expansive theorization of adaptation, one that extends beyond the conventional boundaries of medium-specific analysis and comparative textual studies. It enables scholars to engage more deeply with the varied modes through which audiences encounter narratives: being *told*, being *shown*, and *interacting* with stories.

Each of these modes of narrative engagement – telling, showing, and interacting – constitutes a distinct epistemological and experiential encounter with a story. While all three can be considered immersive in their own right, they differ in the nature and intensity of the immersion they afford. The telling mode (a novel) engages the imagination directly by immersing the reader into the fictional world; the showing mode (plays and films) relies on visual and auditory perception, immersing audiences through sensorial stimuli; the participatory mode (videogames) immerses the audiences both physically and kinesthetically, and the audience's actions influence the unfolding of the narrative. Though all three modes can be considered “immersive”, only the last one is called “interactive” as well; however, it is important to highlight that all modes involve active, interpretive processes: reading a novel or watching a film is never a passive endeavour. In fact, both processes are imaginatively, cognitively and emotionally active. However, interactive forms engage the audience in a qualitatively distinct manner: it is not more active, but it certainly is in a different way.

In the telling mode, such as in narrative literature, narrative control and interpretive freedom are delicately balanced. The reader's imagination is both guided by the author's verbal choices and simultaneously liberated from the constraints of the visual or auditory. Readers may pause, revisit, or skip sections at will, navigating the text with a level of autonomy not afforded by temporally bound media like film. In contrast, the showing mode, as exemplified by cinema or theatre, structures audience experience along an unrelenting, forward-driving story. The viewer is moved from imaginative projection to immediate sensory perception, where gesture, sound, image, and *mise-en-scène* collectively shape narrative meaning. Performance media reveal that language is not the sole or even primary mode of storytelling: visual symbolism, embodied movement, musical scoring, and sound design contribute richly to meaning-making. Yet, while performance can deliver powerful affective experiences, it often cannot approximate the complicated and nuanced verbal play that literature permits through the interconnection of description, narration, internal monologues and explanation.

There is an ongoing debate concerning whether there is a significant difference between verbal texts and visual images; as scholar W.J.T. Mitchell argued, “communicative, expressive acts, narration, argument, description, exposition and other so-called ‘speech acts’ are not medium-specific, are not ‘proper’ to some medium or another”.²⁵⁴ Nevertheless, the different capacities of telling and showing suggest quite the opposite: each mode has its own specificity and its own constraints; each mode possesses distinctive expressive resources (media and genres) and is thus predisposed to achieving certain effects better than others.

The interactive mode, by contrast, represents a significant ontological shift in narrative engagement. Unlike literature or cinema, where the audience remains external to the diegetic world, interactive media enable users to enter and act within that world. Videogames, virtual reality, and performance-based installations transform narrative into a site of agency. In this sense, a war video game may constitute a radically different kind of adaptation of a war narrative than a graphic film like *Saving Private Ryan* (1998), due to the participatory nature of the player’s experience.²⁵⁵ Historical reenactments and database-driven narrative experiences similarly reconfigure audience engagement, shifting from observation to enactment or manipulation.

It is important to note how narratives are shaped not only by the material means that transmit them (media) or the rules that arrange them (genre) but by the communicative contexts in which they are produced and received. Therefore, modes of engagement are not determined solely by medium. For instance, “machinima” – a hybrid form that uses computer game technology to produce films within the game engine – demonstrates that digital media can function in either interactive or non-interactive modes. It is a hybrid form, and its medium is an electronic one. Hugh Hancock’s machinima adaptation of Percy Bisshe Shelley’s *Ozymandias* (1817) visualizes the poem’s imagery in a stylized digital desert but lacks the ironic potency and interpretive depth afforded by the text. Despite its digital form, the piece is non-interactive and arguably less engaging than the original poem in terms of reader involvement.²⁵⁶

Reading a novel, watching a DVD, or viewing a performance in a theatre produces distinct experiences, shaped by a combination of spatial, sensory, technological, and contextual variables. The private, cognitively active process of reading might be closer to the private, domestic reception

²⁵⁴ W. J. T. Mitchell, *Picture theory*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994, p. 160.

²⁵⁵ Linda Hutcheon, p. 26.

²⁵⁶ Ibid.

of digital media (television, computer, videos) more than the collective, communal experience of live theatre or cinema. Adaptation studies must go beyond medium to examine how different modes of engagement shape narrative experience: telling, showing, and interacting are not merely aesthetic choices; they are structurally distinct forms for audience to participate that open up different interpretive possibilities. Recognizing these distinctions allows for a finer understanding of how stories are experienced, transformed, and meaningfully recontextualized across media and modes.

For a comprehensive understanding of adaptation, one must move beyond medium-specific analyses and consider the various *modes of engagement* through which narratives are accessed. When viewed through this lens, adaptation is not merely a transpositional act, but a dynamic process situated within specific sociocultural, economic, and historical contexts of both creation and reception. Narratives are never engaged with in isolation; they are received within particular temporal and spatial contexts, embedded in material, cultural, and ideological frameworks. Consequently, significant shifts in the contextual setting – whether temporal, geographic, or cultural – inevitably alter the interpretation and ideological meaning of an adapted work. How the audience reacts to a male director adapting a woman’s novel or to an American director adapting a British novel all depends on the context of reception and production. Adapters often happen to “indigenize” – a term borrowed from anthropology²⁵⁷ – stories, wherein narrative elements are localized to resonate within a new sociocultural milieu. In Germany, to give an example, Shakespeare’s plays were appropriated through Romantic translations and used to create a German national literature: however strange it may seem, such an act of cultural alignment was what made possible for the works of an “enemy dramatist” to be performed – though ideologically reframed – through both World Wars. The National Socialist regime, in fact, emphasized themes of public over private values and heroic leadership, reconfiguring these canonical texts as politically serviceable narratives.²⁵⁸

Temporal shifts within adaptations similarly illuminate the sociohistorical moment of their production and reception: Robert Louis Stevenson’s *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1886), which has been frequently adapted across media, exemplifies how the shift from a telling to a showing mode requires the physical embodiment of ambiguities which were left unspecified in the source text. Because of the change of modes, these versions all had to show Hyde’s evil side through his appearance, and the means which were chosen to be used are representative of the historical and

²⁵⁷ Ibid, p. 27.

²⁵⁸ Ibid, p. 28.

political climate of their production, mirroring cultural anxieties of the time. John Robertson's 1920 silent film reflects Prohibition-era moral concerns by framing Hyde's transformation as a descent into alcoholic depravity, whereas Roy Ward Baker's 1971 *Dr. Jekyll and Sister Hyde* reveals Britain's reaction surrounding post-1960s feminist movement.²⁵⁹

For mainly economic reasons, adapters usually pick works which are already well-known and have endured the test of time through the years, still retaining their popularity; for legal reasons, they pick works that are no longer protected by copyright.

Technological advancements too have played a role in the choice of what to adapt and what not to adapt: new media have always opened the door for new possibilities concerning all three modes of engagement. New technologies have made possible what could be called fidelity to imagination – not to reality, as one would expect – particularly those in digital imaging and 3D environments, which have expanded the possibilities for narrative immersion. One of the core ideas of adaptation theory is that audiences ask for fidelity when the source text is a classic, but a shift has taken place now with the new cult of popular classics, especially with the works of J.R.R. Tolkien and J.K. Rowling. These new classics are being adapted to all kinds of audiences through various media: on stage, in cinemas, in gaming formats, and so on. The resultant tension between the reader's imagined world and the director's realized version is extremely felt. Imagination of such fantasy literary worlds is notably individual and varies from reader to reader: consequently, the visualization of fantasy narratives on screen inevitably alters, and often supplants, earlier private imaginings within the public imagination.

Adaptation must also be understood through the lens of its economic grounds; media industries often operate through reciprocal forms of adaptation: Broadway draws from Hollywood, film releases are accompanied by novelizations and cross-platform video games, and publishers reissue source texts with promotional imagery to coincide with screen adaptations. The simultaneous 2001 release of the *Harry Potter* film and its corresponding video game is emblematic of this market-driven synergy.²⁶⁰ It is not unusual to see book publishers produce new editions of literary works that would coincide with the film version, adding photos of the movie's actors or scenes on the cover. Such economic issues – e.g. the distribution and financing of various media/arts forms – are to be considered for any general theorization of adaptation. In order to appeal to the global market or to a very specific one, a television series or a movie will probably have to alter the cultural, regional or historical features of

²⁵⁹ Ibid, p. 28-29.

²⁶⁰ Ibid, p. 30.

the text that is undergoing adaptation. Thackeray's *Vanity Fair* (1848) has been repeatedly recast as a benign comedy of manners in American film and television, displacing the novel's more acerbic social critique in favor of narratives of personal triumph.²⁶¹ Another way to capitalize on a "franchise" is through videogames based on popular films (and vice versa). The economic motives underpinning adaptation are often viewed pejoratively, especially in discussions of popular culture; yet, such commercial imperatives are not exclusive to contemporary media. Shakespeare's decision to write a play for theatre inspired by the familiar story about two teenagers in love clearly shows how this "trend" is not something born of recent.²⁶² However, the public tends to judge negatively only productions from popular culture, seeing it stained with capitalism, rather than high art.

This inquiry into adaptation theory calls for a reexamination of evaluative frameworks that label adaptations as "derivative" or judge them by a rhetoric of fidelity and betrayal. Such terminology is not only morally charged but analytically unproductive. Over time, alternative conceptual models have emerged: Robert Stam, focusing mainly on the novel to film adaptations, likens adaptations to hybrid forms, as "meeting places of different 'species'". Therefore, such filmic adaptations – or as he calls them, mutations – can help their "source novel 'survive'".²⁶³

Departing from binary media comparisons, this thesis advocates a more ecologically grounded view of adaptation: drawing on Darwin's evolution theory, it can be said that narratives, like genes, mutate in transmission and are shaped by a given environment, in this case, a cultural one. Stories can evolve thanks to adaptations, and they do not remain immutable over time. From time to time, like with biological adaptation, cultural adaptation entails migrating to more favourable conditions: stories, too, travel to other environments, which can be found in other cultures and media. To quote Hutcheon, "stories adapt just as they are adapted".²⁶⁴ As further discussed by Richard Dawkins in his 1976 book *The Selfish Gene*, there exists a parallel between culture and Darwin's biological theory: "Cultural transmission is analogous to genetic transmission in that, although basically conservative, it can give rise to a form of evolution".²⁶⁵ Language, technology, the arts "all evolve in historical time in a way that looks like highly speed up genetic evolution, but has really nothing to do with genetic evolution."²⁶⁶ Some stories are more fit for survival than others; they subsequently persist to exist

²⁶¹ Ibid.

²⁶² Ibid, p. 31.

²⁶³ Robert Stam, *Introduction: The theory and practice of adaptation*, Oxford: Blackwell, 2005, p.3.

²⁶⁴ Linda Hutcheon, p. 31.

²⁶⁵ Richard Dawkins, *The selfish gene*, New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989, p. 189.

²⁶⁶ Ibid, p. 190.

within a culture by themselves or through adaptations. Like evolution, adaptation is a transgenerational phenomenon: some stories happen to have more “stability and penetrance in the cultural environment”, as stated by Dawkins.²⁶⁷ Stories, like biological entities, are not fixed but fluid; they migrate, mutate, and are rearticulated across new media and social contexts. Those that best adapt to the prevailing cultural conditions not only survive – they thrive.

²⁶⁷ Ibid, p. 193.

Chapter 3.3 – The role of the medium

Adaptation, as both a creative and interpretive act, involves reworking a familiar story or text into a new form. This process often acts like a palimpsest and, at the same time, a transcoding into an extended range of conventions. The medium – or the material form through which a story is expressed – is a key part of how meaning is shaped; as W.J.T. Mitchell has noted, “The medium does not lie between sender and receiver; it includes and constitutes them”.²⁶⁸ In past scholarly discussions, the focus was on adaptation as process and product, though the social and communicative dimensions of media are as equally important.

When an adaptation involves a change of medium – such as from a novel to a film – it brings up long-standing questions surrounding the formal specificity of the arts. These debates date back to the 18th century and interrogate the distinct expressive capacities and limitations of different media. Over time, many critics and artists have argued that each art form has its own strengths and limits, ranking them in a hierarchy – a tendency that continues to pervade adaptation studies. Historically, critics have often privileged their own medium of expertise, reinforcing these aforementioned hierarchies within the arts. In the 20th century, critic Clement Greenberg updated these ideas in his essay “Towards a Newer Laocoon”.²⁶⁹ He argued that each art form should focus on its own materials and methods, a view that strongly influenced modernist thinking. This belief has also shaped how new media, like film, are understood. As André Gaudreault and Philippe Marion put it, each medium “according to the ways in which it exploits, combines, and multiplies the ‘familiar’ materials of expression – rhythm, movement, gesture, music, speech, image, writing – each medium possesses its own communicational energetics.”²⁷⁰

Adaptations that stay within the same medium – such as a cinematic remake – usually don’t raise many questions about medium specificity, since the formal conventions are largely stable. On the other hand, when a work is adapted across different media – especially from page to performance (e.g., novels to plays, films, or operas), or into interactive digital forms – the discussion becomes more complex. These changes raise the question: What can one medium do that another cannot?

²⁶⁸ W.J.T. Mitchell, *What do pictures want? The lives and loves of images*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005, p. 204.

²⁶⁹ Linda Hutcheon, p. 34.

²⁷⁰ André Gaudreault, and Philippe Marion, 2004, *Transécriture and narrative mediatics: The stakes of intermediality*, Trans. Robert Stam, in Stam Robert, and Raengo Alessandra, *A companion to literature and film*, Oxford: Blackwell, 2004, p. 65.

Film is often regarded as the most inclusive of performance media: “A composite language by virtue of its diverse matters of expression – sequential photography, music, phonetic sound and noise – the cinema ‘inherits’ all the art forms associated with these matters of expression [...] – the visuals of photography and painting, the movement of dance, the décor of architecture, and the performance of theater”.²⁷¹ Yet other media such as dance, opera or television also possess their own distinct grammar and syntactic structure to communicate meaning to the audience. The process of adaptation, then, is not merely translational but transformational, involving both constraint and creative affordance.

One of the most fraught instances of adaptation is moving a complex novel into a performance medium. Director Jonathan Miller argued that “most novels are irreversibly damaged by being dramatized as they were written without any sort of performance in mind at all, whereas for plays visible performance is a constitutive part of their identity and translation from stage to screen changes their identity without actually destroying it.”²⁷² Novels often have to be condensed and restructured to fit the time and space limits of film or theater. While such abridgments are frequently interpreted as losses, they may also yield heightened narrative focus or emotional intensity. Sometimes, authors themselves endorse the transformative effects of adaptations: Zadie Smith, for example, praised the changes made to her novel *White Teeth* (2000) for its television adaptation, noting that cutting some parts and adding new motivation actually improved the story:

The cuts were necessary to make the fat and messy kid presentable, and at least one of the changes is inspired [...]. A cut has been made; a motivation inserted, and an artistic clarity is the result. The moment I saw it, I gasped – this section of the novel would have been so improved had I thought of the same strategy [...]. In a novel, one scrabbles in the dirt for motivation or stretches for decorative language to hide the lack of it. In film, no such disguise will be tolerated by the viewer. When we watch a man do something on screen, our guts much more than our brains will tell us the truth of the gesture. It cannot be fudged.²⁷³

Smith’s observation points to a fundamental medium difference: while prose may tolerate ambiguity or decorative evasion, cinematic representation requires immediacy and clarity.

²⁷¹ Robert Stam, 2000, p. 61.

²⁷² Linda Hutcheon, p. 36.

²⁷³ Ibid, p. 36-37.

Adaptations often involve adding new elements, not just removing the already present ones. When Raymond Chandler adapted James M. Cain's *Double Indemnity* (1935) for the screen, he didn't just condense the story – he also infused it with his own stylistic markers – wit, moral ambiguity, and sexual tension – recasting the story in a manner closer to his own literary voice.²⁷⁴ Adapters might also change the structure, impose a clearer narrative arc, or even alter the ending to suit audience expectations. Despite these creative possibilities, discourses around adaptation, particularly filmic adaptation, are often discussed in terms of loss – of depth, complexity, or literary refinement. Pragmatically, adaptation requires temporal and spatial compression; yet, the concern often shifts from quantitative reduction to qualitative degradation.

When thinking of adaptations, the most commonly considered ones are those that transition from the telling (e.g. novels) to the showing mode (e.g. films). This trajectory – from print to visual – has long dominated discussions in adaptation studies. Novels contain much information that needs to be adapted and translated, posing the challenge of turning descriptive text into dialogue and action. Novelist and literary critic David Lodge explains that adapting a novel means turning narration and inner thoughts into speech and behavior: novelistic elements such as exposition, internal monologue, and ideological subtext must be reconstituted as action, dialogue, and visual cues. In doing this, some themes or characters might get more attention, while others might fade into the background.²⁷⁵ Adaptations often emphasize visual elements; however, sound is just as important. Kamilla Elliott states that film relies heavily on spoken dialogue²⁷⁶, while soundtracks – including voice-over, music, and ambient effects – guide audience response. For the adapter, music in film “functions as an emulsifier that allows you to dissolve a certain emotion and take it in a certain direction.”²⁷⁷

While critics often argue that film restricts perceptual range by directing the gaze, it also enables dynamic framing and montage unavailable to the stage: it can use editing, special effects, and camera angles to shape what the audience sees and feels, though some argue that the camera actually limits the spectator's view compared to the broader focus of live theater. Also, each medium has its own “language”: film uses cuts and shots, while theater relies on live performance. Cinema allows for a more nuanced, visual grammar. Still, both film and theatre must translate indexical and iconic signs

²⁷⁴ Richard Schickel, *Double indemnity*, London: British Film Institute Publishing, 1992, p. 52.

²⁷⁵ David Lodge, *Adapting Nice Work for television*, In Reynolds Peter, *Novel images: Literature in performance*, London and New York: Routledge, 1993, p. 196-200.

²⁷⁶ Kamilla Elliott, *Rethinking the novel/film debate*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003, p. 78.

²⁷⁷ Michael Ondaatje, *The conversations: Walter Murch and the art of editing film*, Toronto: Vintage Canada, 2002, p. 103.

– people, places and things – while literature, on the other hand, uses symbolic and conventional signs.²⁷⁸ Because of this, graphic novels, due to their hybrid visual-verbal nature, often translate more seamlessly to film.

Many Hollywood films aim for realism, with logical plots and consistent characters. This can cause tension when adapting books that focus on inner thoughts. Luchino Visconti's *Morte a Venezia* (1971) could be taken as an example: it was adapted from Thomas Mann's novella *Der Tod in Venedig*; Mann's original story deeply explored the main character's inner world. However, in the film version, this complexity is revealed more slowly and visually, and the character is changed from a writer to a composer, making his artistic struggles easier to show on screen. The movement from telling to showing necessitates complex negotiations of form, medium, and genre. Adaptation is not a process of direct translation but of reconfiguration, in which meaning is reconstructed within the material constraints of the new medium. The formal properties of the target medium – be they theatrical, cinematic, operatic, or choreographic – both limit and enable particular expressive possibilities, demanding that the adapter make strategic aesthetic and interpretive choices.

²⁷⁸ Linda Hutcheon, p. 43.

Chapter 3.4 – The crucial importance of context

As Malcolm Bradbury observes, even without any modifications to temporal, national or cultural setting, the way the context and the public receive a story can alter completely how it is understood. More importantly, the way a story is reinterpreted changes dramatically: both adaptations and their source texts are inescapably situated within specific contexts – temporal, spatial, societal, and cultural; they do not exist in isolation. Context-dependent variables such as fashion trends and value systems inevitably shape both the creation and reception of said texts. In response to this ever-changing environment, many adapters choose to adapt narratives to modern-day times, in order to ensure resonance with the audience.

Adaptation, as stated before, may be characterized by a “theme and variation” structure – a process of repetition with difference, as affirmed by Hutcheon. This implies not only the inevitability of change but also the presence of multiple potential causes for it: the constraints of form, the interpretative choices of the adapter, the expectations of the target audience, and, crucially, the broader context of both production and reception. This environment is both vast and heterogeneous; as argued by Miller:

Just as a painting changes when it is moved from the Eastern end of a church and placed in an art gallery, so a play by Shakespeare, or an opera by Mozart, changes its character according to the physical format in which it is presented. A play that started its theatrical life on the unfurnished platform of the Globe and then went on to be pictorially represented in the Victorian theater, with further alterations in physical format when thrust on to the apron stages that developed after the 1950s, has undergone changes that are just as far reaching as the ones that result from reinterpretations of the spoken lines.²⁷⁹

Furthermore, the medium and mode of an adaptation – the size of the television screen, the style of a book’s print, or the gaming platform – also contribute to the shaping of its context, influencing both the creation and reception of the work.

Context also encompasses elements of promotion and reception – the “hype” – an adaptation gets: advertising strategies, reviews, and celebrity involvement. The paratextual apparatus surrounding an adaptation plays a significant role in shaping audience interpretation; in fact, depending on the celebrity status of the director or actors involved, the reception of the public may differ. Furthermore,

²⁷⁹ Jonathan Miller, *Subsequent performances*, London: Faber and Faber, 1986, p. 60.

socio-historical context is not peripheral but central to both the production and reception of adaptation; the “timeliness” of certain narratives often conditions their adaptability. For instance, Italian film adaptations in the early 20th century of epics such as *El Cid* and *Gerusalemme liberata* coincided with the nationalist-imperialist fervor in Italy during the Libyan War (1911–12). During the Fascist era, epic narratives continued to be employed and valorized, therefore it should not be surprising that postwar Italian neo-realists responded with an aesthetic of anti-adaptation.²⁸⁰ Thus, any study of adaptation that conceives it as a dynamic process must attend to these broader ideological and historical forces.

Every adapted narrative, regardless of medium – whether told, shown, or interacted with – exists within a particular spatiotemporal and sociocultural context. For example, a videogame adaptation of *The Godfather* may elicit markedly different responses from an Italian American player than from a Korean player, due to differing cultural identifications and historical relationships to the narrative.²⁸¹ Adaptation is often culturally coded and contextually inflected, a fact well understood by adapters. Nonetheless, these are not the only variables to be taken into consideration: time, or even short periods of time, can change the meaning of a work and how it is received within a certain context.

In the study of adaptation, the question of *where* a narrative is recontextualized is as critical as *when* it is recontextualized. The practice of adapting texts across cultures is not a new phenomenon – after all, ancient Romans adapted plays from Greek theatre. However, what contemporary scholarship often terms “cultural globalization”²⁸² has heightened the attention of such transcultural transfers in recent years. These adaptations frequently involve changes not only in language, but also in temporal and spatial setting, and in nearly all cases, such cultural transpositions entail a transformation in the “transculturated” version, whether it be political, ideological, or moral, demonstrating that context fundamentally conditions meaning. While it is reasonable to expect that shifting time and place would result in a recalibration of cultural associations and values, this is by no means guaranteed. Adapters do not always acknowledge, or successfully account for, evolving cultural sensibilities.

Legal constraints have also prompted transcultural modifications, in order to avoid repercussions. F.W. Murnau’s *Nosferatu* (1922), a cinematic adaptation of Bram Stoker’s *Dracula*, altered the

²⁸⁰ Linda Hutcheon, p. 143.

²⁸¹ Ibid, p. 144.

²⁸² Melba Cuddy-Keane, *Mrs. Dalloway: Film, times, and trauma*, In Laura Davis, and Jeanette McVicker, *Virginia Woolf and her influences: Selected papers from the seventh annual Virginia Woolf conference*, New York: Pace University Press, 1998, p. 171–75.

novel's period of events (moving it 50 years back), setting (changing the locations from Transylvania to Germany and from London to Bremen), and even characters' names (Dracula changed into Count Orlock). These changes, while arguably sufficient to constitute a new work by today's copyright standards, failed to prevent conflict at the time. More commonly, however, adaptations aim to *modernize* rather than historicize, seeking to minimize temporal and cultural distance between the source work and contemporary audiences. For instance, Franco Zeffirelli's *Romeo and Juliet* (1968), emphasized physical intimacy and trimmed dialogues that would have slowed down the action to better suit the cinematic tastes of the era. What the intended audience found legible, entertaining, or meaningful consequently dictated formal and stylistic changes. Baz Luhrmann's 1996 adaptation, on the other hand, responded to a generation raised on MTV aesthetics and action cinema, setting the play in a stylized gangland and employing frenetic pacing.²⁸³ Even adaptations of the same canonical work that are merely decades apart have to evolve in order to reflect their contemporary cultural environments. These acts of recalibration are themselves forms of transculturation.

Transcultural adaptation can also result in narrative simplification and aesthetic flattening. Film critic David Edelstein observed that in such cases with Hollywood adaptations, the pace of the narrative changes; the life is "streamlined out of the narrative" since narrative complexity is often sacrificed, surrendering ambiguity and subtlety in favor of sentimentality and mass appeal. Furthermore, family values have to be kept in high regard while also overromanticizing the story. Edelstein further states, "It would be terrific to report that Hollywood does not, contrary to popular belief, have a coarsening effect on the foreign properties it remakes. Terrific, but wrong. In this area, as in few others, studios live up to their reputation as titanic forces of philistinism".²⁸⁴

Moreover, transcultural adaptation frequently involves a change of racial and gender politics. Sometimes, elements that may provoke cultural discomfort are deliberately purged; in other cases, the adaptation "de-represses" the politics of an earlier adapted text.²⁸⁵ Even within a single national culture, changes over time can produce adaptations that may be considered transcultural on a micro-level. For example, Shakespeare's *The Taming of the Shrew* has undergone repeated reinvention to for movies and television dramas in order to accommodate shifting gender ideologies, from the

²⁸³ Linda Hutcheon, p. 146.

²⁸⁴ David Edelstein, "Remade in America": A label to avoid, New York Times, Arts and Leisure: (3)20, 2001, p. 3.

²⁸⁵ Robert Stam, 2005, p. 42-44.

suffragette movement of the early 20th century to feminist and post-feminist reinterpretations in more recent decades.²⁸⁶

Chapter 3.5 - Conclusion

By considering the various modes of engagement – telling, showing, and interacting – this chapter sought to explore the nature of adaptation, while emphasizing its dual identity as both a product and a process. It has become evident that adaptation operates within a spectrum of expressive forms and media, each offering distinct possibilities and constraints. In order to reach a richer understanding of what adaptation really means, it is fundamental to move beyond questions of fidelity and proximity to source texts. The role played by historical, cultural, and technological contexts in shaping how adaptations are both produced and received is all the more crucial: whether through the indigenization of canonical texts or the transcultural reimagining of narrative structures, adaptation emerges as a dynamic practice that reflects and responds to ever-changing ideological, aesthetic, and material conditions. The case studies and theoretical discussions presented here reveal how adapted works often carry new meanings, shaped not only by their source texts but by the specific cultural environment into which they are introduced. Lastly, it is fundamental to take into consideration the prominent role of context and that of the adapter as both cultural mediator and creative agent. Adaptation, in this view, is not simply a matter of literal translation, but of transformation – an act of storytelling that challenges static notions of originality and authorship. As such, adaptation theory should move towards a broader reflection on how narratives circulate, evolve, and thrives across diverse cultural landscapes.

²⁸⁶ Linda Hutcheon, p. 147.

Chapter 4 – An analysis of the adaptations

This chapter approaches literary-to-film adaptation not as a one-way test of fidelity but as a dialogue between media, methods, and historical moments. Building on adaptation theory's turn from "faithfulness" to intermedial transformation and negotiation, the analyses that follow read each film both as an interpretation of a source and as an autonomous artwork. In practical terms, that means pairing close reading of the novels with close viewings of the films to trace what is carried over, reweighted, or newly invented at the levels of narration (voice-over vs. first-person prose), focalization (whose gaze orders events), temporality (linear plots vs. flashback structures), and space (how houses, rooms, thresholds, and landscapes are staged). Throughout, attention to medium specificity is central: cinema speaks through framing, light, sound, editing, and performance, so phenomena the novels articulate in sentences (e.g., interior monologue, reported speech, narratorial aside) often reappear on screen as *mise-en-scène*, rhythm, and texture. Methodologically, the chapter proceeds by paired comparisons that move from description to interpretation. First, it inventories what is retained, omitted, or re-ordered; second, it evaluates how those choices reshape themes such as haunted domesticity, class and gender hierarchies, and the negotiation of female agency; and third, it interprets the aesthetic means – camera distance, sound motifs, color and light – by which films materialize or reconceive the novels' concerns. The readings that follow take the director's choices as arguments about the novel, made in the language of cinema, and evaluate those arguments on their own terms as well as against the textual baseline. Adopting this lens is powerful for two reasons. First, it widens the critical evidence: instead of relying only on plot correspondences, it allows us to treat framing, blocking, sound design, and editing as interpretive acts that answer the novels' questions differently than prose can. Second, it clarifies how adaptations operate as cultural mediators: they relocate 19th century materials into new contexts, audiences, and value systems, sometimes amplifying latent elements (e.g., the Gothic sensorium, racialized or colonial undercurrents, psychological ambiguity), sometimes streamlining or rebalancing them to fit feature-length structure or television grammar. Looking at works from page to screen shows that adaptations do not merely illustrate their sources; they activate them, making choices that reveal new emphases (or blind spots) in the originals and, in turn, teaching how narrative voice, ethics, and space behave when they migrate from source text to adapted text.

Chapter 4.1 - Adaptations of *Jane Eyre*

In this section the focus will be on two of the film adaptations based on the novel written by Charlotte Brontë, *Jane Eyre*. The analysis will focus on the way the story is re-told through the new medium, which elements are kept and which are not, and what are the central themes in the adaptation based on the reading each director has given to the novel.

Chapter 4.1.1 – *Jane Eyre* (2011)

Cary Fukunaga's 2011 adaptation of *Jane Eyre* is a romantic gothic drama that reinterprets Charlotte Brontë's novel within a cinematic framework. It is one of those rare literary adaptations that feels both faithful and freshly argued. It hews closely to Charlotte Brontë's core arc – Jane's struggle to reconcile self-respect, moral autonomy, and romantic desire – while reshaping time, voice, and imagery to suit cinema's strengths. The film features performances by Mia Wasikowska in the protagonist role and Michael Fassbender as Edward Rochester, with a screenplay written by Moira Buffini. Critical reception was predominantly positive, with particular attention directed toward its fidelity to Brontë's narrative and its visual aesthetic. The film's costume design, overseen by Michael O'Connor, was recognized with a nomination for the Academy Awards. Structurally, the narrative employs a series of flashbacks as its principal storytelling device. In October 2009, Cary Fukunaga was formally announced as the director of the film. From its earliest stages, the creative team sought to emphasize the Gothic aspects of Charlotte Brontë's novel, thereby distinguishing the film from earlier adaptations that had tended to prioritize its romantic or period-drama elements. As Fukunaga himself stated, his approach was influenced by a close reading with Brontë's text: "I've spent a lot of time rereading the book and trying to feel out what Charlotte Brontë was feeling when she was writing it. That sort of spookiness that plagues the entire story... there's been something like 24 adaptations and it's very rare that you see those sorts of darker sides. They treat it like it's just a period romance and I think it's much more than that."²⁸⁷

The role of Jane Eyre was undertaken by Mia Wasikowska, with Michael Fassbender cast as Edward Rochester. In contrast to numerous earlier adaptations, which frequently featured actresses older than

²⁸⁷ Kyle Buchanan (2010, 10 March), "Director Cary Fukunaga on the 'Darker Sides' of His Upcoming Jane Eyre". Movieline. <https://web.archive.org/web/20100312034759/http://www.movieline.com/2010/03/cary-fukunaga-on-jane-eyre.php> Accessed on: 2025, 15 August.

the character of the novel, director Cary Fukunaga and the production team expressed a deliberate intention to cast an actress closer to Jane's age as depicted in Charlotte Brontë's novel. Fukunaga liked Wasikowska's "sense of observation in her eyes" and that "[she] could communicate [Jane's inner turmoil] in a way that didn't feel theatrical".²⁸⁸ He further emphasized that her appearance could be understated in accordance with the character's literary portrayal. Regarding the casting of Rochester, Fukunaga acknowledged that while other actors might more closely resemble Brontë's physical description of the character, Fassbender embodied what he identified as the essential "spirit" of Rochester. Although the production team initially identified the narrative's setting as the late 1830s, they ultimately decided to set the film around 1843. Fukunaga remarked that this choice was influenced by visual considerations, noting his aversion to the fashion of the 1830s, stating that "the clothing style of the '30s was just awful. Every woman looked like a wedding cake."²⁸⁹ However, it was decided to allow certain characters to retain older styles in order to suggest the persistence of outmoded fashions within certain social classes. Fukunaga underscored the atmospheric role of these landscapes, stating that "Northern England – Yorkshire and Derbyshire, the moors and dales – they look like they're something straight out of a Tim Burton horror film. The trees are all twisted by the wind; the bracken and the heather on the moors have this amazing hue. And the weather is so extreme and it changes all the time. The house even, Haddon Hall, is just so steeped in history, the spaces, the galleries, they sort of just breathe and you feel the presence of the history."²⁹⁰

Form and point of view

Brontë's narrative is a linear first-person autobiography, a retrospective "confession" that escorts us through Gateshead, Lowood, Thornfield, Moor House, and back to Thornfield. The forward march matters: each station forges a piece of Jane's moral armature – resilience at Gateshead, stoicism and justice at Lowood, ethical desire at Thornfield, rigor and vocation with the Rivers. In its filmic counterpart, Fukunaga and screenwriter Moira Buffini re-time the plot, opening in medias res with Jane's flight across the moors to the Rivers siblings and then going back to the past through

²⁸⁸ Barbara Chai (2011, 10 March), "Does 'Jane Eyre' Do Justice to the Book?". *The Wall Street Journal*. <https://www.wsj.com/articles/BL-SEB-64227> Accessed on: 2025, 15 August.

²⁸⁹ Jeffrey Gantz (2011, 17 March). "Jane Eyre redux". *The Portland Phoenix*. <https://web.archive.org/web/20110717031302/http://portland.thephoenix.com/movies/117142-jane-eyre-redux/> Accessed on: 2025, 15 August.

²⁹⁰ Dennis King (2011, 15 April), "Forbidding setting, climate make 'Jane Eyre' production daunting". *Wimgo*. <https://web.archive.org/web/20110423231112/http://blog.wimgo.com/projections/2011/04/15/forbidding-setting-climate-make-%E2%80%98jane-eyre%E2%80%99-production-daunting/> Accessed on: 2025, 15 August.

flashbacks. This nonlinearity imports two effects cinema handles beautifully: suspense (what occurred so that Jane had to escape into a storm?) and emotional crosscutting (the purity of the moors alternated with Thornfield's mounting claustrophobia). The rearrangement preserves the novel's sequence of moral tests but turns Jane's life into a Gothic mystery whose answer will be gradually uncovered. It's a strategic trade: the book's diary-like intimacy is lost in favor of a cinematic rhythm of revelation. Brontë's first-person voice is the novel's engine. Jane's ironic asides, ethical self-scrutiny, and invitations to the "readers" produce the sense that she is confiding to them in a private moral drama. The sentence: "Reader, I married him"²⁹¹ isn't just a flourish; it seals a relationship between narrator and audience that grounds the novel's feminist authority. In the movie such "voiceovers" are downsized, and instead the narration of inner feelings relies on performance, framing, and sound. Mia Wasikowska's Jane externalizes interior life through micro-gesture and controlled speech, and silence becomes a form of eloquence. The film nods to Brontë's confiding tone without fully reproducing it; rather than an ongoing narration, we get carefully placed lines and visual equivalents: lingering shots of sketches, the stillness of plain costuming, and the spatial grammar of doors, corridors, and thresholds. The result is more than enigmatic: less commentary, more implication. The movie avoids directly addressing the viewer as "reader," signaling cinema's different contract with its audience.

Characterization

In the novel, Jane is bright, iron-willed, and piercingly self-analytical; her plainness is her power – she refuses to be reduced to a mere "governess" or an ornament. In the film, Wasikowska's performance is remarkably aligned with the text's ethos: she is quiet, observant, and incorruptible. The camera respects her plainness – no glamorizing sheen – yet renders it luminous through natural light and close framing. A high fidelity is the way the film keeps Jane's ethical self-preservation at the center: in the interrupted wedding and the subsequent proposal to be Rochester's mistress, her refusal is filmed not as melodramatic renunciation but as steady, grief-stricken resolve. What's reduced is the novel's argumentative wit – those extended dialectical exchanges become shorter and more succinct – but the moral stance remains intact.

²⁹¹ Charlotte Brontë, p. 572.

In the novel, Edward Rochester is a Byronic composite: sardonic, commanding, self-lacerating, testing Jane with games and deceptions. His magnetism is inseparable from his threat to morality. Michael Fassbender's interpretation leans into Rochester's volatility without tipping into a cartoonish caricature. The screenplay trims some of Rochester's more flamboyant schemes (e.g., the fortune-teller masquerade), turning him into a credible 19th century man compromised by desire and legal bind. The emphasis shifts slightly from manipulative play to tragic entanglement; he remains a test of Jane's autonomy, but the film smooths his edges to sustain his romantic viability for her.

Ascetic, duty-obsessed, and chillingly self-denying, St. John Rivers represents a rival vision of life founded on religious vocation without passionate love. Compared to the book, Jamie Bell's St. John is cooler and younger, less glacially doctrinaire in manner if not in aim. The missionary imperative (to travel to India) and the loveless proposal are present but strongly compressed. The novel's extended critique of evangelical ambition and colonial mission is narrowed; St. John functions mainly as a counterweight to Jane's passion, not as a full study in religious imperial will, probably due to the time constraints of the medium.

The "madwoman in the attic" is both a Gothic engine and a colonial symptom – Creole, hidden from sight, pathologized. The text gives Jane secondhand accounts of heredity and excess; modern criticism reads Bertha as the repressed "double" of Victorian feminine constraint. In the film, Bertha appears in carefully rationed glimpses – feral, tragic, emphatically othered and alienated. Her and Rochester's backstories are even thinner than in the novel; the adaptation relies on atmosphere rather than exposition. As a result, the colonial critique is muted, almost non-existent, but the symbolic function is sharpened: Bertha becomes pure threat and pity, a visualized boundary Jane refuses to cross when asked to become Rochester's mistress.

The Gothic and the visual grammar

Brontë blends realist social critique with Gothic devices: red-room terrors, midnight laughter, the telepathic call across the moors, the premonitory dreams. Yet her Gothic is filtered through a rational narrator who weighs evidence and resists superstition. Fukunaga emphasizes Gothic environmental storytelling: Thornfield's corridors are narrow conduits of sound, candle flames scallop the edges of frames, doorways bracket power dynamics. The "red-room" is rendered as a genuine, palpable panic

attack for Jane; the stormy moors become topographies of her emotions. Instead of long expository passages, the movie lets lighting and weather do thematic work: austerity at Lowood is all chill grays; Thornfield's seduction glows with low firelight; the moors, scoured by wind, give Jane space to become legible to herself. This is a shift from rhetorical Gothic to sensorial Gothic, a gain the medium can claim as its own.

Gender, power, and the negotiation of equality

In the book, Jane insists on equality of spirit:

‘Do you think I can stay to become nothing to you? Do you think I am an automaton? – a machine without feelings? and can bear to have my morsel of bread snatched from my lips, and my drop of living water dashed from my cup? Do you think, because I am poor, obscure, plain, and little, I am soulless and heartless? You think wrong! – I have as much soul as you – and full as much heart! And if God had gifted me with some beauty and much wealth, I should have made it as hard for you to leave me, as it is now for me to leave you. I am not talking to you now through the medium of custom, conventionalities, nor even of mortal flesh; – it is my spirit that addresses your spirit; just as if both had passed through the grave, and we stood at God’s feet, equal – as we are!’²⁹²

Jane refuses both objectification and saintly self-annihilation. The novel’s argument is dialogic: Jane and Rochester talk their way to parity; Brontë writes long debates about class, gender, and freedom. In the film, the core idea – equality or nothing – survives intact, distilled into a few crucial scenes: the frank exchange between the two protagonists about plainness and worth (“Do you think me handsome?” “No.”), the almost-wedding, and Jane’s decisive departure. Because the film trims rhetorical sparring, it transfers emphasis from argument to choice. When Jane leaves Thornfield, the camera gives her the last word by granting her the last image: a small figure crossing into punishing landscape on her own terms. The feminist spine is preserved by visual grammar rather than discursive elaboration.

²⁹² Charlotte Brontë, p. 339.

Religion, class and colonial entanglements

Jane's conscience is explicitly Christian and rational; her resistance to Rochester's proposal is grounded in law and inward discipline. The "supernatural" moment – the cry of "Jane! Jane! Jane!" heard across distance – sits in a liminal space Brontë leaves open to Providence. The movie respects this balance: it stages the cry with striking sound design, it is not over-explained, refusing to decide between miracle and psychology. St. John's religiosity, however, is less developed, so the theological debate narrows to a moral one: not "what does God require?" broadly, but "how do I live with integrity?" Class critique runs through Jane's compensation, the hierarchy of servants, Rochester's wealth from the West Indies, and the Rivers' genteel poverty. The colonial economy lurks behind the plot: a Jamaican marriage, an Indian mission. In the film, due to the time constraints, these themes are compressed into texture rather than analyzed. The viewers glimpse rank through costume and space – Jane's severe gowns in opposition to Blanche Ingram's finery, Rochester's easy movement through rooms that constrict others – but extended social commentary recedes. The colonial dimensions are largely backgrounded; the adaptation privileges the personal ethics of consent and equality over the structural critique made increasingly explicit by the modern readings of the novel.

Lowood, Gateshead, and condensation

The childhood chapters are crucial: they forge Jane's grammar of justice (the red-room trauma), resistance to cruelty (Mr. Brocklehurst's hypocrisy), and capacity for love and loss (Helen Burns). In the adaptation, these sections are intact, but downsized. The red-room is a brief, searing set piece; Lowood's discipline and the death of Helen arrive swiftly, serving as an emotional prologue to Thornfield rather than a deep societal portrait. The compression is a loss in sociological breadth but preserves the arc of her interior growth: suffering teaches Jane to distinguish true authority from coercion.

Romance, consent, and the interrupted wedding

The courtship between Jane and Rochester is, figuratively, a fencing match; the reveal of Bertha detonates the fantasy of lawful union; Jane's refusal is both legal and moral. Her subsequent temptation – to accept a "lower" place in exchange for love – tests the integrity she has built. The

filmic wedding sequence is tense and nearly procedural, racing from ceremony to attic to ultimate confrontation. The biggest fidelity is tonal: the revelation is not a melodramatic scandal but an ethical crisis. Crucially, the film gives Jane time to look – to register that love without equality would be self-betrayal – before she slips away into the moors. The attention to consent (not only sexual but existential) is strikingly modern yet entirely Brontëan.

Exits, returns, and the end of the haunt

In the novel, fleeing from Thronfield is the moral pivot: Jane walks out to keep her soul intact and is nearly destroyed by exposure. Only after the house burns and the master is humbled does Ferndean become habitable. The epilogue distributes care – Adele’s school, St. John’s fate, Rochester’s sight returning – because a just home requires ongoing labor, not one triumphant moment. In the adaptation, the return is swifter and quieter: Ferndean is small and dim, the weather is calm, and the musical score softens. Haunted domesticity yields to ethical domesticity: the house shelters a contract of equals and stops being an instrument of concealment. Brontë’s extended “aftercare” is lost, but what is shown is a distilled image of what a non-haunted can look and feel like.

Ending and moral resolution

After the fire at Thornfield, Rochester is maimed (blind, one hand lost); Bertha is dead; Jane returns, and mutual dependence replaces asymmetry. The closing chapters underline that equality has finally been achieved: wealth redistributed, power leveled, desire licensed by law and mutual regard. Jane’s last words re-center the narrator’s agency. In the film, the return is swift and spare. The movie embraces the earned tenderness of the reunion and the image of parity – the powerful man reduced, the steadfast woman freely choosing – and stops before the book’s extended conclusion (Rochester’s partial recovery of sight, the updates on the Rivers). What is lost in narrative aftercare is gained in emotional clarity: the final scene insists that love is only just when it meets Jane’s terms, which are egalitarian. The adaptation’s restraint honors the novel’s principle if not its full epilogue.

Haunted domesticity

In both versions, the home is not a neutral setting but an active force that molds – and menaces – female life. The “haunted” in the story is less about literal ghosts than about houses saturated with memory, secrecy, and power: rooms that surveil, corridors that constrain, thresholds that test consent. Brontë argues this through a first-person voice that reads and interprets interiors; Fukunaga translates the same argument into image and sound, making stone, light, and air do the haunting. The film opens with Jane staggering through a squall and hammering at the Rivers’ door before collapsing. The movie’s *in medias res* opening makes the “return of the domestic” the engine of memory: each flashback is a visitation by a place that won’t let go. The cut from howling wind to the low, fire-lit kitchen is abrupt: floorboards, ironware, and steam become instruments of resuscitation as Diana and Mary wrap Jane and spoon her broth. Haunted domesticity here is not menace but a test: is the house porous enough to admit the stranger? The camera keeps Jane on the sill and flagstones – half in, half out – until the women physically draw her across the threshold, establishing that, in this version, houses can both wound (what she fled) and heal (what lets her in), and that women’s labor is what converts shelter from architecture into home. When Jane first entered Thornfield, the echoing entrance and distant, delayed greeting produce a quiet probation. The lens sits back to let her small figure cross a floor of cold stone beneath a high gallery; a servants’ bell board ticks faintly, suggesting a hidden system of summons and surveillance. Mrs. Fairfax eventually ushers Jane forward, but the staging is clear: the house sees the new governess before she properly sees it. Haunted domesticity is registered as deferred admission – she is neither guest nor family, and the building’s scale keeps her provisional. In several early Thornfield ellipses, Jane is shown at her small table by the window, sketchbook open, light falling hard across unadorned walls. The shot axis place her in profile, the world outside bright but withheld by thick leaded glass. The room’s austerity echoes Lowood without repeating it: here, privacy is real, but it comes with limited sightlines – she looks out, unseen, while the house keeps her in a quiet cul-de-sac. The sketchbook functions as domestic counter-magic: women’s work that records what the house won’t yet let her join. During Rochester’s house party, the film repeatedly locates Jane behind a screen, at a doorway, or recessed in a window alcove while Blanche and the guests perform in the salon proper. We do not simply see social difference; we feel spatial segregation: the hearth is monopolized, chairs are angled in a ring that excludes, and Jane’s listening is routed through plaster and drapery. Haunted domesticity here is auditory – music and laughter bled thin by distance – so that the house itself enforces genre: romance for the center, labor

and witness for the edge. One of the film's most unsettling sequences avoids spectacle and makes haunted domesticity procedural. Rochester hustles Jane up back staircases to a locked chamber where Mr. Mason lies bloodied. He orders Jane to stay in the chair, not to speak, not to look around, and the camera obeys; the room's boundaries become legal limits. Pale dawn collects at a shutter; a folding screen cuts the space into forbidden quadrants; a single ewer and cloth become instruments of triage. The house is revealed as a machine for compartmentalizing knowledge, a sickroom nested inside a manor, nested inside a secret Jane is commanded to serve but not to understand. Few scenes capture so precisely how domestic space can conscript a woman into sustaining its lies while denying her the omniscience the novel's narrator can claim after the fact. Fukunaga's long, nearly wordless passages through unlit galleries at dusk – Jane with a taper, or moving by memory in the seam between day and dark – convert anxiety into architecture. Sound design does the haunting: wind under doors, a latch settling, the distant thud of a shutter. The camera often stays at body height, so panelling and newel posts loom; stair landings break sightlines like clauses that refuse to resolve. The effect is that the house regulates pulse and breath, teaching the viewer how a woman's vigilance is not paranoia but the domestic literacy survival requires.

After the proposal, Fukunaga lingers on the split chestnut tree in the grounds, with roots still holding, while the crown severed by lightning. By keeping the frame tight (bark, sap, torn fibres) and letting nocturnal insects replace score, the film treats the estate's skin as part of the house's body. Haunted domesticity extends beyond walls; the parkland becomes prognosis, an externalized memory the interior will have to absorb. The image anticipates the later ruin without stating it, so the home's fate is lodged as a felt riddle in the viewer's mind. On the night Jane leaves, the film declines grand rhetoric for tactile ritual: folding her clothes by lamplight, tightening her cloak, touching the bedstead one last time. The room is small, the diegetic creak of a strap loud against hush: every object becomes witness of her departure. Instead of staging the door as triumphant threshold, Fukunaga isolates the quiet pre-departure choreography by which a woman unthreads herself from a house that has tried to script her. Haunted domesticity loosens not in a single cut but in minute, embodied decisions inside the room that once held her. When Jane convalesces with the Rivers sisters, the camera keeps returning to the worktable by the hearth – mending, bread, maps, letters – so the home's textures counterwrite the trauma of Thornfield. A brief exchange of glances over the kettle – practical, untheatrical – shows domestic power reconstituted as care without surveillance. Later, when St. John presides, the same room stiffens: chairs squared to the table, the Bible central, the air somehow cooler. Fukunaga does not sermonize; he recomposes the frame to show how even a kind house can be

recolonized by duty that makes a woman useful at the expense of being fully present. The reunion at Ferndean avoids epilogue and offers nearness instead: close frames of rough plaster, a small table, the thud of a cane, Jane guiding Rochester's hand to her face. The house's smallness is the argument: fewer sightlines to police, fewer rooms to lie, more surfaces to touch and know. Where Thornfield multiplied secrets, Ferndean narrows to touch and breath: the domestic becomes livable because equality has collapsed distance, and with it, the need for rooms to speak in riddles.

Conclusion

Fukunaga's *Jane Eyre* is less a translation than a recomposition: it selects the novel's essential motifs – selfhood, consent, equality, desire – and rewrites them in light and space rather than in pages of argument. Haunted domesticity is the crucible where a female subject learns what love, law, and liberty mean. The difference is medium: the book argues; the film composes, but they converge on the same claim: that a home is just only when a woman can choose it without becoming its ghost. In that fidelity of spirit, the 2011 adaptation stands among the most persuasive screen readings of Brontë's classic, proving that the heart of *Jane Eyre* is not the thunderclap revelation in the attic, but the quiet, radical conviction with which Jane chooses herself – and then, on those terms, chooses love.

Chapter 4.1.2 – Jane Eyre (1996)

Franco Zeffirelli's 1996 adaptation of *Jane Eyre* pursues a classical, romantic idiom – elegant framing, lyrical pacing, and restrained dialogue – while distilling Charlotte Brontë's first-person novel into a compact, two-hour narrative that emphasizes the love story and the heroine's ethical resolve over the book's fuller social and theological textures. The film preserves the principal arc, yet compresses and rearranges emphasis to serve cinema's demand for momentum and emotional clarity; what Brontë distributes across many chapters of narrated thought and moral argument is rendered as a sequence of concentrated set-pieces. The effect is a sustained fidelity of spirit – Jane's self-respect as the ground of love – achieved through subtraction: fewer debates, less satire of class pretension, less post-wedding aftermath, and a sharper focus on the couple's bond. If the novel's "I" is a discursive engine ("I must keep in good health and not die,"²⁹³), Zeffirelli's Jane is a figure of watchfulness and choice, a presence whose silence carries intentions that Brontë spells out at length.

²⁹³ Charlotte Brontë, p. 73.

Form and point of view

Brontë's tale is an autobiography told with retrospective wit and scruple; the narrating Jane turns readers into confidants and judges. Zeffirelli largely relinquishes this confiding voice: while occasional voiceover gestures toward interiority, the film trusts framing, tempo, and performance, also thanks to Charlotte Gainsbourg's measured gaze and to William Hurt's halting vulnerability to translate inward processes. This trade exchanges the novel's argumentative richness, such as Jane's defense of equality, her legal vocabulary of "law" and "principle," her reasoning at moments of temptation, for a visual rhetoric that locates moral weight in images: a narrow corridor, a backlit doorway, a glove clasped and released. The change matters most at Thornfield, where Brontë builds a courtship from talk: "Do you think me handsome?" "No, sir."²⁹⁴; while the film leans on proxemics and stillness to propose the same equality without the same dialectic.

The formation years

Zeffirelli hews closely to Jane's childhood itinerary at Gateshead and Lowood but abridges its social critique in favor of the trauma's imprint. The "red-room" functions in the book as a primal scene of exclusion: "the red-room was a spare chamber, very seldom slept in"²⁹⁵ whose chill décor and punitive atmosphere teach Jane that unjust authority can masquerade as moral law. Zeffirelli condenses this into a stylized episode in the very beginning of the film: a child alone amid crimson and shadow, a locked door, an abrupt cut to panic, so that a complex reflection on class cruelty and memory becomes a force-field of fear the body remembers. Similarly at Lowood, Brontë's extended portrait of institutional piety and starvation – Mr. Brocklehurst's hypocrisy, the typhus outbreak – yields in the film to a rapid sequence of deprivation and camaraderie, climaxing in Helen Burns's death, which the novel frames with stoic Christian counsel: "Life appears to me too short to be spent in nursing animosity, or registering wrongs."²⁹⁶ and the film marks as an indelible wound. The adaptation keeps the formation logic intact – Gateshead teaches rebellion, Lowood teaches endurance – but compresses the sociological landscape that surrounds those lessons.

²⁹⁴ Ibid, p. 196.

²⁹⁵ Ibid, p. 50.

²⁹⁶ Ibid, p. 105.

Talking through silence

Thornfield's first movements – Jane's encounter with Rochester riding the horse on the road, the dawning curiosity between the two across drawing-room evenings – illustrate how the film translates long talks into looks and intervals. In the novel, Rochester probes and parries, making conversation a test of spirit and station; he asks, "Do you never laugh, Miss Eyre?"²⁹⁷ and soon "Do you think me handsome?" to which Jane answers succinctly "No, sir," a refusal that levels their relationship to equality. Zeffirelli preserves these scenes but pares them back, letting a beat of silence or averted eyes communicate what Brontë articulates: that Jane refuses flattery and requires recognition as an equal. This choice clarifies the romance without reducing its gravity; when Rochester's wounded pride softens into candor, the film relies on proximity – two figures sharing lamplight – to carry the ethical claim the novel makes in words: love must not be purchased by self-erasure.

The love triangle

One consequence of condensation is the treatment of Blanche Ingram and the house party, which in the novel is a miniature of class theater – archery, chansons, hauteur – through which Jane tests her self-possession. Brontë has Jane paint two portraits – Blanche in satin, Jane in plainness – as a discipline against delusion, a didactic exercise in choosing truth over fantasy. Zeffirelli keeps the triangle but trims its satirical edge: Blanche functions chiefly as a plot pressure (the feigned courtship that prompts Jane's self-appraisal) rather than as a sustained critique of aristocratic performance. When Jane confronts her feelings, the novel's rhetoric is explicit: "I am no bird; and no net ensnares me; I am a free human being with an independent will, which I now exert to leave you.", a declaration of her unconquered identity. The film substitutes this with a poised refusal and a physical withdrawal from the drawing room; the outcome is parallel: Jane will not barter dignity for advancement, but her road is less talkative and more tonal.

The Gothic and the visual grammar

The Gothic machinery – mysterious laughter, night wanderings, the fire in Rochester's room, the offstage history of the attic – is also calibrated differently. Brontë's hints at the uncanny grow from

²⁹⁷ Ibid, p. 205.

Jane's responsible senses: she hears, smells smoke, acts, and only later wonders; her report blends empirical detail with interpretive caution. Zeffirelli honors the pattern but favors immediate peril: the camera lens discovers the licking flame; then, a quick movement: Jane shaking Rochester awake, which delivers action before interpretation. Crucially, the film omits or minimizes the fortune-teller masquerade, a Dickensian interlude in the book that shows Rochester's love mixed with manipulation. By streamlining this ethically ambiguous playacting, the adaptation smooths Rochester's edges to frame the central moral crisis – the bigamy revelation – as tragedy rather than as the end of a long series of tests. At the church, Brontë orchestrates a bravura collision of law and desire: "The marriage cannot go on: I declare the existence of an impediment"²⁹⁸. The narrative pace slows to a legal inquiry; witnesses are brought; the mad-wife is named, then shown: "What it was, whether beast or human being, one could not, at first sight, tell: it grovelled, seemingly, on all fours; it snatched and growled like some strange wild animal: but it was covered with clothing, and a quantity of dark, grizzled hair, wild as a mane, hid its head and face."²⁹⁹ Zeffirelli condenses the juridical ritual, moving quickly from the interruption of the wedding to the attic to the final confrontation, and filming Bertha's presence less as a freakish tableau than as a human catastrophe. This shift softens the novel's sensational rhetoric – the "clothed hyena,"³⁰⁰ a phrase Brontë's narrator reports but also recoils from – toward a compassionate pathos that makes Jane's refusal feel even more costly: she loves, sees Rochester's bind, but will not collude with the wrong. The change underscores the adaptation's ethical thesis – that integrity must be visible and swift – at the expense of some of the book's layered debate.

Escape and second education

Jane's departure supplies the story's hinge in both media, but the terms of her autonomy are articulated differently. In the novel, she furnishes a classic defense of principle: "Laws and principles are not for the times when there is no temptation: they are for such moments as this".³⁰¹ Zeffirelli cannot reproduce the entire oration without losing tempo; instead, he concentrates the scene into two movements – Rochester's plea and Jane's steady refusal – so that the ethics are carried by tone and gesture. She departs as soon as she's made the discovery of bigamy; what Brontë argues, the film

²⁹⁸ Ibid, p. 382.

²⁹⁹ Ibid, p. 387.

³⁰⁰ Ibid.

³⁰¹ Ibid, p. 414.

images: that freedom is costly but non-negotiable, and that to stay would be to become less than herself. The Moor House interlude is where adaptation pressures are most visible. In the novel, the Rivers household furnishes a counter-romance: St. John's arid idealism, Diana and Mary's gentle learning, inheritance and kinship are revealed, a second proposal that is ethical but loveless ("God and nature intended you for a missionary's wife"³⁰²). Brontë uses these chapters to test a different temptation: duty without desire, and to stage the supernatural-psychological "call" from Rochester: "Jane! Jane! Jane!" that redirects her to Thornfield. Zeffirelli compresses this movement drastically, abbreviating St. John's courtship and the novel's theological disputation; only one of the two sisters, Mary, is shown; Rochester's cry is retained as a cinematic sound cue rather than a metaphysical riddle. The reduction preserves narrative velocity but attenuates the book's second education, in which a woman refuses an honorable but self-cancelling life path on grounds as rigorous as those by which she left Thornfield.

Reconciliation

The reunion at Ferndean in both versions seals the equality the story has sought. Brontë balances loss and restoration: Rochester is blind, maimed, humbled; Jane is now an heiress and kin-secure, before offering the intimate coda: "Reader, I married him".³⁰³ The novelist then supplies aftercare for all characters: Adele's schooling; St. John's fate; Rochester's gradual recovery of sight. Zeffirelli, consistent with his subtractive method, concentrates on recognition and consent, trusting one close embrace and a final exchange to imply a lifetime without delivering the epilogue's social accounting. Notably, the film does not reproduce the apostrophe to the audience; Jane's voiceover, when present, stays in narration rather than in address, aligning with cinema's preference for observational intimacy over confession.

Political and social commentary

Representation and politics shift subtly in the passage from page to screen. Brontë's text, while critical of class cruelty and male prerogative, is also entangled in colonial economy (Rochester's West Indian marriage; Bertha's Creole identity; inheritance by imperial capital) that the 1996 film largely

³⁰² Ibid, p. 516.

³⁰³ Ibid, p. 572.

backgrounds in order to humanize Bertha and streamline causality. The book's struggle about evangelical duty through St. John likewise recedes; in its place is a less theological, more secular insistence on personal integrity. Yet on the axis that most matters to Brontë – female self-ownership – the movie is strikingly faithful. We still hear “I am no bird; and no net ensnares me,” if both in words and in the grammar of staging: Zeffirelli frames thresholds, corridors, and open moor as a syntax of constraint and release, so that the audience reads space as morality.

Characterization

Performance and mise-en-scène substitute for Brontë's rhetorical texture. Gainsbourg's Jane speaks little but looks hard, a look that both absorbs and judges, doing the work of sentences of ethical self-examination. Hurt's Rochester is less sardonic than on the page, he does fewer games, fewer “contrivances”, but his softness supports the film's melodic line: desire complicated by law, confession followed by renunciation, restoration without triumph. Where Brontë often makes Rochester a test – by turns teasing, tyrannical, repentant – the film presents a man already in process, which makes Jane's refusals feel less like a correction of him and more like a defense of herself. The balance tilts from the novel's dialectic (two strong minds arguing their way to parity) toward the film's duet (two wounded souls choosing terms that preserve dignity). Even the adaptation's Gothic vocabulary follows this logic of translation. Brontë uses sound (mirthless laughter), smell (smoke), and rumor (servants' hints) to keep the attic an interpretive horizon until the wedding, then unleashes melodrama with legal clarity. Zeffirelli literalizes the horizon sooner – footfalls, a shadow at a balustrade, a glimpse of hair – so that dread grows visually rather than discursively. His Bertha is no trope but a human presence whose violence registers as suffering, adjusting the ethical temperature of the reveal: less monstrous disruption, more tragic limit, and thereby sharpening the pathos of Jane's subsequent resolve.

Haunted domesticity

In Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* the house is never just a backdrop; it is a moral machine that disciplines, conceals, tempts, and, at the end, shelters. Franco Zeffirelli's 1996 adaptation preserves the itinerary of homes but reframes their meanings through a classical, romantic film style through candlelit interiors, composed frames, and restrained dialogue, which relocate much of Brontë's

argumentative “haunting” (carried by Jane’s first-person voice) into the look and feel of domestic space. Across both versions, women are the ones who bear and read the pressures of the house: they are punished within it, keep it running, hide its secrets, and ultimately renegotiate its terms. Brontë begins by showing the home as a theater of unjust power: the red-room at Gateshead: “a spare chamber, very seldom slept in”³⁰⁴ immobilizes Jane with decorum masquerading as morality; the room’s silence, chill, and heavy furniture inscribe a lesson about who belongs and who can be locked away. Lowood extends that lesson institutionally through cold water, surveillance in dormitory lanes, and Mr. Brocklehurst’s public shaming. The house teaches that piety can be cruelty in domestic form; Jane’s ethics (and her suspicion of “false law”) are born from rooms. Zeffirelli condenses these events but keeps their spatial charge: his red-room is a saturated color-field and a soundscape of stifled breath, translating Brontë’s narrated panic into a visceral episode; Lowood’s austerity is rendered through textures – coarse cloth on skin, breath in winter air, regimented beds – so that the body learns before the mind names what it is learning. The novel argues at length about injustice, the film shows how the home is producing it. Zeffirelli builds haunted domesticity not with specters, but with architecture that behaves like a character: rooms that monitor, corridors that delay, thresholds that test, all photographed in David Watkin’s chiaroscuro so that candlelight pools while the edges of the frame recede into unknowable darkness. From the start, the film translates Brontë’s idea that houses *act* upon women into a sensorial grammar: the mix of diegetic sounds (wind under doors, latches, clock-chimes), the prevalence of frames-within-frames (doorways, screens, stairwells), and blocking that keeps Jane at the margins of rooms until she claims them. In this visual contract the domestic interior is never neutral; on the contrary, it is a charged space that remembers past uses and polices present behavior, and the viewer feels that charge in how bodies are placed and how light grants or withholds visibility. At Gateshead, the “red-room” sequence establishes the template. Zeffirelli saturates the screen in red and deep brown, letting heavy textiles, high ceilings, and a distant, reflective mirror compress the child Jane into near-stillness. The camera’s slightly lowered, at a child-eye angle and the acoustic deadness of the room (breath and fabric rustle more audible than speech) make space itself the punisher: the house disciplines before any person speaks. Lowood carries that discipline into routine: rows of iron beds, rough blankets, pale winter light, and the echo of boots on stone turn the dormitory into an instrument that extracts obedience from female bodies. Jane learns, as Brontë intended, that domestic order can be cruel in the guise of care; in the film, that lesson is felt in texture and temperature (the cold can be literally *seen*) rather than argued in narration. Thornfield

³⁰⁴ Ibid, p. 50.

refines the haunt through secrecy and surveillance. When Mrs. Fairfax first conducts Jane through the house, Zeffirelli shoots the tour as a series of partial views: corners turned just as a corridor bends out of sight, doorways that open onto intermediate spaces, a gallery glimpsed through a screen. The house seems to be deciding what Jane may or may not know, with the camera placing her at thresholds – the music room door, the base of the staircase – and with sounds – Bertha’s laughter, a footfall above – travelling through stone and timber. The bedroom fire sequence literalizes domestic threat: Watkin lets candlelight show only a band of space as smoke creeps, and when Jane douses the flames, the house appears to exhale: danger has been released, but not resolved. In the aftermath, Grace Poole and her keys become emblems of haunted domesticity: a woman’s hidden labor maintaining the house’s respectability by containing what it won’t admit. Even Rochester’s drawing-room scenes are staged as managed performances: chairs are angled like chess pieces, Jane is repeatedly seated at the periphery, and the hearth warming conversations between her and Rochester take place while the camera reminds us of the upper floor no one names. Zeffirelli renders the novel’s most overt domestic haunt – the nocturnal veil-attack – as a pointed lesson in how houses return what they suppress. The scene begins with quiet: a small pool of candlelight, fabric turned between fingers, a mirror at a raking angle; then, a sudden proximity that collapses the comfort of Jane’s “own” room. The object meant to seal lawful union becomes the instrument of warning, and the house is the messenger. The interrupted wedding converts Brontë’s legal impediment into spatial revelation: from the church to the attic. Zeffirelli’s cutting emphasizes ascent: each flight of stairs tightens the frame, each door narrows light until Bertha is less an explanatory backstory than a pressure upstairs, a human presence the house can no longer contain. The reveal softens the novel’s sensational rhetoric but intensifies the domestic thesis: the grand English home is built on a locked room, and that lock is part of its design. Haunted domesticity here is the moral afterlife of concealment: the house has kept a secret so long it now speaks through damage.

The film uses women’s spatial choices to register power. In Rochester’s post-reveal plea, the room closes in as he circles; Jane resists not only in words but by re-orienting herself, moving toward the door, reclaiming the threshold that leads to the outside. Her exit from Thornfield is one of Zeffirelli’s cleanest statements of the theme: a static composition of the doorway, the quick breeze as it opens, the weather that slaps on her face. Domestic power is renounced so that selfhood may live, even at the cost of bodily harm. At Moor House, haunted domesticity takes a sterile form: bright order, tidy surfaces, St. John’s measured voice placing Jane in a dutiful seat. The proposal reads like furniture

arrangement, a life plotted on a table, until the famous distant call of Rochester fractures the neatness, reminding the viewers that not all hauntings are malignant; sometimes the domestic elsewhere summons a woman out of a room that would consume her in the name of duty. Finally, Ferndean closes the circle with an anti-spectacle: low rooms, damp stone, softened light, and the camera at rest. The house no longer surveils: it shelters a contract between equals. Haunted domesticity ends not because the past is forgotten, but because the space has been re-written by Jane's terms. Zeffirelli's scene construction keeps women at the center of the domestic script. Mrs. Fairfax is the threshold-keeper, ushering, cautioning, smoothing; Grace Poole is the house's necessary violence, the labor that makes secrecy livable; Bertha is the unhouseable remainder whose confinement writes itself onto every floorboard; and Jane is the reader and re-maker of space, translating ethical judgment into where she stands, sits, or passes. By anchoring these ideas in concrete scenes Zeffirelli lets the audience *feel* what Brontë narrates: that a woman's life in *Jane Eyre* is, above all, a negotiation with houses that haunt until they are transformed into homes.

Conclusion

Taken together, these choices yield an adaptation that is both faithful and selective. It keeps Brontë's spine while creating debates about class, love, and vocation; it trusts bodies, rooms, and weather to say what the novel argues; and it narrows the narrative's afterlife to a look and an embrace that stand in for an epilogue. By compressing Gateshead, Lowood, Thornfield, Moor House, and Ferndean into a chain of charged interiors, the film turns haunted domesticity into felt experience. What the novel reasons through voice ("laws and principles") the film renders through blocking, light, and tempo: Jane's agency appears as where she stands, what door she opens, and when she refuses. In trimming social satire, colonial entanglements, and theological dispute, the adaptation narrows context but sharpens emotional clarity, softening Rochester's manipulations and humanizing Bertha to frame bigamy as an immediate moral crisis. Brontë's Jane conquers the right to speak and choose; Zeffirelli's Jane rarely raises her voice, but every cut respects her choice, which, in this medium, is the last word.

Chapter 4.2 – Adaptation of *Wuthering Heights*

This section will focus on of two filmic adaptations made based on the novel written by Emily Brontë, *Wuthering Heights*.

Chapter 4.2.1 - *Wuthering Heights* (2011)

Wuthering Heights (2011) is a British Gothic romantic drama directed by Andrea Arnold, with Kaya Scodelario as Catherine Earnshaw and James Howson as Heathcliff. The project went through several versions before Arnold took over in January 2010³⁰⁵; in April she cast Kaya Scodelario as Catherine, closer in age to the character than many earlier screen portrayals.³⁰⁶ Brontë describes Heathcliff as “dark-skinned” and “gypsy in aspect,”³⁰⁷ and at one point as “a little Lascar, or an American or Spanish castaway.”³⁰⁸ Seeking to honor this, Arnold first looked for an actor from the U.K.’s Romani community, but the search faced some obstacles.³⁰⁹ The casting call then widened to Yorkshire actors aged 16–21 of mixed-race, Indian, Pakistani, Bangladeshi, or Middle Eastern heritage. In November, James Howson was chosen, marking the first time a Black actor played Heathcliff on film.³¹⁰ Critical response to the film was generally favorable. On Rotten Tomatoes, there is a consensus that “Director Andrea Arnold's gritty, naturalistic re-imagining of the Emily Brontë classic stays true to the book's spirit while utilizing an unconventional approach to explore the romantic yearning at the heart of the story.”³¹¹ Despite the praise, Arnold later expressed dissatisfaction with the production. Speaking at the 2016 Tribeca Film Festival, she stated that: “I don't like that movie... It was a difficult experience

³⁰⁵ Ben Child (2010, 20 January). “Andrea Arnold takes on *Wuthering Heights*”. The Guardian.

<https://www.theguardian.com/film/2010/jan/20/andrea-arnold-wuthering-heights> Accessed on: 2025, 19 August.

³⁰⁶ Ben Hoyle (2010, 24 April). “Brooding Brontës replace Austen as 'bonnet drama' returns”. The Times. https://web.archive.org/web/20110615091600/http://entertainment.timesonline.co.uk/tol/arts_and_entertainment/film/article7106879.ece Accessed on: 2025, 19 August.

³⁰⁷ Emily Brontë, p. 41.

³⁰⁸ Ibid, p. 81.

³⁰⁹ Richard Brooks (2010, 4 April). “Film bid to cast gypsy as Heathcliff”. The Times.

https://web.archive.org/web/20110616041809/http://entertainment.timesonline.co.uk/tol/arts_and_entertainment/film/article7086745.ece Accessed on: 2025, 19 August.

³¹⁰ Ben Child (2010, 23 November). “James Howson to be first black actor to play Heathcliff in film”. The Guardian. <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2010/nov/23/james-howson-heathcliff-wuthering-heights> Accessed on: 2025, 19 August.

³¹¹ “Wuthering Heights”. Rotten Tomatoes. https://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/wuthering_heights_2011 Accessed on: 2025, 19 August.

making it, for various reasons. I find it hard to look at it.”³¹² Andrea Arnold’s 2011 adaptation of *Wuthering Heights* is not a traditional “heritage” film. It deliberately strips away much of the novel’s talkative narration and social polish to give the viewer a rough, physical world of wind, mud, and animal life. That choice reshapes the story’s meanings, especially for its women. Where Emily Brontë gives women major narrative power – above all through Nelly Dean’s voice and Catherine Earnshaw’s fierce resistance – Arnold relocates that power from speech to bodies, gesture, and the texture of landscape. The result is a film that is both faithful to the novel’s core passions and sharply different in how those passions are made visible.

Structure and point of view

Brontë uses a layered, first-person structure: Mr. Lockwood listens to Nelly Dean, who recounts decades of family history. This frame does more than organize time; it gives a woman, Nelly, control over the story. Her commentary shapes our judgments, often siding with endurance and practical morality over raw passion. Because we hear Catherine and Heathcliff mostly through Nelly, female narration is central even when female characters suffer. Arnold removes the frame almost entirely. Lockwood is never introduced and there is no Nelly-as-narrator. The camera observes rather than explains. Dialogues are sparse: images and sounds carry interpretation. This switch turns the story from a told history into a lived present. But it also means that the most important female voice in the book – Nelly’s – no longer guides meaning. Women’s agency shifts from verbal authority to physical presence and survival within a harsh environment. The cost is a reduction in women’s discursive power (less commentary, fewer arguments), but the gain is a strong, embodied sense of women’s labor, exposure to weather, and vulnerability to men’s moods.

Heathcliff’s characterization

Heathcliff is described as dark and foreign, but his exact origins are left ambiguous. Class and property shape his exclusion, while racial difference remains suggestive rather than explicit. Arnold casts Heathcliff as black and makes racial abuse more than abundant. This clarifies the social forces that dehumanize him: not only class contempt and illegitimacy, but also racism. It changes the

³¹² Matthew Eng (2016, 19 April). “Andrea Arnold Teases Her Wild and Adventurous *American Honey* During Tribeca 2016 Directors Talk”. Tribeca Film. <https://tribecafilm.com/news/tribeca-film-festival-talks-directors-series-andrea-arnold-ira-sachs-recap> Accessed on: 2025, 19 August.

pressure on Catherine too. Her choice to marry Edgar Linton can now be read as a choice for whiteness and safety as much as for status. For the women around Heathcliff (Catherine, Isabella, and the female servants), the film's racialization of his outsider status intensifies the stakes: love becomes entangled with the violence of a world built on exclusion. The film brings to the surface tensions the novel leaves open, and in doing so reframes women's choices. Catherine's wavering is less a romantic indecision than a survival calculation within a racialized, class-bound patriarchy.

Catherine Earnshaw: from voice to body

Catherine is one of the most articulate heroines in Victorian fiction. She names her conflict: "I am Heathcliff" and argues it through, even as she bends to social pressure. Brontë allows us to follow her reasoning, which lets Catherine appear both self-knowing and tragically mistaken. In the film, Catherine's girlhood and physical life on the moors are emphasized: running, climbing, skinning knees, staring into storms. As she ages, society enters mainly through clothes, lessons, and rooms that constrain movement. The turning point – her engagement to Edgar – is presented less as a long, argued decision and more as a bodily dislocation: Catherine is taken indoors, cleaned, dressed, and contained. We feel the loss before we fully hear it explained. Catherine's agency in the novel is rhetorical and ethical; she defines and defends a position, however flawed. In the film, agency becomes a matter of movement and proximity: who gets to roam, who gets shut in, who is allowed to touch whom. This makes her tragedy immediate and visceral, but it also reduces the complex self-explanations that make Brontë's Catherine such a formidable mind.

Nelly Dean: the missing female narrator

In the text, Nelly is a worker, a watcher, and a talker. She keeps the households running and also interprets everyone else's behavior. Her judgments shape the book's moral weather, often pushing back against male violence and female self-destruction alike. In the adaptation, Nelly's role is drastically reduced. She is present as a housekeeper but not a storyteller. Without her, the women in the film lose their main internal advocate. We witness female pain, but we no longer hear a woman processing and contextualizing it. This silence is a double-edged choice: it avoids softening the brutality we see, but it also removes a crucial form of female power – narrative control.

Isabella Linton: from spectator to target

Brontë's Isabella is naïve, then rebellious, then abused, and finally resourceful in escape. Her arc exposes Heathcliff's cruelty and the limits of romantic fantasy; she is a warning and a study in survival. In the adaptation, Isabella appears, but much of her arc is compressed. Her fascination for Heathcliff and its consequences are shown, but we spend little time on her perspective. The focus stays with Heathcliff and Catherine. As a result, Isabella's experience functions more as evidence of male harm than as a full portrait of a woman who learns and acts. The novel grants Isabella a voice in letters and reported speech, the film tends to show her condition rather than give her discursive space.

Cathy Linton and the second generation

The second half (the children of the first generation) of the novel is not an appendix; it is the moral hinge of the book. Young Cathy's resilience and eventual bond with Hareton break the cycle of revenge. Crucially, a young woman participates in the work of repair. Arnold ends the film before this restorative arc. Without Cathy Linton, the story offers no female figure who can turn pain into something different. The film thus reads as a pure tragedy: elemental, impressive, and closed. For women, the loss is significant. Brontë ends with a woman who re-educates a man and reopens the world. Arnold ends with a woman (Catherine) as memory and absence. This difference reorients the politics of hope in the story.

Men, violence, and domestic space

Hindley's decline, Heathcliff's revenge, and later domestic cruelty create worlds where women must negotiate survival. Yet women also work within those worlds – Nelly manages households, Catherine manages men's attention, Isabella schemes to escape, Zillah and others mediate. In the film, violence is more physical and less narrated: blows, kicks, forced labor, and the rough handling of animals. Domestic space feels porous to weather and male rage. Women's strategies are fewer because the film's minimal dialogue removes many of the small negotiations Brontë records. What remains is stark: lowered eyes, guarded bodies, quick flights outdoors. The patriarchal order is not questioned; it is felt.

Nature, form, and the “female gaze”

The moor is external and symbolic: freedom, danger, and the sublime. The book is language-forward; Arnold and cinematographer Robbie Ryan make the moor tactile: rain on fabric, mud on hands, the sting of wind in the microphone. The camera often stays at child height or close to surfaces, drawing us into Catherine’s and Heathcliff’s sensory world. This can be read as a kind of “female gaze” – not an eroticizing look at women’s bodies, but a sustained attention to their embodied experience: work, weather, pain, and desire as physical states. It does not rescue the women, but it refuses to prettify them. The film’s women are not costumes; they are skin, breath, and fatigue.

Language, silence, and famous lines

For the text, speech is action. Catherine’s declarations, Nelly’s lectures, Heathcliff’s curses – each turns the plot. Brontë’s women persuade, warn, and narrate. In the film, lines like “I am Heathcliff” do not carry the same argumentative weight, if they appear at all. Meaning sits in looks and distances. For women, this means less opportunity to reason on screen, but more room for the body to communicate what social language cannot safely say. Arnold’s choice can feel like a loss of female intellect; it can also read as a critique of a world where women’s speech has no effect – so the film refuses to pretend that it does.

Haunted domesticity

Andrea Arnold turns the households of the Earnshaws and the Lintons into living, remembering structures that abrade or polish the bodies inside them. Haunted domesticity in her film is not a matter of gothic apparitions; it’s the way walls, doors, floors, gates, and weather acquire agency, how they store violence and class contempt, how they domesticate women’s bodies, how they transmit desire and betrayal. Shot almost entirely with handheld intimacy and spare, mostly diegetic sound, the film lets the materials of the houses do what narration does in the novel: interpret and judge. When Mr. Earnshaw first drags the foundling boy into the house, the camera stays at floor height, grazing skirting boards and leather boots as Hindley’s glare fixes Heathcliff. The hearth throws a small, irregular light; everything else is draught, muck, and timber. That first night, the child is shoved into an upper room: there are tight close-ups of knots in the wood, the wind squeezing through gaps so

insistently that the house seems to hiss at the intruder. Haunted domesticity is established without speech: this is a shelter that bites, and it will remember him. That memory is then layered: in later scenes of punishment (Hindley's beatings in the stable, Heathcliff thrown onto the stone flags) the same angles on floor and wall recur, teaching us to read *Wuthering Heights* as a ledger of injuries. Arnold literalizes how domestic space tries to re-make Catherine. After her bite at Thrushcross Grange, the Lintons' women bathe and dress the girl; the camera shows the tactility of it – linen, corsetry, hair pulled tight, hands smoothing fabric into correctness – while the soundscape drops to the soft rasp of cloth. The transformation happens in a room whose symmetry and pale wallpaper police her posture; the house domesticates by touch. Later, Catherine returns to *Wuthering Heights* in silks that snag and stains on rough beams and muddy thresholds; Arnold figuratively depicts the two domestic regimes clashing on her skin. Haunted domesticity is not merely a ghost at the window; it is the way interiors stick to a woman, making her newly illegible at the other house.

Whenever Heathcliff approaches Thrushcross Grange, Arnold frames him at the outer fence or gate: the camera shows briars and iron points as he peers through glass at a parlor combed smooth with lamplight. One key passage shows him pressed to the window while Catherine sits inside, coached in gentility: her body stills, the room stills her. The dogs' bark and servants' movements create a subtle perimeter, sound functions as a border that keeps the outsider out. The scene needs no dialogue to stage class difference: the Grange is haunted not by phantoms but by manners: a choreography of chairs and gazes that domesticate Catherine and turn Heathcliff into a persistent smudge at the edge of the frame. Arnold handles Catherine's decision to marry Edgar through architecture, not speeches. Heathcliff waits in a dark passage, listening; the camera lingers on lath, plaster and the thinness of the wall that carries Catherine's words: she loves Heathcliff but will marry Linton. There is no cut to a reaction shot in the room; the camera stays with Heathcliff in the narrow corridor as the house relays the wound. When he bolts for the door, the latch sticks, the wind rips through, and the threshold expels him. Haunted domesticity here is a relay system: rooms transmitting injury with the indifference of wood and air, then ejecting the wounded body into stark weather that finishes the job.

Arnold returns repeatedly to the kitchen table at *Wuthering Heights*, lit by a single smoky flame. On it we see the work of the house: skinning a rabbit, plucking a bird, scraping fat, and Joseph's muttered scriptures can be heard. Gore is not shown for shock value; it is pedagogy. The female hands that cook and clean (and later, Isabella's tentative hands trying to belong) learn that domestic labor is tied

to death here. When Catherine is back under Hindley's rule, a quick shot of blood soaking into the table's grain rhymes with an earlier animal: violence absorbed by the wood, ready to be served again as "normality." The house feeds on what it processes, and women are tasked with serving it. Arnold also often stages confrontations on the stairs: Hindley looming above, Catherine and Heathcliff forced to halt on a cramped step that denies passing. The camera, chest-high and close, makes the banister a bar across the frame; the landing becomes a micro-room of no exit. When reunited as adults, Catherine and Heathcliff meet in the narrow up-stairs corridor, walls brushing their shoulders as they clutch at each other; the embrace feels less like freedom than compression, two bodies squeezed by the house's geometry. Haunted domesticity here is vertical: power resides higher up; desire survives only where the roof pitches low.

Drawn by the romance she imagines, Isabella crosses the Grange threshold into Wuthering Heights and finds a different contract. Arnold shows her seated on the floor by a damp wall, dress puddled, as wind whistles through cracks and the door bangs. The camera refuses a master shot; she is shown through doorframes, never fully in possession of a room. When Heathcliff's violence arrives, it is off-axis – what the camera shows is Isabella's and the wall behind her more than the blow – so that the house remains the dominant presence. The lesson is brutal: the domestic space that flatters an heiress at the Grange unmakes a wife at the Heights, and the viewer feels it in plaster, draught, and the smallness of her seat. In the film's most suffocating interior, Catherine declines at the Grange in a tight, pale room whose air seems thick with polish. Curtains mute the outside; the camera stays close to her cheek, picking up sweat, hair stuck to skin, the low rasp of breath. When Heathcliff forces his way in to see her, they clutch near the window, and the sealed pane becomes the image of a life sealed off. The haunted element is decorum itself: the room is curated to the point of anoxia, a sweetness that kills. The house does not host the body in extremis, but poses it. Post-death, Arnold gives Heathcliff only empty rooms at the Heights: the camera tracks along a bare mattress, a dress left hanging, mud smeared on a wall where he has pressed himself. He sniffs fabric, licks blood from a wound, lies on floorboards where Catherine once laid – acts that are not "madness" so much as refusal to let the house edit her out. A later sequence with Heathcliff on the moor cutting bark and pressing it to his face cuts back to the interior stain he leaves behind; the Heights become a reliquary of contact, the Grange a mausoleum. Haunted domesticity shifts from oppressive presence to refusal of absence, the insistence that the house must hold what society would tidy away.

Again and again the film lets hinges speak. The slow opening of the Heights' outer door to a sky the color of iron; the slam when Hindley shuts Heathcliff out; the creak of the Grange gate as servants shoo Heathcliff, the mud-covered boy, away. These are not props but sentences the house pronounces. In Arnold's grammar, a door that will not open *is* the ghost; a gate that opens the wrong way *is* the curse. What emerges from these scenes is a domestic Gothic stripped of polite ornament: houses that eat weather and memory and return them as pressure on the people inside. Women register that pressure first and most fully: Catherine in the oscillation between feral motion and curated stillness; Isabella in the misreading that leaves her locked to the wall. By making thresholds, tables, stairs, windows, and doors the true "agents," Arnold lets viewers feel haunted domesticity in their nerves, not as a literary motif but as contact with surfaces, and she shows how love and revenge both take their shapes from the homes that try (and fail) to contain them.

Conclusion

Andrea Arnold's *Wuthering Heights* reimagines Brontë's domestic Gothic by moving authority from the speaking voice to the speaking house that inscribes class, race, and gendered power onto bodies. The film remains faithful to the novel's fierce passions yet alters their delivery: Nelly's narratorial governance is replaced by sensorial evidence; Catherine's ethical argument becomes movement and containment; Heathcliff's outsiderhood is racialized, sharpening the social violence the homes both conceal and enact. By truncating the second generation, Arnold also trades Brontë's slow work of repair for a closed, elemental tragedy. The gain is immediacy: women's labor, exposure, and endurance are made tactile; the cost is a loss of female discursive agency and of the novel's future-facing hope. Read within an adaptation framework, the film is not a mirror but a claim: it proves how changing mediums redistributes power inside the story, turning haunted domesticity from a narrated condition into a material experience the viewer must feel in surface, sound, and breath.

Chapter 4.2.2 – *Emily Brontë's Wuthering Heights* (1992)

Peter Kosminsky's *Emily Brontë's Wuthering Heights* (1992) is one of the few screen versions that attempts to follow the novel's full, two-generation design while also committing to a sweeping, romantic visual idiom, and that double ambition immediately distinguishes it from more selective or "first-generation only" adaptations. Casting underscores the adaptation's two-generation design and

its emphasis on resemblance: Ralph Fiennes makes his feature debut as Heathcliff, while Juliette Binoche plays both Catherine Earnshaw and her daughter Cathy Linton, with a cameo by Sinéad O'Connor as Emily Brontë. Framed by bleak moorland vistas and a score that leans into melancholy grandeur, the film announces its fidelity to Brontë in its very title yet makes clear from its opening movements that it will translate Brontë's layered narration into a more continuous, sensuous flow of scenes. The choice of casting Binoche in a double role as Catherine Earnshaw and her daughter Cathy Linton literalizes the novel's motif of resemblance and inheritance, which visually underwrites Heathcliff's deranged persistence after Catherine's death by making the second-generation heroine the image of the first. The result is a film that treats the moor as a living force, romance as a physical weather system, and obsession as the hinge that turns a love story into a cycle of harm – broadly faithful to Brontë's architecture and affect, even as it modifies emphasis, streamlines argument, and takes a firmer stand on elements (especially the supernatural) the book leaves artfully uncertain.

Structure and point of view

The most consequential difference lies in narrative method. Brontë's novel is a feat of mediation and doubt: we learn the history of the Earnshaws and the Lintons through Mr. Lockwood's diary, which in turn records long oral recollections by the housekeeper Nelly Dean, who herself was present but partial, moralizing, and sometimes evasive. That double frame creates a constant friction between event and interpretation, and it builds character via commentary as much as through action. Kosminsky retains traces of the frame – Lockwood's stormbound arrival and Nelly's explanatory presence – but uses them sparingly, quickly dissolving into a more linear, externally "omniscient" presentation of the two generations. The consequence is that information which in the book arrives as remembered, disputed, or confessed now appears as seemingly objective spectacle: the children racing feral across the heath, the roadside encounter that brings Heathcliff to Wuthering Heights, the quarrels behind closed doors, the deathbed scenes in which words are heated but final. This simplification of viewpoint makes the story more accessible and emotionally direct, and it helps the film hold together as a two-hour feature, yet it also trims away the novel's epistemic games – those pauses and qualifications in Nelly's storytelling that invite us to weigh motives, question reliability, and consider how class, gender, and resentment shape what gets told and how. Where Brontë keeps us alert to the ways a story can be weaponized, the film prefers the certainty of witnessing.

Heathcliff's characterization

Nowhere is such a shift more visible than in the shaping of Heathcliff. On the page he is a study in opacity: an adopted outsider, racially ambiguous and socially illegible, who turns humiliation into a lifelong program of revenge while intermittently revealing the depth of his bond with Catherine and his capacity for a terrible tenderness. Fiennes's Heathcliff is cold-burning, tightly wound, and physically formidable, and the camera repeatedly underscores his separation from domestic space – shot in thresholds, on the far side of doorframes, against sky rather than earth – as if to insist that he is at once inside the family story and perpetually outside of it. The film shows us beatings and expulsions, Hindley's drunken brutality, the roughness of farm life, and later the practiced cruelty of a landlord exacting debts; these images externalize what Brontë often communicates by reported speech and retrospective judgment. At the same time, the adaptation leans into episodes the novel renders as rumor or confession – Heathcliff's nocturnal visits to Catherine's grave, his macabre desire to disturb her coffin – and dramatizes them with a directness that reduces ambiguity but heightens Gothic affect. Some of the novel's oscillation between pity and horror is lost, but what is gained is a stark portrait of a man driven by a single idea until the body can do no more.

Catherine Earnshaw: from voice to body

Juliette Binoche's double casting crystallizes the film's most provocative intervention in Brontë's design: it turns resemblance, which in the book is observed and discussed, into a constant visual fact that organizes desire, grief, and revenge. As Catherine Earnshaw, Binoche supplies the key qualities the novel assigns to her: wild energy, class appetite, a mind quick to self-dramatize yet capable of ruthless self-assessment; and the film gives her several of the famous lines that define Brontë's heroine as a thinker as well as a feeler ("I am Heathcliff," in one form or another, becomes an anchor, even if the surrounding dialectical scaffolding is abbreviated). But because Kosminsky favors movement and touch over prolonged argument, Catherine's choice to marry Edgar Linton reads less as the outcome of an extended, verbally intricate meditation on status and security and more as an enacted passage from one world to another: a change of wardrobe and address, a recalibration of how she inhabits rooms, how she is looked at and looks back. As Cathy Linton, Binoche becomes the film's principal emblem of recurrence – of Catherine's return not as a ghostly visitation but as a personal history repeated with differences – and that decision subtly recasts Heathcliff's later

obsessions as a disquieting struggle with resemblance. Brontë's young Cathy is distinct from her mother in temperament and moral trajectory; the film preserves enough divergence to honor that arc, yet the shared face narrows the gap, making Heathcliff's compulsion both more understandable and more alarming.

Women's agency

The treatment of the women more generally shows the film's mix of fidelity and compression. Brontë grants her women a great deal of discursive authority: Nelly narrates the book, Catherine is brilliantly articulate, Isabella Linton writes letters that expose the romantic folly that has trapped her, young Cathy learns to read the world and to educate Hareton out of inherited ignorance. Kosminsky's adaptation keeps these structural roles but pares their verbal range. Nelly remains the clearinghouse of history and a moral counterweight to male violence, yet the film uses her less as a commentator and more as a witness, a presence in rooms where damage is done and cleaned up. Isabella's trajectory – from dazzled observer to abused wife to resourceful escapee – is observed in carefully chosen scenes rather than argued through her own words, which has the effect of making her a more legible victim and a less complex self-critic. And while the second-generation Cathy does help draw Hareton toward companionship, the film abbreviates the long pedagogical process Brontë lingers over, favoring emblematic images of shared labor or tentative intimacy in place of the book's painstaking chronicles of unlearning and repair. The cumulative effect is to keep the novel's spectrum of female experience in view while letting the men's extremes dominate the soundtrack.

Second generation

A distinctive merit of the 1992 film is that it includes the second generation at all: many adaptations end with Catherine's death or with Heathcliff's last burst of rage and grief, leaving Brontë's intricate moral coda aside. Kosminsky stages Linton Heathcliff's sickly coercion of Cathy into marriage, shows Hareton's degradation under Heathcliff's tutelage, and gestures toward the reconciliation that the book presents as a hard-won, domestic miracle. Even so, the time devoted to this half of the story is necessarily short, and the redemptive dynamic – Cathy's stubborn kindness, Hareton's dawning pride in learning, Nelly's quiet engineering of peace – is more asserted than developed. The film's final tone therefore bends back toward Gothic closure: the famous rumor of ghosts on the moor

becomes an image, the suggestion of spectral reunion a visual statement. Brontë's end keeps two possibilities in the air: rational dismissal of superstition and a superstitious hope that the dead have what the living could not sustain; whereas the movie, committed to the material power of images, gives the latter the last word. It is a choice that delivers catharsis, if at the cost of the novel's carefully cultivated uncertainty.

The voice of the background

Formally and sensorially, the adaptation aligns itself with Brontë's elemental language by making the environment do narrative work. The moor, which in the novel carries metaphorical weight as freedom, danger, and the sublime against which human arrangements look small, becomes in the film a tactile field: bruised light, whipping grasses, mud on boots and hems, the wind that drowns out speech and compels bodies closer or drives them apart. Interiors too are composed for moral purpose: Wuthering Heights is cramped, dark, nailed together out of labor and weather, while Thrushcross Grange is all pale surfaces, reflective glass, the geometry of social ease. In the book these contrasts are narrated, anatomized, and sometimes mocked; on screen they are lived, and the viewer reads them without commentary. This sensory emphasis suits the material – the story is about people who batter one another into shapes that fit houses as much as about people who make houses fit them – but it also moves the center of gravity from the novel's rare and precious debates about love and class to a more bodily register of crush and enclosure. The moor in the film is not only a symbol; it is also a muscle that contracts the plot.

More than mere suggestion

Kosminsky's film is also more explicit than the book in places where Brontë prefers suggestion or hindsight. Violence that is reported in the novel – Heathcliff's treatment of Isabella, Hindley's decline into drunken sadism, physical and verbal humiliations of Hareton – often appears on screen as acts that unfold, which deepens the immediate sense of threat while muting the unsettling experience of hearing those acts filtered through Nelly's judicious, sometimes complicit narration. Likewise, the supernatural, which in the novel hovers in rumor, dream, and the psychological strong weather of grief, receives in the film a handful of unambiguous images: a hand at the window, a grave disturbed, two figures on the horizon. These are potent in cinematic terms: they match the adaptation's

willingness to *show* what prose must *suggest* – but they also narrow the interpretive bandwidth Brontë guards so jealously. The trade-off is intelligible and, for many viewers, welcome: pathos and coherence take the place of mystery and ambiguity.

What is kept and what is left behind

Where the film most faithfully honors the novel is in its insistence that class and property are not mere backdrops but engines of action. Heathcliff's rise and domination are tied to mortgages, debts, and recoveries; the humiliations that set him on his course are tied to money, dress, accent, and hospitality. The movie sketches these structures briskly but the through-line is clear, as it is in Brontë: a love story cannot be extracted from the economic story that wounds and confines it. What the film largely omits (or compresses to the point of evanescence) are the novel's religious arguments and its long, subtle meditations on education as moral labor. There is little of Joseph's terrible yet comic Calvinism beyond the surface. The ethics that remain, however, are recognizably Brontëan: pride curdled into vengeance destroys households, charity and patience can remake them, and the intensity that makes Catherine and Heathcliff singular also makes them unfit for the ordinary compromises by which people live.

Haunted domesticity

Kosminsky's film makes the houses – Wuthering Heights and Thrushcross Grange – behave like repositories of memory and jurisdiction, places that do not simply contain action but adjudicate it. From the opening stormbound arrival to the last emptied interiors, domestic space acquires a will that presses on bodies and choices. The camera's preference for deep interiors lit by candle and fire, the recurring use of stairwells and landings as chokepoints, and the way doors, latches, and shutters punctuate scenes turn the built environment into a dramatic instrument. "Haunting" here is not a parade of apparitions; it is the felt insistence of rooms and furniture that remember what has been done in them and demand repetition, until someone finally refuses the script. The film announces this contract in the Lockwood winter sequence. Driven into Wuthering Heights by snow, the outsider is shown a guest chamber with a heavy bed and a small casement set deep in walling; carved names and dates (Catherine's permutations) are worked into the wood like a private archive. When the wind rises and the casement rattles, Lockwood dozes only to be pulled into a nightmare that is half dream, half

house: a twig tapping at the pane, a child's voice is heard, a hand breaks through the glass, and blood is left on the shards. The staging refuses overt shock and lets the room do the frightening: the *depth* of the window embrasure, the *weight* of the bed curtains, the way the candle gutters when the latch lifts. Heathcliff's response by bursting in, flinging open the casement, calling into the night as if the house had finally answered him completes the lesson: this interior is a palimpsest of Catherine's presence, and men who sleep there must negotiate with the archive. Haunted domesticity is thus literalized as inscribed wood and responsive openings; the house keeps the record and, when pressed, recites it. If the Lockwood scene establishes the house as archive, Hindley's tenure makes it arsenal, and Kosminsky lets us see the shift through table, chair, and stair. Early domestic sequences around the Heights' long table are already brittle but after Mr. Earnshaw's death and Hindley's decline, the same room is re-blocked so the table no longer hosts a meal; it hosts gambling and drink. Cards slap against wood; a pistol appears, and there is a burst of gunfire into the ceiling, dust showering from lathe and plaster. What was a surface for bread and scripture becomes a platform for risk and threat, and the house records the change in literal scars: holes in the plaster, a gouged tabletop, a banister split where a drunken lunge goes wrong. The most chilling instance of the house's vertical menace arrives at the stairwell when Hindley, raving, snatches the infant Hareton and teeters at the landing's edge; the balustrade becomes a moral line, and the drop is not just architectural but genealogical: a house trying to cast off its future. When Heathcliff intervenes and saves the child, it is a salvage from the house's own design: the landing is revealed as a place where lineage can be ended by a stumble. Against the Heights' weaponized interior, Thrushcross Grange functions as ceremonial filter, and Kosminsky makes the viewer feel how its elegance polices bodies. One exemplary passage places Catherine and Edgar in a long, bright gallery: polished floors, a rhythm of doorways, servants moving just ahead to open the next threshold. Catherine's posture is coached by the corridor itself; she adapts her stride to the smoothness, learns the discipline of heel-and-toe that the house requires. A subsequent evening shot from the far end of the gallery shows a string quartet set deep in an adjoining room; music leaks into the passage and flattens as it travels, so by the time it reaches the frame it is etiquette, not melody. The domestic "haunt" here is ceremony: rooms that reframe a woman with every passage, reducing spontaneity to deportment. The Grange is not violent like the Heights, but it is just as insistent; it replaces blows with curatorship, and the house keeps Catherine compliant by making grace the only way to move.

Kosminsky reserves some of his starkest statements of haunted domesticity for legal and sacramental scenes staged as rooms that close. When Cathy Linton is maneuvered into marriage with Linton Heathcliff, the ceremony is held not in church but in a parlor converted into a registry. The windows are shuttered against weather; a table is dragged to the center; paper, quill, and a single candle assemble law inside the house. Nelly stands as reluctant witness; Hareton hovers at the threshold, neither permitted nor banished. The blocking is coercion made visible: chairs angled to trap, the officiant's book placed at a height that forces the bride to look down, the groom seated and gasping, already more patient than partner. Haunted domesticity here is the parasitic colonization of the sacred by the domestic; Heathcliff's control over thresholds (who enters, who stands back, which door is locked) allows a parlor to impersonate a sanctuary and to bind a woman. If haunted domesticity is about what houses store and demand, the 1992 film is unusually frank about how that impulse extends beyond the threshold to churchyard and grave – the community's outer rooms. In a rain-lashed night scene, Heathcliff meets the warden and bargains over Catherine's coffin: he removes a side panel so their bodies may lie together with no timber between. Later, he returns and tampers with a locket at her throat, replacing Edgar's token with his own hair, an intimacy Nelly will half-undo by twisting both together. These acts are staged with damp stone and earth as the new "interior": the grave is lit like a small room, the coffin lid is a door, the dead woman's adornment is domestic property to be rearranged. The Gothic effect is plain, but the domestic argument is plainer: Heathcliff cannot tolerate a house (of wood, of marriage, of burial) that interposes itself between himself and Catherine; he will re-domesticate the dead to suit his will. The churchyard becomes an annex of the Heights' governance, haunted not by shades but by male claims enacted as carpentry. The film also makes the Heights' circulation of keys a recurring emblem of how the house haunts through control. After Heathcliff's return as master, there are quiet shots – no dialogue – of him laying a key ring on the table, pocketing it after a look toward the stairs, or extracting a single key to admit (or refuse) someone to a chamber. The jingle precedes decisions; it is the sound of domestic sovereignty. In one tense night passage, Isabella, newly trapped, tries doors along a corridor; each fails with the same small iron protest, and the camera keeps her boxed between jamb and jamb. We are not shown blows or explicit menace; the architecture does the restraining, and the viewer learns to hear the difference between a latch at the Heights (sharp, grudging) and at the Grange (soft, serviced). The keys are a vocabulary; Heathcliff speaks the house fluently, and others are made to listen.

Where the Heights is punitive, the film finds brief, fragile counter-examples of repairing domesticity in late scenes at the Grange. After the worst has passed, young Cathy sits with Hareton in a small room with a low fire and shared books; the camera stays mid-shot, letting us register the unremarkable miracle of two people occupying furniture without threat. There is nothing grand: a chair that doesn't scrape, a window that opens without dread, the distance between them narrowing by learning rather than by siege. In this key, domestic space stops rehearsing old harm and begins to practice hospitality. The film doesn't labor the point, these moments are quiet and few, but they matter because they show what de-haunting looks like as use, not proclamation. Finally, the film allows the Heights to surrender its voice in Heathcliff's last sequence. Having starved himself into a kind of readiness, he prowls the rooms one last time and ends up in the chamber in which Lockwood first arrived. The wind enters unchecked and the candle will not hold. Heathcliff collapses with his face turned toward the opening he has forced, and by morning the shot is all unpeopled interior: wet stone, a blown-out taper, the noise of shutter and hinge. No specter is required. The house that once punctuated every argument with doors and locks now just takes weather, and the emptiness feels like release: not only from Heathcliff's command but from the cramped program of repetitions it enforced. The last human act is often Nelly's, straightening something, closing a shutter, restoring a surface; the gesture reads as benediction, a domestic rite that neither denies the harm recorded in these rooms nor allows those harms to set the day's terms forever. Taken together, these scenes show how Kosminsky's film makes haunted domesticity legible in concrete actions of rooms: a carved name that turns a bed into an archive; a landing that almost erases an heir; a parlor that impersonates a church; a key that announces a verdict; a casement that, at the end, admits the weather that will bleach the story's stains. Women are the primary readers and laborers of this system: witnesses, managers, reluctant accomplices, and finally tentative authors of different uses, and the film's power lies in letting the viewer feel, in furniture and air, how the houses of *Wuthering Heights* decide fates until those fates are quietly rewritten.

Conclusion

Taken as a whole, *Emily Brontë's Wuthering Heights* is an attempt to reconcile cinema's appetite for immediacy with a novel that lives by indirection and voice. One of its strengths is its willingness to play the long game; that is, to include the second generation, to let the viewer feel the grind of inheritance, to make the moor a companion rather than a postcard, while giving audiences the flesh-

and-blood romance many bring to the title. Its most effective choice is spatial: Wuthering Heights and Thrushcross Grange act as adjudicating interiors, so that keys, landings, casements, and repurposed parlors carry the moral argument more loudly than speech. Double casting (Binoche as Catherine/Cathy) and Fiennes's flint-edged Heathcliff bind obsession to recurrence, even as the film trims Brontë's layered narration and compresses women's discursive power into embodied presence and domestic labor. Violence and the supernatural are rendered with a literal clarity that heightens pathos but narrows ambiguity; class and property remain firmly in view as the engines of injury. By ending on image-led catharsis rather than the novel's suspended doubt, the film privileges affect over epistemic play. Yet its long view – keeping the second generation and showing the slow re-use of rooms – demonstrates how haunted domesticity can be de-haunted through different uses of space. In adaptation terms, the film is faithful where cinema is strongest (space, weather, touch) and freer where prose is sovereign (voice, irony), yielding a resonant, if streamlined, Brontë.

Chapter 4.3 – Adaptations of *The Turn of the Screw*

This section will focus on two of the filmic adaptations made based on the novel written by Henry James, *The Turn of the Screw*.

Chapter 4.3.1 – *The Innocents* (1961)

The Innocents (1961) is a Gothic psychological horror film directed and produced by Jack Clayton, starring Deborah Kerr, Michael Redgrave and Megs Jenkins. The film adapts Henry James's 1898 novella *The Turn of the Screw*. Its screenplay was developed from William Archibald's 1950 stage play of the same name and reworked by Truman Capote, who drew on the play as a main source. Archibald's early screenplay treats the supernatural events as real. Clayton disagreed with this approach and asked Capote to revise the script. Capote's version foregrounds psychological explanations and leaves room for competing readings of what the governess experiences. The finished film therefore sustains two possible interpretations: a literal haunting or a projection of Miss Giddens's fears and desires.³¹³ Clayton felt that a more ambiguous conclusion would fit best: "My original interest in the story was in the fact that one could tell it from a completely different point of view," he said. "In other words – evil was alive in the mind of the governess and in fact she more or less creates the situation. Now this was long before I read the notes on Henry James and found that somebody else also imagines that Henry James wrote it this way – sort of almost Freudian hallucinations the governess had."³¹⁴ Christopher Frayling estimates that most of the finished screenplay reflects Capote's revisions, with John Mortimer later refining dialogue to give it a period tone.³¹⁵ Capote also introduced touches that recall Southern Gothic – lush but decaying imagery and unsettling glimpses of animal life – though Clayton muted these cues in the final cut to preserve the ambiguity between a ghost story and a psychological case study. Clayton initially considered a framing device with an unreliable narrator and even shot a funeral opening³¹⁶, but he ultimately chose a starker beginning: darkness, a child's voice singing, and the image of the governess praying. This opening builds intimacy and invites trust, while the surrounding darkness already hints that what

³¹³ Ginette Vincendeau, *Film/Literature/Heritage: A Sight and Sound Reader*. London: British Film Institute, 2001, p. 87.

³¹⁴ Neil Sinyard, *Jack Clayton*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000, p. 92.

³¹⁵ Ibid, p. 91.

³¹⁶ Ibid, p. 94.

follows may be confined to her mind. The film was shot partly on location at Sheffield Park in Sussex and partly at Shepperton Studios in Surrey. Although Clayton preferred the academy ratio, 20th Century Fox required CinemaScope.³¹⁷ Cinematographer Freddie Francis embraced the wider frame, using deep focus, strong center-weighted lighting, and carefully controlled darkness at the frame's edges. For most of the interior night scenes, Francis painted the sides of the lenses with black paint for a more intense, "elegiac" focus, and used candles custom-made with many wicks to produce more light.³¹⁸ As the production progressed, Clayton began composing boldly for the widescreen format, placing figures at the edges or in profile to heighten both intimacy and unease. Editor Jim Clark extended many dissolves and superimpositions into slow, layered transitions – what he called "mini-montages." These blends often carry meaning from one scene into the next, sustaining mood and suggesting mental association rather than clear causality. Clayton supervised the edit closely which were in accordance with his idea of the film as "mood-oriented", stating: "It gave me opportunities to explore this field, which I had never done before: to create in those multiple dissolves images which hang there, and have a meaning which applies both to the end of the last scene and the beginning of the next."³¹⁹ The sound design was equally innovative: the film makes early use of synthesized electronic sounds created by Daphne Oram, which contribute to its "uneasy" acoustic texture, though Oram went uncredited.³²⁰ The lullaby "O Willow Waly" by Georges Auric and Paul Dehn serves as a recurring motif. As for the casting, Kerr was cast at the main protagonist, despite being older than James's twenty-year-old governess. The actress once stated: "I remember asking Jack what he wanted me to stress in playing the part, and he replied, "You play it the way you feel, but don't forget the ambiguity!" So I tried the very nervous tight-rope between sanity and insanity, and left the audience to exercise its intelligence."³²¹ Pamela Franklin and Martin Stephens play Flora and Miles with striking shifts between innocence and adult poise, making their behavior readable both as possession and as performance. Clytie Jessop and Peter Wyngarde appear as Miss Jessel and Peter Quint, giving faces to figures that James keeps largely at the level of rumor. Redgrave appears briefly as the distant guardian, underscoring the governess's isolation. Clayton sought to distinguish the film from contemporary Hammer horror. Instead of shocks and monsters, he favored atmosphere: long takes, stylized lighting, and disquieting sound. This choice aligns the film more with art-house

³¹⁷ Ibid, p. 92.

³¹⁸ David J. Hogan, *Dark Romance: Sexuality in the Horror Film*, McFarland Classics, 2016, p. 87.

³¹⁹ Anthony Slide, *Fifty Classic British Films, 1932-1982: A Pictorial Record*. Courier Corporation, 2013, p. 103.

³²⁰ Mark Brend, *The Sound of Tomorrow: How Electronic Music Was Smuggled into the Mainstream*. Bloomsbury USA, 2012, p. 183.

³²¹ Sinyard, p. 88.

Gothic than with popular horror cycles of the period and also allowed Clayton – then associated with the British New Wave – to work against type.³²² From its release, the film invited readings centered on sexuality and repression. Earlier literary critics – most famously Edmund Wilson, writing on James’s novella – had already proposed that the ghosts might be the governess’s projections. Film scholars later took up this line of thought. David J. Hogan, for instance, compares *The Innocents* to Robert Wise’s *The Haunting* (1963), based on Shirley Jackson’s text, arguing that both films link supernatural activity to repressed desire.³²³ He reads the final kiss as a dark echo of *Sleeping Beauty*: a supposed “release” that is disturbing rather than redemptive.³²⁴ Anthony Slide also stated: “Through the use of shadows, oblique camera angles, and an atmospheric soundtrack, Jack Clayton not only captured the horror of James’s story, but also its deeper sadness – the children’s isolation from the real world, the governess’ problematic sexuality, and the curiously pitiful nature of the former governess, Miss Jessel.”³²⁵ *The Innocents* stands as a distinctive act of adaptation. It retains the central uncertainty of James’s novella while translating it into images, sound, and performance. Clayton’s direction and Francis’s cinematography create a visual field where seeing is never simple. Capote’s revisions support psychological readings without closing the door on the supernatural. The result is a film that continues to sustain scholarly attention: not only as one of the finest British horror films of its era, but also as a careful study of how cinema can represent states of mind without fixing their meaning.

Point of view and framing

In his novel, James builds ambiguity through form. We hear the tale at second hand: a Christmas gathering, a narrator named Douglas, and the manuscript of an unnamed governess. That double frame puts everything at a slight remove and locks us into a single, intensely subjective first-person voice. The “truth” is inseparable from how he tells it. In the film, Clayton strips away the outer frame and proceeds linearly from Miss Giddens’s hiring to Miles’s death. Losing Douglas and the manuscript shifts the source of uncertainty: instead of wondering about a narrator’s reliability on the page, we watch an apparently “objective” world that is nonetheless filtered through the governess’ experience. The camera does not editorialize, but its alignment – when apparitions appear we are

³²² Sinyard, pp. 59-60.

³²³ Hogan, p. 85.

³²⁴ Ibid, pp. 86-87.

³²⁵ Slide, p. 103.

almost always with her – recreates the novel’s epistemic trap in visual terms. The novel’s ambiguity is rhetorical (a voice that may or may not be trustworthy); the film’s ambiguity is optical and acoustic (images and sounds that may or may not be shared reality). Both make us complicit in the governess’s certainty without guaranteeing that certainty is warranted.

Naming, roles, and credit lines

The governess is unnamed; her social origins (a parson’s daughter) and the guardian’s “no-contact” rule define her role at Bly. Mrs. Grose, the housekeeper, is loyal but limited; the children, Miles and Flora, are enigmatic, alternately angelic and knowing. The dead pair – Peter Quint and Miss Jessel – exist through reported history and alleged sightings. The screenplay names the governess Miss Giddens and preserves the guardian’s condition that she never trouble him. Mrs. Grose remains the pragmatic foil. The children are close to James’s design but are rendered more performatively adult at certain key moments. Quint and Jessel are given faces and bodies – visible, not merely described – without the film fully collapsing the uncertainty around them. Giving the governess a name and faces to the dead shifts our mental picture, but the power dynamics are faithful: a young housekeeper isolated by responsibility who can’t quite corroborate her visions, and two children who may be either haunted by the ghosts or simply playing along.

What the film shows (and how it shows it)

The most unnerving thing is how little the readers can “see”; a scrupulous, fearful voice proceeds on cataloguing sights that no one else seems able to verify. That scarcity of hard evidence is the engine of doubt. *The Innocents* embraces cinema’s capacity to show and then makes “showing” suspect. The apparitions – Quint on the tower, then at the window; Jessel beside the lake – are staged with long lenses, deep focus, and airy diffusion, so that they read both as concrete figures and as atmospheric accidents. Sound does equal work: a child’s song, “O Willow Waly” functions as an aural haunting, and the mix withholds or isolates noises to make space feel sentient. Lighting is crucial: shafts of overexposed daylight and inky interiors create a world where contrast itself feels threatening. The movie replaces James’s rhetorical haze with a visual one. We see more than the novel ever allows, yet we can’t be sure we’re seeing anything other than Miss Giddens’s need to see.

Sexuality, psychology, and “corruption”

The text never says what “corruption” is; it leaves the content of the children’s knowledge vague. The governess’s own erotic unease – especially in relation to her employer and to Miles – gives critics fuel for psychological readings, but James keeps everything deniable. Clayton leans into a psychoanalytic register that readers often find latent in James. Moments of charged physical proximity, Miles’s precocious intimacy, and Miss Giddens’s oscillation between tenderness and alarm push the question of sexuality closer to the surface. A notorious final kiss underscores the adult/child boundary the story is testing and makes the last collapse unbearably literal. By concretizing the erotic tension, the film narrows the range of “what might be going on” but heightens the emotional stakes. If James lets the reader hypothesize repression, *The Innocents* makes the viewers watch it.

Mrs. Grose and the question of witnesses

In James’ novella, Mrs. Grose frequently “confirms” the governess by supplying a backstory about Quint and Jessel and by agreeing that the children are altered – yet she almost never sees what the governess sees. Her agreement is social – a vote of confidence – more than evidentiary. In the film, the pattern holds. Mrs. Grose is sympathetic but visually excluded from the decisive sightings. When Miss Giddens points and insists, Mrs. Grose strains to see and cannot. The movie uses that blocking to keep us off balance: either Miss Giddens alone is sensitive to the supernatural, or she’s generating meanings no one else can share. The film honors James’s clever distribution of testimony: enough corroboration to keep the governess from seeming mad, not enough to certify her as right.

Children as performers

James weaponizes the children’s “innocent” performances: perfect manners, angelic faces, sudden adult poise. Their very sweetness reads as suspicious because it seems staged for the governess, who desperately wants to believe in their purity. In the film, performance becomes literal. Martin Stephens’s Miles can flip from boyish to insinuating within a shot; Pamela Franklin’s Flora moves from singsong to hysteria with frightening speed. The film adds small behavioral shocks (the coolness with which Miles exerts power, a casual cruelty toward a captured bird) to materialize the story’s

hints at moral damage. Where James relies on tone and diction, the movie uses acting beats. The result is less abstract but viscerally unnerving.

Space, staging, and the Gothic

In the text, Bly is a map of thresholds and sightlines – stairs, windows, lawns – described by a narrator who can't stop scanning for meaning. The Gothic is largely cognitive: dread made from inference. Freddie Francis's black-and-white widescreen turns Bly into an instrument. Long corridors, doorways framed like traps, gardens with statuary that catch the eye: the house seems to collaborate with Miss Giddens's suspicions. The lensing (with its distinctive edge diffusion) and rigorous depth-of-field invite us to search the background for intrusions just as the governess does. Clayton translates James's "haunted attention" into a grammar of images. Space becomes a mind.

Religion and morality

The governess of the novel is ethically earnest and classically Victorian in sensibility. She sees herself vested with the task of salvation: to save the children's souls by isolating them from contamination. Whether that zeal is noble or destructive is the question the book refuses to settle. The movie keeps the language of saving and sin but assigns it to gesture and ritual – whispered prayers, protective embraces that become possessive. That moral absolutism is legible without the novel's essayistic interior monologue, and it makes the climax read as an attempted exorcism even if no metaphysical entities exist. The film keeps the ethical stakes and trims the theology; salvation plays as psychology performed through ritual acts.

The finale

The last pages are famously controversial. The governess confronts Miles, demands he confess, sees Quint, hears the boy cry out "You devil!"³²⁶ and then feels him die in her arms. Is it a victory, a murder, a fright, a heart attack, an exorcism? James leaves the cause blank and the ethics suspended. In the film, the sequence is staged with exquisite cruelty. The confrontation is more intimate, the kiss more explicit, and the boy's collapse is immediate. The camera clings to Miss Giddens as if

³²⁶ Henry James, p. 94.

registering the horror of what her “certainty” has produced. Yet the film doesn’t close the case: the apparition is shown as she sees it; the boy’s cry still names Quint; we are left between competing explanations. Both works end with a corpse and a question. The novel’s ambiguity is textual and interpretive; the film’s is experiential and moral. In either medium, the cost of certainty is a child’s death.

Conclusion

The Innocents is a model of adaptive intelligence. It does not try to reproduce James’s prose effects; it invents cinematic ones that press on the same nerve: the peril of righteousness in a world where evidence is never enough. By relocating ambiguity from sentences to shots, from narration to sound and light, Clayton’s film stays true to the novel’s spirit while staking claims only cinema can make.

Chapter 4.3.2 – *The Turn of the Screw* (2009)

The Turn of the Screw, broadcast by the BBC on 30 December 2009 and also titled *Ghost Story: The Turn of the Screw*, is a British television adaptation of Henry James’s 1898 novella. The script by Sandy Welch and direction by Tim Fywell aim to retain the original’s atmosphere while relocating the action from the 1840s to the early 1920s. This change is significant: it introduces a modern psychiatric frame and brings Freudian ideas closer to the surface, especially around sexuality and repression, which many critics have read into James’s text. The film tells its story through flashbacks during interviews between an institutionalized governess, named Ann, (Michelle Dockery), and Dr. Fisher (Dan Stevens). Ann recounts how she was hired by a wealthy guardian (Mark Umbers) to care for the orphans Miles (Josef Lindsay) and Flora (Eva Sayer) at Bly, where she is welcomed by the housekeeper, Mrs. Grose (Sue Johnston). Corin Redgrave, Fisher’s mentor, appears as a professor; his casting carries an intertextual nod, as his father, Michael Redgrave, starred in *The Innocents* (1961) as the children’s uncle. Setting the film in the 1920s serves several purposes. It provides a plausible reason for the shortage of male staff at Bly in the aftermath of the First World War and, more importantly, it allows the introduction of a clinical framing device absent from James: a psychiatrist who listens, probes, and implicitly invites a psychological reading of events. While the novella relies on a first-person narrator to create doubt, the film keeps that subjectivity but filters it through Ann’s sessions with Dr. Fisher. The adaptation also heightens libidinal and Freudian

elements. Ann's suppressed attraction to the Master motivates several openly sexual scenes, and Welch adds a theological strand by making Ann the daughter of a preacher who wrestles with her faith; when questioned by the atheist doctor, she says she believes in the Devil. Together, these choices shift the tone from Victorian ambiguity toward a more explicitly psychological and spiritual drama. Although the adaptation changes the period and adds new frameworks, it broadly preserves the novella's mood of unease. The film favors suggestion over spectacle, relying on small, unsettling details – a broken doll on a sill, a half-seen figure at a window – and on gaps in knowledge that remain unresolved, such as the reason for Miles's suspension from school. Filming began in August 2009 in the West Country of England. Bly is realized at Brympton d'Evercy, a manor near Yeovil, Somerset, chosen for its close resemblance to James's description, including expansive grounds and a lake that is central to several scenes. Railway sequences were shot on the East Somerset Railway. These settings support the adaptation's blend of period authenticity and Gothic isolation. Reviews were mixed. Some critics praised the adaptation as one of the better versions of James's story, citing its restraint and its commitment to atmosphere. Others found it absorbing even if not conventionally terrifying, and suggested it might work particularly well for viewers new to the narrative. A number of reviewers, however, were less impressed, arguing that the film "vandalized" or thinned the original by making implicit elements explicit. Even among sympathetic voices, assessments often acknowledged that the production did not succeed on every level but nonetheless preserved the "spirit" of James's text. The most frequent criticisms concerned departures from the novella. Some argued that the 1920s setting added little because the social context was not fully developed. Others felt that intensifying Ann's sexual feelings for the Master and literalizing the sexual history of Quint and Jessel was unnecessary and even distracting. The psychiatrist's role drew particular scrutiny: the interview structure clarifies motives and diagnoses in ways that risk draining the story of its mystery. For these reviewers, what is suggestive on the page becomes over-explained on screen, reshaping the tale from open-ended haunting into a more conventional psychological thriller. Scholarly responses underline the same tensions. One line of argument holds that beginning in a sanatorium predisposes viewers to read Ann as mad, which weakens the story's ambiguity and moves it toward psychological thriller territory. Specific visual choices – such as Miles's apparition-like entrance at a steam-filled station, or the collage of disturbing images in the prologue – reinforce this shift while also pulling the film toward horror.³²⁷ Another scholarly view judges the adaptation more harshly, criticizing

³²⁷ Sborgi Anna Viola, *To think and watch the Evil: The Turn of the Screw as cultural reference in television from Dark Shadows to C.S.I. Babel: Littératures Plurielles* (24), 2011, pp. 181–94

anachronistic dialogue, heavy-handed sexualization, and an overall tendency to “spell things out.”³²⁸ From this perspective, the film replaces James’s carefully ambiguous narrative with a clearer, less nuanced account of repression and breakdown.

By relocating the story to the early 1920s and wrapping the governess’s testimony in a new psychiatric frame, these structural choices alter the tale’s epistemology before a ghost has even appeared: rather than the novella’s storytelling circle, followed by the first-person manuscript read aloud by Douglas, the film uses Ann’s clinical recollection as its organizing point of view, with intermittent present-tense scenes that try to rationalize or pathologize what she has seen. In James, narration itself is a source of charge and uncertainty: “If the child gives the effect another turn of the screw, what do you say to two children?”³²⁹ It is a tease that signals how the *form* (a story told about a story) will govern what we can trust. In the film, by contrast, the interrogatory frame and the visible presence of a psychiatrist prejudice the viewer toward a psychological reading even as the movie often literalizes the apparitions.

Point of view and framing

James’s double frame – from Douglas to the manuscript to the governess – keeps us inside a consciousness that is both confessional and theatrical; the text’s power lies in the friction between the governess’s certitude and the reader’s doubt. The film consolidates perspective by cutting between Ann’s interviews and her flashbacks – an arrangement that looks “objective” (we *see* Bly and the specters) but is still subordinated to Ann’s retelling. The result is a paradox: cinema’s capacity to show tends to reduce James’s cultivated ambiguity. When Ann says she sees Quint on the tower, the spectators see him too; when she reports Miss Jessel across the lake, the camera obliges. James’s prose does nearly the opposite: it sustains ambiguity in the act of description, as when the governess recalls “He did stand there!” and yet continually qualifies her certainty (“a bewilderment of vision”) in the same breath. The film’s frame also invites psychosexual inference – Ann’s confessed attraction to the Master, the doctor’s Freudian prodding – rather than letting innuendo emerge indirectly from the governess’s language. In James, the frame conspires with doubt; in the film, the frame courts diagnosis.

³²⁸ Thomas S. Hischak, *American Literature on Stage and Screen: 525 Works and Their Adaptations*. Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland, 2012, p. 253

³²⁹ Henry James, p. 5.

The setting

The relocation to the early 1920s is not just an aesthetic choice. It legitimizes an institutional response to female testimony with sanatoriums and psychiatry, lends a social rationale for the scarcity of men at Bly in a world still reorganizing after war, and overlays the Gothic country house with the modernity of trains, clinics, and professional expertise. Yet these gains in sociohistorical specificity come at a cost to James's carefully suspended time. In the novella, the house is a self-enclosed world where moral categories such as innocence, corruption, influence are carried by voice and ritual rather than by medical discourse. The 2009 film, by contrast, gives Ann a preacher-father and an explicit crisis of faith, opposes her belief in the Devil to Dr. Fisher's atheism, and culminates in the doctor briefly "seeing" Quint's face on a policeman in the ending scene of the film, moments that direct the viewer toward either a psychological explanation or a metaphysical one, but in both cases *declare* a framework James fastidiously leaves unstated. These choices are consistent with Welch's desire to update the story and with contemporary critical commonplaces about the Freudian subtext; they are less consistent with James's method of making the reader *do* the work of inference.

The power of ambiguity

Ambiguity, of course, is the novella's engine. The governess's first sightings – Quint on the tower, Jessel by the lake – arrive in passages that oscillate between rapture, chill, and retrospective qualification; the narrative voice generates evidence even as it undermines it. James's technique allows multiple readings: a haunted romance about besieged children, a case study in erotic repression, or a parable of power and projection. Critics of the 2009 film have often argued that its imagery and blocking settle too quickly on an external haunting: in several scenes other characters appear to corroborate Ann's visions, and the climactic montage makes possession and sexualized threat explicit. Even reviewers sympathetic to the production's mood noted that translating James's "terrifying indeterminacies" into a film grammar of shock and payoff changes the kind of uncertainty on offer: what is evasive on the page can feel like "having it both ways" on the screen.³³⁰ The result is an atmospheric, competently unsettling ghost story that often replaces James's hermeneutic

³³⁰ Tom Sutcliffe (2009, 31 December). "Last Night's Television: The Turn of the Screw, BB1; Three Men Go To Ireland, BBC2." The Independent. <https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/tv/reviews/last-night-s-television-the-turn-of-the-screw-bb1-three-men-go-to-ireland-bbc2-1853563.html> Accessed on: 2025, 25 August.

suspense with plot suspense and questions such as “what will pop out next?”, thereby smoothing, rather than deepening, the questions James leaves open.³³¹

Characters and personalities

Characterization also shifts. James famously withholds the governess’s name, producing a narrating “I” that is both intimate and impersonal; her authority is a function of rhetoric and self-command. The film names her Ann, concretizes the Master as an erotic object rather than a distant abstraction, and invents Dr. Fisher as a persistent auditor. Casting and crediting decisions – Ann, Dr. Fisher, Mrs. Grose, Miles, Flora – signal a move from James’s poetics of suggestion to a theater of relationships, where desire and authority must be dramatized in gesture and dialogue, not insinuated by syntax. The screenplay also intensifies the sexual history of Quint and Jessel and literalizes the idea that the children were “groomed,” thereby reframing the governess’s protectiveness as an understandable response to concrete danger rather than – as in some readings of the novella – a projection fueled by class resentment and erotic fear. In James, the children’s “more than earthly beauty” and “unnatural goodness”³³² can be read as the governess’s paranoid eloquence; in the film, their corrupted knowingness is repeatedly staged.

The ambiguity, or lack thereof

Formally, the film substitutes images and sound design for James’s verbal hesitations and self-corrections. Where the book sustains doubt by distributing testimony (Mrs. Grose “almost” confirms, the children never quite confess, the governess overreads), the film tends to consolidate evidence, either through Ann’s flashbacks or through other characters’ reactions that tacitly validate her claims (e.g., the final policeman’s “Quint” face). Editing rhythms and location choices – Bly realized at Brympton d’Evercy, all moody corridors and lawns – create a tactile sense of siege that James crafts with grammar and silence. This is the cinema’s advantage: tone is immediate, weather is felt, and the topography of looking (towers, windows, landing, lake) becomes a playable score. But it is also the cinema’s temptation: to define what James leaves indeterminate. Even the film’s best set-pieces (Ann’s first sighting on the tower; the lake sequence) gain sensory force at the expense of the

³³¹ Tim Dowling (2009, 31 December). “The Turn of the Screw and The Turin Shroud: The New Evidence.” The Guardian. <https://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2009/dec/31/the-turn-of-the-screw> Accessed on: 2025, 25 August.

³³² James Henry, p. 53.

novella's lability, in which a single paragraph can tilt from visionary certitude to retrospective scruple.

Who looks at who?

The question of *who sees what* and *when* is where the two versions diverge most consequentially. In the book, Mrs. Grose almost never sees what the governess claims to see; her "confirmation" comes as reportage – recognizing the description of Quint – or as shared anxiety about the children's behavior. That distribution of seeing and not seeing keeps the apparatus of proof unstable. The film, by contrast, repeatedly grants us the apparition as spectacle and allows secondary figures to react as if a shared reality were at stake, which erodes the novella's evidentiary uncertainty. Where the novel's governess aims to "bring on a proof" at the lake, glorying: "She was there, and I was justified"³³³ because Mrs. Grose can at least share the moment of crisis, if not the sight, the movie must choose: either others see and ambiguity narrows, or Ann alone sees and the sanatorium frame pathologizes her. It often does both, which leaves the logic of haunting and the logic of hysteria overlapping rather than in tension.

What is kept

If we ask what the film *keeps* from James, the list is still substantial. It preserves the isolating "rule" set by the Master, that is to not write to him and that the governess will manage everything alone, the choreography of first sightings – tower, window, lake; the erotic unease around power and class, and the crucial dynamic in which the governess's desire to save the children risks harming them. It honors the tale's tonal doubleness – domestic pastoral shading into dread – and it understands that the house's geography with stairs, landing, panes, lawns is the story's circuitry of threat. But where James lets rhetoric do the haunting – staging the spectral as a problem of interpretation – the film insists on phenomena, psychiatrists, and flashbacks. The result, as several contemporary reviewers observed, is an "absorbing" and often handsome film whose very competence at embodiment pushes it toward decision and away from James's cultivated perplexity.

³³³ Ibid, p. 76.

The finale

The endings sharpen the contrast. James closes with a coup de théâtre that is also a coup of grammar: after Miles cries “Peter Quint – you devil!” and turns, the governess “catches” him only to find that “his little heart, dispossessed, had stopped.”³³⁴ What dispossessed him? A spirit exorcised? Terror? The governess’s smothering embrace? The sentence refuses to say. Fywell’s film stages a grappling that alternates visibly between Quint and Miles, then cuts to Ann cradling the boy’s corpse, and finally returns to the sanatorium/police angle, where Ann is led away for murder as Dr. Fisher briefly glimpses Quint’s face on an officer. These additions change the moral mathematics: James ends on an unfalsifiable private catastrophe; the film ends on a public allegation and a quasi-attestation. Both shock; only one preserves strict undecidability.

Conclusion

Fywell and Welch translate *The Turn of the Screw* into a modern Gothic case-history: a traumatized governess, an inattentive patriarch, suggestible children, and a clinician who both explains and – at the last – seems to witness. James’s novella, by contrast, refuses both case-history and case-closed: it is an instrument for producing – and then sustaining – doubt. That is why a single Jamesian clause (“his little heart, dispossessed, had stopped”) can accommodate incompatible explanations, while a film must choose what to show and how others will react. *The Turn of the Screw* (2009) is thus a faithful infidelity: it carries over the plot and much of the tone, but in exchanging narrational ambiguity for cinematic plausibility, it changes the story’s game. Whether that is a loss or a gain will depend on the viewer’s appetite for closure – James invites them to “turn” the screw themselves, the film turns it for them.

³³⁴ Ibid, p. 93.

Conclusion

This thesis has argued that “haunted domesticity” is not a decorative Gothic trope but a structural principle that binds gender, space, and power across 19th century fiction and its screen afterlives. Read through this lens, the house ceases to be a neutral backdrop and becomes an actor with memory, jurisdiction, and appetite, an architecture that records and redistributes harm. In Victorian culture, the ideal of the “Angel in the House” and its monstrous double organized female identity; Gothic writing exposes how that ideal turns the home from sanctuary into carceral space, where the familiar becomes unhomely and dread takes up residence in corridors and locked rooms. In this sense, haunted domesticity names both a socio-historical condition (women confined to, and defined by, interiors) and a poetics (settings that externalize repression through uncanny effects). The theoretical ground prepared here – the angel/monster dichotomy, the uncanny space, the home as scene of repression and resistance – has shown why the Gothic house so readily bears the weight of gendered fear and why it so powerfully stages counter-narratives of female agency. Across the three novels that I have analyzed, that argument holds with distinct inflections. *Jane Eyre* anatomizes domestic trials as moral and spatial tests: Gateshead’s “red room,” Lowood’s disciplinary architecture, and Thornfield’s corridors chart Jane’s movement from abjection to ethical self-possession. The novel’s doubled feminine – angel and “madwoman” – is not a melodramatic contrast but a symptom of a culture that splits women to manage them. Brontë’s house makes that split legible in doors, keys, and hidden storeys. *Wuthering Heights* radicalizes the same dynamic: the Heights weaponizes furniture, stairs, and names, while the Grange curates bodies through etiquette; Catherine’s “demonic” self-division is sustained (and finally broken) by interiors that alternately admit and refashion her. In *The Turn of the Screw*, haunted domesticity migrates into epistemology: Bly’s polished surfaces and empty vistas become instruments of uncertainty, making the home the very site where the boundaries between reality and projection blur and where a woman’s testimony is mediated, contested, and pathologized. Taken together, the three novels show haunting as a grammar for articulating female constraint and for imagining exits (however temporary) from the scripts of domestic ideology. The adaptation chapter aimed to reframe these insights within contemporary adaptation theory, treating films not as tests of fidelity but as intermedial arguments that “write with” their sources. Following a palimpsestuous model – texts that are visibly layered with earlier ones – my thesis aimed to emphasize medium specificity (light, sound, framing, editing, performance) and context (industrial, cultural, technological) as determinants of what a house can “say” on screen. In this view, adaptations are at

once products and processes: acknowledged transpositions that reinterpret, re-weight, and relocate their sources for new publics, new platforms, and new value systems. This stance moves beyond fidelity/infidelity toward negotiated transformation, where repetition with variation is the point, not the problem. Reading the six films I have chosen through the lens of haunted domesticity clarified how cinema materializes what prose abstracts. In *Jane Eyre* on screen, mise-en-scène and weather perform the moral work of Brontë's first-person narration: non-linear structures and chiaroscuro turn Thornfield into a sensorium of withheld knowledge and forbidden rooms. In *Wuthering Heights*, the two adaptations disclose complementary facets of the same thesis: one renders the Heights as a key-bound regime of thresholds (a domestic sovereignty audible in the jingle of iron keys), and the Grange as a ceremonial filter that disciplines movement; the other relocates haunting into the moor-house continuum, letting mud, wind, and animal sound remake domestic space as exposed, precarious shelter. *The Turn of the Screw* adaptations, finally, demonstrate how framing devices, sound motifs, and historical resets recalibrate ambiguity: the house becomes archive or clinic, chapel or trap, depending on how image and audio manage off-screen space and on whose gaze orders the rooms. Across all six films, the house remains the argument's hinge: a medium through which gendered power becomes legible – as atmosphere, as route, as lock – and through which resistance is staged as a different use of rooms. Methodologically, the comparative page-to-screen readings have also shown that haunted domesticity is diagnostically capacious: it travels across modes and epochs because it is keyed to structures that persist under new guises. This has implications for adaptation studies. If narratives “adapt” as they are adapted, then each new version does more than illustrate a classic; it historicizes it, making the house answer to the anxieties of a given moment while teaching us how stories survive by migrating through media and contexts. Future work might widen this map: non-Anglophone and postcolonial retellings; long-form serial television, where houses accrue seasons of memory; and intersectional studies that track how class, race, and sexuality redistribute who is haunted, and by what, inside the home. What this thesis has tried to demonstrate is that looking at novels and their films together does not dilute either form, but it multiplies the evidence. In the novels and on the screens surveyed here, haunted domesticity names both a historical injury and an aesthetic resource, an insight that only emerges when we let houses speak in floorplans and frames, in sentences and in shots.

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