

# **The Future is Gothic: Elements of Gothic in Dystopian Novels**

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## Abstract

This thesis explores the relationship between the Gothic tradition and Dystopian novels in order to illuminate new perspectives on the body in Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *Herland* (1915), Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932), George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949), Anthony Burgess' *A Clockwork Orange* (1962), Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) and Michel Houellebecq's *Atomised* (1999). The key concerns are those of the Labyrinth, Dark Places, Connectedness and the Loss of the Individual, Live Burials, Monsters and Fragmented Flesh.

A thematic approach allows for the novels to be brought together under common Gothic themes in order to show not only that they have such tendencies, but that they share common ground as Gothic Dystopias. While the focus is on bodily concerns in these novels, it is also pertinent to offer a discussion of past critical perspectives on the Dystopia and this is undertaken in Chapter One: 'Unearthing the Past'. Chapter Two, 'Labyrinths of Time and Bodies', looks at the narrative structure of the novels and finds similarities in presentation to Gothic novels, which leads to exploration of the position of the body in such a narrative of the unseen. 'Dark Places' is the third chapter of this thesis and looks to the spaces inhabited by characters in the novels to examine their impact on the threat faced by these individuals. The Gothic convention of doubling is the focus of Chapter Four, 'Connectedness and the Loss of the Individual', which finds not only doubling operating in Dystopian novels, but the more complex relationship of triangles of doubling holding characters, fixing them in relation to those around at the expense of selfhood. Chapter Five, 'Live Burials and the Waking Dead', takes Eve Kosofsky

Sedgwick's musings on the Gothic as its point of departure and finds that Dystopian bodies occupy a very similarly trapped position. 'Monsters and Monstrosity' is Chapter Six and it identifies two types of monsters that inhabit the Gothic Dystopian space: those people who transform between the human and the monstrous, and those individuals who form a larger monster based on power that lives parasitically on transgressive bodies. The final chapter displays the impact of the Gothic Dystopia on individual bodies: 'Fragmented Flesh'. The destruction of a coherent whole, a body with defined and sustainable boundaries, is the outcome of the novels where fear, repression, and the hidden combine to leave little space for cohesion and identification in the Gothic Dystopia.

**THE FUTURE IS GOTHIC**

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## Introduction

### The Future is Gothic

Dystopian literature generally constitutes a critique of existing social conditions or political systems, either through the critical examination of the Utopian premises upon which these conditions and systems are based, or through the imaginative extension of those conditions and systems into different contexts that more clearly reveal their flaws and contradictions...Dystopian literature is not so much a specific genre as a particular kind of oppositional and critical energy or spirit...the principal literary strategy of Dystopian [is] defamiliarization: by focusing their critiques of society on imaginatively distant settings, Dystopian fictions provide fresh perspectives on problematic social and political practices that might otherwise be taken for granted or considered natural and inevitable.<sup>1</sup>

Gothic is understood in two fundamental ways: first, as a fictional genre, encompassing the strands of historical romance, horror and tales of psychological obsession and haunting, ranging from the eighteenth century to the present; and second, as a discourse of wider resonance,

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<sup>1</sup> M Keith Booker, *Dystopian Literature, A Theory and Research Guide*, (Westport CT: Greenwood Press. 1994), pp. 3-4



utilising images of disorder and monstrosity that embody cultural anxieties about the disintegration of traditional western values and social formations. A fascination with the transgression of cultural limits and with the fears and fantasies bred by transgression is, arguably, the Gothic's most pervasive motif across time and space.<sup>2</sup>

The crossing of boundaries into darkness...throughout the twentieth century is frequent and emphatic. The refusal of conventional limits and the critical questioning of cultural attitudes often proceed within a Gothic structuring of elements with a Gothic inflection. The transformations, adaptations, and other prominent traces of the Gothic in modern writing indicate the persistence of a cluster of cultural anxieties to which Gothic writing and literary modernism...continue to respond. The dark side of the discourse and experience of modernity is evident in all these cultural forms.<sup>3</sup>

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### **Dystopias and the Gothic**

This thesis aims to explore the insights to be gained by looking at six Dystopian texts in the light of the Gothic literary tradition. Such an endeavour requires not only an

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<sup>2</sup> Dani Cavallaro, *Cyberpunk and cyberculture*, (London: Athlone Press, 2000), p. 164-165

<sup>3</sup> John Paul Riquelme, 'Toward a History of Gothic and Modernism: Dark Modernity from Bram Stoker to Samuel Beckett', *Modern Fiction Studies*, 46-3, (Fall 2000), pp. 585-631, p. 589



exploration of the characteristics which define Dystopian texts but also necessitates an attempt to elucidate the boundaries of Gothic literary theory, finding common ground in the nightmare visions provided by Dystopias, and in the Gothic tropes which give meaning to such spectres of terror. The Dystopian texts in question are Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *Herland* (1915), Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932), George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949), Anthony Burgess' *A Clockwork Orange* (1962), Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) and Michel Houellebecq's *Atomised* (1999). In Chapter One I will look more closely at their particular claims to the Dystopian title and to their critical receptions, but in general Dystopian texts share a set of characteristics to be found in all six texts and which echo and reflect many of the concerns of Gothic novels. This introduction is structured so that an exploration of Gothic and Dystopian literature is offered to allow that both approaches can then be connected at shared points of interest, relating both to specific eras of Gothic literature and detailing the Dystopian texts which are the focus of this thesis.

In the introduction to *Dystopian Literature: A Theory and Research Guide*, Keith Booker defines Dystopian literature as: 'specifically that literature which situates itself in direct opposition to utopian thought, warning against the potential negative consequences of arrant utopianism'.<sup>4</sup> Booker goes on to say that an essential element of the Dystopian genre is 'defamiliarisation', where imaginative settings allow fresh perspectives on current situations.

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<sup>4</sup> Booker, *Dystopian Literature*, p. 3

The epistemology of the word ‘Utopia’ provides a reference point in understanding the modern word ‘Dystopia’.

The term ‘utopia’, of course, notoriously embodies a pun; Sir Thomas More’s coinage is deliberately ambiguous in its derivation. Its root may be taken as either *ou-topos* – ‘no-place’, or *eu-topos* – ‘good place’. Utopia then, may be defined as both a good place, and ideal (or at any rate, more perfect) society, yet at the same time one that does not exist – desirable, perhaps, but at the same time unattainable. In utopian fictions this is reflected in the society’s location, almost invariably remote or well insulated from the actual world to which it proposes an alternative.<sup>5</sup>

Such is the nature of the term that it retains its ambiguity and requires the need for the phrase ‘anti-utopian’ or ‘dystopian’ in order to register the negative, to describe a negative existence and society which is at the same time ‘no-place’.

The oppositional spirit and uncanny settings of Dystopian texts place them comfortably alongside the Gothic tradition described by Linda Dryden in *The Modern Gothic*:

Far from the utopian visions and endorsements of ‘Victorian’ values that characterize the best-selling romances of the day, these (Gothic) ‘romances’ explore and expose extremes of moral, psychological and social dilemmas.<sup>6</sup>

This shared perspective of Dystopian and Gothic texts is most evident when one explores the vehicle for the expression of discontent and finds it to be a fascination with the human

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5 Chris Ferns, *Narrating Utopia: Ideology, Gender, Form in Utopian Literature*, (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1999), p. 2

6 Linda Dryden, *The Modern Gothic and Literary Doubles: Stevenson, Wilde and Wells*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), p. 3

body. Steven Bruhm's study *Gothic Bodies: the Politics of Pain in Romantic Fiction* offers this definition of the Gothic body: 'That which is put on excessive display, and whose violent, vulnerable immediacy gives...Gothic fiction [its] beautiful barbarity'.<sup>7</sup> The monsters and doubles, the fragments and labyrinths, and the dark places of Dystopian Gothic novels resonate with both traditions and foreground the tormented, tortured and twisted bodies which populate these narratives.

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### **Boundaries of Gothic**

If there is such a thing as a definition of what constitutes Gothic literature, it is characterised by its fluidity and can be figured in many different ways. However, there are key elements which tend to be included in any discussion of the genre. It is not my intention to cover every element of Gothic theory but to focus on the main elements relevant to this thesis.

The beginnings of the term 'Gothic' originates in the Dark Ages and as such there is only limited historical information on the establishment of the term. What is known is that the Goths were a Germanic tribe associated with the fall of the Roman Empire and this factual information was the basis for the modern myths which now surround the term.

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<sup>7</sup> Steven Bruhm, *Gothic Bodies: The Politics of Pain in Romantic Fiction*, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1994). p. xvii

The Gothic is identified with the primitive for specific ideological purposes, and these are achieved in two main ways. In one, the Gothic is associated with the barbaric and uncivilised in order to define that which is other to the values of the civilised present. Alternatively, the Gothic is still associated with the primitive but this primitive has now become identified with the true, but lost, foundations of culture.<sup>8</sup>

The historical underpinnings of Gothic are therefore understood to be perpetually in turmoil, torn between two connected yet divergent associations with notions of civilisation. These concerns continue to manifest themselves in the rise of Gothic Literature in the eighteenth century.

The original or ‘first wave’ of the Gothic (literary) tradition peaked around 1810 and then fell out of fashion very quickly. Maturins’s *Melmoth the Wanderer* in 1820 was regarded as a revival of a dying tradition. Gothic novels appeared at the rate of more than a dozen every year from 1794 through 1797, and increased to nearly two dozen every year for 1798 through 1810, before subsiding to little more than half a dozen per year for 1811 through 1820, then to only three or four per year for 1821 to 1830.<sup>9</sup>

It was during this time of the massive surge in Gothic literature that the term ‘Gothic’ began to shift its meaning from that attached to the barbarian tribe to a literary term referring to medieval influences. This allowed the establishment of a binary opposite to the barbarism associated with Gothic, finding a common cause under the definition of ‘Classical’. This dichotomy goes far to explain the rejection of Gothic novels and their subsequent lowly place in literature of the time.

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<sup>8</sup> David Punter and Glennis Byron, *The Gothic*, (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004), p. 5

<sup>9</sup> Rictor Norton (ed.), *Gothic Readings: the first wave, 1764-1840*, (London: Leicester University Press, 2000), p. viii



The key Gothic themes are best understood as varied expressions of terror, capable of being explored together under that single explanation, but also functioning as individual concerns which illuminate one another. The most pervasive of these customary Gothic devices is that of fear/terror and the secret/hidden reasons for that terror. In the production of such emotions as fear, there is a certain element of the transgression of boundaries, so that the known is transformed and becomes unknown and terrifying. Another formulation of Gothic terror is the hidden nature of the unconscious and the threat posed by this repression. This involves threat to the self from within as well as from without, from the Other and the unknown repressed self. Both these elements interact and, I argue, converge on the human body as the focus of these fears and repressions.

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## **Gothic History**

The first literary use of the term ‘Gothic’ is in 1764 with Horace Walpole’s *Castle of Otranto: A Gothic Story*. This novel, and those of Radcliffe and Lewis that followed, established the classic Gothic landscape of decaying monasteries and sullen landscapes, lurking and hidden terror, an exploration of the unconscious mind and the expression of perverse impulses. It was during the Romantic and Victorian eras that the Gothic genre

was established and it owes much to the history of these two time periods for its focus and shape.

The Romantic era was one of complicated duality, where the term 'Gothic' in relation to literature operated at once both to connote the negative associations with the Goths believed responsible for the fall of the Roman Empire, and at the same time to stand for some kind of appealing primitivism, which the modern world had lost touch with to its detriment. This era also represented a shift from a poetic literary Gothic focus to begin to move towards novels as the favoured Gothic literary device. These novels focused not on external horrors but began to give shape to the internal terrors which were to haunt the Gothic novel.

It is at the level of the individual that Romantic-Gothic writing takes its bearings. The individual in question stands at the edges of society and rarely finds a path back into the social fold. The critical distance taken with regard to social values derives from radical attacks on oppressive systems of monarchical government.<sup>10</sup>

Here one witnesses the emergence of themes which will be played out in the Dystopian Gothic novels of the twentieth century. The importance of the individual who operates apart from society and whose perspective informs the understanding of the reader is a common theme of Dystopian and romantic Gothic narratives.

In the Victorian era the emergence of the Gothic novel coincided with an age when scientific advances began to fragment the human body and when shifts in society began

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<sup>10</sup> Fred Botting, *Gothic: The New Critical Idiom*, (London: Routledge, 2003), p. 92



to cause the disintegration of the individual. Instances of the uncanny served to destabilise a sense of identity and to call into question the distinction between reality and fantasy.

The Gothic novels of the twentieth century lose none of the recurrent motifs of earlier Gothic literature but recycle and re-invent them in order to invest them with new terrors. Not for the secularised twentieth century fears of the spiritual horror but instead the mortal fear of what science can do to the body and what impact rationality has on the individual. While the Dystopian texts of this thesis owe much to the early Romantic and Victorian Gothic forms and are influenced by their narratives and structures, they are most fully horrific when they engage with this modern, secularised version of terror and invest in fully exploring the horror of the fragmented human body.

The loss of human identity and the alienation of self from both itself and the social bearings in which a sense of reality is secured are presented in the threatening shapes of increasingly dehumanised environments, machinic doubles and violent, psychotic fragmentation. These disturbances are linked to a growing disaffection with the structures and dominant forms of modernity, forms that have become characterised as narratives themselves, powerful and pervasive myths shaping the identities, institutions and modes of production that govern everyday life.<sup>11</sup>

This description of modern twentieth-century Gothic relates closely to the concerns explored in the chapters of this thesis, yet also has elements which can be traced back to the haunted castle, the doppelganger and the vampire. These Gothic tales engage in an

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<sup>11</sup> Botting, *Gothic*, p. 157

unending dialogue with the forms and themes of the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Gothic novels but are updated to offer new terrors to a modern reader. Even in the chosen Dystopian texts themselves, the impact of this updating can be ascertained in the increasing relevance and fear elicited from individual texts; the closer they are in chronology to the audience experiencing their particular Gothic traits. Therefore, the most powerful fear and terror is represented by the vision of Houellebecq when he offers fragmented humanity and a future of clones.

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### **Dystopian History**

The general thrust of Dystopian texts could be argued to be a response to crisis, focusing on social and political concerns, and the exploration of solutions to these problems through the safe medium of literature. However, the perspective of this thesis will be to focus on the terror of such crises and to explore the implications for individuality and the body of events in novels of the future. Dystopias also concern themselves with the idea of progress, usually scientific or technological in scope, and it is through close scrutiny of these elements that the threat to the body is explored and recognised.

Dystopias have as an essential characteristic a disenchanted individual, someone who raises concerns about the imbalance of power in the novel. These characters function best when they are in a detached situation, both within and outwith the society about

which they are expressing discontent. This position, of feeling threatened both from inside and outside the boundaries of self, and society, is explored via such characters. In a similar fashion, Gothic texts focus upon characters who express unease about the events of the novel and the wider concerns of the era in which the novel was written. This character-position is also sympathetic to a major Gothic concern surrounding threat which emanates from inside; inside a person; inside a situation; or inside a society, making the threat not only greater but more difficult to eliminate.

The values that gave shape and direction to the Enlightenment, dominated as it was by writings from Greek and Roman culture, privileged forms of cultural or artistic production that attended to the classical rules...Aesthetic objects were praised for their harmony and texts were designed to foster appreciation on these terms, to instruct rather than to entertain, to inculcate a sense of morality and rational understanding...The dominance of classical values produced a national past that was distinct from the cultivation, rationality and maturity of an enlightened age. This past was called 'Gothic', a general and derogatory term for the Middle Ages which conjured up ideas of barbarous customs and practices, of superstition, ignorance, extravagant fancies and natural wildness.<sup>12</sup>

Like the creation of 'Dystopia', the negative version of a Utopia for those too pessimistic to see hope in the future, Dystopian texts were rule-breakers and as such deserved the same derogatory treatment as the Gothic texts before them, and for very similar reasons. Both were intent on unearthing not only demons and vampires from the imagination, but the demons from the systems within which one must make one's existence, and from within which it is difficult to see the lurking threats. Many of the Dystopian texts have

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<sup>12</sup> Botting, *Gothic*, p. 22

been criticised for their lack of 'literary merit' and readers have set out to find small flaws in narrative, character and style, seeking to discredit a form which did not seek to 'inculcate a sense of morality'. Like the Gothic texts before them, Dystopias operated in a veiled sense; where they seemed to be focused on flights of fancy and fantastical future worlds, they were at the same time intent on exposing the concerns of their own societies. Although they seemed immoral and irrational, their secret intent was to instruct and make morality clearer through breaking boundaries in order to reinforce their importance in their absence and recreation at the ending of the novels.

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### **Modern Myths**

The 'elimination of the natural' is a key concept in understanding not only the Gothic fiction of the Romantic and Victorian era, but of unravelling the myth of the Utopian society of twentieth-century fiction which is entangled with Gothic motifs. It relates closely to the different manifestations of 'family' which are central to Gothic Dystopias. In visions of the future it is important to consider how individuals will relate to each other and also how they will reproduce themselves and their culture. Family is the key vehicle for debates around this idea of kinship and reproduction but in Dystopias it is explored in diverse forms and under constant threat of destruction or decay through loss of value.



Linda Grant, in her 1993 study of modern sexuality *Sexing the Millennium*, looks back to the sixties and the anticipation of the transformation of the body which will bring individuals closer to the elimination of natural cycles of fertility.

The earliest swingers, before the commercialisation of their scene, were scientific utopians, as the population controllers had been. Science, they believed, would liberate sexuality for them. A sociological study of swap clubs, written in 1964...looked at private groups in the Midwestern States including one in Denver...The authors, William and Jerry Breedlove breathlessly anticipated the scientific transformation of the body...pharmaceutical scientists predict the physical evidence of menstruation – the natural haemorrhage and the absorbent pads or injectives – will be eliminated within the next twenty years. We are on the threshold of a revolution in body chemistry as fantastic and beneficial to the comfort of humanity as the Industrial Revolution little more than a century ago.<sup>13</sup>

That it was possible in the 1960s to predict a future where the natural processes of the human body would become eliminated represented for that generation a progression towards a better society, one not limited by the boundaries and constraints of our physical existence. However, as the full realisation of this vision becomes a real possibility in one's lifetime, it darkens to form a Gothic Dystopia which limits our individual choices as surely as it threatens to make machines of our bodies in the name of efficiency and freedom.

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<sup>13</sup> Linda Grant, *Sexing the Millennium*, (London: HarperCollins, 1993), p. 172

False clarity is only another name for myth; and myth has always been obscure and enlightening at one and the same time: always using the devices of familiarity and straightforward dismissal to avoid the labour of conceptualisation.<sup>14</sup>

As a twenty-first-century reader, one feels in a position to see clearly and with the benefit of hindsight the limitations of both forms of progress to which Grant refers: the industrial revolution did not remake the world in a rational mould for the benefit of all mankind, and the sexual revolution of the body in the twentieth century did not bring all the promised freedoms, but more control and technological invasion instead. Both visions, of the Gothic and Dystopian worlds, are products of their relevant myths, but are more specifically moulded by the concerns of their particular eras.

The hopes of the industrial revolution in the twentieth century played out on the landscape of the individual human body, where reproduction rather than production is to be controlled and made efficient by the application of science. The body serves as a metaphor for the effects of unrestrained scientific advance in modern Gothic, with the power of reproduction seen as a force to be shackled and bounded by rationality and the application of technology. Linda Dryden looks to the modern Gothic in her study on literary doubles:

The traditional Gothic was about history and geography. Yet, at the end of the nineteenth century, a new Gothic mode emerged, a modern Gothic, whose narratives focused on the urban present,

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<sup>14</sup> Theodor. W Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of the Enlightenment*, (London: Verso, 1997), p. xiv



refracting contemporary concerns through the lens of a literature of terror.<sup>15</sup>

Dryden draws attention to the shift in focus from the traditional haunted castle backdrop of Gothic to the new scenery of the city with all the hidden horrors of crowded streets and dark alleyways. Dystopian texts reflect this urban focus in the scheme of their narratives, at times providing a futuristic city scene which further highlights areas of concern such as surveillance and safety. While Gothic Dystopias have their heritage in traditional Gothic motifs, they also begin to develop a new, modern Gothic sensibility reflected not only in setting but also in new terrors.

In both modernist and popular discourses, the body can seem to promise authentic person identity, yet is ghosted by a sense of something potentially alien and strange. Anxieties about the physical health of the collective body – human species, race, nation-state, culture – become anxieties about the idea of the self.<sup>16</sup>

The Gothic Dystopia displays these new concerns in the characters that populate the narrative, and the trials which their bodies undergo. The body and all its ghosts populate the events of the novels and offer explorations of the self with a distinctly modern twist.

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<sup>15</sup> Linda Dryden, *The Modern Gothic and Literary Doubles: Stevenson, Wilde and Wells*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), p.19

<sup>16</sup> Andrew Smith and Jeff Wallace, eds., *Gothic Modernisms*, (New York: Palgrave, 2001), p. 3

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## Gothic Dystopias

This thesis argues that evidence of the existence of a Gothic Dystopia is provided by Charlotte Perkins Gilman's turn-of-the-century text, *Herland*, which in itself must first be defined as a Dystopian narrative. The argument for the Gothic Dystopia then moves to 'the novel of ideas' with Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*, closely followed by another Dystopian classic, George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. Then Anthony Burgess's vision of the life of Alex in *A Clockwork Orange* furthers the case, before we cross the Atlantic to engage Margaret Atwood and *A Handmaid's Tale* in the debate. Finally, the millennial vision of Michel Houellebecq's *Atomised* is defined as a Dystopian text to form the final novel analysed as a Gothic Dystopia.

The convention of Gothic literature reflected in the narrative structure itself will be explored in Chapter Two: 'The Labyrinths of The Body'. Gothic texts are characterised by a narrative constructed around mystery and enigma, which struggles to be told at all, an unspeakable narrative as characterised by Eve Sedgwick.<sup>17</sup> This element of mystery is combined with state-sponsored secrecy in Gothic Dystopias, re-inventing and retelling the narrative of Gothic literature:

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<sup>17</sup> see Sedgwick, *Coherence of Gothic Conventions*, (London; New York: Methuen, 1986)

In the [case of narratives of terror] we are often invited to wonder if the events are not really in the mind of the narrator, whereas in the latter [narratives of horror] our focus is often directed to political agents of oppression.<sup>18</sup>

This is a sentiment shared by the authors of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, *A Clockwork Orange* and *The Handmaid's Tale*, where mystery and uncertainty in relation to narrative are central concerns. The continuation of terror and horror in Dystopian texts such as these dictates a narrative closely linked to late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century Gothic novels, where narrative structure was central to the terror experienced by protagonists.

The texts very often take the form of a collection of seemingly unrelated stories which revolve around editorial/authorial insertions, dead ends and endings which do not provide closure. The narrative itself takes on a monstrous form, growing beyond the control of the author and developing into an endless collection of loosely bound accounts of events. But within this labyrinth there is usually some claim to authenticity, to actuality which attempts to locate the story in the real world, to add possibility to the terrors. An example of this is Stoker's classic text *Dracula* (1897) where the events of the narrative are interrupted by newspaper cuttings, letters and diary entries in order to give credence to the tale by way of dates and events in the real world. This fragmented and forced narrative mirrors the constructed selves that inhabit the text, since both attempt to define and maintain the physical boundaries of self and structure.

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18 Norton, *Gothic Readings*, p. viii

Chapter Three, 'Dark Places', finds Gothic elements in the spaces within which the characters and the narrative operate. The notion of supposed safe havens, where characters believe they have found a place to escape the horrors of the world only to discover that they are in just as much, if not more, danger in this space than in any other, is a key concern. The horror pursues the characters not only into the seemingly safe spaces, but is able to penetrate 'inside', to find a way under the barrier of skin, thus denying any form of escape. *The Monk* (1796) offers a perfect example of this, where the subterranean vaults of the narrative seem to offer the persecuted maiden a safe place to escape from the lecherous monk, but in fact they serve only to trap her and aid in her persecution. These places promise so much and have all the signs and symbols of safety and security, but they also illustrate the hidden unconscious threat which those fleeing never discover until it is too late.

A Gothic Dystopia as explored in Chapter Four, 'Connectedness and the Loss of the Individual', uses doubles/alter egos to explore the relationships between characters and the inner turmoil which they are experiencing. Like the classic experience of *Jekyll and Hyde*, it is almost impossible to tell if the doubling is an expression of a single psyche, or two separate individuals who explore the good and evil side inside each of us.

In the work of Lewis and his followers, evil becomes an attractive force, and story and character are constructed in such a way that the reader is tempted to identify with the 'Hero Villain'.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Norton, *Gothic Readings*, p. 107



O'Brien, Alex and Michel all fit the mould of the 'Hero Villain', prevalent in the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Gothic novels where one cannot deny some identification and sympathy with such characters. This further complicates the doubling experienced by characters when the division between hero and villain becomes blurred.

Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick in her critical study *The Coherence of Gothic Conventions*<sup>20</sup> identifies two main strands of 'the Gothic formula',<sup>21</sup> the unspeakable and live burials. These are explored in Chapter Five, 'Live Burials and the Walking Dead', through the use of dreams in Gothic Dystopias to unearth that which is buried and repressed yet remains at the same time part of life, but unmentionable. Images of re-birth and the horrors of a nightmare also locate themselves in this schematic of live burial. Chris Ferns in *Narrating Utopia* makes reference to the nightmare that is a Dystopia and explains this in relation to the position of Utopia in the past:

it is the growing practicability of utopia that renders it so threatening: from being an impossible ideal of perfection, it has been transformed (not least by technological progress) into a possible future – but one to be avoided at all costs. What makes utopia a nightmare, in effect, is the fact that it is no longer merely a dream. With the proliferation of increasingly effective mechanisms for social control, in fact, dystopian fantasy has become in the modern era almost a myth in its own right – as expressive of the deep-seated dreams and anticipations of modern society as was utopia in the Renaissance – and as such it continues to flourish.<sup>22</sup>

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20 Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *The Coherence of Gothic Conventions*, (London; New York: Methuen, 1986)

21 Sedgwick, *Gothic Conventions*, p. 10

22 Ferns, *Narrating Utopia*, p.15

The truly terrifying aspect of the nightmare that is Dystopia is encapsulated here by Ferns since it is the knowledge that you cannot awake from this nightmare and escape. The perfection of a Utopia is now achievable and it is this which brings the horror of a Dystopian live burial in a world which should be paradise but is filled with horrors of your own making.

A Gothic body in the shape of a monster such as the one created by Victor Frankenstein is examined in Chapter Six, 'Monsters and Monstrosity', and brings together many elements of Eve Sedgwick's theory, being both unspeakable in its monstrosity and an example of something which was supposedly dead and has now come to life again. But it also illustrates another feature of Gothic writing, since it is capable of supporting more than one simple definition. The monster is unspeakable since he is without the power of language at the time of his birth, and is driven away and ignored as something dark and unmentionable. And as a symbol of live burials the ending of the text is ambiguous, since we do not know if the monster does die or if his death only exists in our imagination.

Sensationalist 'raw head and bloody bones' are more characteristic of the School of Horror, and partly help to define it. Full-bodied demons have replaced the filmy spectres of the School of Terror. Incest and rape become almost commonplace, and scenes of torture and death are portrayed in lurid physical detail.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Norton, *Gothic Readings*, p. 106



While monstrosity and horror from the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century translate strongly into the narratives of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, and its description of Room 101, and *A Clockwork Orange* and Burgess' graphic descriptions of Alex's torture, it is the added element of the mental torture which the Dystopia brings to such scenes that gives them their added power. Physical monstrosity in itself, the pure horror of the body, is tempered by the attempt to control the mind; this is the goal of such actions which are explored in these texts. The monster of the Gothic Dystopia is a symbol of liminality and transformation but also questions notions of power and the human body. As a liminal subject, monstrosity operates to call boundaries into question regarding good and evil and also the very concept of humanity.

The final Gothic feature which this thesis explores is the fragmentation of the human body which is figured in these Dystopian texts and is the focus of Chapter Seven: 'Fragmented Flesh'. The breaking down and reassembling of human flesh is a recurring Gothic theme, and one which lends itself to a Dystopias perspective of the human body, and a metaphoric re-visioning of the human subject. Creation and destruction remain key areas interrogated by the texts in question, sharing a platform with concerns regarding science and technology in relation to their impact on individuals. This fascination with the shifting form of the human body is part of the Gothic images of vampires and monsters which inhabit eighteenth- and nineteenth-century texts. However, in the twentieth century the boundaries which the monster and vampire transgress are no longer fully reinstated by the suppression of such images of evil and instead ambivalence creeps into the fragmentation of the human form. As this shift occurs, one moves from a

position of horror in relation to displays of fragmented flesh and instead begins to feel some pity for such creatures and their destruction.

Each element in this Gothic framework has, as its point of reference, the body. The body is the site of repression and the locus of the fear that forms the core of Gothic practice. It is also part of the Gothic narrative which can transform to become monstrous and which forms the crossroads of the boundaries which are transgressed. It is this focus on the body which makes the Gothic such a powerful influence on modern Dystopian texts, shifting the focus from issues of power and control, to the site of the exercise of that power and control: the human body. The body becomes the focus of scrutiny in Gothic texts during the 1980s when critics began to distinguish between ‘male’ and ‘female’ Gothic.

Much of the feminist approach of the mid-1980s focused on the ‘gendered’ discourse of sensibility and how that relates to the dichotomy of ‘female’ supernaturalism versus ‘male’ reason: the historical position of women in ‘patriarchal’ society and how that relates to questions of female authorship; contested sites of female sexuality such as the castle and the home; and the villain’s use of the male gaze to police female sexuality.<sup>24</sup>

While these critics looked to eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Gothic texts for their emerging theories, these issues remained central to *Herland*, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and *Atomised*. Dystopias viewed through the Gothic lens allow a vision of the bodies at their centre and the unconscious and hidden elements which play upon these physical spaces.

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<sup>24</sup> Norton, *Gothic Readings*, p. ix

These key elements of Gothic literature are applicable to Dystopian texts of the modern era, allowing a new exploration of the texts and their themes in light of the physical body rather than ideological power.

The argument adopts a thematic approach, allowing both Dystopian and Gothic characteristics to be explored together, while making strong links between the texts under the banner of a Gothic Dystopia. The following chapters share the themes of spaces and structures, and bodies and flesh, which recur throughout the whole narrative of this thesis, re-inventing themselves in each situation and in response to the concerns of each chapter, thus illuminating new and hidden aspects of the Gothic characteristics explored in these Dystopian texts.

The novels all illustrate a very important point about the genres of Dystopian and Gothic fiction, since although they are separated by time, they are linked by a common apprehension about times of change. Gothic has never really left us since its heyday in the eighteenth century but has resurfaced again and again in times of moral panic and social disintegration, and the novels which centre on the Utopian vision gone wrong arise from this same concern for the here and now which is transferred to a fearful future.

This thesis seeks to combine the focus on the individual, on the body, with a careful assessment of the impact of social and political concerns which act upon those individuals. This is facilitated by reference to elements of both Gothic and Dystopian theory. Although the era and the circumstance may change, the human body remains

essentially the same, but is faced with new threats to its unity and survival. Navigating these new threats and rationalising the place of the body within this scheme is given strength and focus by consideration of Gothic theory in the Dystopian context.

## Chapter One

### Unearthing the Past

In order to ground the arguments of this thesis, it is important to engage in a dialogue with other critical approaches to the texts in question, and to offer some context for the novels. Beginning and ending with the most disputed texts, *Herland* and *Atomised*, this introduction challenges the critical consensus which identifies them simply as social and political commentary. Instead, it argues that Gilman and Houellebecq's novels be classified as Dystopias, and allows the Gothic elements to be illustrative of a nightmare future.

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### *Herland* as Dystopia

'A Not Unnatural Enterprise' is the title of Chapter One of Charlotte Perkins Gilman's novel *Herland* (originally published serially in 1915 in *The Forerunner* and finally published in book form in 1979) and it very usefully describes the 'enterprise' not only of the novel itself, but of this reading of a novel most usually categorised as a Feminist Utopia. This chapter will instead argue that *Herland* is a Dystopian vision, heavily



inscribed with Gothic markers, thus lending the events a dark terror previously undervalued by critics.<sup>25</sup>

Before beginning, it will be necessary to justify a Dystopian Gothic reading of *Herland*, one which engages in a dialogue with the work of critics who consider Gilman's novel to be of a Utopian tradition, ironic and humorous, rather than dark and filled with horror. Carol Kessler is one such advocate of *Herland* as a vision of perfect female harmony:

*Herland*...wittily recounts the adventure of three men from the United States, in search for an all-female country, which they name Herland. They are astonished both to find the women indifferent to their charms as males and to view the sophisticated environment these women have built. Gilman validates motherhood by making it the nation's highest office. Her reverence for mothers is both personally compensatory and socially reformist.<sup>26</sup>

While there are undoubtedly moments of humour in the adventures of Van and his companions, the land which they discover where motherhood is 'the nation's highest office' is darkly Gothic in its perspective. 'Astonished' is perhaps an inadequate description of the fear and horror of the male protagonists as they discover a race of women able to reproduce without men, a society of women who think always and only of motherhood. Such a perversion of the natural is a sure reflection of the Gothic tendencies of the narrative and leads to visions of monstrosity further explored in Chapter Six.

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<sup>25</sup> See Booker, M Keith, *Dystopian Literature: a theory and research guide*, (Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1994), who defines Herland as a Utopia

<sup>26</sup> Carol Farley Kessler, *Charlotte Perkins Gilman. Her Progress Towards Utopia with Selected Writings*, (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1995), p. 36

The freedom to choose the non-conventional route is the hallmark of Gilman's life and yet Kessler wishes to argue that her Utopian vision is one where there is no route other than the production of children and the devoting of one's life to their rearing. Kessler argues that the women of *Herland* and the structuring of their society are 'personally compensatory' for Gilman, that to envision a nation of mothers supposedly held in such high regard is cathartic for their author. This need to create 'perfect' mothers in her fiction, from Kessler's perspective, suggests feelings of guilt on Gilman's part for the real treatment of mothers in her life. However, the interpretation offered by this thesis views the women of *Herland* operating to express the feelings of entrapment for Gilman in a role for which she felt unsuited. Women as intensely focused on motherhood as they are have no energy for any other tasks in their lives; they become filled only with mothering. This nightmare vision cannot be considered Utopian for any woman who seeks freedom from a smothering role and who maintains her right to be self-determining.

Kessler considers Gilman's relationship to her own mother to illuminate a reading of *Herland* and yet offers only inconclusive evidence for her findings.

A single mother [Charlotte's mother] with no income, she next lived for a year and one-half with a Swedenborgian cooperative housekeeping group that disbanded in 1876. A rebellious sixteen-year-old at the time, Gilman intensely disliked this residence, and throughout her adult life, she continually voiced her dislike of cooperative ventures.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Kessler, Gilman, p. 17

This dislike of ‘cooperative ventures’ is surely the inspiration behind the dismal Dystopian vision of *Herland*, where the necessity for everyone to rally round the children deprives them of any individuality. This negative aspect of Herland society only surfaces on rare occasions when the women are questioned by Van and his companions:

“Allowed?” I queried. “Allowed a mother to rear her own children?”

“Certainly not,” said Somel, “unless she was fit for that supreme task.”

This was rather a blow to my previous convictions.

“But I thought motherhood was for each of you – “

“Motherhood – yes, that is, maternity, to bear a child. But education is our highest art, only allowed to our highest artists.”...

“Then you separate mother and child!” I cried in cold horror...(Herland, p. 70)

Motherhood of this kind must surely represent the Dystopian vision of rationality taken to its extreme conclusion at the cost of the individual. Rationality rather than emotion is the hallmark of Dystopian texts of the twentieth century, responding to the threats posed by scientific advances in the wake of Enlightenment progress by detailing the impact of a rational response to emotional issues. Rationally the best mothers should be raising the children, but emotionally this is a horrific vision of motherhood. The Enlightenment pursuit of rationality is explored here in the mode of child-rearing adopted in the Dystopia of Herland.

The decision to live like this seems to be driven by need rather than choice; the women of *Herland* lack choices and respond only to basic needs and desires such as caring and mothering.

Gilman and her mother together read and wept over sentimental novels, bonding each to other and affirming of their femaleness...This reading with her mother was a positively formative influence upon her later utopian writing, one of which Gilman seems to have been unaware. Her 1915 utopia *Herland* would elevate motherhood to be the most revered national occupation, with nurturance (not competition) the ruling stance toward others, vindicating her mother's, as well as her own much later, maternal experience. But instead of the positive, Gilman stressed the negative in her autobiography, noting her mother's 'painfully thwarted' life, a condition that she herself would not completely surmount.<sup>28</sup>

Kessler seems to believe that she knows Gilman better than she knew herself. She reads positives into negatives by arguing against the autobiographical details provided by Gilman herself, and consistently refers to *Herland* as a Utopia. Gilman sees her mother's life in a realistic light, aware of the constraints that motherhood brings and the difficulties involved. Her mother's life was thwarted through lack of choice and it is this lack of alternatives to motherhood which she explores in *Herland*. Kessler seems to contradict her own statements, seeing the positive side of motherhood in *Herland* yet believing that there was some 'condition' in Gilman's mother's life that she never truly overcame and which Gilman herself was never able to 'surmount'. If motherhood was such a positive experience then there would be nothing to overcome, no 'condition' requiring surmounting. Gilman cannot have written this tribute to the greatness of being a mother and at the same time believe that her mother's life in bringing them up was somehow 'painfully thwarted'. To escape motherhood would have been a Utopian vision, but for it to become the sole purpose of a whole society is darkly Dystopian. If Gilman saw her

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<sup>28</sup> Kessler, Gilman. p 19



mother's life as 'painfully thwarted' then why would she consider a world inhabited only by women as mothers to be a positive step forward? She herself sought to avoid that very limitation and maintain the freedom to think and choose for herself.

And perhaps Gilman fundamentally did prefer other roles to that of mothering: her actions suggest this to be true. However, the nineteenth century ideology dictating that 'true women' must be a cheerfully dedicated mother could undermine the self-confidence and increase the guilt of those like Gilman who might make other choices, and also increase the sense of desertion experienced by a child like Kate living in such a climate.<sup>29</sup>

The decision to have her daughter Kate live with her father and new mother was heavily criticised by the press of the time. It was unthinkable that a divorced couple could get on well enough for this arrangement and even more unthinkable was that the divorced husband could then move on to marry a close friend of his ex-wife. For a mother to be able to allow her child to be brought up in such an unconventional family was a huge scandal. This open and intelligent attitude towards what she believes is best for her child and her own attitudes to motherhood must surely inform the thinking behind *Herland*. The limiting effect of having a child to care for took up too much of Gilman's time and left her unable to devote herself entirely to her writing, to her passion as an individual. She wanted an alternative role to simply that of mother and wife and sought this freedom of thought and expression in her writing.

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<sup>29</sup> Kessler, Gilman, p. 27



One male perspective on *Herland* is slightly different, yet still reluctant to rethink the Utopian label:

Thus, while at first sight her matriarchal society of 'ultra-women' could hardly be further removed from the patriarchal norms of utopian tradition, this reversal of one of utopian narrative's major premises in fact leaves many of its dynamics unaffected. As Susan Gubar points out, 'Gilman's strategy of reversal [often] threatens to invalidate her feminism by defining it in precisely the terms set up by the misogynists it would repudiate'. While the feminine values which *Herland* endorses offer a positive alternative to the abuses of the patriarchal society of the three explorers, they nevertheless reflect a concept of femininity which is very much the creation of precisely that male-dominated society whose values Gilman rejects. As has often been pointed out, *Herland* is a utopia in which woman's sphere remains the home; the only difference is that here the home has expanded to embrace the entire community.<sup>30</sup>

Although at first the society of *Herland* is matriarchal in shape and outlook, the reversal is not so complete as Chris Ferns would argue. It can hardly be cited as a groundbreaking achievement that a society only of women should form itself as female run and headed; a matriarchy is only an achievement if there is some kind of male dominated alternative which has been overcome for the good of the women involved or indeed for all those involved. Ferns does make the point that Gilman's narrative is conventional in maintaining gender roles prevalent at the time of writing, while presenting them in a context and narrative which makes them appear to be groundbreaking and feminist. However, he does maintain the definition of the narrative as a Utopia, finding similarities between its narrative structure and approaches of male authored Utopian fiction from

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<sup>30</sup> Chris Ferns, 'Rewriting Male Myths: Herland and the Utopian tradition', in Val Gough and Jill Rudd (eds) *A very Different Story: studies on the Fiction of Charlotte Perkins Gilman*, (Liverpool, Liverpool University Press, 1998), pp. 24-38, . p. 33

More to Wells.<sup>31</sup> It is difficult to imagine that the extension of the constraints of 'home' from small to large scale constitutes the formation of an ideal society for the women involved if the definition of 'home' retains the restrictions of patriarchal dominance. While Ferns acknowledges that many of the ideas which Gilman showcases in her narrative are in keeping with the masculinist tradition, he seems reluctant to reclassify the novel as a result. It is understandable that male authors would envision a Utopia which maintained their patriarchal position, but it is problematic for a female author to adhere to this mode of operation.

That *Herland* is a product of the twentieth-century turn away from Utopia to Dystopia will be established with a close reading of the text in relation to the individual and the impact of rationality. The Gothic elements related to this perspective will be highlighted in the structure of the text, as discussed in Chapters Two and Three. Gothic characteristics are also present in the relations between characters that reflect the monstrosity inculcated in this environment, the fragmentation of bodies which eventually occurs and is discussed in the final chapter of this thesis.

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31 despite the fact that More was ambiguous in his definition of a Utopia, and Wells wrote ambiguous Utopias and Dystopias too.

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### ***Brave New World* and Gothic Bodies**

Unlike Gilman's *Herland*, *Brave New World* requires no introductory justification of the Dystopian label, since Huxley's 1932 novel has all the defining characteristic of a classic Dystopian text and has been studied as such for many years and by numerous critics.<sup>32</sup>

Although widely accepted as a Dystopian vision of high distinction, most critics seem unaware of the Gothic elements contained in the 'novel of ideas', preferring instead to read the text solely for its ideas about society, politics and humanity.

Though the plot is fairly substantial and at no point a mere device for sustaining interest, the most impressive aspect of the novel is the wealth of imagined social, political and technological detail... There is, moreover, the apparatus of sexual activity: the pregnancy substitute, the bandolier-containers for contraceptives, the Malthusian belts. And more importantly there is the entire mental attitude in which polygamy is the socially-accepted norm and monogamy the social disgrace; in which ideas of family, of mother and father have grown obsolete and even obscene.<sup>33</sup>

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32 See May, Bowering and also Booker, M. Keith *The Dystopian Impulse in Modern Literature: Fiction as Social Criticism*, (Greenwood Press: USA, 1994) and Hillegas, Mark R. *The Future as Nightmare: H.G. Wells and the Anti-utopians*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1967) and Booker, M. Keith, *Dystopian Literature: A Theory and Research Guide*, (Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1994)

33 Keith May, *Novelists and their World: Aldous Huxley*, (London: Paul Elek Books, 1972), pp. 100-101



The focus on certain elements of the text is revealing in what it does not contain – any reference to the body, only mentioning the ‘apparatus’ by which the sexual activities of individuals are controlled. The only mention is of ‘social, political and technological’ aspects of the novel with no direct mention of the objects of these advances and changes: individual bodies. May argues that these are ‘the most impressive aspects’ of the novel then utilises the actions of individuals in a very bodily sense in order to support his arguments. The changes described may form part of a larger social structure, based around a political theory and implicated by technological advance, but this would be nothing without the bodies on which these new principles are applied. The individuals in the novels are not only the vehicles to explore these newly imagined ideas, but are at the core of the very ideas themselves. This new mode of thinking about the body requires people to carry it forward and is acted upon them in turn. The ideas themselves focus not on the wholesale restructuring of a society but on the very specific moulding of individuals in order that a new way of living is enacted as a result. The material and ideological conditions work in unison to support the treatment and refinement of the body. Once this has been mastered then the environment will be determined as a result. The ‘imagined detail’ comes not from exhaustive descriptions of political ideology or the technology behind this possibility, but on the persons who are products of this change: it is via the physical body that we see the Dystopia emerge. May acknowledges that the structure of the family has ‘grown obsolete and even obscene’ in *Brave New World*. This threat is distinctly Gothic, posing a danger not only to the reproduction of culture and stability itself, but also operating as a threat which comes from the inside.



In an interesting twist within the narrative of *Brave New World*, the focus of attention and discussion shifts away from the social and political situation and is instead diverted to the bodies of the individuals. The characters of the novel do not concern themselves for the most part with the way their country is run and the politics involved, but instead are content to take soma and engage in emotionless sexual encounters. Their bodies divert attention from the material conditions of their existence, contrasting with the interest in the political dimensions which usually characterises readings of Huxley's work.

Bernard...is something of an odd man out even among the Brave New Worlders. An Alpha Plus, he has the physique of a Gamma-Minus (it is said that alcohol had been put into his blood surrogate by mistake). His inadequacy nurtures a sense of revolt: but more important, Bernard's grievances are not merely anti-social; behind his revolt stems a genuine impulse to extend his range of feeling – to know what it would be like if he were not enslaved by his conditioning.<sup>34</sup>

Dissatisfaction with his physical body is the impulse which drives Bernard to search for other ways of being. He not only feels his conditioning in the way he lives his life, but is physically marked by the method of his creation. He is constantly confronted with problems due to the inadequacy of his physical presence in relation to his status within his society. The incident with the lift attendant early in the novel is a prime example of this and is explored in my Chapter Five, where physical shortcomings figure as a form of Live Burial, underlining the difficulties Bernard experiences every day due to his physical appearance. Bowering offers evidence to suggest that this is a search for an alternative emotional existence, a way to escape the conditioned self he has become.

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<sup>34</sup> Peter Bowering, , *Aldous Huxley: a Study of the Major Novels*, (London: Athlone Press, 1968), p. 106

'I want to look at the sea in peace', he said...' It makes me feel as though...' he hesitated, searching for words with which to express himself, 'as though I were more *me*, if you see what I mean. More on my own, not so completely a part of something else. Not just a cell in the social body.' (*Brave New World*, p. 81)

His desire is for boundaries, for a definition which allows him to escape being a small element of a larger whole, to be a complete whole on his own. Yes, this does require a new mode of expression but the emotions are already there and the only struggle is to articulate them. His revolt is like that of Frankenstein's monster whose physical characteristics also belie the emotional depths beneath. Like the monster, Bernard also seeks to articulate how he feels and is cheated of this ability due to his lack of literary experience. And just as Frankenstein's monster is able to learn to communicate through literature, so too is Bernard more able to fully articulate his emotional needs as a result of his encounter with John and, through him, Shakespeare. Humanity could be defined as the ability to communicate with, and understand, other human beings; and literature is the means by which both Bernard and Frankenstein's monster articulate their humanity. Bernard does not possess the standardised characteristics of his social group and is therefore an individual without a clearly defined and satisfying purpose. It is the impact of this physical difference, this awareness, which causes him to awaken to the nightmare of his existence, lending him a new perspective on his society and consequently leading to his dissatisfaction and desire to find an alternative.

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### *Nineteen Eighty-Four* as Gothic Nightmare

Like *Brave New World* it seems unnecessary to stage a justification of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* as a Dystopian text; suffice to say that it fulfils the criteria explored in the introductory chapter. The argument here proposed is the requirement to involve such a canonical Dystopian text in a debate surrounding the Gothic tropes with which it engages. To begin this discussion requires an engagement with existing debates around the work of Orwell and the themes and concerns highlighted by previous critics, of whom Alok Rai might be regarded as just one example of the diverse interpretations offered:

His work demands that we reach out, as *it* does, beyond the confines of personality and even literature, into history and politics, into the Spanish Civil War and the Cold War; demands that we should both find and lose ourselves in necessary alleys and by-ways, and streets that lead suddenly to arguments of often insidious intent.<sup>35</sup>

Rai suggests that the only way to achieve a full understanding of Orwell is to read him in context and I would not disagree with this as a starting point. However, to confine oneself as a reader to the historical and the political is to become blind to the other possibilities of the fiction of Orwell. I would not agree that *Nineteen Eighty-Four* ‘demands’ a reading which encompasses the Cold War, the Spanish Civil War, the personality of the author and the political situation at the time of writing. This approach

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<sup>35</sup> Alok Rai, *Orwell and the Politics of Despair*, (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1988), pp. 4-5



is merely one way of reading Orwell but this historical/political view is the prominent perspective on the novel.<sup>36</sup> To believe that the dominant meanings in Orwell are those tied to politics is directly relevant to any reading of the importance of the physical body in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. Rai's text is designed to address the 'Orwell Problem', as he sees it, and to rescue Orwell's work from entanglement with Orwell the cultural icon, thus allowing some kind of detached process of evaluation. However, his concern seems to remain firmly focused on 'Orwell the man' throughout his text, with the novels acting as interesting diversions rather than the focus of critical attention.

With work that is as subtly ingratiating as Orwell's, criticism must become an act of violence, delicate or brutal as the need arises, but determined anyway to seize that which the work itself is reluctant to yield, instead of politely or gratefully accepting what the work is proffering anyway and so declining into superfluity, mumbling about 'truth'.

I would suggest, further, that one is able to do this to the extent that one can displace, destabilise, or, more modishly, 'defamiliarise' and 'deconstruct' the basis on which the polemic itself is constructed. Because, to be lured into controversy with the work which one is trying to criticise – lured, that is, into arguing with Orwell – is, once again, to obliterate the necessary critical distance. Clearly, anyone who wishes to write on Orwell must be willing to be both 'aesthetic' and 'political'. I find, however, that in trying to cope critically with the urgent invitation of Orwell's writing – an invitation to assent or controversy – I have sought to preserve my critical distance by, to put it schematically, responding 'aesthetically' when the work itself invites a 'political' response, and 'politically' when the work is itself 'aesthetic'.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> see also Hitchens, Christopher, *Unacknowledged Legislation: Writers in the Public Sphere*, (London: Verso, 2002) and Crick, Bernard, *George Orwell: A Life*, (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1982)

<sup>37</sup> Rai, Orwell, p. 9



Rai and I share some common ground in refusing to accept Orwell's work at face value and desiring to look deeper and find something more. However, we disagree fundamentally on how this search should be conducted. While Rai allows the politics of 1948 to maintain a dominant role in the assessment of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, I seek to update this reading to claim the novel as part of the twentieth century Gothic canon. The dark, Gothic body is the focus of my reading of Orwell and the politics of Orwell's era are secondary to that concern. The 'act of violence' which interests me is that contained within the novel, acted out on the human body and layered with Gothic interpretations. I believe this type of evaluation can be achieved without a need to resort to reliance on the political which Rai stresses so strongly and instead can rely on a framework of Gothic theory. I do not believe this constitutes either assent or controversy, the two possibilities imagined by Rai, but rather an attempt to find links to the vast body of Gothic fictions and to address concerns raised by both Dystopian fiction and the Gothic texts of an earlier, yet familiar, era.

But ultimately, 1984 fails to confront the complexity of the relationship between desire and patriarchal authority, sex and power. Fails, ironically, because on the surface it seems to be doing just that.<sup>38</sup>

A Gothic reading of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* should be able to penetrate beneath this surface, to unearth what is buried beneath and reveal a thorough exploration of the relationship between the sexual body and power relations in the state. Under the surface, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* can be read to uncover a larger debate which involves the notion of

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<sup>38</sup> Jenny Taylor, 'Desire is Thoughtcrime' in Paul Chilton and Aubrey Crispin (eds). *Nineteen Eighty-Four in 1984: Autonomy, Control and Communication*, (London, Comedia Publishing Group, 1984), p. 26

the Gothic body and ideas around doubling, which shed new light on sexual relations and authority within the novel. Doubling relationships in Orwell's novel operate to complicate the distinctions between the powerful and the powerless, the good and the bad in the narrative in order to question further all boundaries and assumptions which seek to simplify the novel.

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### **Darkness and Terror in *A Clockwork Orange***

*A Clockwork Orange* requires only slight encouragement to fall neatly into the category of a Dystopia, and only slightly more pressure to be categorised as a Gothic Dystopia.

Modern allegorists, however, reverse the process: 'Here is your world,' they say; 'look at it in a slightly different way and you will see how full it is of monstrous and unrecognised forces'.

Anthony Burgess, fascinated by words – their denotative meanings as well as their implications – fulfils in his novels the definition of 'modern' allegory cited immediately above.<sup>39</sup>

DeVitis here sees the allegorical nature of Burgess' writing, while I look to name the monsters as Gothic. The monsters in the allegories are people and this must be worthy of comment on more than just a political level.

Perhaps what best describes and most distinguishes black humour is the strange combination of surrealism and horror that serves it, for the activities described in these novels...excite the reader

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<sup>39</sup> DeVitis, *Anthony Burgess*, (New York, Twayne Publishers, 1972), p. 20

as he might be excited by a nightmare; for the emphasis is on logical illogicality as the plot capitalises on scenes of fear and terror; and it often does so by means of incremental repetition. In other words, the same situations repeated; and even though the reader is aware of the repetitions, he is beguiled by them...Although black humour succeeds in shocking or revolting the reader into some physical response such as horror, terror or nausea, laughter of a curiously guilty nature results, eliciting as it does so a catharsis of sorts...Laughter results as the reader is first terrified and then made aware of the fact that the institutions and beliefs he has taken for granted no longer afford comfort, that these institutions and beliefs have been turned into monstrous perversions of what they once meant.<sup>40</sup>

What DeVitis terms 'black humour' I would like to name Gothic, since there is less laughter and more darkness and terror. The characteristic Gothic traits of terror, horror, doubling and the uncanny are all described here by DeVitis, but he does not read them as such, choosing instead to see the 'monstrous perversions' as humorous. The terror at all structures, all institutions becoming monstrous does not easily translate into humour. He claims the motives of such attempts at humour are 'the improvement of a social situation, or the correction of a social injustice'. Laughter would seem an inappropriate response to such concerns, and the terror, horror and disturbance of mind that Gothic creates would be far more likely to induce awareness and interest.

For Alex, a creation of the society in which he lives, there are no such things as love, affection, or duty; for only mechanical sex, compliance with the strong, and a display of power mean anything. In other words, Alex is the 'clockwork orange' of the title: he is produced by a system, and he exemplifies in his actions the implications of it. He is punished by the same system when his

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40 DeVitis, *Burgess*, p. 27



individuality, his love of music, can no longer be ignored by it. Alex is separated from the community not for his evil but because his individuality threatens the status quo.<sup>41</sup>

I would argue that Alex is not punished for his love of music, and that his 'individuality' is the same as for every member of his group and perhaps his generation. The uniform of himself and his droogs is the perfect visual evidence of his lack of individuality. My contention is that he is punished as a form of treatment, to make his body comply with the standards set by society, by the majority, which exclude from adult life the terrors he is capable of. DeVitis argues that only a limited number of things in *A Clockwork Orange* 'mean anything', but I would take issue with this viewpoint. Does music not 'mean anything' in Alex's world? DeVitis recognises that a 'display of power' means something and I would add that surely any display of power necessarily requires an object upon which it can display and exercise its power in order to have any meaning. A 'display of power' is grounded in the physical reality of the body, in the actions of that body and the consequences of those actions. His 'punishment' is not designed to preserve any kind of status quo, but is in fact about the creation of a new type of human being who will re-establish and protect a new order, one in which good is the only available option. He is prototype for this new kind of treatment, for a new vision of the response of society to the problems caused by its youth. Success in treating him will herald a new era in which youthful folly will be replaced by individuals unable to choose good or bad, but instead conditioned to be revolted by violence. His body must be re-educated because they fear the evil of which he is capable. His capabilities terrify because they make evident what we all might be capable of should we choose to no

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<sup>41</sup> DeVitis, *Burgess*, p. 106



longer to comply. He is the hidden and the dark which we fear lurks inside of us all. But it is easier to label him evil, a monster, than to look inside and see the very same monstrosity. If Alex is to be likened to the image of the ‘clockwork orange’ then it is as an orange slowly peeled, slowly unwound, to reveal each rotten segment, created by each hand which wound him and made him what he is. The unnatural image of a piece of fruit which is mechanical also refers to the darkly Gothic image of Alex after his treatment when he mechanically chooses only good, despite his nature. The extreme order of the Dystopian society of which he is indeed a part is only the fragile mask, lurking beneath which is the hidden terror, the otherness that comes from within as well as outwith.

In their article in *College Literature*, Todd Davis and Kenneth Womack offer an account of *A Clockwork Orange* which focuses on the impact of the inclusion of the twenty-first chapter of the novel on the notion of family in the narrative. While able to define and dissect various ‘pseudo-families’ in the midst of Burgess’ novel, the authors also highlight many of the Gothic tropes which populate the tale of Alex and his treatment:

Each critic neglects to consider the tremendous ethical import of *A Clockwork Orange*’s twenty-first chapter as a rejoinder to the vacuous moral and family systems that fail Alex, Burgess’ teen-aged protagonist, as he attempts to achieve selfhood. In spite of what appear to be Alex’s obvious attempts to establish and participate in various family structures throughout the novel – indeed, to search for some form of ‘HOME’ – critics continue to ignore the role of the family as a substantial narrative force in Burgess’s text.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Todd F. Davis and Kenneth Womack, ‘O my brothers’ reading the anti-ethics of the pseudo-family in Anthony Burgess’s *A Clockwork Orange*, *College Literature* (West Chester Univ., PA), 29, 2, (2002), pp. 19-36, (p. 20)

Families and notions of home are important considerations for Gothic texts and ones which mark the narrative of Burgess's text. Todd and Womack look to psychology and morality to underpin their analysis of *A Clockwork Orange* but I think there are insights to be gained from recognition of the many 'families' which operate in the narrative and which influence the choices of Alex. Family structures are also relevant to the Dystopian debate, where the lack of family or the creation of state-controlled family systems is a recurring theme. Burgess's novel is not the only Dystopian narrative to lack a nuclear family and to seek to supplement this lack with other pseudo-family relationships. Dysfunctional families are not only hallmarks of Dystopian fiction, but also play a significant role in defining the Gothic family mode.

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### **Unnatural Bodies in *The Handmaid's Tale***

Although recognition of Gothic elements in Margaret Atwood's fiction exists,<sup>43</sup> it is usually only as one element of a larger work and rarely applied to *The Handmaid's Tale*.

The social dimensions of Atwood's fiction are always underpinned and sometimes undermined by representations of individual behaviour, for if there is a single distinguishing Atwoodian marker, it is her insistently ironic vision which challenges her readers' complacent acceptance of easy definitions about anything. As a novelist who was first and still is a poet with a poet's fascination

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<sup>43</sup> see Grace, Sherrill, *Violent Duality: a study of Margaret Atwood* (Montreal: Vehicule Press, 1980) published before *The Handmaid's Tale* therefore only focuses on duality in earlier texts. See also *The Art of Margaret Atwood: Essays in Criticism*, eds Davidson and Davidson (Toronto: House of Anansi Press, 1981)

for the endless possibilities of language, she also shows the same speculative interest in the possibilities of narrative which she views as fictional space to be opened beyond the constraints of traditional genre conventions.<sup>44</sup>

As with Orwell and Huxley before her, critics prefer to focus on the social and political aspects of *The Handmaid's Tale*, which at times obscures the possibilities for a Gothic reading. Atwood's fascination with language and narrative are attributes which she shares with Gothic novelists and which she explores in her novels *The Handmaid's Tale* and *The Blind Assassin*. Both texts allow the story to be stitched together like many a Gothic monster, becoming more twisted and monstrous as it progresses, told and retold by various narrative voices. Although Howells has a chapter on 'Gothic Atwood', she makes the distinction between those novels and the Dystopian/futuristic novel *The Handmaid's Tale*. The discussion of the story of Offred is referred to in the Gothic section only with the comment: '*The Handmaid's Tale* exploit[s] traditional Gothic motifs in their representation of classic female fears of sexual violence or imprisonment',<sup>45</sup> failing to engage with any other Gothic elements in the text.

Mark Evans in his essay 'Versions of History: *The Handmaid's Tale* and its Dedicatees', gives a thoroughly engrossing account of the historical groundings of the narrative in relation to New England society of the Puritan era of the late 1600s. While detailing the importance of the body in both societies, historical and fictional, Evans also highlights the occurrences of unnatural Gothic elements in both. He contrasts a description by

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<sup>44</sup> Coral Ann Howells, *Margaret Atwood*, (London, Macmillan, 1996), p. 2

<sup>45</sup> Howells, *Atwood*, p. 64



Atwood of the perils of delivering an ‘Unbaby’ with an historical account of a similar birth:

It was a woman child, stillborn, about two months before the just time, having life a few hours before...it had a face, but no head, and the ears stood upon the shoulders and were like an ape's; it had no forehead, but over the eyes four horns, hard and sharp; two of them were above one inch long, the other two shorter; the eyes standing out, and the mouth also; the nose hooked upward;...behind, between the shoulders, it had two mouths, and in each of them a piece of red flesh sticking out; it had the arms and legs as other children; but instead of toes, it had on each foot three claws, like young fowl, with sharp talons.<sup>46</sup>

This unpleasant depiction highlights the grotesque which is also present in *The Handmaid's Tale* and focuses the reader's attention firmly on unnatural bodies, flesh which does not comply. However, in the novel itself, we are never privy to a description of an ‘Unbaby’ and instead the unnatural bodies which populate the narrative are those of the Handmaids themselves, and the horrors they are capable of producing do remain central but unspoken in the narrative. One is also led to believe in the course of the narrative that there is something to be feared in the person of the Commander. However, one later learns that the Commanders are subject to the same bodily control as other persons when we are witness to the perverse charade of ‘The Ceremony’ where the bodies not only of Offred, the Handmaid, but of the Commander and of his Wife, are subject to the higher laws decreed by state power.

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<sup>46</sup> Mark Evans, ‘Versions of History: The Handmaid's Tale and its Dedicatees’, in *Margaret Atwood: Writing and Subjectivity, New Critical Essays*, ed. Colin Nicholson, (London: Macmillan, 1994), pp. 177-188 (p. 184) from David E. Stannard, *The Puritan Way of Death* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977) pp. 89-90



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### *Atomised and Future Fears*

Michel Houellebecq's colourful literary life has received much attention in the press and from reviewers of his novels, but there is little in the way of critical appraisal of his novels and their theoretical underpinnings in English. The recurring theme in approaches to *Atomised* is to focus on the sensational elements, the sex, the violence and the generally depressing perspective which the novel offers. What reviewers tend to agree on is that the novel presents a dark picture of the future of humanity should we choose to continue to live as we do now. John Sturrocks suggests that Bruno

is a young man conditioned by the zeitgeist to live by the body, but he hasn't been given the admirable body that success in a world of sexual competition requires. For full measure, his parents, too, have lived in variously sleazy ways by the body. His father is a cosmetic surgeon grown rich from the silicone implant business and his mother a narcissistic hippy who may have danced with John-Paul Sartre but has been going downhill ever since, to end as her looks fade amid the fatuities of the New Age.<sup>47</sup>

Sturrocks focuses on the importance of the body in *Atomised* and also in *Whatever* where humans in the information age have been reduced to mere particles of a much larger whole. He sees the driving force, and destructive power, of the novels to be the Western libido, which drives both Bruno and Michel to diverse yet connected ends. Bruno's experience of feeling his physical appearance to be in some way grotesque is a common

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<sup>47</sup> John Sturrocks, 'Agitated Neurons' *London Review of Books*, XXI, (1999), pp. 24-25. (p. 25)

factor in the exclusion of Gothic monsters but also relates him to the essential Dystopian character who is unhappy with the world around him, the critic in the midst of what appears to be pleasure for all.

Despite the lack of academic discussions of the novel, the available reviews do add weight to the argument for *Atomised* to be classified and understood as a Gothic Dystopia, where nightmare visions disturb and terrorise reader and character alike. Kevin Walsh argues that

one of the most unnerving things about Houellebecq's books is his propensity to kill off his female characters. And *Atomised* has a high body count: the brothers' mother (of natural causes), and both their girlfriends (suicides). Which has, inevitably, led to accusations of misogyny – to add to the anti-Muslim, anti-Semite and anti-black charges that Houellebecq has clocked up during his turbulent career.<sup>48</sup>

While highlighting the importance of the high number of female deaths in the novel, this reviewer misses the important deaths of both grandmothers in the lives of the young characters, and the deep impact this has on both their futures. Not only do their girlfriends take their own lives, but they do so in a way that is influenced by and part of the fragmentation of their bodies and their cultures; this forms a large part of the focus of the novel and serves to highlight the importance of the body to a Gothic reading of Houellebecq's novel.

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<sup>48</sup> Kevin Walsh, 'Filth and Philosophy', *Spike Magazine*. Book Reviews.

<<http://www.spikemagazine.com/1102michelhouellebecq.php>> [2 November 2004]

The narrator is keen to draw the relation between the hopeless lives of the characters and wider historical forces. Houellebecq's erudition adds intellectual spice to this engaging and often moving story. The narrative weaves together personal anecdotes, historical crises, and the laws of biology and physics, along with theories of existentialism. The style of narration may at times seem heavy-handed and flat, but by the end of the novel this starts to feel like the rather reliable voice of reason.<sup>49</sup>

This type of narrative structure is deeply resonant of the monstrous weavings of the Gothic novel, providing 'facts' and 'historical depth' in order to encourage the reader to become engaged and involved in the flights of fancy undertaken in the narrative. The frightening aspect highlighted in this review is the transformation of the narrative voice of the clone from 'heavy-handed and flat' to 'the rather reliable voice of reason', a move which seems a huge leap within the novel and a frightening vision of monstrous rationality.

Where Michel turns to science, Bruno is a would-be poet and writer (achieving very limited success). It is too neat a separation, two sides of the author himself, divided for literary effect, but Houellebecq uses them quite effectively to make his points.<sup>50</sup>

While this review recognizes the doubling of the author with his characters, they make little reference to that doubling of the brothers and the Gothic dimensions of this 'neat

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49 Miraz, Munira, 'Atomised', *Culture Wars*, 11, (Autumn 2002), <<http://www.culturewars.org.uk/2002-11/atomised.htm>> [2 November 2004]

50 'The Elementary Particles by Michel Houellebecq', *The Complete Review*, <<http://www.complete-review.com/reviews/houelbqm/partelem.htm#ours>> [2 November 2004]



separation'. We are presented with Bruno and Michel as two halves of one personality which may be that of Houellebecq's or may simply be a device to explore the Gothic presumption that the evil double must die.

Bruno is the greater failure in life. His outlook is Nietzschean ("pretty second-rate Nietzschean at that" he silently admits), and the end he chooses runs fairly true to form.

It is in Michel, the brilliant biologist, that Houellebecq places his greater hopes. The book does not end in the present day, but rather looks ahead at another ten years or so of work by Michel, and then provides an epilogue which summarizes what happened in the decades after. Good things -- sort of -- happen, all based on Michel's insightful discoveries. They are also odd things. The world is remade, and it is a better place -- sort of. Houellebecq briefly presents a utopian (or Dystopian) vision -- what the future might hold. It is a brave and disorienting jump -- and it is also a too-easy way out in a philosophical fiction of this sort.<sup>51</sup>

The assertion that the character of Michel and his impact on the human race is a sign of hope on the part of Houellebecq is indeed frightening. While few would argue that Bruno is an excellent example of what a human being should strive to be: at least he is only concerned with his own selfish pleasure and in no way poses the threat that his brother embodies. To believe that 'good things' inspired by Michel's work are the destruction of the human race and the creation of a race of clones to wipe us out, is a very generous stretch of the imagination. To imagine that the world could be a better place

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<sup>51</sup> 'The Elementary Particles by Michel Houellebecq', *The Complete Review*.



were it populated by monstrous clones rather than degenerate human beings is a nightmare vision in which one can find no space for hope nor optimism.

A close reading of the reviewer's comments goes far to highlight the Gothic Dystopian elements of Houellebecq's vision. Words like 'brave and disorienting' place the reader in a unique position in relation to the narrative of *Atomised*, both within the scope of the world being described and also made obsolete by the end of the narrative. The repetition of the phrase 'sort of' makes clear the uncertainty which this novel creates for the reviewer due to the position he finds himself in in relation to the narrative. Houellebecq describes a future which could still come to pass for this reviewer and thus leads to feelings of uncertainty with regard to the events and ending of the novel. For the reviewer to see the disorientating vision of the future that Houellebecq describes is literally to be privy to a glimpse of a remade world order of which he could become a part. But the warning comes from the suspicious tone of 'too-easy way out', bringing sharply into focus the threat of such a dark encounter with future possibilities.

## Chapter Two

### The Labyrinths of the Body

Throughout Gothic fiction terror and horror have depended on things not being what they seem. In encouraging superstitious interpretation in, and of, novels by means of narrative devices and generic expectations, Gothic texts have always played along the boundaries between fictional forms and social rules. In the complex assemblage of different stories within early Gothic novels, the labyrinthine complexity ultimately delivers its secret and produces the horror that expels the objects of fear, restoring properly conventional boundaries.<sup>52</sup>

The form of the Gothic novel, again as Sedgwick remarks, reflects further upon the parasitical monstrosity it creates. The story buried within a story buried within a story that Shelley's *Frankenstein* popularises evolves into the narrative with one story but with many different tellers....Within this narrative system, the author professes to be no more than a collector of documents, a compiler of the facts of the case.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> Fred Botting, *Gothic: the New Critical Idiom* (London: Routledge, 2003) p. 170

<sup>53</sup> Judith Halberstam, *Skin Shows. Gothic Horror and the Technology of Monsters* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998), p. 20

This chapter engages with the labyrinthine structuring common to Gothic texts, which is central in relation not only to the shape of the narrative, but to the themes of the texts themselves. For my purposes I want to focus on the narrative structure of the aforementioned Dystopian texts and find the similarities in the use of an especially Gothic form of narration. I also want to point to the centrality of the body in Gothic fiction and link this idea to the Dystopian vision of the end of bodily unity. The Gothic narrative device I will also explore is the editorial note present in so many Gothic texts, making claims to authenticity that are entirely fictitious. Fred Botting, in his book *Gothic; the New Critical Idiom*, traces this characteristic back to Horace Walpole's *Castle of Otranto*<sup>54</sup> and I would argue that it is a defining characteristic of my texts, one which leads them into Gothic territory. The device of framing narratives, of a story within a story, is also of major concern in the discussion of Gothic Dystopias, and provides a context for the focus on bodily fragility laid bare in these texts. I begin with a discussion of such framing devices in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, *A Clockwork Orange* and *Atomised*.

A key symbol for the understanding of the narratives of Gothic Dystopian novels is the labyrinth. It symbolises both the unseen elements in the twisting narrative and plot and also that which is out of sight for the characters themselves, that which is both hidden and emerging. This leads to another Gothic dimension of these novels, that of mysteries and

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<sup>54</sup> see Botting, *Gothic: the new critical idiom*, (London: Routledge, 2003), p. 49

secrets, explored in *The Handmaid's Tale*, and of memories and labyrinths explored in the narration of *Herland*.

In order to place the human body at the centre of a discussion of narrative, the theoretical approach of Kelly Hurley in her book *The Gothic Body* will be central. Hurley argues that degeneration theory interprets Gothic texts as 'minus narratives',<sup>55</sup> expressions of the threat of a reversal of human evolution, rather than the continued progress towards higher order. Within this framework, there is also space to see degeneration as a distinctly Dystopian mode of thinking, where the destruction of human society and genetics coincide to visualise the end of the world. Each of the texts in question engages with a narrative form that focuses the reader's attention on the frames of the narrative, but within these framing devices there operate questions which threaten the human subject.

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### **Framing the Future**

The narrative frame which surrounds *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is unusual as it encloses the text from the end to the beginning rather than operating as a framing device set up at the start of the narrative. There is no prologue as there is in *Atomised*, but only an appendix explaining the language of Newspeak. The appendix begins:

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<sup>55</sup> Kelly Hurley, *The Gothic Body, Sexuality, Materialism and Degeneration at the Fin de Siecle*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 65



Newspeak was the official language of Oceania and had been devised to meet the ideological needs of Ingsoc, or English socialism. In the year 1984 there was not as yet anyone who used Newspeak as his sole means of communication, either in speech or in writing. (*Nineteen Eighty-Four*, p. 312)

The past tense of this description throws new light on the darkness with which *Nineteen Eighty-Four* ended, promising hope for a time when Newspeak would have to be explained to those who had never encountered it except in the history books. But there is also an implied threat in the passage since it states that Newspeak was ‘not yet’ used by anyone as their sole means of communication, implying that at some point after the end of this narrative, the grip of the Party did tighten and the growth of Newspeak did occur, before some kind of change led to it becoming part of the past and of history. Within the appendix there is the grotesque promise of a time when things were even worse than they were for Winston Smith, but also the hope that this era was finally overcome and rendered historical, something to be explained to a reader in an appendix.

An ending like this lends the beginning of the novel an entirely different focus and intent. This is not only the story of a man from the future, but is a history lesson from the future’s future. The beginning of the narrative of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is not the year 1984 but a time long after that when this account has supposedly been uncovered and been set down as a lesson from history. But this only becomes apparent at the end when the reader is confronted with this appendix. This means that the text then becomes a pseudo-historical document, like Offred’s account in *The Handmaid’s Tale*, and loses some of its power to shock, although not in the initial reading.

For a reader from the twenty-first century, the threat and fears of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* have lost some of their impact, but the appendix seems to have been Orwell's way of anticipating this effect of time. It ends with the sentence 'It was chiefly in order to allow time for the preliminary work of translation that the final adoption of Newspeak had been fixed for so late a date as 2050' (*Nineteen Eighty-Four*, p. 326).

By setting the final date of the take over by Big Brother so far in the future from the time the novel was written in 1948, Orwell ensures that the terror of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* will be far-reaching, extending, as it does, well beyond his own lifetime. He makes the terrors of The Party fresh for us since we are no longer safe having passed 1984, but have the spectre of Newspeak hanging over us for many years to come.

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### **Inescapable Narratives**

The beginning of *A Clockwork Orange* is more subtle in its framing, but illustrates Gothic tendencies in the fascination of the effects of a return of pasts upon the present. The first and last chapters of the novel begin with the phrase 'What's it going to be then, eh?' and this question haunts the events of the novel as the protagonist Alex is constantly faced not only with choices which will determine the direction his life will take but also larger questions about the future of society. The questioning in the opening chapter refers to

Alex himself, and the reader is then given an account of his teenage years. However, by the end of the narrative Alex has matured and the question then refers to his son, and to a wish on the part of Alex that events of his past will not become part of the future of his son. The choices made by Alex in response to the question of ‘what’s it going to be then, eh?’ haunt his life, but he hopes that his son will make different choices in response to the question, thus escaping his fate from the past. This frame constitutes not only the actual beginning and end of the novel, but surrounds the whole of the narrative which centres on the story of a possibility of life without choice. The implications for the loss of the human capacity to choose right or wrong, and the loss to humanity faced by the denial of this right, are central concerns of the novel. He eventually succeeds in finding maturity in adulthood, but not without being taunted by his own poor decisions and facing their consequences. He never manages to fully struggle free from his past and in the end even the hope he has for the future is tainted by past events:

My son, my son. When I had my son I would explain all that to him when he was starry enough to like understand. But then I knew he would not understand or would not want to understand at all and would do all the veshches I had done, yes perhaps even killing some poor starry forella surrounded with mewing knots and koshkas, and I would not be able to really stop him. And nor would he be able to stop his own son, brothers. (*A Clockwork Orange*, p. 141)

The inescapable nature of the teen culture of which Alex believes he is now free is here recognised: that although he may have learned his lesson, it is a lesson that each son and son of a son will have to learn for themselves, with all the violence necessarily involved. His past will be lived out before his eyes in the figure of his son so that the end he has



reached is only a beginning for the next generation and the violence will never truly end because it is part of human society and culture, and cyclical in nature.

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### **Degeneration as a Future**

The framing in *Atomised* takes the form of a prologue and epilogue. Not only is this a Gothic device which produces historical distance, but it also frames the lives of two brothers, which is the main story of the novel, within a set of observations from the future. The first of these editorial insertions marks the beginning of the novel and also highlights its claims to a Gothic interpretation: ‘At the time of his disappearance, Michael Djersincki was unanimously considered to be a first-rate biologist and a serious candidate for the Nobel Prize; his true significance, however, would not become apparent for some time’ (*Atomised*, p. 3). From the outset, the narrative of the novel sets up a mystery, a secret of Gothic motive, which the reader feels compelled to read and discover the truth of. Not only do we have a disappearance on our hands, but we also have a character presented to us as important but for unnamed reasons, intrigue in classic Gothic manner. This preface is designed to be a fiction about a fiction but it presents itself as a factual account of real events with the sole intention of describing the life of a man who was unnoticed in his lifetime and lived a life very like many of his contemporaries. This claim to authenticity is effective because it is from the standpoint of a future society and provides the distance required for the critical analysis missing in the reader’s awareness



of the circumstances of their own lives. By setting up this frame, the reader is suspended in time, neither able to feel connected to the world portrayed in the novel from the harsh, and brutally truthful, perspective of the narrator, yet also not able either to be fully sympathetic to the views of this editor/narrator.

The narrative of *Atomised* itself is oddly structured, punctuated as it is by moments which range from explanations of emotions: 'Happiness is an intense, all-consuming feeling of joyous fulfilment akin to inebriation, rapture or ecstasy' (*Atomised*, p. 13), to factual accounts of historical events.<sup>56</sup> These incidents in themselves attempt to ground the narrative in historical fact while raising questions as to the need to explain everyday emotions. The historical 'facts' relayed are also interesting since they appear randomly chosen in the beginning of the narrative, and only take on their full significance as the narrative progresses. It is only with hindsight that we realise the importance of the historical moments of our own era which Houellebecq highlights, allowing the possibility that this future could really be awaiting us.

As well as conforming to the Gothic convention of the framing narrative, *Atomised* also presents the past to us in a way that allows it to function as a barbarous past, while at the same time accurately reflecting the world in which we are at present living. The effect of this type of narration is horrifying for the twenty-first century reader, presented with their era as a brutal past from which future clones must now learn lessons.

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<sup>56</sup> see Houellebecq, *Atomised*, p. 15. where he details the history of the idea of quantum energy by Nobel Prize winner Max Planck in 1900.

Unlike the other texts, *Atomised* places the reader in a position where the events and culture described in the interior narrative, that of Bruno and Michel, are very similar to the events and culture of today. In contrast to the frames offered in texts like *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, where we are given the hope and assurance of a time when Newspeak will no longer be the language of choice, Houellebecq uses the narrator to shock the reader by positioning them in a future yet to be decided. He places the reader in the labyrinth, unsure if the guides offered are to be trusted. All other Gothic Dystopias function with protagonists who are representative, but in *Atomised* the protagonists seem untrustworthy and alien. In this way the degeneration of the human species seems entirely possible. The common theme in all the narratives of Gothic Dystopia is a concern with the continuation of the species, with reproduction and the human body. The framing of narratives involves placing them within a timeframe where the future can be explored, for the most part, in relative safety, where new forms of society and culture can be allowed to reproduce as an experiment in ways of living. The unusually disastrous outcomes then function as Dystopian tales, warning of the error of our ways. The Gothic element comes from the essential engagement with the body and the horror and terror invoked by such nightmare visions.

Kelly Hurley offers insight into the future possibilities explored in *Atomised* via her theory of degeneration and the human body:

Degeneration, like syphilis, with which it was often confused, could be seen as a divine punishment for some 'original sin'. Degenerationists wrote in highly coloured, apocalyptic style of the sins of the parents being visited most heavily on the heads of children who had forfeited

their innocence even before birth. The perverted morality of one generation – of the alcoholic mother, the father who had contracted syphilis from prostitutes – found literalization in the deformed bodies and minds of the next.<sup>57</sup>

The warning in the novel is particularly potent in this context, where we, the twentieth-century generation, are those of ‘perverted morality’, and thus the cause of degeneration into Bruno and Michael, and finally into the clones created in their image. Increasingly deformed bodies and minds litter the text of *Atomised* and find literalisation in the final image of clones who look back on our times with pity and disgust, considering themselves to be of some higher order while in denial of their origins.

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### **Narrative Bodies**

By utilising the effects of framing devices and editorial notes, each of the authors is able to end the novel in such a way that the whole of the narrative is re-defined. This uncertainty of time and beginning mirrors the bodily uncertainty of the characters in times of upheaval, an uncertainty which threatens their very sense of self. Like the reader they are caught in a labyrinth of meaning which constantly writes and re-writes the boundaries of the body. The fictional editorial invasions, while being classically Gothic, also serve to highlight the power of the narrative and its ability to manipulate succeeding and preceding events.

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<sup>57</sup> Hurley, *The Gothic Body*, p. 68



In this 'postmodern condition' the breakdown of modernity's metanarratives discloses a horror that identity, reality, truth and meaning are not only effects of narratives but subject to a dispersion and multiplication of meanings, realities and identities that obliterate the possibility of imagining any human order and unity.<sup>58</sup>

Botting's standpoint enables one to place the body in the centre of this struggle for meaning and truth. The chaos created by the breakdown of metanarratives not only throws human order and unity into disarray, but renders the body no longer a certain and definable quantity. The novels themselves in their narrative structure parallel this multiplication of meaning and disruption of order, since their ends signal beginnings and their beginnings are impacted upon by their endings.

In her study *Purity and Danger*, Mary Douglas comments on the relationship between the boundaries of the body and boundaries which are under threat. Within the scope of Gothic Dystopian texts, the body can be understood to represent the fragile boundaries of time and of narrative unity. The labyrinthine structure of the texts and their propensity to unravel at critical moments, is mirrored by the instability of the individual in the texts.

The body is a model which can stand for any bounded system. Its boundaries can represent any boundaries which are threatened or precarious. The body is a complex structure. The functions of its different parts and their relation afford a source of symbols for other complex structures.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> Botting, *Gothic*, p. 157

<sup>59</sup> Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: an analysis of concepts of pollution and taboo*, (London: Routledge, 2000), p. 142



Thinking about the body in this way, there is a relationship of reliance between the narrative and the bodily in the novels. The breakdown of bodily unity echoes the breakdown of narrative unity, as both are being torn apart and reinterpreted by the multiplication of meaning. Thus the novels not only confront us with a narrative of complex and confusing parameters, but also centre around bodies and the threat to their unity and continuity. Douglas reflects that the relationship between the body and a bounded system is one of parts, where each element is essential and dependent on all others. This provides a framework within which to relate the body to social structures in terms of shared complexity and dependency. In Gothic Dystopias the symbolism of the body discloses a further interpretation of the system within which the body exists. In this way, the weeping sore on Winston's leg in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is important not only for the reading of the body but also refers to the regime of the party as a bounded system. If the body of the main protagonist is infected and weakened, this casts new light on the stability, security and purity of the regime under which his body exists and operates.

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### **Labyrinths of Memory**

The narrative structure of *Herland* is a story told from memory without the carefully constructed record that Van, the narrator, intended to use. The labyrinthine structure of Gothic novels is here mirrored in the wandering story which Van tells, without the aid of

his records, moving, as it does, from topic to topic and from one incident to another. He feels compelled to do justice to the women he is describing and to complete the telling of his story.

This is written from memory, unfortunately. If I could have brought with me the material I so carefully prepared, this would be a very different story. Whole books full of notes, carefully copied records, firsthand descriptions, and the pictures – that's the worst loss. (*Herland*, p. 1)

Unlike Stoker's *Dracula*, *Herland* is a tale devoid of the letters, newspaper cuttings and general documentation intended to convince the reader that it is based on real events. However, in order for the narrative to be believable, Van must be robbed of his notes and photographs. Therefore the lack of evidence is just as convincing in this case as the body of evidence in *Dracula* is intended to be for its purposes. If Van were allowed to emerge from the jungle with his notebooks intact, we would not have the rambling narrative he provides and we would lose the pleasure of encountering his discoveries about these women, in the fresh manner in which he himself made them. What this story also maintains is mystery. Although Van provides detail about the lives and culture of the women of Herland, he purposefully does not reveal the exact location of the country for fear of outsiders and the contamination they will bring. Therefore, while his account contains information about Herland, it does so without destroying the mythical status of the women. They remain mysterious, an effect aided by the narrative itself with its lack of detail and supporting evidence.

Chapter Five, 'A Unique History', allows a dialogue to develop which offers comparisons between the society of Van and his companions, and that of the women of Herland. Here the narrative displays its masculine leanings;

It is no use for me to try to piece out this account with adventures. If the people who read it are not interested in these amazing women and their history, they will not be interested at all.

As for us – three young men to a whole landful of women – what could we do? We did get away, as described, and were peacefully brought back again without, as Terry complained, even the satisfaction of hitting anybody.

There were no adventures because there was nothing to fight. There were no wild beasts in the country and very few tame ones. (*Herland*, p. 42)

For Van the narrative seems to come to a standstill around this difficulty of having no one to fight, despite the fact that the most interesting part of the narrative is the comparison of the two cultures and the subtle and satirical way in which Gilman draws the reader to the inevitable conclusions. The previous part of the narrative focusing on the journey, the adventure, seems to be merely a prelude to the real action of the discovery of the workings of Herland society. The masculine perspective of both narrator and supposed reader, is that stories are made out of 'adventures' focusing on the heroics of men and that any other type of narrative would require 'piecing out' if it did not focus on such things. Like some hideous monster, the narrative slowly slips from the control of Van and his fellow explorers and instead becomes wholly reliant on the twists and turns dictated by the teaching and lives of these women.

Again and again Van expresses his frustration with a narrative which seems to be constantly escaping his control, and each time it is implicit that we should hark back to the opening chapter and the loss of his notebooks as some kind of explanation.

I wish I could represent the kind, quiet, steady, ingenious way they questioned us. It was not just curiosity – they weren't a bit more curious about us than we were about them, if as much. But they were bent on understanding our kind of civilisation, and their lines of inquiry would gradually surround us and drive us until we found ourselves up against some admissions we did not want to make. (*Herland*, p. 43)

The description of the questioning methods of the Herland women could be likened to the impression of a labyrinth; slowly winding round and round till it left the individual with no alternative but an unwanted dead end, an admission.

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### **Mysteries and Secrets**

The narrative of *A Handmaid's Tale* proceeds to set up many mysteries: the Commander, his Wife, Nick, who winks at our nameless narrator, and the loss of Offred's first companion, who is replaced with no explanation by another red woman. An intricate web links all these individuals: their fates are connected and form the structure of the novel, shrouded in intrigue and secrets to be discovered in the course of the narrative.



The reader still has no name to attach to the narrator, and only the titles of Commander and Wife for those whom she works for.

On their return from a shopping trip Offred and Ofglen pause to look in the window of a shop called Soul Scrolls which houses machines utilised by the Handmaids as a form of religious penance and also as a method of social stratification. The Commanders' Wives all pay to have these prayers printed and spoken as a sign of piety and to aid the careers of their husbands. Looking into the window of this shop their eyes meet for the first time and this leads to a conversation in which they confess to each other their true feelings about the regime in which they are living. Offred also realises that there is a network of Handmaids who feel the same way that she does and this gives her hope that there may be a way out, a way back to her life which for the moment exists only as memory.

However, as she is recounting the narrative after the event, Offred begins to ponder the existence of such secret networks.

I find it hard to believe in these whisperings, these revelations, though I always do at the time. Afterwards though they seem improbable...Passwords, things that cannot be told, people with secret identities, dark linkages: this does not seem as if it ought to be the true shape of the world. But that is my own illusion, a hangover from a version of reality I learned in the former time.  
(*Handmaid*, p. 212)

This description of the shadowy world operating under the ever watchful Eyes, suggests the true Gothic shape of the novel which forms around the narrator in her every

relationship. She has a secret with the Commander surrounding their nightly visits and games of scrabble, she has a secret with Nick as the messenger for such encounters, she has a huge secret with the Commander's Wife who arranges for her to meet with Nick in an attempt to conceive and she now has knowledge of this hidden network of Handmaids disaffected with the shape of their lives. In the larger scheme of the narrative of the novel, Offred harbours yet more secrets, creating and maintaining masked identities for herself, the commander and his wife, and a whole host of characters who exist only as imitations and secrets. Around herself Offred leaves many mysteries unanswered, only hinting at the truth behind the events of her life and leaving the reader with many spaces for speculation. However, such creations are entirely in keeping with the new shape of the world in which Offred exists, where illusions are all that is left and the images from her former life no longer apply.

Throughout her narrative Offred repeats to the reader how little she wants to be telling this story, that what she has to relate is terrible and should not be said.

I don't want to be telling this story.

I don't have to tell it. I don't have to tell anything, to myself or to anyone else. I could just sit here, peacefully. I could withdraw. It's possible to go so far in, so far down and back, they could never get you out. (*Handmaid*, p. 237)

This reflexive moment in the narrative invites many questions as to the motives of the narrator, the audience of the tale and the nature of the story itself. Most of the narrative deals with events and issues which are naturally difficult to talk about, and the narrative

flounders at these moments as Offred searches for a way to convey the horrors, or the strength to decide not to relive the details. This difficulty arises from the very nature of the tale itself: it is a secret and should not be told at all. The details of Offred's life are dangerous to relate as so many of the things she recounts are hidden secrets. Not only does the story hold pain for her in the telling – 'I don't *want* to be telling this story' – but it forms a narrative of threat in the telling since the details could endanger her life. But as with a confession from a Gothic novel, Offred does feel compelled to retell her story in broken fragments to an unknown and unspecified reader. Like Hogg's *Confessions*, the narrative is complex and multi-layered with sufficient space for the fragments of doubt and uncertainties to take hold.

Sedgwick's treatment of 'the Unspeakable' engages with the difficulties of narrative of the type encountered by Offred: 'The real terrors of the Unspeakable had to do, not with any special content of the thing that could not be said, but with the violence greeting any attempt to pass an originally arbitrary barrier'.<sup>60</sup> The narrative structure determines that one experiences the life of Offred in the present tense, believing that her reluctance to detail events is a strategy for coping with her life. However, what we finally discover is that her story comes from beyond the grave: it remains unspeakable even after the event. The 'Historical Notes' at the end of Atwood's novel give an anthropological/historical account of the events which Offred recounts in the course of the novel. She threatens to withdraw from the telling to avoid confrontation with the barriers of truth and narrative: 'I could withdraw...go so far in, so far down and back, they could never get you

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60 Sedgwick, *Gothic Conventions*, p. 22



out'(*Handmaid*, p. 237). But the boundaries obvious to the reader are those of control of self and of content, as the final chapter of the novel asserts:

The tapes were arranged in no particular order, being loose at the bottom of the box; nor were they numbered. Thus it was up to Professor Wade and myself to arrange the blocks of speech in the order which they appeared to go; but, as I have said elsewhere, all such arrangements are based on some guesswork and are to be regarded as approximate.(*Handmaid*, p. 314)

Thus the labyrinthine narrative of Offred's life is not of her construction but is one unravelled by others and although the reader is presented with *a* narrative, what Offred intended to represent remains unspoken, only interpreted by academics long after her death. As a ghostly presence she is allowed to speak, but only in a controlled manner to avoid the larger danger inherent in her approach to the barriers which taboos hold within society. She is restored to her rightful place within conventional boundaries, a fitting ending to a Gothic tale.

Offred sees her only other option to be that of live burial,<sup>61</sup> requiring her removal so entirely from life that 'they' could never recover her sufficiently to make any use of her body. Rather than tell her story the suggestion is that she could retreat into a mental life made up of all these stories and escape an ending to the tale. She could invent her own life to live, bury the old stories and create a happy ending outwith the horrors of her bodily life.

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61 Sedgwick, *Gothic Conventions*, p. 20



Part of the labyrinth structure which Offred creates relies on unspeakable narrative events in order to confuse the reader and deny them any satisfactory interpretation. However, Offred also grounds her story in multiple narratives, detailing events in various different voices. This allows her to adopt different perspectives and shield or risk her self or body to varying degrees. This mirrors her actions during the course of the narrative and also hints at the kind of person she was in the time before she became a Handmaid. An example of this is during her encounters with Nick. Like other events which Offred finds difficult, she relates various versions of the evening, inventing fiction upon fiction, a labyrinth of tales which cover and reveal the truth of the event. Each version has similarities: the room is the same, some of the conversation is similar, but it is the elements which are different that reveal the most. The first version is romanticised and bodily focused, followed by a version which appears more realistic and finally an evasion; 'It didn't happen that way either. I'm not sure how it happened; not exactly. All I can hope for is a reconstruction: the way love feels is always only approximate' (*Handmaid*, p. 275).

The labyrinth has both a dead-end, and an escape, in its ending. To progress this far in a story riddled with love in all its forms and be confronted with an explanation such as this, late in the narrative and completely unexpected, is to be confronted by an impenetrable wall. But it is also an encounter with another twist, a sideways glance at a way out, at a mirror offering only a version of the true image. What Offred has done is to reconstruct from the torn memories of her life a space which she can physically inhabit, which shields her from the outside by a twisting narrative and a protective body of armour.

The first telling of her encounter with Nick resonates with desire and raw, physical emotion.

He moves away from me, turns off the lamp. Outside, like punctuation, there's a flash of lightning; almost no pause and then the thunder. He's undoing my dress, a man made of darkness, I can't see his face, and I can hardly breathe, hardly stand, and I'm not standing. His mouth is on me, his hands, I can't wait and he's moving, already, love, it's been so long, I'm alive in my skin, again, arms around him, falling and water softly everywhere, never-ending. I knew it might only be once. (*Handmaid*, p. 273)

For Offred this telling is more about her imaginative encounter than the physical intimacy she shares with Nick, even the landscape offers itself as punctuation in her tale. The massive break in the detailing of events and the fabrication of a story is punctuated by the lightning strike and the thunder, which also operate to symbolise the link between the emotional lightning bolt of love, and the bodily thunder which follows. We are to imagine that for Offred, Nick is not Nick in this telling of the encounter, but is 'a man made of darkness' and can be any and every man she has ever loved. But, more importantly, the telling of such a story allows her to imagine that it can be Luke, the 'one and only' love of her life. In such circumstances, her body escapes the fragmentation which has been its expression throughout the narrative and finds the unity denied to a body in a Gothic Dystopia.

However, this telling is only fantasy, devoid of the harsh reality of her body in pieces, moved and shaped to meet the needs of others, trapped in gross corporeality and unable to transcend to any higher planes. In her second telling of the encounter Offred is more careful and uses language and gestures which have the ring of realism, since they contain less of the symbolic weather conditions and sexual connotations which mark the previous telling as fabrication. This telling also has links to a true past which they could be feasibly discussing with each other.

We're quoting from late movies, from the time before. And the movies then were from a time before that: this sort of talk dates back to a time well before our own. Not even my mother talked like that, not when I knew her. Possibly nobody ever talked like that in real life, it was all a fabrication from the beginning. Still, it's amazing how easily it comes back to mind, this corny and false gay sexual banter. I can see now what it's for, what it was always for: to keep the core of yourself out of reach, enclosed, protected. (*Handmaid*, p. 274)

But even this attempt at 'realism' is false, since it alludes to a reality which no longer exists and which is no longer real; it is as much a fairy tale as the first version of the story. Offred herself recognises this but at the same time plays with this notion of reality, teasing the reader with notions of fabrication, of story telling and word play. In recognition of these words and the power they have, Offred uses them in the context of her storytelling in order to shield herself from what really transpired, to avoid the recognition of the most difficult aspects of the tale she feels compelled to tell. Not only does the sexual banter keep her 'protected' but the fabricated talk, the corny and false words in the narrative as a whole, and in episodes like this in particular, enclose the real



events and emotions surrounding them in fabricated tales and fairytale imaginings. By imagining her 'real life' as a story, Offred is able to distance herself from the events and create a space of safety between the actual events and her descriptions of them. Rather than the close proximity of autobiography, Offred prefers the distance of fiction and the freedom that narrative gives her to veil events and true selves.

But despite her best narrative efforts, Offred cannot stop the words piercing through her carefully constructed armour. This is most evident in her second telling and in her thoughts after the events:

There wasn't any thunder though, I added that in. To cover up the sounds, which I am ashamed of making...And I thought afterwards: this is betrayal. Not the thing itself but my own response. If I knew for certain he was dead, would that make a difference? (*Handmaid*, p. 275)

The uncertainty displayed in the question mark is telling of the confusion which prompts the schizophrenic narrative. But the narrative can also be a friend, a mask to the actions which shame Offred and a powerful ally to disguise such events. From this one sentence, one can presume that the events of that night are a compilation of the two stories, requiring the disguise of the thunder but being unable to escape the shame of the version closer to the truth. This is the one emotion which escapes from the narrative labyrinth in which it has been deliberately hidden: guilt. In the aftermath of the event, however it actually happened, we know it did occur because Offred is unable to use the narrative effectively to escape the implications to her own actions.



As one nears the end of the narrative, Offred delves deeper into the structure of her tale and offers insights into its telling and shape. ‘I’m sorry there is so much pain in this story. I’m sorry it’s in fragments, like a body caught in crossfire or pulled apart by force. But there is nothing I can do to change it’ (*Handmaid*, p. 279). The simile highlights the parallels in the shape of the narrative and the topic of the novel: fragments of a story and fragments of human bodies, pulled this way and that by unseen uncontrollable forces. The novel appears to lack a conventional beginning, middle and end, and the bodies in the novel either lack defined boundaries and a secure sense of self, or have been torn apart and placed within new boundaries, transformed and transfigured in the process. But this lack of fixed coherence, in structure or character, is the force which drives the novel towards an ending which is ambiguously without closure leaving the reader with ‘Historical Notes’ rather than an explanation of what happened to Offred. We are not presented with closure as the story ends, but instead are presented with possibilities and questions, with fragments of pain in disarray.

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### **Labyrinths and Bodies**

One of the most potent symbols for the narrative structure of the novels and the understanding of the bodies within this structure is the labyrinth. Not only is the labyrinth important because its structure leads to confusion and loss of orientation, but because it is only able to be defined by boundaries which offer confusion and uncertainty.

Like the regimes in the novels, it requires some kind of defining structure in order to be a labyrinth at all. Without the walls there would be no labyrinth, and without the beginning and end frames the novels in question would lack the depths of intrigue and horror which mark them as Gothic Dystopias. And without a system in which to exist, the bodies of the novels would subsist without classification and meaning.

Botting suggests that ‘Labyrinths, like novels, seduce, excite, confuse and disturb: they lead readers on “fatal paths”’.<sup>62</sup> The labyrinth which forms the narrative is for the most part explored in the prologue and epilogue incidents, and the twists and turns of the story between those two points. *Atomised* is a perfect example of the interweaving of many stories to form a complex web of narration through which readers have to navigate themselves, coming across many dead ends and finally encountering an end which could very well be another beginning. The labyrinth aspect of the characters, their ability to constantly seem transparently comprehensible yet at the same time to mask hidden depths, is made most explicit if we view it in relation to the idea of boundaries proposed by Douglas. The Gothic body is one of transgression and the most basic of these transgressions – to defy meaning – is one which is central to Dystopian texts.

The bodies of Julia and Winston in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* transgress within the scheme of the novel by refusing to submit to the rule of the Party, but more importantly they defy definition on the larger scale. They deny the reader any single interpretation, remaining ambiguous to the very end.

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<sup>62</sup> Botting, *Gothic*, p. 84

But the truly frightening thing was the emaciation of his body. The barrel of the ribs was as narrow as that of a skeleton: the legs had shrunk so that the knees were thicker than the thighs... 'You are rotting away,' he said; 'you are falling to pieces. What are you? A bag of filth. Now turn round and look into that mirror again. Do you see that thing facing you? That is the last man. If you are human, that is humanity. Now put your clothes on again.' (*Nineteen Eighty-Four*, p. 284-285)

This final confrontation with the boundaries of his bodily existence is one of many episodes in the novel which evades definition. The ambiguity and uncertainty which obscure its meaning are Gothic features used to full effect by Orwell. The language used also helps to enforce a Gothic interpretation. Words like 'skeleton' and 'rotting away' are suggestive of decay and death: the threatened Gothic body. Not only are we confronted with an individual in an emaciated state, but we are asked to extend this image to include humanity as a whole, bringing this brutal vision to bear on our own symbolic bodies. Orwell continues this evasive manoeuvring as the narrative nears a conclusion, and Winston and Julia meet for the last time.

She made no response whatever to the clasp of his arm; she did not even try to disengage herself. He knew now what had changed in her. Her face was sallow, and there was a long scar, partly hidden by the hair, across her forehead and temple; but that was not the change. It was that her waist had grown thicker, and, in a surprising way, had stiffened. He remembered how once, after the explosion of a rocket bomb, he had helped to drag a corpse out of some ruins, and had been astonished not only by the incredible weight of the thing, but by its rigidity and awkwardness to handle, which made it seem more like stone than flesh. Her body felt like that. (*Nineteen Eighty-Four*, p. 304-305)



It is not the obvious external changes which focus Winston's attention but rather he finds deeper meaning in the subtle changes to Julia which allow him to liken her to a corpse he once pulled from the rubble. The most shocking element is the link made between the living flesh of Julia and the cold hard qualities of stone. Where she was once defined by her supple shapely body, at the close of the narrative she is reduced to a statue devoid of feeling. Like the Undead of the vampire narratives, she has become a cold and dead version of herself but one required to go on living.

The bodies in the texts, and the body of the text, constantly defy single meaning and challenge the boundaries within which we expect it to operate. This defiance is helped by the editorial notes, appendices and prologues which form a confusing labyrinth around some vague notion of understanding. The Gothic novel, and those of the Dystopian genre, become monsters of the author's creation and spiral out of control to become increasingly undefined. As a parallel to this narrative action, the characters of the text move with the constantly changing storyline to become themselves undefined and monstrous. Alex and his action, Winston in Room 101 and the narrative which encloses these events is pieced together bit by bit and surrounded by the intrusions of an editor/narrator in an attempt to hold the whole together.



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### End of the Labyrinth?

The framing of *Atomised* is the fullest exploration of the narrative of degeneration: the other texts do engage with this idea but are tempered by their relation to the reader.

These fears echo back to nineteenth-century Gothic text which were concerned about the new scientific discoveries of Darwin, which proposed that man was the result of evolutionary developments and had as his decedents both monkey-like creatures and those which resembled fish. The logic of the time posed that if it were possible for man to evolve in this way, it was also possible for him to devolve and return to a primeval position. This was the basis of the theory of Degeneration, Max Nordau's 1895 work of the same name, which was played out in Gothic texts of the nineteenth century and returns to haunt the work of Houellebecq in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

One's position in relation to Houellebecq's 1999 creation is entirely different from that of *Brave New World*, or the other earlier novels. The early twentieth-century novels allow us to be in a position of looking backwards, but *Atomised* looks forward to an uncertain future. In *A Handmaid's Tale*, for instance, reproduction is no simple matter in a textual or physical sense, leading to a narrative which degenerates in reflection of the society of which the narrator is part. The increasingly reluctant narrative also mirrors the state of mind of Offred in her role as reproductive vessel, terrified of the repercussions of her

actions. In *Herland* the loss of the notebooks is a lack felt by Van throughout his narrative, and as such a reflection of the lack he feels in relation to the women of Herland with regard to reproduction and the repercussions for the future. For Alex in *A Clockwork Orange* the concern for his future offspring taps directly into the fear for a future created from the gene pool of the here-and-now of the text. His constant repetition of the unanswered question ‘what’s it going to be then, eh?’ could equally be an expression of his fears for a future heir faced with the same lack of choices that characterised his life.

However, the narrative degeneration of *Atomised* is more fully expressed in the decline of civilisation begun with the lives of Bruno and Michel, and more fully expresses the looming threat of a Gothic Dystopia: ‘While the evolution from animal to human, from savage to modern, had taken place gradually, over an unthinkable span of time, degeneration was rapid and fatal.’<sup>63</sup> As a fast-paced and disruptive narrative, degeneration theory is a reflection of a Gothic narrative structure, referencing the impact of frames and the wandering, transgressive impact of labyrinthine accounts.

Degeneration theory, however, not only reversed the narrative of progress, proposing a negative *telos* of abhumanness and cultural disarray. It also accelerated the pace of the narrative, emphasizing the mutability and flux of human bodies and societies.<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> Hurley, *The Gothic Body*, p. 66

<sup>64</sup> Hurley, *The Gothic Body*, p. 65

As part of the larger ‘narrative’ of human history, Degeneration is a denial of the usual order of things. Within Gothic Dystopias there is space to explore degeneration in the shape of the narrative and the events of the novel, to detail a narrative consumed by misdirection and to reflect on the bodies ensconced in that structure. The narratives remain fixed by their frames and yet out of control at the same time. Such framing devices at the end of the narrative must necessarily change the perspective of events and lead to further questioning and revisiting of past encounters. The energy of these novels, of Gothic Dystopias, is dissipated in the telling and the required re-telling of the story as it looks backwards while pushing the boundaries that lie ahead.

## Chapter Three

### Dark Places

It is a segmented, immobile, frozen space. Each individual is fixed in his place. And, if he moves, he does so at the risk of his life, contagion, or punishment.<sup>65</sup>

This chapter focuses on the cityscapes of Gothic Dystopias, revealing dark secrets about places named ‘Home’ and other such supposed safe-havens. It also engages with the idea of Interfacing Surfaces, explored by Eve Sedgwick, and notions of the symbolism of gardens in Gothic novels, a theory detailed by Robert Miles.

In her 1980 study *The Coherence of Gothic Conventions*, Eve Sedgwick focuses some of her attention on the Gothic landscape as an ‘interfacing surface’ where the danger of the text is to be found. This ‘interfacing surface’ can be either metaphorical or literal, the castles and monasteries of classic Gothic tales, or the symbolic, hidden depths of the self or the text. Remaining within a system produces little threat or danger, but to interact with a new form of living causes ruptures in morality and social order which challenge carefully constructed boundaries. The consequences of such interaction in Gilman’s novel *Herland* also allows a questioning of the categories and boundaries of genre. A

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<sup>65</sup> Michel Foucault, ‘Discipline and Punish’, in Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan, eds, *Literary Theory: An Anthology*, (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), p. 466



collision between the terms ‘Gothic’ and ‘Dystopian’ produces the nightmare vision of a dark future and the loss of the self.

violence seems to pertain much less to a sojourn in the depths of the monastery, convent, inquisition, castle, or hiding place than to an approach – from within or without – to the interfacing surface.<sup>66</sup>

Sedgwick makes the case that it is not the hidden place itself which harbours the threat, but that it is the invasion of such secret spaces that is the catalyst for horror. It is the boundary of the hidden and the seen which poses the most threat, the place where definition breaks down and where there is space for misunderstanding. The crossing of boundaries, the movement from one known and defined place to another known and defined place requires the momentary danger of crossing the unknown.

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**Technological Liminality**

Gothic spaces feature strongly in *Brave New World*, with its emphasis on the threat of technology surrounding the buildings and landscapes of the novel. Chapter One of Huxley’s *Brave New World* begins with a description of the ‘fertilizing room’ within the ‘Central London Hatchery and Conditioning Centre’, focusing on distinctly Gothic elements of the ‘squat grey building’:

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66 Sedgwick, *Gothic Conventions*, p. 24

The enormous room on the ground floor faced towards the north. Cold for all the summer beyond the panes, for all the tropical heat of the room itself, a harsh thin light glared through the windows, hungrily seeking some draped lay figure, some pallid shape of academic goose-flesh, but finding only the glass and nickel and bleakly shining porcelain of the laboratory. Wintriness responded to wintriness. The overalls of the workers were white, their hands gloved with a pale corpse-coloured rubber. The light was frozen, dead, a ghost. Only from the yellow barrels of the microscopes did it borrow a certain rich and living substance, lying along the polished tubes like butter, streak after luscious streak in the long recession down the work tables. (*Brave New World*, p. 1)

The distinct lack of a human presence, a bodily absence, is supplanted by science and the products of laboratories, just like this one, throughout the text, replaced by the ‘luscious’ and ‘living substance’ of shining technology. Unnatural throughout, the room is layered with uncanny references. Despite facing north, the room maintains a tropical temperature throughout the year; the light in the room provides no warmth, only coming alive when in contact with the long rows of microscopes. The light becomes personified, described as ‘harsh and thin’ as it seeks out pale flesh on which to light, but finding only the artificial surfaces of the lab which it succeeds in bringing to life far more easily than the ‘white’ and ‘corpse-coloured’ people working there. When the light touches the whiteness of the human shapes it is described as ‘frozen, dead, a ghost’, taking on the characteristics of those it touches. Once they were warm and vibrant, but now they are a shadow of what was once human, resurrected to wander the earth and turn daylight to wintriness. In contrast, the light touches the lab equipment and from it gains ‘a certain rich and living substance’ as if the tubes and porcelain were more alive than the persons in the room, as

if they were capable of giving life and light where the people were not – and in some ways this is true. Light on the microscopes is described as ‘streak after luscious streak’ in a wonderful description of the lively play of light on a receptive surface and in sharp contrast to the ‘pallid flesh’ which also inhabits this space. The minimal human presence is made even less noticeable by having the workers dressed in deathly white and gloves the colour of death. Considering this is a room for the production of new life, it could not be more dead. The language used to describe the room focuses on the Gothic intentions of this Dystopian vision; ‘cold’, ‘harsh’, ‘pallid’, ‘corpse’, ‘dead’ and ‘ghost’, perversions of life itself. The subversion of all the rules of rationality we associate with light, life and creation has an uncanny effect on the opening scene and continues in the course of the novel, for this is not a text where life is vibrant and spontaneously created, but is controlled and artificial from horrific beginning to horrific end.

The tour party moves on to the next lab in the Hatchery and Conditioning Centre: the Embryo Store.

The temperature was still tropical. They descended into a thickening twilight. Two doors and a passage with a double turn ensured the cellar against any possible infiltration of the day. (*Brave New World*, p. 8)

It is in this subterranean vault that the real horrors lie, away from the light of day and in an atmosphere of suffocating intensity. The events in this room are the pinnacle of the whole process of multiple persons from a single egg. What happens here, Mr Foster observes,



‘brings us at last,’ continued Mr Foster, ‘out of the realm of mere slavish imitation of nature into the much more interesting world of human invention’.

He rubbed his hands. For, of course, they didn’t content themselves with merely hatching out embryos; any cow could do that.

‘We also predestine and condition. We decant our babies as socialised human beings, as Alphas or Epsilons, as future sewage workers or future...Directors of Hatcheries.’ (*Brave New World*, pp. 10-11)

The move beyond the confines of nature is the driving force behind many Gothic texts seeking the power attached to the production of life, for example, the efforts of Victor Frankenstein in Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* (1818) to overcome nature and create life and the desire of Dorian Gray in Oscar Wilde’s *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, to escape the decay of time and thus defeat the cycle of nature. Instead of the natural cycle of life, these embryos are moved on artificial conveyor belts and subjected to varying treatments in order to produce specific types of workers to take their allotted place in society. From before they are ‘born’ each person will have their life mapped out for them based on the treatment they receive in this dungeon.

In Chapter Six, Lenina and Bernard go on a first date together and then make the journey to America and the Savage Reservation to combine the study of the natives with some holiday time together. Lenina finds Bernard a little strange since he seems to want to spend time alone with her rather than with the joys of ‘Electro-Magnetic Golf’. Bernard also has strange notions of the beauty of the natural world, which should have been conditioned out of him in his childhood:



On their way back across the Channel, Bernard insisted on stopping his propeller and hovering on his helicopter screws within a hundred feet of the waves. The weather had taken a change for the worse; a south-westerly wind had sprung up, the sky was cloudy.

‘Look,’ he commanded.

‘But it’s horrible,’ said Lenina shrinking back from the window. She was appalled by the rushing emptiness of the night, by the black foam-flecked water heaving beneath them, by the pale face of the moon, so haggard and distracted among the hastening clouds. (*Brave New World*, p. 80)

For Bernard the stormy sea night holds delightful thrills, for Lenina only the horror of nothingness. The ‘rushing emptiness’ which so appals Lenina is the force of nature which should inspire awe, but for her it rushes in with its emptiness and exposes the hollow centre of her existence, rather than illuminating a fulfilled life. In the face of such wonder the pointlessness of her existence comes crushing down on Lenina and causes her to recoil from that threat in horror. The threateningly Gothic atmosphere of the scene increases the intensity of her feelings, so ‘black’ and ‘empty’ and ‘haggard’, till she can personify the moon as a kind of monstrous figure wandering in the lonely night sky. Like a mud-dwelling creature that had known only the dank darkness and is suddenly thrust into the light and air, she can have no happy ending. To remain in the depths is to know contentment, to be taken or to take yourself out of that environment and into another is to approach a barrier about which one has no knowledge or awareness.

*Brave New World* explores the violence encountered when there is an 'approach to the interfacing surface'.<sup>67</sup> The approach which Bernard makes is one towards realisation but ultimately he fails to fully realise his ambition and is thwarted in his attempts to understand the society in which he lives and to become an integrated member of this world. The ruptures created by Bernard are those which threaten the order of his society but are ultimately repelled when he is able to escape and no longer offer a threat to the interfacing surface of the rules and regulations which hold *Brave New World* together. When Bernard journeys to the reservation and returns with John both their lives are jolted from their comfortable depths of security and ignorance. The caste system also adds an interesting dimension to the idea of depths and surfaces, since the meeting of the high-caste Bernard and the below-caste John is in itself a representation of the problematics of the inside/outside divide as well as the notion of the 'interfacing surface' and this is also an element which must be subdued if the threat of violence is to remain unrealised. John himself displays the only violence of the text and he does so in a context removed from society and in response to the denial of escape. He approaches again and again the limits of what this society will allow and in the end succumbs to the violence which this approach promises. He is unable to continue to live because the ruptures are too great for him to maintain a sense of self in *Brave New World*.

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<sup>67</sup> Sedgwick, *Gothic Conventions*, p. 24

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### **The Threshold of Violence**

The scheme of Gilman's *Herland* focuses on this idea of the 'interfacing surface' as the point of exposure which pushes the narrative forward. When Van and his fellow explorers venture into Herland they represent the force from without, which brings with it the element of difference to this ordered and hidden world. Yet the real violence of the narrative is committed much later in the novel:

Terry put in practice his pet conviction that a woman loves to be mastered, and by sheer brute force, in all the pride and passion of his masculinity, he tried to master this woman. (*Herland*, p. 113)

This is Terry's attempt to approach the literal and symbolic 'interfacing surface'. He has been in Herland a long time and yet still revels in his masculine ideas in relation to these women. He is now married to Alima yet theirs is an unconsummated marriage. It is only when he tries to apply his theories to Alima that he encounters problems: 'Sheer brute force' highlights Sedgwick's theory that such an approach to a liminal space of difference is determined by violence. Terry's desires, the 'pride and passion of his masculinity', drive him from a position of relative harmony toward a point of no return where he damages the male/female relations beyond repair. Terry pushes beyond agreed

boundaries and as he does so his attempt at 'mastery' literally falls flat and is symbolically damaging.

It is the coming together of two very different ideas of existing that leads to the rupture in male/female relations, which remains unresolved until the eventual expulsion of the men from Herland. The male exploration into the territory of these women was far more peaceful than this individual encounter because their activities were strictly controlled and under the direction of the women. Once they became 'civilised' they ceased to be outsiders and were almost considered as part of the community. In this way the violence of Terry now comes from within rather than without, and is therefore all the more horrific to the women of Herland. To begin with it was expected that he could and would behave in such a way, but with the passage of time trust was established and this has led to a feeling of safety; the men became honorary women and were trusted as such. The interfacing surface exists within a scheme of difference, with boundaries that determine 'this' and 'that'. The differences between the men and women had become obsolete in Herland due to the intense focus on the role of parenting and the lack of the male presence; they had become the opposite sides of an all-important equation: mother and father. But the understanding of this naming remained confused, for Herland women only equate sex with the production of children, while for Terry and friends sex is also a form of recreation. It was this hidden and unresolved misunderstanding that led to Terry's downfall.



The sexual act is not what causes his dismissal from Herland, but it is his approach to Alima which shames him. The violence caused by his action is especially turbulent because he seems to approach from both within and without. On the level of understanding and education he approaches from a position within Herlandian society. He knows their history, their customs and the ways of their society, he has become an accepted member of that society – yet he is also very strongly influenced by his early conditioning, believing that ‘a woman loves to be mastered’ despite all current evidence to the contrary. On a symbolic level, he is an outsider to the ‘depths’ of Herland, as all men have been for a very long time. This is an all-woman society which has been able to reproduce without the need for intercourse, without the need for the crossing of that physical boundary of the female body. Alima is not ready for his approach from the threatening position of an unknown quantity, and rather than being able to complete his conquest, he is repelled at her ‘interfacing surface’, at the physical boundaries of her body. He is symbolically, and literally, denied access to the depths which Herland has to offer and his outside influence is rejected.

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### **Supposed Safe Havens**

In Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-Four* the danger lies not only in the secretive nature of the junk shop room where Winston and Julia believe they have found space to be together and escape the constant surveillance, but in the connection it must have with Mr

Charrington; he is the 'interfacing surface' from which the horror springs. Charrington is the meeting point of the two seemingly divided worlds; he seems to be inside the world of safety yet is at the same time part of the outside world from which Winston and Julia seek refuge. It is this close relationship between Charrington and the space which brings the danger for Julia and Winston. Charrington appears to come from a position inside the safety offered by the room, but in reality he is part of the outside, harbouring threat and fatally damaging the sanctity of the junk shop room. Before this point the actions of Winston and Julia seem only to benefit their lives, adding to, more than taking away from, their happiness. But Winston's decision to occupy this room and trust this man mark the turning point in the narrative, where they approach the dangerous point, where they operate beyond the allowed parameters in order to occupy a space which is apart from these rules and expectations. However, the entry of Charrington into the room ends this safety which their secrecy seemed to provide.

On a more literal level, the interfacing surface of the hidden telescreen provides the link between the hidden inside and the threatening outside. Although they believe the room to be safe because it has no telescreen, this is another Gothic complexity in the double-bluff: providing a hiding place for the telescreen behind a seemingly innocent picture. The irony of this hiding place is how near again and again they come to discovering it, as Julia ponders on cleaning behind the picture for bugs, threatening to do it 'some day', but that day never comes. They even take comfort from the picture, as it brings to mind some long forgotten song, all the time not realising what lurks behind such an innocent image of a church. While they remain hidden in their room, hidden in their room is the threat

which they cannot see. Like all other threats, it remains hidden from sight until the very last minute, when the fate of Winston and Julia is already sealed. In the midst of their safe haven, there lurks a threat from the outside: an interfacing surface which allows danger to penetrate to the heart of their space and their relationship. It is via the hidden telescreen that the Thought Police are able to discover Winston's deadly fear of rats, and use this against him in Room 101. But the links between these two rooms are stronger than just the association which the rats facilitate; they mark the beginning and end of the secret life which Julia and Winston construct together.

Both of them knew that it was lunacy. It was as though they were intentionally stepping nearer to their graves. As he sat waiting on the edge of the bed he thought again of the cellars of the Ministry of Love. It was curious how that predestined horror moved in and out of one's consciousness. (1984, p. 146)

The junk shop room is the lunacy to which Winston refers, seeing with alarming clarity the danger in which it places them and yet seeming unable to remove himself from this threat. The connection between the two spaces is most fully understood as an exploration of Sedgwick's idea of an 'interfacing surface'. They would enjoy relative safety if they remained within their allotted space of existence, if they did not challenge order and fulfilled their roles. But to attempt to construct an alternative place of existence, to move toward a place where they decide to rebel is the moment of intense danger. The danger increases for the protagonists as they move towards spending more and more time in the junk shop room, because it brings them closer to spending time in Room 101. They have some awareness of this in the recognition of their moving 'nearer to their graves' but



allow the pleasure to be had in the junk shop room to move the ‘predestined horror’ out of their conscious minds.

The telescreen in the junk shop room is the point of the ‘interfacing surface’, linking them to the horrors that lie beyond their cocoon of safety. The final approach from the inside comes as Winston looks out of the window at a female prole, thinking as he does so of the future.

You were the dead; theirs was the future. But you could share in that future if you kept alive the mind as they kept alive the body, and passed on the secret doctrine that two plus two make four.

‘We are the dead,’ he said.

‘We are the dead,’ echoed Julia dutifully.

‘You are the dead,’ said an iron voice behind them.

They sprang apart. Winston’s entrails seemed to have turned to ice. He could see the white all round the irises of Julia’s eyes. Her face had turned a milky yellow...

‘You are the dead,’ repeated the iron voice.

‘It was behind the picture,’ breathed Julia. (1984, p. 230)

Their much-repeated statement of their corpse status is sharply contrasted by the open threat of the ‘iron voice’. They have moved too close to the ‘interfacing surface’, they have allowed it to hide from them and be witness to their most private moments, and now they have allowed it inside finally to capture them. The threat to the body is not the one that most concerns Winston, because he believes it is his duty to continue to advocate freedom of thought and that he will be able to do that. But the danger he has placed



himself in, because of the space he has chosen to occupy, means that he will in fact fail in his duty to ‘keep alive the mind’.

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### **Detachment and Danger**

In *Atomised* the threat which Michel poses does not come from his in-depth knowledge of the human psyche, but rather from his ability to approach humanity from a position entirely removed from that very race. He examines what makes those around him human, with an ability which is chillingly lacking in humanity. The first hint of Houellbecq’s concern with the ‘interfacing surface’ comes early in *Atomised*, in the incident with Michel and the death of his canary:

He didn’t know what was at the end of the chute. The opening was narrow (though large enough to take the canary). He dreamed that the chute opened onto vast rubbish bins filled with old coffee filters, ravioli in tomato sauce and mangled genitalia. Huge worms, as big as the canary, armed with terrible beaks, would attack the body. Tear off its feet, rip out its intestines, burst its eyeballs. He woke up, trembling; it was only one o’clock. He swallowed three Xanax. So ended his first night of freedom. (*Atomised*, p. 14)

The violence of Michel’s dream, paralleled with the narrative commentary that this was his ‘first night of freedom’, provides a new vantage point from which to assess the seemingly innocuous event of the death of a canary. This seemingly minor incident becomes entirely more significant in light of Sedgwick’s idea that the violence of Gothic

novels comes not from their plunge into the depths of darkness, but from the encounter, from the inside or outside, with some kind of interfacing surface. The freedom which Michel is described as experiencing is not only as a result of leaving his unfulfilling job, but of his insight into himself and his subconscious through the harrowing dream. The darkness of his vision is frightening but also liberating; it is almost an admission of the dark depths into which he is capable of plunging and to which he will delve as the narrative progresses. The unknown destination of the chute is not really the concern which shapes the dream Michel has, but is merely the trigger to his thoughts on where his new, and as yet undefined, research will take him. The ‘mangled genitalia’ of his dream hint at the final destruction of the function of this part of the body; they are no longer required to reproduce and are therefore obsolete. The ‘interfacing surface’ he is approaching is one which leads to the depths of his own humanity and of which he does not know the destination.

Houellebecq further extends this exploration of the ‘interfacing surface’ in the third chapter and establishes it as a major force in the novel:

It is easy to imagine that a fish, bobbing to the surface to gulp the air, sees a beautiful, insubstantial new world. Then it retreats to its world of algae where fish feed on one other. But for a moment it has had a glimpse of a different world, a perfect world – ours. (*Atomised*, p. 22)

The image of the fish is one which serves not only to underpin the theme of approaching and transgressing boundaries, but also highlights the plight of the narrator with the play on words of ‘ours’. Is this perfect world one which belongs to humanity and Michel as a

human being; or is it the future world of the narrator, which belongs to the clones and is perfected through science and technology? The fish could be Michel himself who has seen a higher world via his studies and understanding of the manipulation of human biology, but has chosen to re-engage with the human world by calling his brother and trying to integrate himself in the human race. His boss realises that he has no private life, no existence outside of working in the lab and existing in his lovely apartment, and perhaps this realisation is one that Michel shares and seeks to rectify. Michel has seen the 'beautiful, insubstantial new world' of genetic manipulation and has instead chosen to sink back into the world where the other 'fishes' are. Read in the full knowledge of the text, this extract is the explanation for the whole of the narrative. Michel's story is one of the quest of a man to rediscover his life, to begin to become human again, but it is also the story of this failure and the violence of an encounter with the depths of knowledge as it approaches a turning point in evolution. He is the brilliant scientist tainted by his own experience of life, disappointment and heartache, who turns towards the 'solution' offered by the creations of human clones designed to be without the emotions and feelings which so blighted his life. Tragedy begets tragedy in Michel's personal life and this is reflected in the direction of his research.

Michel's brother Bruno also suffers from an inability to connect with himself or those around him. However, Bruno's problem is the shallowness of his existence, rather than the dangerous depths of understanding and power which Michel possesses and that separate him from his peers. Bruno makes continual attempts to find happiness but is unsuccessful each time:



He hesitated outside the creative writing workshop, then went down to the next floor, where he studied the programme for the water-colour class for about 20 seconds before walking up the steps. The stairway was made up of straight flights each with a curved section in the middle. The steps grew wider towards the middle and narrowed again as one approached the landing. In the curve was a step which was wider than all the others. It was here that Bruno sat, leaning against the wall. He began to feel happy.

As a schoolboy, he would often sit on a step between floors just after class began; these were his rare moments of happiness. Midway between landings, he would lean back against the wall, eyes half-closed, sometimes wide open, and wait...He had stopped wishing, he had stopped wanting, he was nowhere. Slowly, by degrees his spirit soared to a state of nothingness, the sheer joy that comes of not being part of the world. For the first time since he was 13, Bruno was happy.

*(Atomised, pp. 153-154)*

It is in such undefined spaces that Bruno finds his illusive moments of happiness. Not in a crowd or with a special individual, but in a nameless, liminal place. He compares this almost-happy state to those which he enjoyed in his childhood, when he was again able to escape from group activities, which served only to emphasise his loneliness, to inhabit an interval of nothingness, where the world does not intrude and where he can disappear.



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## City Spaces and Home

In Orwell's novel, the spaces and places inhabited by his characters are an important part of the Gothic landscape of the text. The idea of considering the Dystopian vision of George Orwell's city in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* as a Gothic landscape has considerable support within the text. Orwell's novel has the classic features of the stage for a Gothic encounter: the darkly Gothic buildings like the Ministry of Truth; the labyrinthine alleyways where the proles live out their bodily existence; the buildings of the past interacting with and influencing events of the present, such as the junk shop room filled with relics and memories; the dank dungeons of the Ministry of Love and the sullen landscapes of Airstrip One. But I want to take the Gothic elements and reconsider them in light not only of the buildings of the Gothic cityscape, but of these spaces and how they interact with the protagonists in a bodily sense. The notion of supposed safe havens is central to my discussion of these cityscapes, which leads to an exploration of concepts of boundaries.

I quote here from Liliane Weissberg's essay 'Gothic Space': 'A Gothic building, as it survived in its representational form, and as it was represented in fiction, was simply unsuitable for the idea of home.'<sup>68</sup> The spaces which Winston occupies in *Nineteen*

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<sup>68</sup> Liliane Weissberg, 'Gothic Spaces: the political aesthetics of Toni Morrison's *Beloved*', in Sage and Smith, eds, *Modern Gothic a Reader*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1996), pp. 104-120, p. 105

*Eighty-Four* are Gothic by this definition, since none of them have these characteristics of a home, as defined again by Weissberg:

the bourgeois home, as invented in the eighteenth century, drew a clear line between the inside and the outside. Inside one was able to find not only shelter but also thermal content; the inside provided protection against outside spaces filled with potentially hostile forces.<sup>69</sup>

Home offers the crucial element of protection; it is supposed to be a safe haven, a place where the horrors of the world can be kept at bay, and the junk room hideaway offers that illusion to Winston and Julia: they behave in this room as if they were safe from discovery and from the reality of Big Brother. Although Winston's 'home' is actually a dingy flat in Victory Mansions, it is this ancient room which feels most like home to himself and Julia. It appears to have been abandoned in time and suggests to them that they can live the kind of life before telescreens and Big Brother in this little room. They believe that material surroundings can influence the ideological forces that are shaping the rest of their world, and they are deluded into thinking this of their safe haven, although outside forces have a very definite hold on the space via the hidden telescreen. This breakdown of the inside/outside divide between the safety that home is supposed to offer and the threats that the telescreen symbolises, mirrors the later attempt by O'Brien to break down this same divide in a bodily sense during his encounter with Winston in Room 101. This foreshadowing of doom is a typical Gothic device, leading to an increased feeling of insecurity and danger central to the tension in the novel. The fact that the telescreen is able to penetrate the internal space of Winston and Julia, is symbolic

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<sup>69</sup> Weissberg, *Gothic Spaces*, p. 105

not only of the political situation within the novel, but, more importantly for my purposes, this lack of protection offered by the junk shop room from hostile external forces stages the bodily threat faced by Winston and Julia. There is no safe domestic space and they are forced to exist in a space which offers only the illusion of safety.

This idea of protection, of a hidden space, relates to Freud's notion of 'The Uncanny'. His discussion of the German word 'unheimlich' brings out interesting ideas about the term, which is literally translated as 'unhomely'. Part of Freud's conclusion is that 'everything is *unheimlich* that ought to have remained secret and hidden but has come to light'.<sup>70</sup> The unhomely Gothic space of the junk shop room fits this description, since events in that room were intended to remain hidden, to retain their quality of the inside. However, there has been a penetration of that boundary: the secrets of this space have come to light.

The opening cityscape of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is Victory Mansions where Winston exists rather than lives, the unhomely with all its secrets:

these vistas of rotting nineteenth-century houses, their sides shored up with baulks of timber, their windows patched with cardboard and their roofs with corrugated iron, their crazy garden walls sagging in all directions (1984, p. 5)

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<sup>70</sup> Sigmund Freud, 'The Uncanny', in Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan, eds. *Literary theory: an anthology*, (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), pp. 154-167, p. 156



This image of the decay of the city sets the dark tone for the rest of the novel to follow, only lifting slightly in the wildscape when the 'romance' begins. Not only is the city in decay, but it is plagued by some kind of disease which leaves the buildings 'rotting' rather than just old and derelict. The suggestion of something unseen that is behind the rot, the idea of hidden detrimental forces carries throughout the novel. The lack of effective repair to the buildings is also telling, suggestive of a general malaise in society, where care is not lavished on these buildings as places to call home. And this is the first sign of the inappropriate nature of this term 'home' when applied to the living spaces of this Dystopian city. The outside forces of weather and decay have left gaps to the inside of these buildings, which lack adequate repair and therefore no longer repel in order to protect the inhabitants inside.

The notion of 'Home' is also important to the actions in *A Clockwork Orange*, serving as it does to invert the traditional meaning and understanding of such a place. One first encounters the home environment of the writer and his wife through the eyes of Alex the narrator:

we could viddy this cottage fine and clear as I eased up and put the brake on, the other three giggling like bezoomny, and we could viddy the name on the gate of this cottage veshch was HOME, a gloomy sort of name. (*Clockwork Orange*, p. 17)

'Home' is 'a gloomy sort of name' to Alex, without the connotations one would normally expect of a place of refuge. In some respects his description is accurate since this 'home' offers no protection to its inhabitants and is in fact the scene of their suffering and



destruction. The ‘potentially hostile forces’ of the outside world are allowed to enter this space and carry out hideous acts within the very walls which should offer protection and security. This invasion of the domestic space by external forces is later mirrored in the experience of Alex himself:

What it was going to be now, brothers, was homeways and a nice surprise for dadada and mum, their only son and heir back in the family bosom...I very firmly fitted the klook in the lock and turned, then opened up then went in, and there I met three pairs of surprised and almost frightened glassies looking at me, and it was pee and em having their breakfast, but it was also another veck that I had never viddied in my jeezny before, a bolshy thick veck in his shirt and braces, quite at home, brothers, slurping away at the milky chai and munchmunching at his eggweg and toast.  
(*Clockwork Orange*, p. 99)

Again, the idea of the home as a safe haven is distorted, as Alex returns to find his place usurped by this ‘alternative son’ his parents have taken in. This replacement of Alex by his alter-ego renders him homeless and supplementary to requirements; his home no longer belongs to him and is instead filled with this stranger who is ‘quite at home’. The Gothic characteristic of the thwarted family line is neatly echoed in the events of *Clockwork Orange* and intensifies the focus upon the Gothic body as a site where central tensions of the novel are played out in this Dystopian setting. Alex expects that his return to the family home will be welcomed by his parents as some kind of re-establishment of the family line but this ancient approach to notions of family and home is replaced by harsh economics: ‘Well, you see son, Joe’s paid next month’s rent already’ (*Clockwork Orange*, p. 102).

In *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, the other 'home' which Winston inhabits is the room above the junk shop, and this is presented as a vision of how Victory Mansions might have looked in an earlier era. It is a scene from the past, before the city had begun to poison itself and feed on negativity. It is a room of transformations where Julia and Winston are both different and where time seems to have stood still.

In contrast to this scene is the idealised picture of rural life, which is glimpsed in Winston and Julia's journey to the countryside to be together. More secure and less threatening, the wildscape of nature is allowed to operate as a place of the 'natural' where birds sing and the reality of day-to-day living slips into the background. The city and all its constraints fade, offering the possibility of relationships, of human encounters. The decay of the city and its poison is replaced with the illusion of untainted nature and harmony:

Winston picked his way up the lane through dappled light and shade, stepping out into pools of gold wherever the boughs parted. Under the trees to the left of him the ground was misty with bluebells. The air seemed to kiss one's skin. (1984, p. 123)

This vision of Eden is enticing, yet like Julia it holds hidden dangers and cannot be trusted: both have their hidden serpents. The landscape offers the promise of escape from the confines and control of the city, but it is no more safe or unobserved. Julia also seems to offer a form of escape and rebellion, but becomes more like a trap designed to draw out such feelings in response to her physical body. Winston is always conscious that there may be disguised microphones which will betray them, so that even when he is

enthralled with the singing of the thrush he cannot help but relate it to the possibility that they are being overheard, that some member of the Thought Police may also be listening to the wonder of nature. However, the kissing of his skin by the very air itself does not last long for Winston;

Already on the walk from the station the May sunshine had made him feel dirty and etiolated, a creature of indoors, with the sooty dust of London in the pores of his skin. (1984, p. 125)

The taint of the city and all its implications are difficult for Winston to escape. The very contact with wilderness and nature serves to remind him of the fact that he is a city dweller, that this is strange to him and almost not part of his natural state of existence. Sunshine here is given the negative connotations we would usually expect to be associated with the later 'sooty dust of London'. This inversion of expectations works well to make the reader aware that you can take the man out of the city, but you can't take the city out of the man. Winston cannot escape the city in the same way that he cannot escape his destiny once he has made the decision to journey to the countryside to be with Julia. Again the Gothic notion of supposed safe havens is central to the promise of safety which this landscape holds. This is when they both become trapped more deeply than before, and reach the point of no return. From this point Winston's need to see Julia impels him to consider actions he would have previously considered too perilous, thus placing himself in certain danger.

They become more exposed to danger as they decide to inhabit the room above the junk shop. This seems to grow from their need to have a 'room of their own'. The outside of



the wildscape does not satisfy these conditioned city dwellers: they need to have four walls and somewhere to call 'home'. But as Weissberg reminds us, a Gothic building cannot become a home because it offers no protection from the outside. This space which Julia and Winston share cannot ever be the home and the safe haven they desire because it lacks the vital element of security. It does, however, have the enticing characteristic of pretending to be exactly what it is not. It operates as a trap and is perfectly concealed as such. Winston and Julia believe they are safe because the room is old and untouched, but most importantly because it is without a telescreen. However, they are deceived from the outset and never protected from outside hostile forces. Their feelings of safety are emphasised by their actions; Julia paints her face with make-up, and they both strip naked to go to bed. She feels safe enough to wear her femininity openly, wearing make-up and swapping her Party-issue overalls for womanly dresses, and Winston makes himself entirely vulnerable in his naked state.

However, there are Gothic forebodings of doom even in this illusorily safe place. There are constant references to the lunacy of their actions which Winston justifies by saying; 'It was curious how that predestined horror moved in and out of one's consciousness' (1984, p. 146). He is able to block the reality of the situation from his mind to a certain extent but it continues to creep in. By this stage in the narrative, Orwell refers to a 'predestined' horror, one that has become inescapable since they began this course of events. Later in the narrative the link between what is happening now and the eventual fate of the protagonists is further strengthened. A rat is discovered in the room and this sends Winston into hysterics – 'Of all the horrors in the world – a rat' (1984, p. 151).



The horror he feels in this supposed safe haven mirrors his eventual fate at the hands of O'Brien, where the rat again comes to symbolise the horror of the world in which Winston must exist, where such control and knowledge are in the hands of those other than him. Like the telescreen, the rat hides itself within the junk shop room, an invisible and terrifying presence within the supposed safety of this space. These feelings of horror are also about the failure of their little room to maintain the inside/outside divide, to keep the world at bay and allow them safety to build a human relationship. This breakdown of the boundaries of the public space of the city and the private sphere of the home is echoed in the failure of Winston to maintain the integrity of his skin when in Room 101, to defend the boundaries of his body while under threat. The rat threatens to eat into his body, to pierce his skin and destroy that boundary. And in the junk shop room it warns of the same invasion of horrors.

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### **Bodies and Spaces**

Gothic Dystopias concern themselves with individual bodies, but also with the social body: the mass created from many individuals. Kelly Hurley explores the position of the individual in the Gothic city in her study *The Gothic Body*:

There is no such thing as coincidence; accidental meetings serve eventually to reveal that all subjects are interrelated, and that their every action, however secretly performed, will have very visible consequences, punishments, rewards.<sup>71</sup>

In such a vast city as Airstrip One, it would be logical to assume that there is limited interconnectivity between the masses of individuals who live there. Yet the actions of Julia and Winston seem to belie this very idea. Their planned and contrived ‘accidental’ meetings in the crowded city streets are exactly that: engineered coincidences. They appear to be acting just like any other person on the lanes and roads of the vast metropolis, yet they have in fact planned the whole meeting and it has been made possible by the very nature of the city itself. These secrets, which they attempt to bury throughout the novel, are eventually discovered. It is the labyrinthine city which makes their concealment possible at all. The consequences of such actions are in the end physically marked on the bodies of Julia and Winston. Their actions, having been monitored over a long period of time, eventually catch up on them in Room 101. It is in the aftermath of this time of consequences that we see the visible results:

She made no response whatever to the clasp of his arm; she did not even try to disengage herself. He knew now what had changed in her. Her face was sallow, and there was a long scar, partly hidden by the hair, across her forehead and temple; but that was not the change. It was that her waist had grown thicker, and, in a surprising way, had stiffened...It occurred to him that the texture of her skin would be quite different from what it had once been. (1984, p. 304)

This description is in contrast to their previous secret and ‘coincidental’ meeting:

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<sup>71</sup> Hurley, *The Gothic Body*, p. 165

The girl's shoulder, and her arm right down to the elbow, were pressed against his. Her cheek was almost near enough for him to feel its warmth. She had immediately taken charge of the situation, just as she had done in the canteen. She began speaking in the same expressionless voice as before, with lips barely moving, a mere murmur easily drowned by the din of voices and the rumbling of the trucks.....It was almost time for Winston and the girl to part. But at the last moment, which the crowd still hemmed them in, her hand felt for his and gave it a fleeting squeeze.

It could not have been ten seconds, and yet it seemed a long time that their hands were clasped together. (1984, pp. 121-122)

This earlier encounter has all the passion, fear and excitement of a forbidden act. They rely on the buzz of the city to disguise their carefully planned meeting. The noise of the trucks covers the exchange of words to arrange the next meeting and the crush of bodies disguises their own bodily encounter. Everything is fleeting and hidden, their bodies touch yet they cannot openly respond for fear of discovery. The later meeting has none of that tension: they meet openly in the park having no need to hide, as all their secrets have already been discovered. Although their bodies can now meet without fear, there is no desire to do so. Their time in the subterranean vault of Room 101 has left them looking and feeling like members of the Undead. They have been resurrected, brought back from the dead, but only into a meaningless existence where nothing elicits emotion any more.

The vast metropolis of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* allows Julia and Winston seemingly to melt into the darkness of this Gothic landscape. However, the Dystopian elements of constant



surveillance and control mean that these unhomely Gothic buildings never keep their promise of safety. In a Dystopian Gothic city there are only spaces of dubious intent, not houses to be made homes. Sedgwick makes the case that 'A prison which has neither inside nor outside is self-evidently one from which there is no escape...but it is also one to which there is no access'<sup>72</sup> and this is the situation of Winston's existence, emphasised by his time in Room 101. The impossibility of access is the most telling Gothic trait not only in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* but also in the other Dystopian texts under discussion. There is a lack of accessibility in the lives of all the protagonists which keeps them imprisoned in their own situations and apart from those around them. They are never able to step outside of their lives and gain insight into the lives they are living.

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### Hidden Threats

In his *Gothic Writing 1750-1820, A Genealogy*, Robert Miles explores the symbolism of the garden in Gothic novels as a place where the nature/nurture debate is played out. In *Herland* the landscape that the three explorers enter is tended as a garden, rather than a wild landscape which yields fruit with little human intervention, and this mirrors the engineered method in which the women are able to reproduce themselves and their culture. The 'state of perfect cultivation' which the garden enjoys is symbolic of the unnatural 'perfection' of the land and its population as a whole, where everyone is

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<sup>72</sup> Sedgwick, *Gothic Conventions*, p. 26



content in their place and peace rules. Miles also discusses gardens as a place where conflicts can be displayed. 'A basic structural principle of the Gothic garden is to place in apposition two contrary visions, the "ideal" and its antithesis (or "shadow").'<sup>73</sup> The landscape of *Herland* offers the opposing landscapes to those to which the men initially travel, while they are still in the 'real world', the 'land of men', and in contrast the 'dark tangle of rivers, lakes, morasses and dense forest' (*Herland*, p. 2) of the hidden landscape inhabited only by women. Although untamed and unmanageable, it is difficult to decide if this is the ideal, or if the overtended and perfectly surreal landscape of the women of Herland is the 'shadow'. What is simpler to ascertain is the connection between an ideal garden and an ideal woman. Both explore the dichotomy of the nature/nurture debate and require that the landscape of *Herland* be read metaphorically in relation to the women who live there and tend that land.

Sullen, shadowy and secretive as a labyrinth, the landscape of *Herland* creates a dark, foreboding Gothic atmosphere as the three men 'got farther and farther upstream', with here and there an unexpected long spur running out from the big mountains beyond...' (*Herland*, p. 2). The effect of such a landscape is to suggest an air of menace; even the land itself seems determined to surprise them, as the long spur 'unexpectedly' makes an appearance. And within this dangerous landscape lies the gravest danger of all: a race of women who live without men, a place where the guides claim 'it was dangerous, deadly, they said, for any man to go' (*Herland*, p. 2). The unknown otherness of the women of Herland is the draw for Van and his companions, sensing that 'there was something

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<sup>73</sup> Robert Miles, *Gothic Writing 1750-1820, A Genealogy*. (London: Routledge, 1993), p. 83

attractive to a bunch of unattached young men in finding an undiscovered country of a strictly Amazonian nature' (*Herland*, p. 5). They expect these women to be unlike any other they have known, shrouded in myth and mystery as they are. There is also the lure of scientific discovery which interests these explorers: not only do they want to find the women in expectation of their sexual availability, but they also want to make a name for themselves as explorers via this expedition. These women are virgin territory as a discovery and as a conquest.

When the companions reach their destination, they provide the reader with a first glimpse of Herland:

It appeared well forested about the edges, but in the interior there were wide plains, and everywhere parklike meadows and open places. (*Herland*, p. 9)

– a land in a state of perfect cultivation, where even the forests looked as if they were cared for; a land that looked like an enormous park, only it was even more evidently an enormous garden. (*Herland*, p. 10)

The tended nature of the landscape is inescapable and is in sharp contrast to the 'crowding forest' (*Herland*, p. 9) from which it rises. This is a land where nature has been tamed and harnessed, where there is harmony with all things in the natural world, including, we discover, the women themselves. This lush, fertile land is also symbolic of the women themselves, and when the men arrive in *Herland* and invade the rich forests and the undulating plains, they are also invading the physical spaces of these women.

Robert Miles further argues that ‘The Gothic garden is always (at least implicitly) stretched between two states, one where fruition is promised, and one beset by denial’.<sup>74</sup> Just as the narrative structure outlined in the previous chapter had direct links to bodily concerns, so it is that the landscape of *Herland* also connects metaphorically to the bodies of these women and the threats they face. Within the cultivated landscape of *Herland*, there is much promise of fruition and fertility, in the women, in the fruit bearing trees and flowering crops, but the landscape also houses foreboding buildings which offer only denial of liberty and desire.

When they are confronted by a large mass of Herland women in the first town they enter, Van and companions allow themselves to be led by these women until ‘A large building opened before us, a very heavy thick-walled impressive place, big, and old-looking; of gray stone, not like the rest of the town’ (*Herland*, p. 18). Such a building is entirely out of character with the land they have just passed through, with its pastel-coloured houses and tenderly cared for landscape. The three men make every protestation imaginable to avoid being taken into such a building, fearing that they may never get out again. It is the building itself which has this dramatic impact, since they have been calm in following the women until this point. The fact that it is so different from the rest of the buildings seen so far is the most powerful warning to the three explorers. it is ‘old-looking’ and with a purpose obvious from its ‘heavy thick walls’. The description is reminiscent of the Gothic castles in which maidens are imprisoned: old, dank castles which have walls thick

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<sup>74</sup> Miles, *Gothic Writing 1750-1820*, p. 83



enough to form impressive dungeons. In view of the lack of options the men decide to try to break free from the crowd of women and escape being confined in the building. However they are quickly overcome ‘womanfully’ (*Herland*, p. 20) and anaesthetised to prevent further struggle. The realisation of their situation is gradual and when they awake from their anaesthetic, the physical location of their imprisonment is revealing:

This was not the pink-walled town we had so rashly entered the day before. Our chamber was high up, in a projecting wing of a sort of castle, built out on a steep spur of rock. Immediately below us were gardens, fruitful and fragrant, but their high walls followed the edge of the cliff which dropped sheer down, we could not see how far. The distant sound of water suggested a river at the foot. (*Herland*, p. 25)

They have been moved to a much more secure location, high in a castle surrounded by walls – a fortress. The reversal of expectations is that we find three men trapped in a ‘sort of castle’ with women as their captors of unknown intent. Gothic convention dictates that it is the virginal maidens who find that circumstances and evil villains conspire to remove their liberty and find them ensconced in foreboding castles. But even though there are elements of the decaying mansion in the castle in which the men are held, the ‘fruitful and fragrant’ gardens below have an ironic edge suggestive of a peace and tranquillity which the men no longer enjoy. The men had no qualms about entering the metaphorical ‘pink-walled town’, little realising the consequences. This blind incursion into the female territory and its consequences are later mirrored in the actions of Terry when he attempts to rape Alima and they are expelled from Herland as a result.



Both encounters begin with intentions of discovery and mastery, but end in defeat and humiliation at the hands of these extraordinary women.

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### **Inner Darkness**

The exploration of Dark Places is a literal and narrative discovery, revealing the internal spaces of the characters themselves. The Gothic trait of danger emanating from the inside is explored in the Dystopian text, where the landscape poses a threat but one that is equalled by the protagonists themselves. The spaces and places of the Gothic Dystopia are most dangerous when undefined, shrouded in mystery and difficult to determine. It is the striving for understanding which drives the journeys within the landscapes of these novels.

Not to know if you inhabit a place of safety or of threat is to be in a constant state of fear and insecurity. Such Gothic terrors not only come from time spent in dark castles or dungeons, but from time in dark laboratories or run-down city apartments, where the usual comforts are denied and doubts creep in. Liminality is a place of undefined potential and for Gothic Dystopias this surfaces again and again as potential for harm. The bodies occupying such spaces know only unease and tension, unable to define inside from out and constantly on the cusp of approaching some yet more undefined space.

## Chapter Four

### Connectedness and the Loss of the Individual

Men were given their individuality as unique in each case, different to all others, so that it might all the more surely be made the same as any other...The unity of the manipulated collective consists in the negation of each individual: for individuality makes a mockery of the kind of society which would turn all individuals to the one collectivity.<sup>75</sup>

This chapter explores uncanny connections between characters in Gothic Dystopias and the implication of this form of doubling on individual bodies and the recurring events in the novel as a whole. In Gothic texts of the nineteenth century the concern surrounding the coherence of the individual self began to intensify and led to explorations on the themes of doubling and its implications for selfhood. If there were two texts which embodied this debate on doubling they would be Stevenson's *Dr Jeckyll and Mr Hyde* or perhaps Wilde's decadent exploration of the fragmentation of self, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. In his essay 'The Uncanny', Freud offers exploration not only of what is uncanny, but also of the function of doubles, which he defines as

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<sup>75</sup> Adorno and Horkheimer, *Dialectic of the Enlightenment* (first published as *Dialektik der Aufklärung*, New York, Social Studies Association, 1944; English translation first published New York: Jerder & Herder, 1972; reprinted London: Verso, 1997), p. 13

those unfulfilled, but possible futures to which we still like to cling in phantasy, all those strivings of the ego which adverse external circumstances have crushed, and all our suppressed acts of volition which nourish in us the illusion of Free Will.<sup>76</sup>

It is the reference to the illusion of 'Free Will' which links the ideas of Freud to the doubles to be found in the Gothic Dystopias of this thesis, since they focus not only on the recurrence of doubles of self but also doubles of situation. Protagonists revisit events and each time believe they can affect the outcome to their advantage. While the doubling of characters and the exploration of alter egos is an integral part of the Dystopian novel, such novels of future possibility are also strongly shaped by the recurrence of situations where the characters appear trapped, doomed to revisit situations again and again. While it is certainly the case that literature in general is based upon retelling and repetition, the focus on death and the way in which this certainty haunts the narratives in question allows a darker presence to inform the retelling and the doubling in Gothic Dystopias. This chapter explores the Gothic connections which operate between Dystopian characters and events with uncanny results. In *Herland* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four* the three characters in triangles of doubling represent the possibilities for existence which operate to expose the 'possible futures' of the characters involved, while Orwell also explores the illusion of free will through Winston's relationship to O'Brien and Julia. For Offred in *A Handmaid's Tale* the secrets through which she psychologically doubles herself allow her to experience an uncanny kind of freedom, while she is undermined by the physical doubling which the structures of her society impose upon her. In both *Atomised* and *A Clockwork Orange* the doubling of the spaces and events of the

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76 Sigmund Freud, 'The Uncanny', in Rivkin and Ryan, *Literary Theory: An Anthology*, (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), pp. 154-167, p. 163



characters operates to interrogate the ‘possible futures’ which these Dystopian texts explore.

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### Triangles of Doubling

In *The Coherence of Gothic Conventions*, Sedgwick explores the ambiguity of doubling relationships, especially between two male characters:

The tableau that is seen as embodying primal human essence or originary truth: the tableau of two men chasing one another across a landscape. It is importantly undecidable in this tableau, as in many others like it in Gothic novels, whether the two men represent two consciousnesses or only one; and it is importantly undecidable whether the bond...is murderous or amorous.<sup>77</sup>

A recurring characteristic of Gothic Dystopias is the endless chase to which Sedgwick refers, with the ambiguity surrounding the outcome of the pursuit and the connections between those involved. The danger inherent in this image is strongly Gothic,<sup>78</sup> lending itself to the exploration of connections between the individuals involved, while the unknown outcome allows a Dystopian reading to centre around an unknown future. As well as the homoerotic leanings of the relationship between Winston Smith and O’Brien, there is another doubling in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* which is worthy of comment. Not only are there parallels between O’Brien and Winston, but also between Julia and O’Brien to

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<sup>77</sup> Sedgwick, *Gothic Conventions*, p. ix

<sup>78</sup> for example, *Caleb Williams*, by William Godwin, 1796



the extent that they sometimes appear to be two halves of the one whole. They can also operate on the level of rivals, thus strengthening the triangle which links all three as lovers or rivals. Sedgwick herself examines these ties in her study *Between Men*:

In any erotic rivalry, the bond that links the two rivals is as intense and potent as the bond that links either of the rivals to the beloved: that the bonds of 'rivalry' and 'love', differently as they are experienced, are equally powerful and in many senses equivalent.<sup>79</sup>

This connection between any two in the triangle is strengthened by the existence of the third and their contrasting yet dependent bond. I would argue that the rivalry exists between O'Brien and Julia for the 'love object' of Winston. However, neither of them 'love' Winston in any conventional sense, but rather they fight to control access to him and this draws all three tightly together in a bond of triangulation. For Julia the love of sex and rebellion draws her to Winston but for O'Brien the attraction is the ability he has to control and manipulate Winston in order to remove the third member of the triangle and all that she represents; any form of desire. Instead he wishes to reduce Winston to a compliant body, unconnected with those around him or his own desires.

Through the use of alter-egos and uncanny connections between characters, Orwell explores the relationships between the three main protagonists in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, unravelling the human body through the use of this classic Gothic device.

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<sup>79</sup> Eve Sedgwick, 'Between Men', in Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan, eds, *Literary Theory: an anthology*. (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), pp. 969-712, p. 708

Despite these fantasies Winston is in fact rather mild and hesitating, quite prepared to give Julia the lead in their relationship. His fatal characteristic is not his latent sadism but the stronger reverse side of his personality, his masochistic admiration for O'Brien.<sup>80</sup>

The triangle that operates to link Winston to both Julia and O'Brien is well articulated in the sense of a 'reverse side' of Winston's personality. Like Jekyll and Hyde, Winston's lover and his adversary could be said to operate to expose the two sides of his personality. To Julia he appears to have hostile intent and to be distrustful of her in the beginning, yet he has no such qualms about O'Brien. Despite his protestations of revolutionary intent, he is drawn to the powerful figure from the Inner Party based only on some instinctive link or understanding. But the relationship is more complex than this simple doubling, since Julia and O'Brien also have a linked relationship, as discussed above.

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### **Ambiguous Connections**

In his capacity as the narrator of *Herland*, Van is able to present himself as the rational middle ground, the male figure that falls between the two extremes of Jeff and Terry. He quotes the women of Herland in support of his claim to be the one whom the women prefer: 'We like you the best,' Somel told me, 'because you seem more like us' (*Herland*, p. 76), implying that they and he are the norm to which all others are measured. Not

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80 Mason Harris, 'From History to Psychological Grotesque: The Politics of Sado-Masochism in Nineteen Eighty-Four' in Peter Buitenhuis and Ira B. Nadel, eds. *George Orwell: a reassessment*, (London: Macmillan, 1988), pp. 32-50, p. 40

content simply to imply that he is the superior man in a land of women, he goes on to explain that ‘When a man has nothing to give a woman is dependent on his personal attraction, his courtship is under limitations’ (*Herland*, p. 76), thus making it clear that it is his ‘personal attraction’ which makes him the popular choice in Herland. By positioning himself as somewhat of an insider, Van is attempting to give an account with more ‘insight’ than either Jeff or Terry could claim to. But his failed efforts at subtlety in broadcasting his favoured position make his claims to a scientific and rational enquiry somewhat dubious.

The women may have different names, but Alima, Ellador and Celis are replicas of each other in thought and experience.

What left us even more at sea in our approach was the lack of any sex-tradition. There was no accepted standard of what was “manly” and what was “womanly”.

When Jeff said, taking the fruit basket from his adored one, “A woman should not carry anything,” Celis said, “Why?” with the frankest amazement... “Does it work?” asked Alima, in her keen, swift way. “Do all men in all countries carry everything? Or is it only in yours?”

“Don’t be so literal,” Terry begged lazily. “Why aren’t you willing to be worshipped and waited on? We like to do it.”

“You don’t like to have us do it to you,” she answered.

“That’s different,” he said, annoyed; and when she said, “Why is it?” he quite sulked, referring her to me, saying, “Van’s the philosopher.”

Ellador and I talked it all out together...(*Herland*, p. 79)



While Van makes every effort to find distinction between his own partner, Ellador, and the other two women, this conversation highlights their shared expectations and outlook. One has to read carefully to see the change in female speaker, since all three offer the same perspective on the incident. This is a recurring element of the narrative and begins when the men first encounter the three girls when they land, and each of them shows the same ability to outsmart and outmanoeuvre the three explorers. The three women are a further experience of doubling in the way explored by Sedgwick in *Coherence of Gothic Conventions* and *Between Men*. As the three men could be seen as alter egos that combine to form one male consciousness, so the women are repetitions of the same consciousness, the mass, shared one of Herland society. This formulation offers a complex vision of doubling in which divided selves operate to illuminate difference and also to highlight a loss of individuality. This kind of ambiguity is a trademark of the Gothic tradition and also maintains the Dystopian focus on uncertainty as a key element of narrative.

The magnetism that surrounds two opposing forces is recognised by Van as part of the reason why two men as different as Terry and Jeff should be able to be so close in such difficult circumstances. Like two halves of the one whole, they represent the possibilities for machismo and emotionalism, with Van in the middle as the rational aspect of masculinity. The three of them are only able to make it to Herland by combining their skills, and their survival depends on their ability to draw on each other for strengths they do not themselves possess individually. As the narrator Van is able to position himself as superior to his two companions, 'I think I had the habit of using my brains in regard to



behaviour rather more frequently than either of them' (*Herland*, p. 105), believing that he is able to understand all their idiosyncrasies because he is not subject to such irrational behaviour. And yet, for all his supposed superiority and intellectual ability, Van is unable to predict or stop the course of events which Terry sets in motion and which is the downfall of them all. With all his 'brains' Van is powerless to control the more base emotions which dominate in Terry, nor can he rationalise the overly emotional responses of Jeff.

A revealing Gothic trait of *Herland* is the uncanny doubling of the characters of Van and his companions. Within their threesome, it is Van who positions himself as the observer, the outsider, the narrator, able to provide a detached perspective on events. This positioning further strengthens the link between Jeff and Terry as alter egos. While Terry feels most strongly his imprisonment and the constraints of the society in which he has found himself, the parallel between himself and Jeff makes his suffering more poignant. The contrast in their characters is established early in the narrative, as the men set out to explore and find this hidden land of women.

Jeff was a tender soul. I think he thought that country – if there was one – was just blossoming with roses and babies and canaries and tidies, and all that sort of thing.

And Terry, in his secret heart, had visions of a sort of sublimated summer resort – just Girls and Girls and Girls – and that he was going to be – well, Terry was popular among women even when there were other men about, and it's not to be wondered that he had pleasant dreams of what might happen. I could see it as he lay there, looking at the long blue rollers slipping by, and fingering that impressive moustache of his. (*Herland*, p. 6)

As narrator, Van gives his insight into the characters of his two companions as opposites to each other. Terry is the epitome of hegemonic masculinity, all sexuality and imposing power, while Jeff idealises the women he expects to find, and puts them on pedestals. However, Jeff's heavenly vision of these women is not altogether one of pristine innocence. Even with the images of flowers and tweeting birds, the word which introduces and therefore influences them all is 'blossoming', suggestive of youthful women and virginity ripe for exploitation. To blossom is to be reaching a peak of beauty and fertility, just like the rose and the singing canaries and the next step from this is the product of that blossoming: new life. Jeff's intentions are to be the man to take the blooming to its logical conclusion of children, although he couches that intention in charming language. He is not so different, after all, from the more explicit form of masculinity that Terry embodies and they both operate in a secretive manner with regard to revealing their true intentions towards the women. Jeff disguises his intentions via language, while Terry relies only on silence and the mask of adventure.

The relationship between Van and his companions is developed further by Gilman as the men begin to plan their expedition:

Terry's idea seemed to be that pretty women were just too much game and homely ones not worth considering.

It was really unpleasant sometimes to see the notions he had.

But I got out of patience with Jeff, too. He had such rose-coloured halos on his womenfolks. I held a middle ground, highly scientific, of course, and used to argue learnedly about the physiological limitations of the sex. (*Herland*, p. 8)

Each of the men engages with the presence of the females in a different fashion, but ultimately each reaction is against the female body. Terry categorises the women according to his notion of female beauty, deciding which ones are to have fun with and which are to be ignored. This cataloguing method is much derided by Van and yet he himself has a similar attitude to women, but disguises it behind the mask of 'science'. However, Van is just as negative towards the attitude of Jeff, whom he sees as holding unrealistic opinions of the women, turning them into angels and consequently bestows them with an unearthly and spiritual presence only. It is amusing when Van turns his attentions to his own ideas on 'womenfolk' and decides that he holds the rational, scientific 'middle ground' between the two extremes of his companions. He describes his own opinions as 'learned' and 'highly scientific', rather than the 'unpleasant' and 'rose-coloured' ideas that Terry and Jeff have in relation to women. He believes that the study of the new science of sociology, combined with an interest in 'science in general', makes him the infallible neutral point between the two extremes. What he fails to realise is that his position is only another way of registering the otherness of women. Terry sees their otherness in a highly sexualised manner, while Jeff believes that their wonder comes from their being other to him and Van allows his pseudo-scientific views to dictate that the women are other due to the physical make-up of their bodies. These conclusions are arrived at individually, but together they provide a complete picture of the otherness of women and add to the intrigue of the expedition they are engaged upon.



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## Chance Encounters

Winston's relationship with O'Brien seems to begin with a chance meeting during the Two Minutes Hate:

Momentarily he caught O'Brien's eye. O'Brien had stood up. He had taken off his spectacles and was in the act of re-settling them on his nose with his characteristic gesture. But there was a fraction of a second when their eyes met, and for as long as it took to happen Winston knew – yes, he knew! – that O'Brien was thinking the same as himself. An unmistakable message had passed. It was as though their two minds had opened and the thoughts were flowing from one into the other through their eyes. 'I am with you,' O'Brien seemed to be saying to him. 'I know precisely what you are feeling. I know all about your contempt, your hatred, your disgust. But don't worry, I am on your side!'*(Nineteen Eighty-Four, p. 19)*

This connection happens early in the novel and haunts Winston throughout the unfolding events. The action also has elements of the uncanny in the way that the familiar resettling of his glasses by O'Brien this time takes on a surreal sense for Winston. The gesture is 'characteristic' yet its implications are far reaching. The action is described as 'momentary' yet takes on great significance for Winston when he believes he discerns a connection in the 'fraction of a second' during which he catches O'Brien's eye. They seem to transcend the confines of their physical bodies and become linked in some higher spiritual way that allows each to see into the other's mind. However, the language



surrounding Winston's interpretation of these events leads one to doubt his conclusions. Winston initially describes this epiphany as 'an unmistakable message' but later expresses this sentiment in less sure terms: 'O'Brien seemed to be saying to him'. This uncertainty, coupled with the fact that the whole event is over in seconds, undermines Winston's reading of events. His certainty about the interaction seems to stem not from the actual events, but more from the 'masochistic admiration'<sup>81</sup> that he has for O'Brien. His ardent desire for a Brotherhood of resistance and his dogged determination for its leader to be O'Brien, seems to lend undue significance to ordinary events for Winston. The simple eye contact which he is describing becomes a magical meeting of minds for Winston in his search for a resistance to Big Brother. He even fails to see the warning in the naming of the resistance as 'The Brotherhood' when its function is rebellion against the very same larger sense of Brotherhood embodied in Big Brother.

But Winston does feel himself connected in the strongest sense to O'Brien and this builds throughout the novel, even to the extent that Winston dreams about him:

He could not now remember whether it was before or after having the dream that he had seen O'Brien for the first time; nor could he remember when he had first identified the voice as O'Brien's. But at any rate the identification existed. It was O'Brien who had spoken to him out of the dark.

Winston had never been able to feel sure – even after this morning's flash of the eyes it was still impossible to be sure – whether O'Brien was a friend or an enemy. Nor did it even seem to matter greatly. There was a link of understanding between them, more important than affection or partisanship. 'We shall meet in the place where there is no darkness,' he had said. Winston did

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<sup>81</sup> Harris, 'Psychological Grotesque' p. 40

not know what it meant, only that in some way or another it would come true. (*Nineteen Eighty-Four*, p. 27)

He identifies O'Brien as the speaker in his dream for no other reason than a vague sense that he knew it was him. Like their initial meeting, Winston relies on impressions rather than facts and builds a consciousness which surrounds this constructed version of O'Brien and what he might mean. Winston cites only their connection as important and not what O'Brien's intentions towards him might be. He is drawn to O'Brien for inexplicable reasons. But he does believe that what he has with O'Brien is more important than any kind of affection that Julia might give him. The understanding he thinks he shares with O'Brien is more highly prized than the relationship with Julia where he never manages to achieve the same kind of connection, as they continually talk at cross purposes and misunderstand each other's intentions. Between himself and O'Brien Winston sees an identification, however imaginary, believes that they have some similar purpose or intention. This is evident since they both seek to find the 'true' Winston Smith but for different purposes. The reason Winston does not know if O'Brien is his friend or his enemy is because he himself is undecided as to what his own intentions are. He is drawn unconsciously to O'Brien in seeking answers to the riddle of life under the rule of Big Brother, and the answers are provided to him, although not in the form he expected.

This connection between Winston and O'Brien continues to grow in strength until they meet for the first time at O'Brien's home and he questions the pair as to their willingness to adhere to the demands of the Brotherhood:

‘You are prepared, the two of you, to separate and never see one another again?’

‘No!’ broke in Julia.

It appeared to Winston that a long time passed before he answered. For a moment he seemed even to have been deprived of the power of speech. His tongue worked soundlessly, forming the opening syllables of first one word, then of the other, over and over again. Until he had said it, he did not know what he was going to say.

‘No,’ he said finally. (*Nineteen Eighty-Four*, p. 180)

O’Brien at this point appears to exercise enough control on Winston that he is almost unable to think and speak for himself. Rather than instantly agreeing with Julia, he not only struggles to decide what he wants, but also seems to have even lost the power to articulate those thoughts. He tries again and again to say the words but he does not know what words he is going to say: until they become sound he has no knowledge of what might come from his mouth. He has been ‘deprived of the power of speech’, not that he has lost it, but that it has been taken from him. This is more evidence of the special connection that he shares with O’Brien, strong enough not only that they can see into each other’s minds, but that O’Brien is able to exert a measure of control over Winston’s. This is only the beginning of O’Brien’s ability to bring forth a side of Winston that no-one else has access to, to know him in a way that has been hidden in Winston’s own narrative account of events.

Like Dracula with Renton, O’Brien seems to hold an inexplicable power over Winston which grips his body and makes it conform to his wishes:



A wave of admiration, almost worship, flowed out from Winston towards O'Brien. For the moment he had forgotten the shadowy figure of Goldstein. When you looked at O'Brien's powerful shoulders and his blunt-featured face, so ugly and yet so civilised, it was impossible to believe that he could be defeated. There was no stratagem that he was not equal to, no danger that he could not foresee. (*Nineteen Eighty-Four*, pp. 182-183)

Winston makes this statement after he has sworn to do abhorrent things in the name of the Brotherhood, to kill and maim in the name of a political cause. He claims to be fighting against a cruel and totalitarian government and yet his pledges to this new association seem to match that cruelty. He is also told that members of this Brotherhood in fact work alone and know nothing about each other or the larger workings of the group, so that he will never achieve the sense of camaraderie that is lacking in the workings of the Party. His willingness to accept such harsh conditions is attributable to the influence of O'Brien and the spell he has cast over him. He takes on a mystical invincibility for Winston, as an unbeatable force in the world but for good rather than evil. Winston also bestows on O'Brien the ability to predict future events, to know what will happen and to be in control of events in a way that reflects the Party slogan: 'He who controls the past, controls the future.' Winston believes that O'Brien can see what will happen and his own situation is a case in point. But all these glaring defects are missed by Winston in the same way as he misses the brutality of the conditions he agrees to in order to join the Brotherhood.

This moment of confrontation with the brutality to which O'Brien is asking them to commit is also the first time that Julia has spoken during this encounter and it is at a point



of significance for her – the question of whether politics is more important than the physical relationship she has with Winston. But the question has less significance for the revolutionary Winston. He has been more than happy to agree to all of O'Brien's demands so far and the suggestion is that he would have simply said 'yes' to this question if Julia had not spoken up. The struggle between Julia and O'Brien for the fate of Winston begins here as his rivals operate as two alternatives for Winston: Julia and the non-cerebral relationship to life that she offers, and O'Brien and the interrogation of everything that he will eventually put Winston through. Does Winston want to aspire to the unthinking happiness of the proles, or the intellectual battle promised by Goldstein's book? This is a further formulation of the triangle of desire which pulls Winston in different directions, causing his identity to rupture. What he fails to realise, to understand and experience in his own lifetime, is his own prophecy: that the hope lies with the proles and not in textual entrapment.

Winston's initial contact with Julia and with O'Brien is curiously similar, in that he is drawn to them both for vague and inexplicable reasons. His first encounter with Julia is imagined as fraught with dangers:

But this particular girl gave him the impression of being more dangerous than most. Once when they passed in the corridor she had given him a quick sidelong glance which seemed to pierce right into him and for a moment had filled him with black terror. The idea had even crossed his mind that she might be an agent of the Thought Police. That, it was true, was very unlikely. Still, he continued to feel a peculiar uneasiness, which had fear mixed up in it as well as hostility, whenever she was anywhere near him. (*Nineteen Eighty-Four*, p. 12)

Winston's fear is irrationally directed at this individual woman, in the face of constant surveillance from the Thought Police and the Telescreens. The individual has become the face of fear and the method of control; she both threatens and is herself threatened. It is the body of Julia which Winston associates with her ability to terrify, symbolised by 'a narrow scarlet sash, emblem of the Junior Anti-Sex League', that is 'wound several times round the waist of her overalls, just tightly enough to bring out the shapeliness of her hips' (*Nineteen Eighty-Four*, p. 11). This threat is bound up with the thrill of the body itself, her youthful curves and the eroticism of her shape. Winston's emotions in relation to Julia are mixed up from the start and remain so throughout the novel. This confusion begins in his mistaking her for a possible member of the Thought Police while the thought never enters his mind in relation to O'Brien.

The actions of O'Brien are interesting in relation to Winston and the choices he makes. Why does O'Brien not have Winston and Julia taken to Room 101 immediately after their meeting with him? Why does he wait and allow them time in the junk shop room and the chance to read Goldstein's book? One suggestion is that O'Brien watches Winston as a form of voyeurism, that he takes pleasure in spying on him, even perhaps that Winston fulfils some kind of fantasy life that O'Brien had to sacrifice for his present position. In the same way, Winston voyeuristically observes the proles in order to provide a vision of a simpler life he can no longer sample. This doubling further strengthens the connections between Winston and O'Brien, as they now share a characteristic which highlights their similarities in yearning for what they can never have.

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### **Dilution of Selfhood**

For Offred, her experience of doubling in *The Handmaid's Tale* operates to deny her individuality and underline her interchangeability with any other Handmaid. Doubling is an experience of loss of self. To have an image of you reproduced is to dilute and dissolve the essence of your individuality. Introduced to the progress of the narrator through the town as 'Doubled, I walk the street' (*Handmaid*, p. 33), the reader is reminded that whenever she is in town she is accompanied by this woman who looks exactly like her. In public she is part of a duo, indistinguishable from the woman at her side; both are red women and become nameless as such. In her position as a Gothic double, she is inexorably linked not only to this other red woman, but to all red women who share her appearance and predicament. They are all nameless and easily substituted one for another.

When Offred's fellow Handmaid, Ofglen, is found to be a revolutionary she is quickly removed by the Eyes, revealing the fragility of their existence:

"Has Ofglen been transferred so soon?" I ask, but I know she hasn't. I saw her only this morning.

She would have said.

"I am Ofglen," the woman says. Word perfect. And of course she is, the new one, and Ofglen, wherever she is, is no longer Ofglen. I never did know her real name. That is how you can get lost, in a sea of names. (*Handmaid*, p. 295)



Loss of individuality is strongly expressed in this dialogue, where Offred is faced with a new individual assigned to Commander Glen who has 'become' Ofglen in every sense of the word and the previous Handmaid has ceased to exist. Naming here is a powerful weapon in the destruction of individuality since Offred did not know the real name of the original Ofglen and can therefore never trace her to keep in contact and continue their secret association. But more than that, naming is powerful in erasing identity in the moment, losing individuality in 'a sea of names' so that Handmaids become property rather than individuals.

Atwood offers a landscape which appears to be devoid of any Gothic menace in *The Handmaid's Tale*, but the illusion is only surface deep. Again one is presented with bodies trapped in watched spaces:

Late afternoon, the sky hazy, the sunlight diffuse but heavy and everywhere, like bronze dust. I glide with Ofglen along the sidewalk; the pair of us, and in front of us another pair, and across the street another. We must look good from a distance: picturesque, like Dutch milkmaids on a wallpaper frieze, like a shelf full of period-costume ceramic salt and pepper shakers, like a flotilla of swans or anything that repeats itself with at least minimum grace and without variation.

Soothing to the eye, the eyes, the Eyes, for that's who this show is for. We're off to the Prayvaganza, to demonstrate how obedient and pious we are. (*Handmaid*, p. 224)

Beginning with an innocuous summer's day, Atwood manages to end on a scene of dark threats and masks. Offred is enclosed by the scene around her and defined by it. Her own symbolic language recognises this as she describes the pairs of Handmaids in relationships of doubling represented by their comparative objects which belong together:



salt and pepper pots; endlessly repeated wallpaper figures; ironic swans swimming together with connotations of grace and loyalty. Although the time is afternoon and the sun is shining, the heaviness of the sunlight already hints at the darkness disguised by this seemingly innocent weather. Likened to dust, it seems that the light can get into every corner and illuminate what is lurking within, that rather than being a welcome spell of weather it is in fact a means to uncovering hidden secrets. The reference to the 'bronze dust' also has connotations of statues, images of women created to be admired and untouched, like Offred and the other Handmaids. Again, Atwood emphasises the doubling effect the clothing and the position has on these women; they all look so alike that they become interchangeable, because their whole function is singular and could be performed by any of them. The Handmaids are compared to milkmaids, which they will be if they are able to complete their task and eventually breastfeed.

But the darkest element is the emphasis again on the power of the Gothic gaze, that ability to look but not to see. The lack of boundaries and focus on the hidden disrupts the vision of the Gothic gaze, disrupts self-image and destroys individuality, scattering the body in different directions as it finds itself reflected in matching salt and pepper pots, and numerous women with identical lives. This appearance of standardisation soothes the eye in an aesthetic sense, explored by Atwood's metaphors; it soothes the 'eyes' of the watchers, content in this display of the structures of society neatly fitting into place and most of all it soothes the Eyes, as they watch everything, falling like ultra-bright light into every space, covering everything with their watchful dust.

In contrast to the doubling imposed on Offred by outside structures, Offred's secrets operate to allow her to achieve some kind of double life. Offred builds herself an uncanny double, which isolates her more than binding her to anyone.

Any dire knowledge that is shared but cannot be acknowledged to be shared – that is, as it were, *shared separately* – has the effect of rendering the people, whom it ought to bind together, into irrevocable doubleness.<sup>82</sup>

The secrets Offred shares with the commander and with Ofglen serve to distance her from any bond with these two individuals. Instead she is placed in a position of obligation. Although she has a relationship with the Commander which is outside the legitimate realms of their respective positions, she gains very little in the process and instead undergoes a strange transformation which benefits the Commander in his enjoyable role-playing and exercising of his power, but does little to elevate her status towards some kind of equality and advantage. They are linked by their secret but not by the acknowledgment by them, or anyone else, of that secret. Secrets operate as Gothic devices which ambiguously promise a bond yet at the same time divide those involved because of the danger inherent in ever acknowledging such a secret. In all her confidences with Ofglen the position is surprisingly similar, since this sharing of knowledge binds the fates of the two women but can never be acknowledged by them to gain any advantage in their respective situations. Not only are they physically doubled in their appearance, but Offred and Ofglen are doubled in their reliance on each other, imposing a mutual obligation which if disregarded will result in the downfall of both.

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<sup>82</sup> Sedgwick, *Gothic Conventions*, pp. 16-17

Offred's Commander surprises her one evening with an outing, and, once suitably dressed, the two of them are driven to a mystery location which requires false papers, false clothing and false faces. Later in the evening the Commander takes Offred upstairs to a bedroom of the hotel in which the 'party' is happening, bringing back many memories of her time in hotel rooms with Luke, secretly plotting to be together.

He unlocks the door of the room. Everything is the same, the very same as it was, once upon a time...I sit on the edge of the bathtub, gazing at the blank towels. Once they would have excited me. They would have meant the aftermath, of love. (*Handmaid*, p. 263)

While Offred recognises the hotel room as one that she once occupied with Luke, it is an uncanny rather than comforting realisation. Previous encounters in that space were pleasurable and loving encounters, and while what the Commander wants from her may appear to be the same, it has none of the same connotations. This encounter is about power and control, not love and choice. However, such a Gothic encounter cannot be understood without a deeper exploration of the reasons for such an uncanny feeling:

This uncanny is in reality nothing new or foreign, but something familiar and old – established in the mind that has been estranged only by the process of repression. This reference to the factor of repression enables us, furthermore, to understand Schelling's definition of the uncanny as something which ought to have been kept concealed but which has nevertheless come to light.<sup>83</sup>

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<sup>83</sup> Sigmund Freud, 'The Uncanny' in Julie Rivken and Micheal Ryan, eds. *Literary Theory: an anthology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998) p. 166



In a Freudian reading of events, what is uncanny about the situation is that it is so similar to the one in which she found herself with Luke: the man may be different but the 'sharing' of him with another woman is the same. Both circumstances are unreal, hence the fairy tale beginning of 'once upon a time' in the initial description of the Commander and Offred entering the room. The man involved is therefore playing a role he is not capable of fulfilling and linking to Offred in a purely bodily sense. Prior to her marriage to Luke, she was his mistress and met him in secret to share a physical experience but not the emotional attachment that he reserved for his wife. Now with her Commander, the situation is very similar and it unearths the repressed feelings of unease which she had/has about Luke. When Offred describes the lead-up to the complete overhaul of society to create the present set of circumstances, she describes her feelings of helplessness and discomfort when her bank balance is erased and she is forced to rely on Luke for everything. While Atwood wants us to relate to Offred as a strong female narrator, episodes like this one, which highlight the doubling of the Commander and Luke, undermine this aspect of her character. But Offred has managed to repress such feelings about Luke until confronted by such an uncannily similar experience, which brings to light deeply buried sentiments that come forth even in the punctuation of the narrative. When describing the emotions that the towels reignite in her, Offred tells us that 'they would have meant the aftermath, of love'. The placement of the comma gives the impression that the inclusion of the notion of love was an afterthought rather than the whole point of the exercise, as Offred claims in the narrative.



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## Sibling Rivalry

Houellebecq explores the doubling of situations which haunt the lives of his protagonists as they struggle to cope with the cruelty of their existence. This experience of doubling has most to contribute to an understanding of the relationship between the two brothers, Michel and Bruno. In his book *The Double in Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, John Herdman details the relationship between Robert Wringhim and his brother in Hogg's *The Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner* (1824), describing it as

the equivocal relationship of half-brotherhood, which denotes both likeness or relatedness and opposition. Their characters indicate that, as doubles, they come into the category of complementary opposites, the divided halves of a sundered whole.<sup>84</sup>

The likeness between the two sets of brothers is striking; they are both raised by pseudo-parents and only meet each other in adulthood. In Houellebecq and Hogg's narratives the reader is presented with characters at once connected and yet at the same time contradictory, with the further complication of uncertainty as to which operates to explore the evil side of human nature. We expect that the sexual vices of Bruno will be his undoing, and at times fail to notice the quiet threat which Michel embodies. The ending of the narrative is illuminating since it sees Bruno committed to an asylum while the true madman continues to work on the destruction of human kind.

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<sup>84</sup> John Herdman, *The Double in Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, (London: Macmillan, 1990), p. 72

Another formation of the doubling relationship in *Atomised* is that between Michel and the future clones that exist as a result of his experimentation and vision. Herdman suggests that

The *Doppelgänger* is a second self, or *alter ego*, which appears as a distinct and separate being apprehensible by the physical senses (or at least by some of them), but exists in a dependent relation to the original.<sup>85</sup>

In this way the link between Michel and the clones can be viewed as a result of inherent dependency. As the ‘second self’ the clones take on the characteristics which Michel feels he cannot display in his life. As in Robert Louis Stevenson’s *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (1886), the clones function like Hyde and are the expression of what Michel has repressed and hidden. The Epilogue of *Atomised* details the aftermath of Michel’s work, pursued by a researcher called Hubczejak who proposed that ‘humanity must disappear, that humanity would give way to a new species which was asexual and immortal, a species which had outgrown individuality, individuation and progress’ (*Atomised*, p. 371). Michel strives for a life lacking the human complications which he has had to endure, and by removing sex, death and individuality he believes he will achieve a superior human being. However, the clones also function as an effective mirror for society in 2029, at the time of their creation, by representing humanity as the evil of the world. “This unique genetic code of which, by some tragic perversity, we were so ridiculously proud, was precisely the source of so much human unhappiness” (*Atomised*, p. 375). In the same way as Ambrosio in Matthew Lewis’s *The Monk* (1794) allowed

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<sup>85</sup> Herdman, *The Double*, p. 14

pride in his purity to cause him to feel untouchable by evil,<sup>86</sup> humanity is accused of that same vanity with regard to individuality, thus leaving themselves open to the pitfalls of such evils as pride. The complex doubling which associates the clones with one human, Michel Djerzinski, also makes a connection to all humanity, serves to highlight the doubling of good and evil in separate beings mutually dependent on each other.

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### **Doubling of Experiences**

Burgess foregrounds the experience of doubling in *Clockwork Orange*, specifically those faced by his main protagonist, Alex. After Alex is released from prison, he bumps into one of his former victims in the library who remembers him. In a curious instance of doubling, he is attacked and beaten up by a gang of old men as revenge for his attack two years ago on their friend. Just as the phrase ‘What’ll it be then, eh?’ is endlessly repeated in the narrative, the events of Alex’s life are doubled and uncannily altered to haunt him again and again.

He is eventually rescued by the police, and saved from the hands of the gang of pensioners, only to find that in fact he is in much worse danger in this situation since his former friends are in fact the police officers. In an echo of the events of his anti-social youth, Alex and his droogs – now employed as police officers – drive out of the city and

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<sup>86</sup> see Matthew Lewis, *The Monk*, 1796



into the darkness of the countryside. However, this time Dim and Billyboy are not under the control of Alex and he is again betrayed by them and left for dead.

The doubling continues in this second half of the narrative of the life of Alex, after he has been assaulted by his former friends and drags himself to the nearest 'home' in search of help. Unluckily for Alex, this 'home' also happens to be the house that he attacked in previous years with his gang, and the homeowner has not forgotten him. This episode is deeply uncanny, with Alex noting his travel 'brought me to a sort of village I felt I had viddied before' (*Clockwork Orange*, p112). This return to what is familiar yet unnerving is also metaphorically the uncovering of what should have remained hidden.<sup>87</sup> Although Alex realises into whose home he has unwittingly stumbled, his victim does not and Alex does all he can to remain unknown to him. The first time he entered this man's house he was masked and this time also he intends to mask his true identity in order to maintain his safety and secure any help he can. When Alex tells this man what has happened to him at the hands of the police, his comment is deeply ironic: 'Another victim,' he said, like sighing. 'A victim of the modern age' (*Clockwork Orange*, p113). In this effective doubling of the previous situation, Alex is now the victim of modern society and the police state, in contrast to their original meeting when the man was a victim of the modern age of youth gangs and lawlessness. The playing around with 'victim/aggressor' status continues to be developed as the writer confesses to Alex that he does recognise him, but only from the newspaper, and considers him an unfortunate individual to have been treated as such by the state authorities.

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<sup>87</sup> see Freud's essay 'The Uncanny' for an exploration of this notion of uncovering of what should be hidden in a return to familiar situations/places.



In the morning Alex wanders round the writer's home, and discovers his name;

There were two or three shelves of books there too, as I thought there must be, a copy of *A Clockwork Orange*, and on the back of the book, like on the spine, was the author's eemya – F. Alexander. Good Bog, I thought, he is another Alex. (*Clockwork Orange*, p. 117)

In order to emphasis the doubling of these two Alex's, Burgess makes the author another kind of Alex, perhaps the kind the narrator might have been had he made different choices and had different opportunities. Reading through *A Clockwork Orange* allows Alex an insight into the writer's way of thinking, an echo of his own way of life.

► It seemed written in a very bezoomny like style, full of Ah and Oh and that cal, but what seemed to come out of it was that all lewdies nowadays were being turned into machines and that they were really – you and me and him and kiss-my-sharries – more like natural growth like a fruit. (*Clockwork Orange*, p. 117)

The machinic element begins to operate as a central theme after this encounter with the writer F. Alexander. Alex cannot operate in accordance with his individual will after his treatment but after his second encounter with F. Alexander, he is used by a second group for their own ends. The dialogue between the 'natural' and the 'man-made' is an undercurrent throughout the novel, involving, as it does, the 'nature/nurture' debate which will return to haunt the narrative at its ending when Alex fears for the future of his own son. Incorporating an author whose work is titled the same as the novel also allows Burgess to create another level of doubling where the text in which F. Alexander features

is also the text which is created by him. The unfolding of this relationship is as never-ending as the unfolding of what makes Alex the lover of violence he is, while simultaneously raising the question of the symbolism of the clockwork orange itself.

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Free Will, Guilt and Apologies

Dualistic fictions, in all their dream-like generic idiosyncrasy, continue to impart experiences of duplication, division, dispersal, abeyance. Many are at once alibis and apologies. They are works which can find themselves both innocent and guilty. Hostile actions are ascribed to some further or to some foreign self, are performed by proxy – a performance which scribes, in which fiction itself, are deeply implicated. The actions can therefore be said to be both admitted and denied.<sup>88</sup>

The denial aspect of doubling is one which links the Gothic and Dystopian aspects of the novels, allowing new insights via the connections achieved between the two theoretical perspectives. Functioning as apologies, *A Clockwork Orange* and *Herland* are effective experiences of the doubling of place and people respectively, in order to offer a nightmare vision of future possibilities. *Atomised* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four* offer dualism which impacts on the boundaries between innocence and guilt, while the actions of the doubles in *A Handmaid's Tale* are both 'admitted and denied'. If we consider all this in light of the assertions made by Miller and by Herdman, that doubles are closely

88 Karl Miller, *Doubles: Studies in Literary History*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), p. 25

associated with the fear of death, then the desire to apologise, to determine boundaries and to find truth seems an understandable reaction to the prospect of the End.

The structural elements are a strong influence on the experience of doubling in Dystopian Gothic texts, allowing for a revisiting of events to explore alternative possibilities.

However, for the most part this doubling is felt by the physical bodies of the characters, in the impact upon them of such a repeating and reliving of past events. *Atomised* is an example of this in the fates of the women who become involved with the two brothers, as they are repeatedly cast aside, rejected and die. The morphing of three characters into a representation of one self is another example of the power of uncanny doubling, where the splitting of the self into three explores the depth/shalowness of the individual in a triangle of desire and rivalry. Possible futures are explored in the Gothic Dystopias, layering the experience of characters and the larger scheme of the novels to play up the unique position of these novels in relation to time and possible events. Authors also investigate the possible loss of self, the erosion of boundaries, which an experience of doubling can produce.

## Chapter Five

### Live Burials and the Walking Dead

Weber anticipated a society of people locked into a series of rational structures, who could move only from one rational system to another. Thus, people would move from one rationalised educational institution to rationalised work places, from rationalised recreational settings to rationalised homes. Society would become nothing more than a seamless web of rationalised structures; there would be no escape.<sup>89</sup>

Another spatial structure which influences the Gothic Dystopia is that of live burials.<sup>90</sup> This Gothic trait most readily shows itself in the form of dreams, or dreamlike states, but is manifested in the structure of the novels as a whole and influences the selves which populate these spaces by fixing them in a deathlike space while marinating the activity of the novel around them. Live burial taps into fears of death which are central to the Gothic and also the terror of 'a fate worse than death' which is explored in the lives of the protagonists in the hell of Dystopia.

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<sup>89</sup> George Ritzer, *The McDonaldisation of Society (revised edition)*, (London: Pine Forge Press, 1996), p. 21

<sup>90</sup> see Eve Sedgwick, *The Coherence of Gothic Conventions* (London; New York: Methuen, 1986)



Eve Sedgwick details the instances of live burial for Gothic protagonists, linking each one to the ‘spatialization’ of the character within the scheme of the novel; the fictional space in which they exist and how that relates to the scheme of the novel as a whole.

Roughly, it can be said that when an individual fictional ‘self’ is the subject of one of these conventions, that self is spatialized in the following way. It is the position of the self to be massively blocked off from something to which it ought normally to have access. This something can be its own past, the details of its family history; it can be the free air, when the self has been literally buried alive; it can be a lover; it can be just all the circumambient life, when the self is pinned in a death-like sleep. Typically, however, there is both something going on inside the isolation (the present, the continuous consciousness, the dream, the sensation itself) and something intensely relevant going on impossibly out of reach.<sup>91</sup>

As well as a literal reading of live burial, there flourishes in Gothic Dystopias an expression of this kind of concern about being trapped yet still able to witness the events of life, which is manifested in the bodily experience of the protagonists. In Dystopian texts the events of the novel are the ‘something going on inside the isolation’, while that which remains out of reach is the realisation of the nightmare of imprisonment itself.

While Sedgwick names only the ‘Live Burial’ element of the experience, for a Gothic Dystopia the continuation of life in the frames of the narrative is important, as is the fact that the narrative continues to be populated by bodies who should by rights have ceased to function, and are thus the Walking Dead.

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<sup>91</sup> Sedgwick, *Coherence*, p. 12

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## Unspeakable Games

Sedgwick offers another working of the motif of live burial by way of the unspeakable.

At its simplest the unspeakable appears on almost every page: the ‘unutterable horror’:

‘unspeakable’ or ‘unutterable’ are the intensifying adjectives of choice in these novels. At a broader level, the novels deal with things that are naturalistically difficult to talk about, like guilt; but they describe the difficulty not in terms of resistance that may or may not be overcome, but in terms of an absolute, often institutional prohibition or imperative.<sup>92</sup>

While many ‘unspeakable’ things happen in the course of the Dystopian narratives it is the unspeakable in relation to taboo which is most strongly articulated in these novels, impelled as their characters are to repress that which always threatens to come to light. In *The Handmaid’s Tale* the exploration of live burial is not in terms of the acts committed but in terms of the difficulty of their very articulation, the unspeakable, and the reasons behind this repression. At the request of the Commander, Offred visits him in his private quarters, a completely illegal act for both of them, where they play Scrabble and he asks her to ‘kiss him like she meant it’. These strange requests break many taboos and the narrator questions why.

The first time, I was confused. His needs were obscure to me, and what I could perceive of them seemed to me ridiculous, laughable, like a fetish for lace-up shoes.

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<sup>92</sup> Sedgwick, *Coherence*, p. 14

Also, there had been a letdown of sorts. What had I been expecting, behind that closed door, the first time? Something unspeakable, down on all fours perhaps, perversions, whips, mutilations? At the very least some minor sexual manipulation, some bygone peccadillo now denied to him, prohibited by law and punishable by amputation. To be asked to play Scrabble, instead, as if we were an old married couple, or two children, seemed kindly in the extreme, a violation too in its own way. As a request it was opaque.

So when I left the room, it still wasn't clear to me what he wanted, or why, or whether I could fulfil any of it for him...I thought he might be toying, some cat-and-a-mouse routine, but now I think that his motives and desire weren't obvious even to him. They had not yet reached the level of words. (*Handmaid*, p. 163)

Atwood plays with the notion of 'the unspeakable' in the contrasting ideas of Offred and the Commander. What is unspeakable to Offred is some kind of standard sexual perversion, something that makes sense in the situation, something that she can prepare herself for. But what she encounters is a man who wants to play word-games with her, another form of manipulation for which she is unprepared. And yet, this kind of playing with meaning is written throughout the text, in symbols rather than words and is a game at which Offred is becoming increasingly skilled. She began as a nameless figure in a red dress but now has two names, Offred and Pam, but only one of these is utterable, the other is a dark secret from which she draws power.

For the Commander, his requests barely conceal the desires he has for Offred and although he may not be aware of them, they seep through in his actions. To invite her to his private rooms is to break a taboo strongly held in his society; he is relating to her as a human being rather than a womb on legs. And his choice of game is interesting too, since



it reveals an understanding and appreciation for language and the power it has. Books are banned in Offred's world and yet the Commander's study is full of them, full of dangerous objects, and this is the place he chooses to meet with Offred. She comments that his desires are subconscious, hidden from him, that they have 'not yet reached the level of words'. While they are able to engage in word-play via scrabble, he still relies on the more basic form of communication, signs. Between himself and Offred he has constructed a complicated form of communication which allows her to know when she is safe to visit him and employs signs rather than the more incriminating use of language. Also, to form what he wants from Offred into words would require a conscious knowledge of exactly what those desires were. In this way he can have her company without ever having to explain the reasons to her, or to himself.

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### **Dreams and Burials**

Eve Sedgwick details the impact of dreams in Gothic novels, and the links between sleep and live burials.

The Gothic dream is, far more thematically than the place of live burial, simply a duplication of the surrounding reality. It is thrilling because supererogatory. To wake from a dream and *find it true* – that is the particular terror at which these episodes aim, and the content of the dream is subordinate to that particular terror.<sup>93</sup>

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<sup>93</sup> Sedgwick, *Coherence*, pp. 27-28



Dreams are not merely a reflection of the reality but as a form of live burial they develop the Gothic structure and depth of the novels. To dream when sleeping is to inhabit a liminal space and be open to the threats of such a position. In *Brave New World* the major method of conditioning and controlling the population is by means of sleep conditioning, which begins in infancy. This method of conditioning – hypnopaedia – involves the repetition of moral conditioning while the children are asleep, invading their dream space with the complex and controlled rules of their society.

‘Till at last the child’s mind *is* these suggestions, and the sum of the suggestions *is* the child’s mind. The adult’s mind too – all his life long. The mind that judges and desires and decides – made up of these suggestions. But all these suggestions are *our* suggestions!’ The Director almost shouted in his triumph. ‘Suggestions from the State.’ (*Brave New World*, p. 25)

Such wholesale alteration of a population’s ability to think and conceive of ideas is a horrific prospect. To empty the mind of all individuality and fill it instead with these ‘suggestions from the state’ is to remove the individual from the body and replace it instead with a shell to house the intentions of the state. To invade the minds of children when they sleep is to cross boundaries from the rational waking state to the unconscious emotional state of sleep. At a time when these infants should be collating all the information gleaned in the daytime and readying their bodies for their next period of activity, they are instead being attacked by a conscious force intent on controlling them.

The narrative of *Brave New World* is also littered with the products of their scientific creation of life, the monstrous elements that are hidden in the more advanced castes.

The liftman was a small simian creature, dressed in the black tunic of an Epsilon-Minus Semi-moron.

‘Roof!’

He flung open the gates. The warm glory of afternoon sunlight made him start and blink his eyes.

‘Oh, roof!’ he suddenly repeated in a voice of rapture. He was as though suddenly and joyfully awakened from a dark annihilating stupor.

‘Roof!’

He smiled up with a kind of doggily expectant adoration into the faces of his passengers. Talking and laughing together, they stepped out into the light. The liftman looked after them.

‘Roof?’ he said once more, questioningly.

Then a bell rang, and from the ceiling of the lift a loudspeaker began, very softly and yet very imperiously to issue its commands.

‘Go down,’ it said, ‘go down. Floor Eighteen. Go down, go down. Floor Eighteen. Go down...’

The liftman slammed the gates, touched a button and instantly dropped back into the droning twilight of the well, the twilight of his own habitual stupor. (*Brave New World*, pp. 52-53)

Huxley very often uses minor characters to highlight the real situation of the central protagonists, and this is a good example of how effective his technique is. He begins by detailing the physical characteristics of the lift operator to highlight his difference from those in the lift of a higher caste; he is likened to a monkey in relation to them and his full caste title, ‘Epsilon-Minus Semi-Moron’, leaves no doubt as to his low rank. He is hardly even accorded human status, described as a ‘creature’ as well as monkey-like, and dressed in drab black to blend in with the machinery of which he is only a living part. In

ascending with the lift he is briefly able to experience the ‘rapture’ which for him is a visit to the light of the roof, then he descends again to the darkness which is his habitat. Each and every day he is in perpetual motion between the light and life of the roof and the darkness and ‘stupor’ of the lower levels. However, he does have the momentary enlightenment of being ‘suddenly and joyfully awakened from a dark annihilating stupor’, which, although very temporary, is more than seems to be achieved by most of the main protagonists.

The Live Burial of the lower-caste lift worker resonates with Sedgwick’s explorations of the convention when she comments that ‘it is the position of the self to be massively blocked off from something to which it ought normally to have access’.<sup>94</sup> Huxley makes it obvious what is denied to the lift worker, the very basics of light and fresh air, but leads from this simplicity to the complexity of what is denied to the higher-caste characters in their position of denial. Soma is the main blocking agent, it bestows the status of live burial; it denies access to emotion and reduces the user to an animal state of blind existence. Humans ought normally to have access to their own emotional states but in Huxley’s vision this stupor, this burying alive of individuals, is a state expression of power which the masses have bought into.

Those of the Alpha caste never seem to gain any insight into the process which commands them. Unlike the liftman’s, the machinery in control of their lives is subtle and internal; they have no lift which carries them to and from enlightenment. The voice

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<sup>94</sup> Sedgwick, *Coherence*, p. 12



in the lift is the obvious commander of the operator and demands instant obedience, yet the same forces operate in the lives of even the highest classes, but Huxley chooses to show this level of control by focusing on this small incident with the liftman in order to make parallels with the forces at work in high-caste lives which exert an invisible presence. Although the Alphas ‘step out into the light’ this metaphor is misleading since it is only a positive step within an enclosed system; they never truly see the light, just as the liftman is only privy to small and unsatisfactory glances. The commands which the lift operator obeys drop him back into his ‘own habitual stupor’ in a very literal way but this stupor is shared by the brightest of *Brave New World* society because they all obey the voices of the state and are subject to its will via their sleep conditioning.

To further emphasise both the disparity between the lives of different caste members and to highlight the similarities, an appeal to Sedgwick’s *Coherence of Gothic Conventions* provides further evidence of the positional importance of the live burial.

Typically, however, there is both something going on inside the isolation (the present, the continuous consciousness, the dream, the sensation itself) and something intensely relevant going on impossibly out of reach.<sup>95</sup>

For the lift worker this space, which is out of reach, is symbolised by the ‘warm glory of afternoon sunlight’ by which he must be tortured every time the lift reaches the roof and he is subsequently plunged back into darkness. But for the higher-caste individuals, the darkness is all-consuming and they seem never to realise that there is something out of

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<sup>95</sup> Sedgwick, *Coherence*, p. 12



reach of which they should be aware. The only glimpse of this that one does see is through the character of Helmholtz and his poetry, where he strives for something more but is denied, in the same way that the liftman must return to his darkness, by the inability to imagine beyond his conditioning and his society. Bernard also appears to capture glimpses of fulfilment when he implores Lenina to appreciate the beauty of the sea from their plane, but these moments offer only further opportunity for rejection and alienation, rather than rapture and happiness.

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### **Re-birth**

The third chapter of *Herland*, 'A Peculiar Imprisonment', highlights two Gothic tropes, of uncanniness and nightmarish imprisonment. The novel achieves this by a structure focused on the experience of the explorers as one of live burial, where the time they spend in Herland blocks them from their lives outside and submerges them in this suffocating culture. The sense of the uncanny centres around the return to childhood which Van experienced earlier in the narrative, emphasising the Freudian element of the narrative. The imprisonment of the men infantilises them in such a way that they feel as if they are being re-born.

From a slumber deep as death, as refreshing as that of a healthy child, I slowly awakened.

It was like rising up, up, up through deep warm ocean, nearer and nearer to full light and stirring air. Or like the return to consciousness after concussion of the brain. I was once thrown from a

horse while on a visit to a wild mountainous country quite new to me, and I can clearly remember the mental experience of coming back to life, through lifting veils of dream. When I first dimly heard the voices of those about me, and saw the shining snowpeaks of that mighty range, I assumed that this too would pass and I would presently find myself in my own home.

*(Herland, p. 21)*

This bundle of confused and confusing memories and sensations mirrors Van's return to consciousness, but more importantly gives insight into his subconscious associations. He feels as though he is waking up into a new life, which he then likens to a return to the surface after a sojourn at depth in the ocean. Van's next association memory links these feelings to another occasion entirely, when he was concussed after a fall from a horse and the associated belief that this too was a confused happening and that he would soon wake up in his own home. This otherness, this feeling of being far from home and the known, is the overriding sensation for Van in awakening in Herland. The first simile focuses on the re-birth image, struggling through the warm, wet environment towards the light and the air, while the second image concentrates more fully on an incident in later life where concussion is the basis of the confused state. However, each of the incidents does contain the overriding motif of home, of being in 'the right place'. Birth is a time to move from an existence which is no longer suitable, to a new and permanent environment; waking up indulges the same transfer from a temporary state to a more 'real' place of living. And the returning to consciousness which occurs after the fall has a double return to place, firstly in the recovery and reinstatement in the land of the conscious, and secondly in the subconscious expectation that this will be followed by a return to the 'proper' place of home. All these experiences contribute to the alienation felt by Van in this 'out-of-place'

place where he will not wake up to reality, where he will remain even when conscious and in which he will question the very values upon which the term 'home' rests.

The other strong image in the awakening sequence for Van is that of a 'rising from the dead'. He describes his sleep as 'a slumber deep as death' and his regaining consciousness as 'coming back to life'. Both these images are Gothic in their leaning towards ideas of ghosts, of chilling supernatural phenomena and the nightmare of live burial. When monsters rise from the dead in Gothic tales it is to wreak havoc on those who have wronged them in life and to gain vengeance; theirs is a struggle for power over those who are living and over death itself. Then there are the monsters created in the Frankenstein mode, who are dragged back to life by others in pursuit of power and recognition. Van and his friends rise from the dead in both these senses, seeking both power and recognition but at the same time being controlled and manipulated by the women who have allowed them to live again.

Live burial is a recurring theme, manifesting itself in numerous ways throughout the narrative and masquerading under different titles and guises. Alongside notions of live burial exists a parallel Gothic trait of the walking dead, where persons who were presumed dead and buried have in fact resurrected themselves to continue their life, or where an individual who should have died refuses to do so and instead seeks vengeance. Terry most strongly associates himself with this theme not only of live burial, but of the walking dead. His description of the awakening in Herland has strong differences from those of Van:



‘So you realise what these ladies have done to us?’ he pleasantly inquired. ‘They have taken away all our possessions, all our clothes – every stitch. We have been stripped and washed and put to bed like so many yearling babies.’ (*Herland*, p. 22)

Both these descriptions are very telling of what is to come in the novel. It is a re-birth for the men into a world entirely different from the one from which they have come. The ‘slumber’ from which they are waking is described as death-like, as if they are re-born in this new world to be children again, knowing nothing of value and having to be instructed in a course of education to make them useful members of society. In this second childhood they are given a new narrative, a new point of origin and a new collective mother. Stripped of their clothing, exposed and vulnerable in their nakedness, they have little choice but to comply with the wishes of those around them, to wear what they are told, eat what they are told and do what they are told, just as young children must. We also see in their behaviour the futile defiance of children, most especially evident in the behaviour of Terry. This stripping and washing is a symbolic gesture, attempting to cleanse them of any remnants of their former life and civilisation, leaving them as blank canvases on which a new identity can be created.



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## Nightmare Awakenings

The recurring nightmare of Gothic Dystopias is that of a dream from which there is no awakening, since to awaken is to realise that the nightmare is true. Atwood plays with this theme in *The Handmaid's Tale* to explore the horror of the situation in which Offred finds herself.

I'm dreaming that I am awake.

I dream that I get out of bed and walk across the room, not this room, and go out the door, not this door. I'm at home, one of my homes and she's running to meet me...I begin to cry, because I know then that I'm not awake. I'm back in this bed trying to wake up, and I wake up and sit on the edge of the bed, and my mother comes in with a tray and asks me if I'm feeling better. When I was sick, as a child, she had to stay from work. But I'm not awake this time either.

After these dreams I do awake, and I know I'm really awake because there is the wreath, on the ceiling, and my curtains hanging like drowned white hair. I feel drugged. I consider this: maybe they're drugging me. Maybe the life I think I'm living is a paranoid delusion.

Not a hope. I know where I am, and who, and what day it is. (*Handmaid*, p. 119)

This layering of reality conveys the confusion over the level of consciousness of Offred and the difficulty in distinguishing the reality in the nightmare. Like Van, she repeatedly believes herself to be awake, and conscious, only to find that she is still asleep and dreaming. This experience of confusion is doubled in the waking self when she debates

the possibility that she may be constantly in a deluded state and therefore any one of the dream possibilities may in fact be reality. In her state of live burial what remains out of reach to Offred is the past and the hope that life once offered. In her present position she is denied hope even in her dreams and awakens to find a clarity and painful awareness that eludes her when sleeping.

The metaphor of live burial is relevant to other women in *The Handmaid's Tale* and is explored in the ceremony which former nuns go through to renounce their celibacy.

They have that look about them too: weak eyed, stunned by too much light. The old ones they send off to the Colonies right away, but the young fertile ones they try to convert, and when they succeed we all come here to watch them go through the ceremony, renounce their celibacy, sacrifice it to the common good. They kneel, and the Commander prays and then they take the red veil, as the rest of us have done...There's an odour of the witch about them, something mysterious and exotic; it remains despite the scrubbing and the welts on their feet and the time they've spent in Solitary. They always have those welts, they've always done the time, so rumour goes: they don't let go easily. (*Handmaid*, p. 232)

This image is of individuals unearthed from a live burial, dragged into the light and the reality from which they were hiding, forced to end the life they knew and render themselves 'dead' to all they believe and hold sacred. This symbolic death is a reversal of a bodily death, since they are allowed to live, in fact to reproduce, yet are clothed in the colour of death and desire. They remain Other because unlike most of the other women they chose not to fulfil their 'natural' purpose but chose instead to devote their lives, and bodies, to a higher purpose. But in this new age the highest purpose is to

breed: there is nothing more sacred than the veil of blood, of death and of forced desire. They are literally buried alive by these forced garments, blocked off from a religious life of their choosing in order to be determined by a new ruling. Despite being broken, these women still pose a threat, are still considered more dangerous than other Handmaids, because they bear the marks of their past, they have the physical and mental scars of their renunciation which mark them as 'witches'. This difference is directly related to their personal choice to 'marry' the church, to be with God and part of a power few in this society have touched.

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### **Prophetic Dreaming**

Like *The Handmaid's Tale*, dreams are a constant theme in *Atomised*, mostly in the form of nightmares. Such dreaming allows the protagonists to experience the full horror of awakening to realise that the nightmare continues.

On Friday night Bruno barely slept. He had a bad dream. He was a piglet and his body was fat and glabrous. With the other little piglets, he was sucked by a vortex into a vast, dark tunnel, its walls rusted. He was carried by the slow drift of the current. At times, his feet touched the bottom, but then a powerful swell would carry him on. Sometimes he could make out the whitish flesh of his companions as they were brutally sucked down. He struggled through the darkness and a silence broken only by the scraping of their trotters on the metal walls. As they plunged deeper, he could hear the dull sound of machines in the distance. He began to realise that the vortex was pulling them towards turbines with huge, razor-sharp blades.



Later, he saw his severed head lying in a meadow below the drainage pipe. His skull had been split from top to bottom, though what remained, lying on the grass, was still conscious. He knew ants would slowly work their way into the exposed brain tissue to eat away at the neurons and finally he would slip into unconsciousness. As he waited, he looked at the horizon through his one remaining eye. The grass seemed to stretch out forever. Huge cogwheels turned under a metallic sky. Perhaps this was the end of time; at least the world that he had known had ceased to exist.

*(Atomised, pp. 160-161)*

The images in his dream represent a metaphorical telling of the story of his life, narrated in such a way that the reader is unsure whether 'Later' means later in the dream or later in the real timeline of Bruno's existence. Like all the other little 'piglets' who share his world, his body is becoming increasingly alien to him, hairless and fat. The dark vortex of progress sucks them all in with its 'slow current' eventually to carry them toward the turbines with razor-blades that signal the end of the unified human body. The deeper he is pulled by the 'powerful swell' the closer he gets to the 'dull sound of machines' which is the music of the future. He remains conscious, live, throughout the encounter and yet is detached from the events which signal the end of 'the world that he had known'.

The move signalled by 'later' is an ambiguous one, never defined as later in the dream or later in the real life of Bruno. The episode detailing his fragmented body also forms a new paragraph, marking a break from the narrative defined as his 'bad dream'. The vision Bruno experiences is that of a live burial, where he is witness to his own bodily destruction and death, with a full level of consciousness and awareness of what is happening to him. His body has been broken into the smallest pieces, fragments of



neurons which ants will carry away as a food source for the growth of their machine-like colony.

While visiting his childhood sweetheart, Annabelle, Michel falls asleep in her arms and is subject to a disturbing and prophetic dream.

At first he saw a man, a form in space, only his face was visible. The expression in his eyes as they flashed in the darkness was indecipherable. There was a mirror facing him. When he first looked in the mirror, the man felt as though he was falling into an abyss. But he sat down and studied his reflection as though it were a thing apart, a mental image unrelated to him. After a time he began to feel more at ease, but if he turned away, even for an instant, he had to begin again. He had to force himself to shatter the link which bound him to his reflection. The self was an intermittent neurosis, and this man was far from being cured of it...Last, he saw the mental aggregate of space and its opposite. He saw the mental conflict through which space was structured, and saw it disappear. He saw space as a thin line separating two spheres. In the first sphere there was being, then space, and in the second was non-being and the destruction of the individual. Calmly, without a moment's hesitation, he turned and walked towards the second sphere. (*Atomised*, pp. 281-282)

This dream which Michel has resonates with the thoughts of Eve Sedgwick on Gothic dreams, that they are most frightening because the protagonist awakes to find them true and that they have a doubling effect on the reality contained inside the novel. As part of a framework of live burial, the dream functions to allow Michel space apart from his life in which to make the decisions which will in effect bury him for ever. Dreams also confront him with his most deeply repressed ideas on humanity and allow for exploration of such

themes to chilling conclusions. The doubling effect is twofold, emanating not only from the dream itself in the focus on mirrors, but also in the doubling of the dream perception of the self and the reality of the self which is Michel. The choices which he faces in the dream resonate within the scheme of the narrative eventually to lead to the same conclusions and choices. Michel continues to have strange dreams as he continues to spend time with Annabelle, savouring ‘simply sleeping next to her, feeling her living flesh’ (*Atomised*, p. 284). Despite his dream-choice, Annabelle shows that Michel still has some ability to appreciate human connections and physical closeness. It is the destruction and death of Annabelle’s body which pushes him towards the ‘second sphere’.

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### **Horrorshow Surfacing**

Live burial is explored in *A Clockwork Orange* through the dreams of Alex where he explores the possibilities that confront him when he is awake. His dreams prove to be terrifyingly prophetic on many occasions.

What was even funnier was when I went to sleep that night, O my brothers. I had a nightmare, and, as you might expect, it was of one of those bits of film I’d viddied in the afternoon. A dream or a nightmare is really only like a film inside your gulliver, except that it is as though you could walk into it and be part of it. And this is what happened to me. It was a nightmare of one of the bits of film they showed me near the end of the afternoon like session...And then at the height of

all this dratsing and tolchoking I felt like paralysed and wanting to be very sick, and all the other malchicks had a real gromky smeck at me. Then I was dratsing my way back to being awake all through my own krovvy, pints and quarts and gallons of it, and then I found myself in my bed in this room. I wanted to be sick, so I got out of the bed all trembly so as to go off down the corridor to the old vaysay. But, behold, brothers, the door was locked. And turning round I viddied for like the first raz that there were bars on the window. And so, as I reached for the like pot in the malenky cupboard beside the bed, I viddied that there would be no escaping from any of all this. Worse, I did not dare to go back into my own sleeping gulliver. (*Clockwork Orange*, p. 83)

The whole experience of Alex within the novel is a recurring nightmare of waking/surfacing to find that events are exactly as he had envisioned them in his worst nightmare. The ‘horrorshow’ which plays out in his mind while he is sleeping echoes and parallels the acts of violence committed in his past which used to make him feel ‘real horrorshow’ when he was taking part. This time the nightmare moves him to nausea rather than excitement. The nausea that Alex feels in his dream remains with him when he finally surfaces to wakefulness, as in Sedgwick’s live burial schematic. But also within that uncertain space between fully awake and fully asleep, is the moment when Alex reaches the fullest realisation of his situation, when he is for the first time aware that he is in a prison cell with no option of escape. This realisation is larger than the simple awareness of the condition of his room, however, since he states that ‘there would be no escaping from any of all this’ to encompass a far wider reaching assertion. Just like earlier in the novel, when there was no escaping the fact that he had been betrayed by his droogs, or later in the narrative when he realises there is no escaping from the new shape of his mind or from the hands of those who wish to use his predicament for their own ends, Alex realises that escape from the room is no guarantee of escape from his life and



situation, from who he is. He may very well achieve release and escape the confines of the room in which his nightmare occurred, but he will not escape the recurring nightmare of his life and the society in which he exists. This experience also displays for Alex another terror of the Gothic: the fear of a threat that comes from within. He does not dare 'go back into my own gulliver', suggesting that the horrors which await him in that internal space outweigh even those which he faces in the external world.

After his upset with his droogs, when he punches Dim for being rude about the classical music a woman sings in the Milkbar, Alex dreams about Georgie:

In this sneety he'd got like very much older and very sharp and hard and was govoreeting about discipline and obedience and how all the malchicks under his control had to jump hard at it and throw up the old salute like being in the army, and there was me in line like the rest saying yes sir and no sir, and then I viddied clear that Georgie had these stars on his pletchoes and he was like a general. And then he brought in old Dim with a whip, and Dim was a lot more starry and grey and had a few zoobies missing as you could see when he let out a smeck, viddying me, and then my droog Georgie said, pointing like at me: 'That man has filth and cal all over his platties,' and it was true. Then I creeched: 'Don't hit, please don't, brothers,' and started to run. And I was running in like circles and Dim was after me, smecking his gulliver off, cracking with the old whip, and each time I got a real horrorshow tolchock with this whip there was like a very loud electric bell ringringringing, and this bell was like a sort of pain too.

Then I woke up real skorrry, my heart going bap bap bap, and of course there was really a bell going brrr, and it was our front-door bell. (*Clockwork Orange*, p. 28)

This dream episode is prophetic, telling of the future nightmare situation in which Alex is to find himself on his release from Dr Brodsky's care. The complete reversal of the



power structures which exist for Alex within his group is a frightening foretelling of the collapse of his position as leader and his descent into a life in prison and the destruction of his identity. His running in circles is as pointless an exercise to escape from Dim as his later attempts to outsmart Dr Brodsky will be. Just as he is unable to escape the reach of Dim's whip, he will be unable to escape from the reach of the treatment to which he is subjected. In the end his temporary escape comes when reality invades the dream to bring him back to a level of consciousness where these events are only part of a nightmare from which he believes he has successfully awakened and escaped.

The importance of dreams is such that even Alex's father has a dream about his undoing at the hands of his friends.

'Sorry, son,' he said. 'But I get worried sometimes. Sometimes I have dreams. You can laugh if you like, but there's a lot in dreams. Last night I had this dream with you in it and I didn't like it one bit.'

'Oh?' He had gotten me interessovatted not, dreaming of me like that. I had like a feeling I had had a dream, too, but I could not remember proper what. 'Yes?' I said, stopping chewing my gluey pie.

'It was vivid,' said my dad. 'I saw you lying on the street and you had been beaten by other boys, These boys were like the boys you used to go around with before you were sent to that last Corrective School.'

'Oh?' I had an in-grin at that, papapa believing I had really reformed or believing he believed. And then I remembered my own dream, which was a dream of that morning, or Georgie giving his general's orders and old Dim smecking around toothless as he wielded the whip. But dreams go by opposites I was once told. 'Never worry about thine only son and heir, O my father,' I said.

'Fear not. He can taketh care of himself, verily.'

‘And,’ said my dad, ‘you were like helpless in your blood and you couldn’t fight back.’ That was real opposites, so I had another quiet malenky grin within...(Clockwork Orange, pp. 37-38)

Alex feels an empty comfort in the fact that his father’s dream is a vision of ‘real opposites’ and therefore unlikely to be any kind of premonition. But he does not realise that the evil of which he is now capable will indeed be turned to opposite and make him physically incapable of such acts as he now relishes. He feels himself comforted by the fact that the dream is so far-fetched, but in fact he takes false hope in continuing encounters with visions of the future when he has become transformed from the self he now recognises to the ‘not-self’ (*Clockwork Orange*, p. 31) created by the powers of the state.

Once in prison, Alex again relates a dream; this time it occurs after he and his cell mates have given a beating to a new inmate and left him in a pool of blood.

What I dreamt of, O my brothers, was of being in some very big orchestra, hundreds and hundreds strong, and the conductor was like a mixture of Ludwig van and G.F. Handel, looking very deaf and blind and weary of the world. I was with the wind instruments, but what I was playing was like a white pinky bassoon made of flesh and growing out of my plot, right in the middle of my belly, and when I blew into it I had to sneck ha ha ha very loud because it like tickled, and then Ludwig van G.F. got very razdraz and bezoomny. Then he came right up to my litso and creeched loud in my ooko, and then I woke up like sweating. (*Clockwork Orange*, p. 67)

The violence which preceded this dream could be the reason why Alex dreams of his favourite composers, but this time he is part of the orchestra and also incurs the wrath of

his hero. As dreams form a recurring feature of the narrative, the events in the cell on this night also mirror the earlier betrayal of Alex by his friends. This time he is blamed for the death of the new inmate, despite the participation of all cell occupants in the beating. Now a double murderer, his experiences begin to double themselves. The intertwining of music and violence is explored in his dream where music is visualised as an intrinsic element of his body, part of the flesh of Alex.

Alex's final dream is one about the restoration of his body to a sense of wholeness, denied him throughout the novel.

I went, too, only back to the land, back to all the blackness lit up by like odd dreams which I didn't know whether they were dreams or not, O my brothers. Like for instance I had this idea of my whole plot or body being like emptied of as it might be dirty water and then filled up again with clean. And then there were really lovely and horrorshow dreams of being in some veck's auto that had been crasted by me and driving up and down the world all on my oddy knocky running lewdies down and hearing them creech they were dying, and in me no pain and no sickness. And also there were dreams of doing the old in-out in-out with devotchkas, forcing like them down on the ground and making them have it and everybody standing round clapping their rookers and cheering like bezoomny. (*Clockwork Orange*, p. 127)

This image of the reinstatement of the boundaries of Alex's body and agency is significant in that it echoes the events of the narrative and although other dreams offer this reflective quality, Alex is keen to awake from this particular dream and discover its truth. This final dream occurs after he has taken the decision to jump from the window in order to escape the torment of music inflicted on him by his captor, F. Alexander. After



his process of being cleansed, he now feels that everyone is on his side, as is evidenced in the approval he feels in his dream for actions which were previously named as criminal and evil. He awakens in a hospital bed with his parents at his side, with them willing to be remonstrated for their earlier treatment of him and to welcome him back to his rightful place in their home as their son. He also realises at this point that he is capable, in fact willing and able, to consider violent acts without any of the repercussions instilled by his treatment; he is cured to return to his former life of violence. In fact he makes another important choice and decides that he will not go back to his old ways.

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### **Unearthing of Dead Love**

On a more spatial and literal level, live burials operate as a theme which draws out the trapped and frightful nature of the existence of the protagonists in Houellebecq and Burgess's novels. Chapter Eighteen of *Atomised* is 'Second Meetings' and details Michel's return to the village of his childhood, Crecy-la-Chapelle, in order to be present at the moving of his grandmother's grave. While he is there he also encounters his childhood sweetheart, Annabelle. The two encounters are strangely related, both featuring a resurfacing of feelings and relationships long dead.

Death is a difficult thing to understand; only reluctantly does a person face the reality of it. Michel had seen the body of his grandmother 20 years before and had kissed her for the last time. At first he was surprised by what he saw. His grandmother had been buried in a coffin, but among the



freshly dug earth there were only fragments of broken wood, a rotting board and indistinct white fragments. When he realised what he was looking at he quickly turned his head and forced himself to look the other way, but it was too late. He had seen the skull caked with earth, clumps of white hair falling over empty sockets. He had seen her vertebrae scattered in the clay. He understood. (*Atomised*, p. 275)

In contrast to this literal unearthing of a dead love, Michel encounters Annabelle, the figurative love which he buried alive in the café, now utterly changed, where they used to spend time together in their youth. In the face of the graphic realisation of death and the final fragmentation of their bodies to the point where they are no longer recognisable, Michel is confronted by the physical presence of Annabelle: ‘she had hardly changed. Her face was still incredibly smooth and pure, her hair was dazzling blonde. It seemed impossible that she could be 40: she looked 27 or 28 at most’ (*Atomised*, p. 276).

Annabelle seems to have escaped the ravages of time, in marked contrast to the body of his grandmother which has been unearthed in horrific detail. Even in her physically youthful state, Annabelle acts as a reminder to Michel that whatever he felt for his grandmother, and could have felt for her, is only transitory and played out in the shadow of death, with the backdrop of their decaying bodies: ‘We’re at the same point now,’ said Annabelle, ‘the same distance from death’ (*Atomised*, p. 277). The irony is that buried in Annabelle’s youthful body is the destruction of her relationship with Michel, and his subsequent destruction of humanity. While Annabelle looks perfectly healthy, she will in fact soon succumb to cancer and her loss will be a strong factor in Michel’s decision to turn his back on humanity for good.

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## Walking Dead

Monstrosities of the *fin-de-siecle* Gothic...are interstitial creatures: they exist across multiple categories of being and conform cleanly to none of them. Dracula, for example, is *Nosferatu*, or Undead: living and not living, aglow with a horrible ruddy vitality, and yet stinking of the charnel house.<sup>96</sup>

The reference is to Gothic creations that operate in liminal spaces, remaining undefined and dangerous. To be neither alive nor dead, to be buried alive, is to experience horror; but Hurley refers also to the phenomenon of the walking dead: those who have returned to life, who should by rights be dead, but instead refuse to conform and remain living.

Alex falls within this category of the living dead after his treatment when he finds himself re-united with the author, F. Alexander, whose wife he murdered. As the result of a few careless words, what should have remained buried comes to light and F. Alexander remembers who Alex is, or at least he thinks he remembers and one of his friends asks Alex to make sure. F. Alexander then invites his friends round in order to meet Alex and marvel at what a useful 'device' he could be, but with a few reservations:

If anything, of course, he could for preference look even iller and more zombyish than he does.

Anything for the cause. No doubt we can think of something. (*Clockwork Orange*, p. 120)

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<sup>96</sup> Kelly Hurley, *The Gothic Body: Sexuality, Materialism and Degeneration at the Fin de Siecle*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 24

By stating his preference for Alex to resemble someone raised from the dead or without a mind or will, Z. Dolin articulates the terrifying truth about the situation in which Alex now finds himself. His former existence is dead and yet he continues to exist and suffer. He is a member of the walking dead, cursed to continue to walk the earth and be used by all while being valued by none. His status as an individual is only a distant memory and comes second to the cause, of bringing down the government official responsible for the radical new treatment, for which his new 'friends' are willing to do almost anything to him, as we find out.

It is after this that Alex awakens in the flat he has been taken to:

When I woke up I could hear slooshy music coming out of the wall, real gromky, and it was that that had dragged me out of my bit of like sleep. It was a symphony that I knew real horrorshow but had not slooshied for many a year, namely the Symphony Number Three of the Danish veck Otto Skadelig, a very gromky and violent piece, especially in the first movement, which was what was playing now. I slooshied for two seconds in like interest and joy, but then it all came over me, the start of the pain and the sickness, and I began to groan deep down in my keeshkas...I had to get away from it, so I lurched out of the malenky bedroom and ittied skorry to the front door of the flat, but this had been locked from the outside and I could not get out. And all the time the music got more and more gromky, like it was all a deliberate torture...The music was still pouring in all brass and drums and the violins miles up through the wall. The window in the room where I had laid down was open. I ittied to it and viddied a fair drop to the autos and buses and walking chellovecks below. I creeched out to the world: 'Good-bye, good-bye, may Bog forgive you for a ruined life.' Then I got on to the sill, the music blasting away to my left, and I shut my glazzies and felt the cold wind on my litso, then I jumped. (*Clockwork Orange*, pp. 123-124)



This is the final punishment element of Alex's live burial, to be buried alive by his music in a tomb created by those who purported to be his friends. F. Alexander knows his whole story, in his own words, and while he displays horror at such a treatment for offenders like Alex, he is not above using this knowledge for his own revenge and for the ends of his political ambitions. The supposed safety of the space in which Alex has been installed quickly evaporates as it is transformed into a torture chamber.

The opening of the final chapter of the novel is an exact replica of the opening chapter of the novel: only the names of the droogs have changed. What Alex does encounter at the end of the chapter is the ghost of his past in the shape of Pete, his former gang member, grown up, married and living a respectable life. This image of what Alex might have become is haunting. The difference between the two men is emphasised by the different language each uses, Alex still favouring the nadsat dialect of youth, while Pete has adopted the language of adulthood along with his adult life. This emphasises all that Alex has lost in the live burial of his wasted youth. Here is the image of what he might have been, the alternative life which was going on while Alex was engaged in youthful violence. It is this encounter which motivates Alex to decide that this is what he wants, to grow up, to move on and to settle down to a family life.

The walking dead populate the narrative of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* too, in the visions of Winston and his destructive relationships. When Winston and Julia meet in secret with O'Brien, he tells them the history of the Brotherhood and warns them that 'we are the dead. Our only true life is in the future' (*Nineteen Eighty-Four*, p. 183). Yet at the same



time as they are dead, they refuse to remain fixed and instead continue to transgress boundaries. As members of the Brotherhood, Winston and Julia become the walking dead; they retain a presence in the scheme of the novel but from this moment their fate is sealed. Orwell writes that the ‘true life’ of the Brotherhood is ‘in the future’. By playing with time in this way, he opens another scheme of liminal space up to the reader, offering the possibility of a future where desire for resistance does not condemn the individual to a living death.

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### **Living Death**

In *Brave New World* John receives word that his mother is very ill and rushes to be at her bedside, an encounter which takes him to the Park Lane Hospital for the Dying. Here he is greeted by a ‘large room bright with sunshine and yellow paint’ (*Brave New World*, p. 180) and a nurse who is horrified by the pain he shows at the prospect of the death of someone he knows. Unlike Linda, the others in the ward are not old and bloated:

Faces still fresh and unwithered (for senility galloped so hard that it had no time to age the cheeks – only the heart and brain) turned as they passed. Their progress was followed by the blank, incurious eyes of second infancy. (*Brave New World*, p. 181)

Although the inhabitants of these beds look as if they are in the flush of youth, this is in fact a shallow mask which hides the true horror of this living death. While their faces

may retain the illusion of life and youth, they have lost the vital elements in being alive – health and mental function. Again the terror of transformation is a strong motif; the ‘galloping so hard’ of senility that means you are unaware and unprepared for its arrival, you have no warning signs in the general decay of your body and are instead attacked by the speed of the arrival of the blankness of ‘second infancy’. The monstrosity of youthful faces and blank eyes, of individuals who looked in the mirror and saw life, but who were instead staring into the face of death, is enough to make John ‘shudder as he looked back’. In contrast to this image of death is his own mother, who looks physically like a corpse but who still retains some of her mental faculties, although she has surrendered most of them to soma. Rather than dying with a dignity not available to those who share her ward, Linda seeks to emulate them through her sustained use of soma:

Linda looked on, vaguely and uncomprehendingly smiling. Her pale, bloated face wore an expression of imbecile happiness. Every now and then her eyelids closed, and for a few seconds she seemed to be dozing. Then with a little start she would wake again...would wake to these things, or rather to a dream of which these things, transformed and embellished by the soma in her blood, were the marvellous constituents, and smile once more her broken and discoloured smile of infantile contentment. (*Brave New World*, pp. 181-182)

This is one instance where physical monstrosity does not induce terror based on transformation, since Linda’s physical appearance is at least honestly representing the extent of her decline into old age. Although physically very different from the fresh-faced corpses in her ward, Linda shares the status of a living death with them. With so

much soma in her blood Linda is tasting enough of eternity for her to be there permanently; she need never return to living in order to die. Sleeping or awake she is in a dream-like state impenetrable by those around her in the land of the living, as she is now in her space of live burial. Like those around her she has been reduced to a childlike state of dependence, not on permanent care like the others, but permanent on soma to take her away from the realities of life.

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### **Burial and Repression**

Structured around live burial and populated by the walking dead, the Gothic Dystopia is a narrative of layers, of surfaces to be explored in order to delve to the hidden depths. These depths can be schematised as dreams and the subconscious of the protagonists, or can function as spaces within the narrative which bury characters and events, only for them to resurface later and return to haunt the present happenings. These dreams become nightmares for the characters like Offred, Van and Alex, who awaken to find that the terrifying vision of their slumber is in fact the real condition of their lives. Alex also has to face the prospect that his dreams are in some way prophetic, and that a return to consciousness necessitates living through these events as a member of the walking dead, in full knowledge of his fate. Live burial suffocates the character and plot, but at the same time drives them towards that which has been repressed.

## Chapter Six

### Monsters and Monstrosity

Only a human being or a humanoid can be a true monster. No monstrous cupboard, chair, plant or teapot could engender real fear, horror and fascination all at once. The essential condition for a monster is that the human characteristics it possesses must not be changed too far...The monster is able to tap emotions of fear, disgust or alienation primarily through its subversion, or inversion, of expectations. We react violently when what appears natural proves not to be, and to some extent vice versa.<sup>97</sup>

This chapter explores the monster as a symbol of transformation within the Gothic Dystopias. Throughout the course of these novels, not only does the monster offer transformation, but also the possibility of the transgression of the boundaries upon which assumptions both inside and outside the novel are made. These boundaries can be bodily or societal and at times seem like positive barriers to keep the self safe and also operate to constrain and threaten a sense of self. Carefully constructed boundaries which determine the selfhood of characters can be threatened by the state which seeks to impose its own limits on the actions of that body, with monstrous effects. The very definition of what is

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<sup>97</sup> Jasia Reichardt, "Artificial Life and The Myth of Frankenstein", in Stephen Bann, ed., *Frankenstein, Creation and Monstrosity*, (London: Reaktion Books, 1994), pp. 136-157 (p. 139)



monstrous becomes undefined and open to speculation as the narrative shifts perspective to reveal and conceal horror and the bodies which both suffer and control suffering.

Gothic fiction is a technology of subjectivity, one which produces the deviant subjectivities opposite which the normal, the healthy and the pure can be known. Within Gothic novels... multiple interpretations are embedded in the text and part of the experience of horror comes from the realisation that meaning itself runs riot. Gothic novels produce a symbol for this interpretative mayhem in the body of the monster.<sup>98</sup>

This uncertainty and ambiguity is central to my (mis-)understanding of the Gothic monster in Dystopian fiction. It accounts for the unavailability of certainty as to which characters are indeed monsters and which are in the process of transgressing that definitional boundary in order to question it further. Not only do the subjects of the novels provide difficulties in interpretation, but by placing the characters in such a futuristic setting, the reader is already suffering from a feeling of disorientation so that we are then confronted with situations which seem designed to defy interpretation.

The importance of the monster figure in the Dystopian text cannot be over-estimated, since its very inclusion is key to the structure of the text as a whole, providing the fear and the terror, but also the element of duplicity which brings the plot alive. The lack of insight into any kind of 'truth' with regard to which side of the 'good' and 'evil' dichotomy each character lies on is due in large part to the multiplicity of interpretations and the constantly shifting boundaries. The figure of the monster also makes the false

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<sup>98</sup> Judith Halberstam, *Skin Shows: Gothic Horror and the Technology of Monsters*, (Durham, NC; London: Duke University Press, 1998), p. 2

claim to provide these boundaries, to allow us access to certainty through our understanding of this type of deviance. However, at the same time that monstrosity seems to create a boundary within which we can begin to ascertain meaning, it is simultaneously transgressing and subverting that very value code which ascribes definition and builds understanding.

Alongside the definition of monstrosity as challenging and subverting any attempt to define boundaries, is the understanding of monstrosity as revolving around the deception involved in the transformation which the monstrous performs.

The crude horror of physical abnormality is as nothing to the fear that human appearances cannot be trusted. So a character might suddenly shift from showing conventional behaviour to a 'suddenly feral, red-eyed, dissolving imitation'.

Such changes enact a loss of self which Mark Rose has described as being characteristic of the Science Fiction genre: 'feelings of self-alienation typically express themselves as narratives of metamorphosis, stories of the transformation of men into something less than or more than human'.<sup>99</sup>

This is the definition of monstrosity outlined by David Seed in his essay 'Alien invasions by body snatchers and related creatures', as one which underlines the concerns of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and *A Clockwork Orange*: the uncertainty as to meaning and definition, who are the 'good-guys' and who are the 'baddies'. Although the image of a 'suddenly feral, red-eyed, dissolving imitation' is monstrous, it is the transformation and

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<sup>99</sup> David Seed, 'Alien invasions by body snatchers and related creatures' in Victor Sage and Allan Lloyd Smith, eds, *Modern Gothic: a reader*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1996), pp.152-170, (p.153)

its speed which is most noticeable and unsettling. To be always and throughout the narrative a monster is not nearly so frightening as to change and become one or to move back and forth between monstrosity and humanity, to evade definition. Subtle monstrosity is also a powerful device, since it is not always those with an overtly monstrous appearance who are in fact the threatening individuals. The deception of surfaces adds power to the threat of monstrosity. It is this shifting, these transformations, which will be the focus of this chapter.

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### **Monstrosities**

The types of monstrosity that the novels engage with fall into two basic categories: the horror of the individual and the evil of the state/ideological machinery. The fear of the individual regarding the integrity of the self manifests itself in visions of monsters, which leads to transformation and struggles to maintain the boundaries of the body. The power of the state in Dystopias operates to invade these carefully constructed boundaries with fiendish intent. The definition offered by David Seed, and to which I refer, centres on the demoniac fear that human appearances cannot be trusted, leading to the creation of anxiety about the individual and their threatened and invaded body. These kinds of mutations transform and transgress throughout the course of these novels, never providing fixed boundaries and challenging ideas of fixed identities. However, even this type of person-monstrosity constituted by an individual in flux does not remain fixed in



the course of the narrative, since certain individuals within the scheme of the novels operate as part of the larger machinery of state monstrosity. This kind of state power is most usually constituted from large numbers of demonic people: power is a parasite on the human body, it needs it to survive. This exercise of power by the state apparatus serves to threaten the interiority of the individual, becoming nightmarish in the process. Its monstrosity emanates from the ability it has to invade boundaries, question them and also restructure them in new, abstract and frightening ways.

However, definition when dealing with monsters is difficult since:

The body that scares and appals changes over time, as do the individual characteristics that add up to monstrosity, as do the preferred interpretations of that monstrosity. Within the traits that make a body monstrous – that is frightening or ugly, abnormal or disgusting – we may read the difference between an other and a self, a pervert and a normal person, a foreigner and a native.<sup>100</sup>

Some of the monsters I discuss are neither physically ugly nor disgusting, yet fit into categories of monstrosity which operate in different ways to contribute to a definition of 'monster'. There are as many characteristics of monstrosity as there are individual ideas of what is horrific. As individuals we define our own horrors in relation to ourselves and the boundaries we wish to create and operate within. It is the very changeability of notions of evil which makes definition so difficult and interesting. The uncertainty which surrounds the monster reveals personal as well as cultural ambiguities that enlighten the reading of the text.

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<sup>100</sup> Halberstam, *Skin Shows*, p. 8

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## Mutability

Monstrosity is the horror felt by Winston when he discovers the mutability of the human body, when at his moment of capture the junk-shop owner, Mr Charrington, seems to alter physically before his eyes into something horrible, changed utterly from the man who rented them a room and kept them safe, into some unspeakable kind of ‘thing’.

There was another, lighter step in the passage. Mr Charrington came into the room. ...The cockney accent had disappeared...Mr Charrington was still wearing his old velvet jacket, but his hair, which had been almost white, had turned black. Also he was not wearing his spectacles ...He was still recognisable, but he was not the same person any longer. His body had straightened, and seemed to have grown bigger. His face had undergone only tiny changes that had nevertheless worked a complete transformation. The black eyebrows were less bushy, the wrinkles were gone, the whole lines of the face seemed to have altered; even the nose seemed shorter. It was the alert, cold face of a man of about five-and-thirty. It occurred to Winston that for the first time in his life he was looking, with knowledge, at a member of the Thought Police. (*Nineteen Eighty-Four*, p. 233-234)

In the beginning Winston still thinks of the person before his eyes as ‘Mr Charrington’, but by the end of the passage he has been transformed into ‘a member of the Thought Police’: no longer a named individual, but part of the monstrous organisation which Winston has been seeking to avoid. The idea of ‘imitation’, of a pretence at being human, is critical to an understanding of the horror which Mr Charrington represents.

Winston can barely believe what he sees before him. The transformation which has occurred is utterly fantastic; Mr Charrington has not only altered almost beyond recognition, but has become so much younger that it is a frightening vision. He is described as not only growing younger, but bigger, colder and more alert, not at all the kind old man from whom Winston believed he had rented the room. The imitation of this figure of a kind landlord is very effective since Winston never considers him anything other than an old man until the very moment he is confronted with these changes and realises he is actually a member of the Thought Police. Mr Charrington first seems to fit the category of a person monster since he physically undergoes transformation which produces horror; however, he is in fact also part of a larger power monster which works its own transformation to utilise his corporeal form to further its own ends. The monstrous state power is parasitical; needing to live in and feed on human bodies: it cannot exist for and of itself.<sup>101</sup> The alterations to Mr Charrington are described as ‘tiny’ yet they are enough to convince Winston for an extended period of time. This suggests some element of self-deception; Winston wants to believe that it is possible to escape from the rule of Big Brother, to exist outwith the constant surveillance of the telescreens, so he allows himself to be duped by the illusion. He cannot accept that the state-imposed boundaries of his life are fixed so he seeks the gap through which he can slip, and ensures he does not look too hard for the catch. Mr Charrington has shifted from a faceless element of the state-monster, to become a monster with a body capable of action. He has become more than human, transferred all his power into a corporeal form to confront those who thought they were safe from the large, faceless monstrosity of the state.

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<sup>101</sup> see Giddens, ‘Structuration Theory’ <http://www.theory.org.uk/giddens2.htm>



Burgess explores the impact of the transformative powers of monstrosity in *A Clockwork Orange*, focusing on Alex as he struggles with the colossal invasion of the state apparatus.

I was like dazed, O my brothers, and could not viddy very clear, but I was sure I had met these millicents some metso before...The older one of the two said:

‘Well well well well well well well. If it isn’t little Alex. Very long time no viddy, droog. How goes?’ I was like dazed, the uniform and the shelm or helmet making it hard to viddy who this was, though litso and goloss were very familiar. Then I looked at the other one, and about him, with his grinning bezoomny litso, there was no doubt. Then, all numb and growing number. I looked back at the well well welling one. This was then fatty old Billyboy, my old enemy. The other was, of course, Dim, who had used to be my droog and also the enemy of stinking fatty goaty Billyboy, but was now a Millicent with uniform and shelm and whit to keep order.

(*Clockwork Orange*, p. 109)

Alex is here confronted by the state powers of transformation, where he comes face to face with the less than human faces of individuals from his youth. In the same way as Victor Frankenstein was haunted by the monster he created while young, the monstrous creations of Alex’s youthful adventures have returned to haunt him in new and more terrifying forms. Like Frankenstein, Alex is responsible for creating the gang of Droogs and he now finds himself threatened by them, in the same way as the monster in Mary Shelley’s novel comes back to wreak havoc on the life of his creator. In the past Dim was one of Alex’s gang and shared the same uniform as Alex, the white suit and the black extremities, but now he has a different uniform and a different stance in relation to Alex;

the power has shifted in Dim's favour. Under Alex's guidance Dim became the thoughtless, violent and terrifying monster which Alex now faces but without the element of control he once exercised. He has become a member of the state's controlling forces and is now part of the larger monster, the power-monster.

His metamorphosis is figured very strongly by his clothing. The new uniform confuses Alex to the point where Dim is almost unrecognisable to him, almost only a uniform and no longer a person. This same effect occurs earlier in the novel when Dim is in his anti-establishment uniform and with Alex, where their acts are somehow distanced from reality by the strangeness of their clothing, and their language. Not only is there a transformation on the level of the uniform and the shift in power this produces, but coupled with this is a complete shift in any loyalties that existed in youth. Dim and Billyboy were once enemies, as were Alex and Billyboy, but this is no longer the case; Dim and Billyboy are now in a new relationship where their shared status aligns them against Alex. This crossing of boundaries is a key feature of the monster character, bringing confusion and uncertainty, which is the emotional status of Alex when confronted with this new image of state power. Both Dim and Billyboy were hideous characters in the first part of the novel and this continues in their new incarnation, since although the uniform has changed, the 'litso' and the 'goloss' is still the same: the same twisted monstrous individuals as before are under the uniform, save that now they have some legitimacy. This is in contrast to Alex, who looks the same as ever but has undergone hidden alterations. His apparent rescue from one group intent on his harm has turned into a nightmare of larger proportions.

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## Liminal Monsters

The boundaries under which the individual operates are further explored in *A Clockwork Orange* and can be understood with reference to Judith Halberstam's *Skin Shows*:

Skin houses the body and it is figured in Gothic as the ultimate boundary, the material that divides the inside from the outside. The vampire will puncture and mark the skin with his fangs, Mr Hyde will covet white skin, Dorian Gray will desire his own canvas....Slowly but surely the outside becomes the inside and the hide no longer conceals nor contains, it offers itself up as text, as body, as monster.<sup>102</sup>

Halberstam makes reference to classic Gothic texts, Stevenson's *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* and Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, in order to illustrate her argument about the Gothic features of the boundary of skin on the body. In both these texts the skin is both a boundary and a place of invasion, leading to the exposure of dark, Gothic secrets. The moment when the interiority of Alex begins to be threatened is when his 'treatment' begins and they pull back the protective covers of his eyes in order to penetrate below the level of the exterior. The marks which are left on Alex are invisible, the invasion has been one of the 'not-me' of otherness from outside his own body but without visible traces on his skin. The boundary of his skin is peeled back to reveal at once the 'me' and allow it to be swamped by the 'not-me' flooding in from outside:

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<sup>102</sup> Halberstam, *Skin Shows*, p. 7



I do not wish to describe, brothers, what other horrible veshches I was like forced to viddy that afternoon. The like minds of this Dr Brodsky and Dr Branom and the others in white coats, and remember there was this devotchka twiddling with the knobs and watching the meters, they must have been more cally and filthy than any prestoopnick in the Staja itself. Because I did not think it was possible for any veck to even think of making films of what I was forced to viddy, all tied to this chair and my glazzies made to be wide open. All I could do was to creech very gromky for them to turn it off, turn it off, and that like part drowned the noise of dratsing and fillying and also the music that went with it all. (*Clockwork Orange*, p. 79)

As in the case of Winston in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, the authorities do not want him to simply be cured on the outside, but they want the transformation to be from the inside out. His skin is no longer allowed to offer him any protection, because no matter how hard he tries he is unable to close his eyelids and put an end to the images which are invading him. This transgression of boundaries is not engineered by Alex himself, but is entirely outwith his control and contrary to his wishes, although he did initially volunteer for the treatment in full ignorance of its implications. The marks left on Alex penetrate deeper than the surface, invading him completely as they were intended to, providing a complete transformation.

‘Of course it is horrible,’ smiled Dr Branom. ‘Violence is a very horrible thing. That’s what you are learning now. Your body is learning it.’

‘But,’ I said, ‘I don’t understand. I don’t understand about feeling sick like I did. I never used to feel sick before. I used to feel like very the opposite. I mean, doing it or watching it I used to feel real horrorshow. I just don’t understand why or how or what –’ (*Clockwork Orange*, p. 81)

During the treatment, Alex and the reader begin to realise that this learning is not a method which engages with the mind, but rather is based on the cooperation of the body. In his mind Alex never really changes his opinion of violence but his bodily reaction is what becomes altered. He still desires to engage in violent acts, but is prevented due to the now violent reaction of his body to such thoughts and actions. The sickness he feels is separate from any logic which his mind employs during his treatment. He remains rational and coherent in his mind while being transformed, but his body no longer responds as it once did to such stimuli. Dr Brodsky and his fellow enthusiasts are able to peel back the skin to expose Alex, but the success of this invasion is limited. The state authorities fail to invade his mind at the deepest level: that which structures his thoughts and shapes his emotions. Instead they only tinker with meaning. The love of violence remains but what it triggers in Alex's body is different. The meaning has become altered and rather than such scenes being pleasurable, a different sensation fills the body at the sight of violence; the meaning of such scenes works differently upon the physiology of Alex. For the state the alteration of meaning for Alex is not so important as the compliance of his body, since this is the representation of self which he shows to the outside world and which they hope to use to compel others to follow his example and avoid the treatment he received.

As a reader one is torn between the belief that those who treat Alex are monsters, and that he himself is monstrous. Even this distinction is further complicated, however, by the fact that there is a 'before' and 'after' Alex to consider. He may very well have been a monster, but has his treatment made him less of a monster or more? Is he more or less

human as a result? If we focus on the definition of monstrosity as ‘the fear that human appearances cannot be trusted’,<sup>103</sup> then it would seem plausible to argue that by ‘curing’ Alex the state has in fact only served to create a new form of monster, one which acts as though it were different, but that this change is only skin deep. Alex is monstrous after his treatment because of two key factors: his lack of ability to actively choose to do good, or to choose at all; and the lack of correlation between the desires of his mind and the responses of his body. He has become distanced from his humanity, just as he was when he committed acts of ‘ultra-violence’, because he lacks the free will to determine his own actions: a monstrous creation.

The treatment of Alex is an example of the interaction between people monsters and power monsters. Alex strives to protect his carefully constructed boundaries yet he is happy for the treatment to be visited upon him, confident that he is capable of controlling events and that his continued pretence of goodness will be enough to convince them of his changed attitude. Instead, what he becomes is an invaded body, transformed further than he would have believed possible. The cause of this transformation is the monstrous power of the state, which is capable of executing this invasion through the bodies of people monsters like Dr Brodsky, causing ‘interpretative mayhem’<sup>104</sup> where there are no clear boundaries to define acts of monstrosity and acts which create monsters.

Alex states that he used to feel ‘real horrorshow’ when confronted with or engaged in acts of violence, but now the same acts have become to him truly horrific and beyond

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103 Seed, ‘Alien Invasions...’, p. 153

104 Halberstam, *Skin Shows*, p. 2



what he feels he can physically endure, leading him to ‘creech’ for the torture to end.

The ambiguity of the phrase ‘real horrorshow’ is powerful in this context, since it is used at once to describe how Alex used to feel and also how he is being taught to see. By physically controlling his eyelids, the focus is on the visual impact of the scenes, that they become a *real* horrorshow. The emphasis is on the viewing of these scenes, since to see them under this new influence of drugs is what will penetrate Alex. Yet, it seems apparent that the success is only in a physical sense; Alex retains an inherent love of violence but the undertaking of violent acts has been transformed to become a different sensation on his body. He has become an impotent monster, no longer having the physical capacity to satiate his desires but still experiencing the wish to do so. Like his beloved music, violence used to be a high point in his life, but after his treatment its impact is entirely the opposite. He still loves his music and his violence, but they no longer have the same meaning in a physical sense to him. They have been transformed into sensations of pain rather than pleasure. He is unable to withstand the physical side effects of engagements with violence but the appeal of violence is still as strong in itself. The horror of the ‘show’ has only become ‘real’ to Alex in a physical sense to his body, but the horror ends there.

The breaching of the ultimate body boundary of the skin is the key moment of invasion in *A Clockwork Orange* and it is mirrored in Room 101 for Winston. The metaphor for the threat to his bodily unity, to the coherence of what is held together underneath his skin, is the rat in the cage:

‘I will have pressed the first lever,’ said O’Brien. ‘You understand the construction of this cage. The mask will fit over your head, leaving no exit. When I press this other lever, the door of the cage will slide up. These starving brutes will shoot out of it like bullets. Have you ever seen a rat leap through the air? They will leap onto your face and bore straight into it. Sometimes they attack the eyes first. Sometimes they burrow through the cheeks and devour the tongue.’

*(Nineteen Eighty-Four, p. 298)*

The horror of this threat is more than that of the Gothic symbol of the vampire, because these rats will not only penetrate the skin and the flesh, they will remain inside. The mark of a vampire penetrates, but only momentarily. The implication of the rats’ invasion is that it will be complete; it will not stop but will bore right through Winston, leaving the ultimate mark of death. The actions of a vampire seem less invasive because they bite and leave, while the rat will invade and remain. Although the impact of the vampire is lasting – since it signals recruitment to the leagues of the Undead – it does not have the same specific horror that the rat holds for Winston. Vampires are symbols of horror for the vast majority, but the rat is a specific object of fear for Winston. It is important that this is what O’Brien chooses to threaten Winston with, since it is privileged information that he has been able to gain from observing Winston. Thus, the rat is symbolic not only of Winston’s fears, but also of his existence as an invaded body long before his time in Room 101. His very thoughts and emotional states, his fears and desires are known to the power-monster of the state and it is this information which makes them monstrous, since they are able to use it in such frightening ways.

The significance of their attack also rests on the areas which O'Brien predicts they will attack - the eyes or the tongue.<sup>105</sup> Throughout the text Winston has been masquerading as a hero, a revolutionary who values freedom of speech and knowledge above everything else, but here the very symbols of these freedoms are under threat. If the rats bore through his eyes en route to the destruction of his bodily integrity, they invade through the very body parts which would have been central to Winston's 'revolutionary' activity – sight and seeing are paramount in the novel. However, the other possible route is no better since this would deprive Winston of a voice while accessing his interiority. Yet again the threat is played out against a backdrop of many different interpretations of this event. Is Winston's desire to protect what lies beneath his skin part of his rebellion, part of his on-going fight for freedom? Orwell himself believed that 'freedom of thought' was a useless concept in a regime like 1984 because without the freedom to communicate this thought to others there is no freedom because ideas die in solitude. Winston is willing to transgress but not to the point where it becomes a risk to himself. He values his own bodily integrity above all other considerations, evidenced by his willingness to sacrifice Julia in order to save his own skin. This is a moment of climax in the novel since it is the point when Winston faces up to the power of the state monster. This threat to his skin reveals the true nature of the man: the 'hero'. What he faces finally overwhelms him and his façade of bravery, of rebellion and of heroics is overcome. Although he maintains his bodily integrity, he exposes and destroys a more important element of his selfhood, that of a decent human being. 'Do it to Julia! Not me! Julia! I don't care what you do to her. Tear her face off, strip her to the bones. Not me! Julia!

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<sup>105</sup> see also Steven Bruhm, *Gothic Bodies: The Politics of Pain in Romantic Fiction*, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1994), p. xv, for a discussion of Hoffman's 'Sandman' and importance of attacks on eyes as source of terror.



Not me!’ (*Nineteen Eighty-Four*, p. 300). Winston believes that by transferring the torture to his lover Julia he has preserved his ‘sense of self’ by ending the threat to his body. However, he has lost much in the process, being transformed into a monstrous entity capable of such a lack of humanity. As an individual monster he has been confronted with and defeated by the larger monster of state power. His boundaries have been breached and his humanity called into question. He is willing to sacrifice anyone but himself, the woman he supposedly loves can be ‘stripped to the bone’, exposed in the most base and horrific way. She can have her face ‘torn off’, her very symbol of individuality rendered meaningless, anything that will protect Winston. He professes to love her and yet he is capable of such disregard for the sanctity of her ‘skin’ when faced with the choice between Julia’s loss of self and his own. When his skin is threatened it loses its capacity to conceal, his ‘hide’ can no longer hide. In a novel obsessed with lies, secrets and surfaces, Winston is shown as the ultimate deceiver, able to cover his true self in the mask of the rebellious hero until the dénouement when this mask is threatened. He is transformed into a monster, ‘a screaming animal’ (*Nineteen Eighty-Four*, p. 298), capable only of the basic emotion of self-preservation. But the irony is that in attempting to preserve his sense of self bound up in his body, Winston actually exposes an unpleasant and distasteful side to his character, one which will sacrifice those he supposedly loves in order to protect himself. What Winston loses in Room 101 is his right to choose, to be undetermined by the Party. He can no longer choose to hide his true thoughts and feelings after the rats; all his secrets are revealed. The rats have made evident his true capacity to be used as an instrument of the power monster.

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### Future Transformations

Another formulation of the monstrosity, of ‘the transformation of men into something less than or more than human’, takes place in Houellebecq’s *Atomised*. In this novel, masculinity is a transformative power, one which allows for the exploration of body boundaries. This is most strongly emphasised in an early chapter in the novel titled ‘The Omega Male’.

Pele comes up behind him now. He is short, stocky and very strong. He thumps Bruno hard and the boy starts to cry. They punch him to the ground, grab his feet and drag him across the floor to the toilets. They rip off his pyjama bottoms. His penis is hairless, still that of a child. Two of them hold him by the ankles while others force his mouth open. Pele takes a toilet brush and scrubs Bruno’s face. He can taste shit. He screams. (*Atomised*, p. 48)

This whole encounter is framed by the comments of the narrator which focus on the social structure of the animal kingdom, making the link to animal behaviour explicit. The importance of Pele’s physical size and dominance is critical to his ability to command the situation and inflict this torture on Bruno. He is bigger, he is stronger, he is altogether more masculine and therefore attracts followers among the other boys. The pack mentality is strong and the narrator explores the links in this chapter and throughout the novel. Not only is Pele himself monstrous, but the boys as a whole operate to become a coherent group of monsters. They band together under the leadership of Pele in order to pose a serious threat to the bodily integrity of Bruno. Only as a gang are they able to

hold him down and hold his mouth open in order to push the toilet brush into it. Again this power monster is composed of many people monsters who become more monstrous in their shared status. Yet the parasitical nature of power means that it must become dependent on those people it inhabits and therefore it becomes fearful and then strong. Like Winston and Alex, the boundaries of Bruno's body are transgressed so that the outside dirt and disgust of the toilet is forced inside of his mouth. He is physically degraded, becomes a naked, curled up ball that is covered in shit. In response to his ordeal Bruno loses control of his bowels. This is the final humiliation: the inability to control one's body on any level. He is screaming and crying already but this final degradation crosses a new line where he becomes more animal than human. However, the masculinity of the group of boys is adolescent in nature, requiring brutality to gain respect, and would not be so monstrous without the narrative commentary and the comparison he offers with the brutality of the animal world.

We are not presented as facts with the lives of the protagonists in *Atomised* and left to arrive at our own conclusions. Rather, we are guided in the 'right' direction by the narrative commentary at all stages:

Animal societies, for the most part, are organised according to a strict hierarchy where rank relates directly to the physical strength of each member. The most dominant male in the group is known as the *alpha male*, his nearest rival the *beta male*, and so on down to the weakest of the group, the *omega male*. Combat rituals generally determine status within the group; weaker animals can try to better their position by challenging those above them...The weakest animals can generally avoid combat by adopting a submissive position...Bruno, however, found himself in a less auspicious position. While dominance and brutality are commonplace in the animal kingdom,



among higher primates, notably chimpanzee, weaker animals suffer acts of gratuitous cruelty.  
(*Atomised*, p. 51)

The information presented by the narrator takes the form of a natural history lesson, placing human behaviour alongside that of animals and studying it accordingly. The superior position of the narrator with regard to the two boys is interesting, since human beings generally consider themselves to be at the peak of the evolutionary ladder and yet this narrator believes himself better than the humans whose story he relates. This hints at later revelations with regard to the narrator and explains many of the strange insights offered. By first describing the characteristics of animal hierarchy, and then comparing the behaviour of humans, the narrator makes it clear that he considers this aspect of human behaviour to be lower than that of the animals. The cruelty suffered by Bruno is not related to the establishment of some kind of working and understandable hierarchy, but is gratuitous, executed for fun and the sadistic enjoyment of the attackers. To return to David Seed's definition of monstrosity – 'the transformation of men into something less than or more than human'<sup>106</sup> – this seems to be exactly the intention of the narrator. Rather than presenting the events and allowing the reader to come to their own conclusions, this narrator is determined to intercede at every stage. The behaviour of the boys is cruel but only becomes monstrous when marked as lower than that of animals. Although the chapter is titled 'Omega Male' the suggestion of the narrator is that the hierarchy in which Bruno occupies the weakest position is not altogether the same as the animal hierarchy from which the name comes, that there is an even lower position for which Bruno is more than suitable.

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<sup>106</sup> Seed, 'Alien Invasions...', p. 153

Unlike Winston and Alex, Bruno's treatment was in his childhood, and rather than being some kind of punishment for actions as an adult, his experiences have consequences for his later adult behaviour. In the cases of Winston and Alex we are given the background of their actions leading to their encounter with monstrosity, but with Bruno we are given his life story chronologically in order that his adult behaviour may be considered in the light of his childhood experiences. We are therefore offered some justification for the later, sometimes monstrous, behaviour of Bruno, but this is contaminated by the control of the narrator.

Individual monstrosity is a strong feature of Dystopian texts, focusing as they do on core protagonists, their encounters and the effect this has on them. Houellebecq's *Atomised* is the story of two brothers and the impact life has on their relationship, and in some ways also about the impact they have on life itself. While Bruno attempts to maintain a physical link to other human beings in the course of the novel, his brother Michel removes himself almost entirely from the sphere of human existence, distancing himself emotionally from all those around him. However, they are similar, since the events of their adult life are very much influenced by their childhood experiences. In his youth Michel is closest to Annabelle, but even this union is tenuous and fraught with difficulties, culminating in her leaving him for a more openly passionate young man. Michel's response to this reveals his monstrosity as he becomes less and less human as the narrative progresses:

He had a sudden premonition that all his life he would feel as he did at this moment. Emotion would pass him by, sometimes tantalisingly close; others would experience happiness and despair. but such things would be unknown to him, they would not touch him... Though he wanted to, he simply could not move; he felt as though his body were slipping into icy water. Still everything seemed strangely calm. He felt separated from the world by a vacuum moulded to his body like a shell, a protective armour. (*Atomised*, p. 99)

This physical and emotional separation increasingly begins to characterise Michel's existence as he slips further and further away from the world around him. He becomes less than human as his ability to react with emotion to situations is diminished. His transformation allows the creation of this 'vacuum' or 'protective armour' to protect his inside from the world around him. He minimises interaction to minimise hurt and in the process comes closer and closer to the emotionless clones for whom in the future he is responsible. The numbness of his life is epitomised in the 'icy water' which he feels himself slipping into, so that little by little his body becomes numb and unresponsive. He becomes like a robot, able to function but unable to interact in any meaningful way with those around him; 'For years, Michel had lived a purely intellectual existence. The world of human emotions was not his field; he knows little of it' (*Atomised*, p.139). He exists only on one level, unable and unwilling to explore the 'field' of human emotions which remains a mystery of little relevance to him. The implication is that some kind of training is required in order to be a fully functioning human being, training that Bruno and Michel lacked in their childhood.



I quote again from Halberstam: ‘Slowly but surely the outside becomes the inside and the hide no longer conceals nor contains, it offers itself up as text, as body, as monster’.<sup>107</sup>

The outside shell that Michel creates to protect himself from what lies outside in turn becomes the governing feature of the inside. By being so afraid of what he might feel if he were to remove his armour, he becomes as icy cold as the outside shell he created to protect what he holds inside. His attempts to hide, to conceal himself and remain safe serve only to transform him into a monster capable of creating a race of monsters.

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### **Reproductive Monstrosity**

Like the moment when Victor Frankenstein realises the implications of the creation of a female mate for his monster, the horror of Gothic Dystopias rests in large part on the forms of reproduction undertaken by such monstrous forms as inhabit these narratives.

The story of the female monster – a story within a story within a story – folds Gothic back upon itself. While certainly the image of one story folded into another suggests pregnancy...this is also a structure that firmly dissociates itself from the organic, the natural, and the reproductive. One story folded within another also signifies the machinic, the productive, the technological.<sup>108</sup>

This dichotomy between the natural and the technological does much to intensify the horror of the situations in *Herland* and *The Handmaid's Tale* where the female-centred

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<sup>107</sup> Halberstam, *Skin Shows*, p. 7

<sup>108</sup> Halberstam, *Skin Shows*, pp. 48-49

narratives are those of reproduction, but of a reproduction turned monstrous. The labyrinthine element of the texts discussed in Chapter Two relates to the presentation of these narratives as those of twisted reproductive practices, where the monsters who populate the narrative are multiplied by horrific practices, thus increasing monstrosity in both quantity and intensity.

As a society of only women, the rules and regulations in Gilman's *Herland* seem far more benign than were they to be ruled by men who placed similar restrictions on reproduction and the labelling of those 'unfit for the supreme task' of motherhood and the education of children. The narrative is full of praise for their calm, rational behaviour and decisions, for the lack of the hysterics which Van and friends were determined they would find in a nation of women. And yet, this complete lack of emotion is far more chilling than any hysterics. It is the men in the narrative that engage in emotional responses, while the Herland women have been able to breed out this undesirable characteristic, focusing instead on the fostering of community spirit and a lack of individuality. The results have been monstrous. Not only are the women themselves monstrosities in their physical capabilities, but the society they have created is itself a monster based around the naming of 'undesirables' unsuitable for the supreme task of mothering, the control of child rearing by a state appointed authority and a regime which seeks to root out any propensity towards individuality and emotion.

*The Handmaid's Tale* is also a narrative where elements of the machine impose to create production rather than reproduction. There is nothing natural about the process which

creates life in Atwood's novel, it is a choreographed performance designed to produce children and underscore the structures of that society:

The Ceremony goes as usual.

I lie on my back, fully clothed except for the healthy white cotton underdrawers...Above me, towards the head of the bed, Serena Joy is arranged, outspread. Her legs apart, I lie between them, my head on her stomach, her pubic bone under the base of my skull, her thighs on either side of me. She too is fully clothed.

My arms are raised; she holds my hands, each of mine in each of hers. This is supposed to signify that we are one flesh, one being. What it really means is that she is in control, of the process and thus of the product. (*Handmaid*, p. 104)

Here, what should be intimate becomes monstrous. A multi-limbed, layered mass of bodies creating a life as distasteful as this scene of conception. Serena Joy seeks to control the event in order to assert her control over the finished product, thus highlighting the move away from the natural reproductive expectation towards a technologically driven production line for the delivering of babies. The womb of the Handmaiden becomes an instrument to create life for pre-determined parents in a fully determined life, rather than a place of natural growth and nurture. The attempt is made to diffuse the monstrosity by reminding the reader that each member of the mass is fully clothed but this only serves to intensify the feeling of unease and distaste; one does not expect that such an intimate act should be undertaken with the barriers of clothing still in place.



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## Fearful Monstrosities

Although the central theme of monsters rests with the agents of control, be they the Party or those in the Staja or State Police, the transformation to monstrosity is also the story of Winston, Alex and the other characters who suffer at the hands of authority.

He stopped because he was frightened. A bowed, grey-coloured, skeleton-like thing was coming towards him. Its actual appearance was frightening, and not merely the fact that he knew it to be himself. He moved closer to the glass. The creature's face seemed to be protruded because of its bent carriage. (*Nineteen Eighty-Four*, p. 284)

This description by Winston is actually of his own body after his time in Room 101. His own flesh has become alien to him: an 'it'; a 'creature', rather than himself; something which can no longer be trusted; it has been transformed into something less than human: a monster. The condition of his body is an expression of the absolute power of the Party to alter everything, to change what they want, even almost the physical structure of the human body. No boundaries are sacred and outwith the reach of the Party; their transgression is absolute.

A similar transformation occurs for Alex in the course of *A Clockwork Orange*, but it is more complex and involves many more boundaries. In the first part of the novel Alex is the aggressor, the monster. In the second part the State is the aggressor and monster and

finally Alex becomes the victim surrounded by monsters. However, within this scheme there are many ambiguities. When Alex is treated and 'cured' his actions are more acceptable to those who have treated him, but the reader still feels there is something monstrous about a human being deprived of his right to choose; he has again become a monster and the author character who is definitely the victim in the first part of the novel metamorphoses into a monster, capable of sub-human actions with regard to using Alex and his suffering as a political tool to further his own ends.

Winston is determined that he will never allow Big Brother to access the secrets of his mind, that this one area will remain untouched and true. However, in striving towards this end he creates for himself an alter-ego in the shape of O'Brien and is faced with his ultimate fear. Van strives to attain the perfection he sees in the women of Herland without realising the futility, and harm, of his enterprise, eventually fostering monstrous behaviour in his fellow man. For Bernard his status as anti-hero makes it possible for him to achieve the creation of monstrosity not only in himself but in the body of John the Savage. Houellebecq plays two anti-heroes against each other, with both striving for their own particular brand of monstrosity. Bruno manages to limit his destructive capacity to himself and Christiane, while Michel is capable of far wider-reaching hideousness. The threat comes not from the outside, from otherness, but from their own unknown capabilities. The creation of Alex is fostered solely on his own body but with significant help from those around him. He creates a self alien to the reader and himself.

By focusing upon the body as the locus of fear, Shelley's novel suggests that it is people (or at least bodies) who terrify people, not ghosts or gods, devils or monks, windswept castles or

labyrinthine monasteries. The architecture of fear in this story is replaced by physiognomy, the landscape of fear is replaced by sutured skin, the conniving villain is replaced by an antihero and his monstrous creation.<sup>109</sup>

This bodily focus is one shared by Dystopian texts, where the landscape of the Gothic plays a less significant role than the fear inspired by the monsters which inhabit these spaces. The monsters in the novels are people, and despite a Dystopian obsession with issues of power and control, with the power of the state to influence the individual, the most frightening aspect is the monstrosity of the characters involved. They are the face of any larger monster one could attempt to fix and label; it is people who commit the acts of the novel and form the consciousness from which we view events. Dystopian novels are stories of the anti-hero who strives throughout the novel to resist the forces at work within himself and his ideology, but eventually either *creates* something hideous and outwith his control or *becomes* something hideous and outwith his control. In contrast, people like O'Brien and Dr Brodsky personify the monstrosity of the state: invasive and all-consuming.

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<sup>109</sup> Halberstam, *Skin Shows*, p. 28



## Chapter Seven

### Fragmented Flesh

To George Steiner, de Sade's perversions prefigured the Industrial Revolution, flesh as raw material, as parts, 'torn or twisted in turn with the impartial, cold frenzy of the piston, the steam-hammer and the pneumatic drill.' To de Sade himself, his brothels and torture chambers were laboratories. His fictional victims learn that goodness is merely a means of social control and that love transforms nothing.<sup>110</sup>

The final chapter of this thesis envisages the Gothic Dystopian nightmare fulfilled in the destruction of a unitary human subject. The dismantling of a stable sense of identity is in part achieved via the devices of doubling, the uncanny, live burials and existence in dark places, and while such destruction is the cumulative project of all Gothic novels, its emphasis is most strongly felt in Gothic Dystopias.

In place of a human body stable and integral...Gothic offers the spectacle of a body metamorphic and undifferentiated;...in place of a unitary and securely bounded human subjectivity, one that is both fragmented and permeable.<sup>111</sup>

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<sup>110</sup> Linda Grant, *Sexing the Millennium: A Political History of the Sexual Revolution*, (London: Harper Collins, 1993), p. 38

<sup>111</sup> Kelly Hurley, *The Gothic Body: Sexuality, Materialism and Degeneration at the Fin de Siecle*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 3

The Gothic convention at work in Dystopian texts is the destruction and reshaping of human bodies, the blurring of their boundaries and the destabilising of their psyche. The Gothic body is one which has been fragmented in the course of the Dystopian narrative, broken apart in the search for hidden monsters, to be reformed in new and frightening shapes. Gothic bodies suffer the fragmentation of alienation, as they are named as other and become horrific in the process.

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### Genetic Fragments

The bodies of *Brave New World* suffer fragmentation in the course of their creation. They are not individuals even on the molecular level since they were created from the division of one cell to make many identical bodies. This lack of individuality is prevalent in Dystopian Gothic novels, and can usefully be explored by way of Sedgwick's description of the Unspeakable in her *The Coherence of Gothic Conventions*.

At its simplest the unspeakable appears on almost every page: 'unutterable horror': 'unspeakable' or 'unutterable' are the intensifying adjectives of choice in these novels. At a broader level, the novels deal with things that are naturalistically difficult to talk about, like guilt; but they describe the difficulty, not in terms of resistances that may or may not be overcome, but in terms of an absolute, often institutional prohibition or imperative.<sup>112</sup>

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<sup>112</sup> Sedgwick, *Gothic Conventions*, p. 14

This definition allows a full examination of the position of the body within the sphere of power which operates in Dystopian novels. The experiences of Bernard serve to highlight the ‘institutional prohibition’ against selfhood and individual drives, and the ‘institutional imperative’ towards the social and the collective. The impact of this is the guilt and pain which literally rips those non-conforming bodies apart. This drive towards a collective society is implemented by the state from the inception of its citizens in fertilization labs. During a tour of one such lab the Director explains to the students around him the processes and procedures involved in this multiple creation.

‘Bokanovsky’s Process,’ repeated the Director, and the students underlined the words in their little note-books.

One egg, one embryo, one adult – normality. But a bokanovskified egg will bud, will proliferate, will divide. From eight to ninety-six buds, and every bud will grow into a perfectly formed embryo, and every embryo into a full-sized adult. Making ninety-six human beings grow where only one grew before. Progress. (*Brave New World*, p. 3)

At its most basic level, our sense of individuality stems from the fact that we look different from those around us, that we are genetically unique. This process of Bokanovskyfying defies this individuality at this basic level, at the point where a unique life is created. ‘Progress’ in *Brave New World* is centred on the removal of individuality in the pursuit of multiple persons able to carry out mundane tasks with complete contentment. The removal of the tag ‘normality’ is the inescapable conclusion of such efforts in the name of progress. To remove the need for individuals in the scheme of procreation is taken a step further to include the removal of the need for individuals to be



the product of such procreative endeavours. Notions of doubling also contaminate this version of new life, since each person created is a part of an original whole and therefore never truly separate from it – like mass twins who maintain an uncanny link throughout their lives. And the motivation for such a process is ‘social stability’, the production of ‘standard men and women’ (*Brave New World*, p5) who manifest the planetary motto ‘Community, Identity, Stability’.

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### **Fragmented Families**

Houellebecq explores the Gothic concern with families, inheritance and kinship through the character of Michel’s brother: Bruno. The unspeakable is again critical to an understanding of the importance of such concerns in Gothic Dystopias. Sedgwick’s idea that the unspeakable associates itself with guilt in relation to the failure to comply with a larger social imperative, allows a deeper understanding of Bruno’s interactions with those ‘family’ members around him. In many instances the reasons for the unutterable nature of his relationships are either their close association with taboo or the horror of the fragmented bodies with whom he interacts.

In their own family relationship the two brothers are victims of the decay of parental responsibility, both in their relationships to their own parents and in their interactions with the families they create themselves. The decay of the bonds of family are

symptomised by the bodily decay of the individuals involved in these relationships, leading to recurring images of the destruction of the human body. They struggle to hold together their own sense of individuality and therefore find it impossible to support a larger unit such as a family.

During his time at holiday camp, Bruno meets Christiane and they begin a sexual relationship which begins to grow into something resembling love for both of them.

When he leaves, one is given an account of his 'first love', Annick, whom he met at his father's home and re-encounters while at university. However, like most of the relationships in Bruno's life, it is doomed from the beginning.

Two policemen were trying to disperse a small crowd gathered outside Annick's building. Bruno went a little closer. The body of a girl lay smashed and strangely twisted on the pavement. Her shattered arms seemed to form two strange limbs around her head. Her face, or what was left of it, lay in a pool of blood. She had obviously brought her hands up to her face in a last desperate reflex to protect herself from the impact...As they lifted her body he saw her shattered skull and turned away. (*Atomised*, p. 183)

The final self-destruction of Annick is the end of a long process begun when she met Bruno on the beach many years ago. The uncanny return of this girl to his life functions to emphasise the capacity the world has for the fragmentation of frail human bodies, aided by other persons around at the time. She is one of many faceless women with whom Bruno becomes involved and who suffer and die, echoing each other's bodily fragmentation and descent into non-humans, distorted, smashed and twisted beyond

recognition. His first encounter with Annick is described as 'one of the most beautiful moments of my life' but it ends in her shattered body forcing him to turn away. She is not the only person shattered by her actions; this event is pivotal and returns to haunt Bruno when he believes he has found some form of happiness again with Christiane.

The role of the female characters in *Atomised* maintains a focus on their bodily destruction and the recurrence of this within the lives of the male protagonists. Bruno and Christiane spend their weekends together in Paris, frequenting wife-swapping bars and clubs until in one disastrous moment all that is ruined, and Christiane is left paralysed from the waist down by an unknown and careless lover. Despite all the higher emotions Bruno claims to feel for Christiane, he hesitates when she asks if he really wants her to move in and live with him. He leaves her with little choice but to return home and await his phone call, which she never receives. Like Bruno's first girlfriend Annick, Christiane ends her life and escapes from the unhappiness of her existence.

The doubling of experience continues with Annabelle, Michel's lover, as she is nursed back to health in her family home after a gynaecological illness. However, for this female body age and time are against her and any healing is only skin deep. A routine examination reveals that her body has been hiding grave enemies since her miscarriage of Michel's baby, and she will require radiotherapy to have even a thin chance of survival. Unlike in her youth when her beauty and health made her body her friend, this time round she is fighting an unseen battle against herself. Her response is typical of the women in *Atomised* whose bodies turn against them:



That was life, she thought; her body had taken a turning that was unfair and unexpected and now it could no longer be a source of joy or pleasure. On the contrary, it would gradually, but quickly, become another source of pain and embarrassment. And so she would have to destroy her body.  
(*Atomised*, p. 336)

Like Annick and Christiane before her, Annabelle also realises that her relationship to her body is one which determines the pattern of her life. Rather than a part of herself, Annick sees her body as a separate entity which she must fight against. This detached perspective allows her the distance required to come to the conclusion that 'she would have to destroy her body'. Not that she would have to destroy 'herself', but only her body. In her mind the two remain unconnected, separated by the fragmentation played out in Houellebecq's Gothic Dystopia. For Annick her inability to sculpt a body in which she could be comfortable leads to her suicide. Christiane chose to end her life when her body was no longer able to provide her with the pleasure it once had. Her otherwise empty life was now completely without pleasure, meaning that the body as a whole was no longer of any use to her. Annabelle wanted desperately to have children, yet after three abortions and the cruel twists of fate, she finds herself in a position where that essential part of her body is in fact killing her. Bodily destruction and fragmentation are recurring experiences for the unfortunate women of *Atomised* as they struggle to maintain some form of identity in the shifting mass of the modern world. However, Annabelle's bid for death is thwarted and she instead manages to achieve the status of living death, surviving instead in a coma for a few lingering days.

Children existed solely to inherit a man's genes, his moral code and his name... That's all gone now: I work for someone else, I rent my apartment from someone else, there's nothing for my son to inherit. I have no craft to teach him, I haven't a clue what he might do when he's older. By the time he grows up, the rules I lived by will be meaningless – the world will be completely different. If a man accepts the fact that everything must change, then his life is reduced to nothing more than the sum of his own experience – past and future generations mean nothing to him. (*Atomised*, pp. 200-201)

The decay of kinship is what Bruno here describes, where generations do not benefit from the experience of those that have come before them because the pace of change outstrips the growth of the family and the knowledge acquired quickly becomes obsolete. The family has always been a problematic Gothic space, where the fiercest conflicts arise and the most chilling events occur. It is the very nature of such a structure of kinship which allows for the exploration not only of the individual, but of the health of the group as a body itself. When this primary unit of society begins to fragment and corrupt, it is the sign of a far larger malaise within society as a whole.

Bruno continues to talk and explore his relationship to his son in similar negative terms.

I just couldn't cope with the fact that I wasn't young any more; my son was growing up and he would get to be young instead and he might make something of his life, unlike me. I wanted to be an individual entity again. (*Atomised*, p. 223)

Bruno sees his own son as somehow draining the life away from him in order that he can grow stronger and build himself a future. His son's youth and vitality are a constant

reminder to him of all that he has lost and will never regain. The expectations of fatherhood also weigh heavily upon him, causing him to feel a loss of individuality as a result. Like his marriage, which requires a surrender of his individual bodily boundaries in order to become 'one flesh', being a father means to Bruno a similar surrender of self, whereby his son feeds on him, growing to surpass him.

The end-of-century Gothic is a genre thoroughly imbricated with biology and social medicine: sometimes borrowing conceptual remodelings of human physical identity, as it did from criminal anthropology; sometimes borrowing narrative remodelings of human heredity and culture, as it did from the interrelated discourses of evolutionism, degeneration, and entropy; sometimes borrowing spatial remodelings of the human subjects, as it did from the psychologies of the unconscious.<sup>113</sup>

Hurley can be usefully utilised to describe the re-making which Houellebecq undertakes in his novel: that of the bodily, the narrative and the consciousness. These are played out in the characters of Bruno and Michel, leading to fractures in their own sense of selfhood and the relationships of those around them. The aspect of biology and social medicine offers explanation for the 're-modeling' which Michel undertakes and the impact of this not only on the coherence of his flesh, but humanity as a whole. Human heredity and culture is explored via Bruno in his relationship to his son. He views him merely as a vessel containing his DNA with the possibility that it may be in some way superior to his own genetic configuration. This future narrative is figured as flesh, but as flesh that is abandoned and fragmented, unaware of its preceding chapters. And finally the re-making

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<sup>113</sup> Hurley, *Gothic Body*, p. 5



of the human psyche is played out in the gulf that exists between the two half-brothers and their dyadic relationship.

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### **Failed Flesh**

As an outsider, Bernard is always conscious that he does not fulfil the criteria of *Brave New World's* motto: Community, Identity, Stability. He does not feel part of a community and has an identity not pre-determined by the state, thus lacking the prescribed stability. His feelings of self-loathing are centred around the physical shortcomings of his body and the constant reminder that he does not fit the criteria of his caste, or any other.

A faint hypnopaedic prejudice in favour of size was universal. Hence the laughter of the women to whom he made proposals, the practical joking of his equals among the men. The mockery made him feel an outsider; and feeling an outsider he behaved like one, which increased the prejudice against him and intensified the contempt and hostility aroused by his physical defects. Which in turn increased his sense of being alien and alone. (*Brave New World*, p. 58)

Although technically within the society of London, Bernard's otherness is profound because the culture in which he exists prizes the physical quality he lacks. He also fails to feel like a complete human being because he lacks the recognition of those around him, central to the successful assertion of self. Sedgwick argues that 'in the Gothic view,

therefore, individual identity...is social and relational rather than original or private; it is established only ex post facto, by recognition'<sup>114</sup> thus placing Bernard firmly in the position not only of an outsider, but one whose whole sense of self is thus threatened. His body is a constant source of trouble for him, a permanent reminder of his flaws. From the outside he is subject to mockery and laughter and this is internalised so that he comes to expect such treatment and is hostile as a form of defence. This cycle can continue without end, intensifying his feelings of alienation as it does so. The chasm of difference is made wider and wider as Bernard feels himself more and more as an outsider and those around him treat him with increasing contempt as a result. All this stems from his physical defects which are impossible to hide, particularly in such a controlled society. Despite the fact that he is as mentally capable as every other Alpha, written upon his body is the mark of difference which defines his otherness.

In contrast to the poised and sanitised deaths of other London inhabitants, John's mother is the epitome of a fragmented and destroyed body that struggles towards the release of death. At the Park Lane Hospital for the Dying, John is greeted by a 'large room bright with sunshine and yellow paint' (*Brave New World*, p. 180) and a nurse who is horrified by the pain he shows at the prospect of the death of someone he knows. The contrast between this room, where life ends, and the Conditioning Rooms, where life begins, is quite stark. It is all part of Huxley's vision to horrify readers with the grim creation of life and the happy celebration of death. John remains with Linda in her soma-holiday,

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<sup>114</sup> Sedgwick, *Gothic Conventions*, p. 142

attempting to wake her and receive her acknowledgement of his presence. In his attempt to rouse her he shakes her in anger and she eventually speaks his name, but soon after:

Her voice suddenly died into an almost inaudible breathless croaking: her mouth fell open: she made a desperate effort to fill her lungs with air. But it was as though she had forgotten how to breathe. She tried to cry out – but no sound came; only the terror of her staring eyes revealed what she was suffering. Her hands went to her throat, then clawed at the air – the air she could no longer breathe, the air that, for her, had ceased to exist...The look she gave him was charged with unspeakable terror – with terror and, it seemed to him, reproach. She tried to raise herself in bed, but fell back on to the pillows. Her face was horribly distorted, her lips blue. (*Brave New World*, pp. 186-187)

The image of the death throes of Linda is not a pleasant one for the reader or for John, terrible as it is. But the full extent of the terror comes from not knowing, from the fact that Linda loses the ability to tell what she is feeling and John is left only to guess that her look is one of ‘reproach’ towards him. The unspeakable nature of her death is twofold, arising from her physical inability to breathe enough to speak, but also from the drugged-up state in which she expires, which leaves her mental faculties struggling to comprehend the situation. So confused is her drugged mind, that John fancies that she has forgotten how to breathe as she dies. This fleshy death is not that which is desirable in *Brave New World*, where controlled birth and controlled life and controlled death are the norm.



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## Veiled Flesh

In *A Handmaid's Tale*, Atwood uses clothing, veils and mirrors to explore the relationship between the veiled body and the self.

In this map of the self, a vesicle of life substance, is separated from the surrounding reality by a thin membrane that, while formed from the life substance, has for protective reasons differentiated itself in several respects. To guard its contents against dissolution as a result of inner drives, it had developed mechanisms of defence, signally repression, by which the inner drives, signally sexuality, are denied expression and returned to the interior 'unconscious'. Trauma, or the rupture from without of the protective membrane, threatens dissolution through and uncontrolled influx of excitation; and its content too is often notoriously sexual.<sup>115</sup>

In this schematic the veils and the clothing which the Handmaids wear and the many instances of veiling, are both ceremonies of control which require the hiding of their true sexual selves at the same time as they perform a reproductive, sexual role. This seemingly untenable position is further complicated by the narration of the novel which provides instances for the suppressed subconscious to spill forth and offer insight behind and below the veiled surface. Each time that the protective layer of the surface is invaded, the threat is to the selfhood and unity of that individual.

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<sup>115</sup> Sedgwick, *Gothic Conventions*, p. 141

Clothing is used to illustrate the fragmentation of the body and to reduce its sense of self to a collection of garments worn by mere collections of flesh.

The red gloves are lying on the bed. I pick them up, pull them onto my hands, finger by finger. Everything except the wings around my face is red: the colour of blood which defines us. The skirt is ankle-length, full, gathered to a flat yoke that extends over the breasts, the sleeves are full. The white wings too are prescribed issue; they are to keep us from seeing, but also from being seen. I never looked good in red, it's not my colour. (*Handmaid*, p. 18)

The symbolism of the colour which the narrator is forced to wear is significant in many ways, ambiguously referring to both passion and danger, sin and menstruation, vampires and death. The emphasis on the hidden, on not being seen and not seeing, performed by the regulation issue 'wings' sets up the reader to expect secrets and a Gothic unravelling of them. The choice of red for this woman to wear takes on greater significance as the narrative progresses, but even at this early stage the word choice places the emphasis on this significance. The wearing of red 'the colour of blood which *defines* us' is more than mere symbolism to those who wear it, and those who control the wearing and the colour. To be defined by blood, the colour red, is to become only that colour and only that element. The full purpose of these women is their fertility, their ability to menstruate and produce blood; this is what defines them as wearers of red and as individuals. But the rest of their dress code, the full length skirts, the full sleeves and the general suggestion of the covering of as much flesh as possible, leaves no doubt that the colour of their garments is not a celebration of their fecundity, but a warning of it and a signal of their controlled status. However, despite the prescriptive nature of the clothing, there is the

suggestion already that the narrator will not entirely conform to the rules of this society; she shares; 'I never looked good in red, it's not my colour', she observes, anticipating the moment when she will reject this colour which is not her, which she refuses to allow to define her.

As our narrator walks from her room down the staircase of the house in which she lives, she passes a mirror:

If I turn my head so that the white wings framing my face direct my vision towards it, I can see it as I go down the stairs, round, convex, a pier-glass, like the eye of a fish, and myself in it like a distorted shadow, a parody of something, some fairytale figure in a red cloak, descending towards a moment of carelessness that is the same as danger. A Sister, dipped in blood. (*Handmaid*, p. 19)

The image which she sees of herself is a 'shadow' of what she would once have seen reflected in such a mirror, suggesting that there is a past life which this woman has endured before coming to this point. Again the imagery of blood is a strong theme but this time the blood is from an external source, rather than the woman's own body: she has been dipped in it by the powers that be. The strong association is with the fairytale 'Little Red Riding Hood' with its sexual overtones and moral warnings. Like 'Little Red Riding Hood', the narrator sees herself descending the staircase to 'a moment of carelessness that is the same as danger', feeling the wolves to be all around her and ready to consume her at any moment. The description of Offred as 'A Sister, dipped in blood' offers an opportunity to contrast the religious purity of nuns to the state imposed penetration of the veils of Handmaids.



On their return from the shopping expedition they encounter Japanese tourists who want to take their photograph and invade behind their white wings.

Modesty is invisibility, said Aunt Lydia. Never forget it. To be seen – to be *seen* – is to be – her voice trembled – penetrated. What you must be, girls, is impenetrable. (*Handmaid*, pp. 38-39)

The threat of this image is ambivalently sexual, bringing the threat of rape into the public arena and making it part of the everyday experience of the Handmaids. It also shifts the blame from the observers to the object of the look, making the women the offenders if they allow themselves to be visible. The ambiguous nature of a Handmaid's existence is that she must be 'impenetrable' to looks and invisible in the home of her Commander, yet she is defined by the very penetrability of her body, and the expectation that this penetration will bear fruit.

The gaze operates like Foucault's panopticon: it is a disciplinary apparatus by which "subject positions" – that is, socially prescribed images of how to be a subject – are transmitted to individuals who, in responding to them, are constituted as subjects.<sup>116</sup>

Atwood's novel spends much of its time in looking, in seeing others, in observing their actions and maintaining standards by way of this watchfulness. In this way it is strongly Dystopian yet also feeds directly on the Gothic fear of otherness and danger. By choosing to expend a vast amount of energy in the surveillance of Handmaids and all members of Gillead society, those in power can excuse themselves from taking the time

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<sup>116</sup> Henry Krips, *Fetish: an erotics of culture*, (New York: Cornell University Press, 1999), p. 105

for self-observation. Awareness of fragmentation is held at bay by the constant watchfulness employed to look for signs of fragmentation, to recognise individuals who stray from the collective mass. Like all surveillance systems, the problem arises when you consider who watches the watcher. The narrative unfolds to consider that very question from a variety of angles: the doctor; the Commander and Serena Joy; not to mention the ‘eminent scientists’ of the epilogue and the reader. Each of these pairs of eyes takes something different from the novel, thus increasing the fragmentation.

The novel moves to ‘III Night’ and the narrator describes the events of the night when she ‘step[s] sideways out of my own time. Out of time. Though this is time, nor am I out of it’ (*Handmaid*, p. 47). She steps back in time to escape the events of the present time but does not escape the imagery of women’s bodies, broken into parts and roughly re-assembled by outside agencies. She recalls a time as a child with her mother when they were part of a protest group burning magazines:

I threw the magazine into the flames. It riffled open in the wind of its burning; big flakes of paper came loose, sailed into the air, still on fire, parts of women’s bodies, turning to black ash in the air, before my eyes.

But then what happens, but then what happens?

I know I lost time.

There must have been needles, pills, something like that. I couldn’t have lost that much time without help. You have had a shock, they say.

I would come up through roaring and confusion, like surf boiling. I can remember feeling quite calm. I can remember screaming, it felt like screaming though it may have been only a whisper.

*Where is she? What have you done with her?* (*Handmaid*, pp. 48-49)

This image of women as only parts of a body, as separate body parts requiring the attention of outside forces to become whole again, is a recurring one in *The Handmaid's Tale*, explored in great depth throughout by Atwood as a theme, and as a symbol. The taking apart of all female bodies for the pleasure of men is symbolised by the pornography in flames which burns and distorts the bodies of women. This destruction leads the narrator to consideration of a time when this happened to her: she fragmented into pieces, 'lost time' and returned to a world of 'roaring and confusion'. This lost span of time is induced by those who attempted to piece her back together through the use of 'needles, pills, something like that', unknown technological forces acting on the female body to force it to conform again to the image of togetherness. There is also a third suggestion of harm to a female in the question of 'Where is she?' and the silence which provides the answer.

The narrator details a visit to the doctor, an occurrence which is now obligatory for Handmaids and which again brings her into contact with a site of rupture for her 'protective membrane'.<sup>117</sup>

After I've filled the small bottle left ready for me in the washroom, I take off my clothes, behind the screen, and leave them folded on the chair. When I'm naked I lie down on the examining table, on the sheet of chilly crackling disposable paper. I pull the second sheet, the cloth one, up over my body. At neck level there's another sheet, suspended from the ceiling. It intersects me so that the doctor will never see my face. He deals with a torso only. (*Handmaid*, pp. 69-70)

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<sup>117</sup> See David Coad 'Hymens lips and masks: the veil in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*', *Literature and Psychology*, 47 (2001), pp. 54-68 for further discussion of veils, female boundaries and control.



Like other instances in *The Handmaid's Tale* the body is the concern of others but separate from identity. The narrator could be any Handmaid under examination by the doctor; she is interchangeable, a mere body part, a body *apart* from the person and as such a much easier commodity to medicalise and control. The paper on which she is lying is not the only disposable thing in the room. Her 'intersected' body is detachable from a throw-away person, *she* is not needed, only the reproductive function of her body is important. Again one sees the importance of seeing and being seen, since as a body separated from the person, the narrator is removed from any emotional contact with the doctor and vice versa. He will never see *her* and she will be in no position to catch a glimpse of him.

But it is the doctor who crosses the shielded boundary, lifts the sheet and propositions the narrator, asking her if she would like his 'help' to conceive a baby, offering her a way out. She declines but the suggestion is left hanging in the air, available and tempting. This unveiling by the doctor conforms to Sedgwick's idea that any broaching of the protective membrane which defines surface and depth will be of a sexual nature, and will threaten the dissolution of that very protective device. If Offred were tempted to take the doctor up on his offer, then she would be placing not only her body but that carefully guarded selfhood in danger. She does later agree to do this with Robert, but only in the context of a narrative of which she herself feels in control, and one which allows her the unconscious space to explore who she is and to allow free rein to her inner, sexual drives.

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## Unbodies

In her final preparations for an unnamed evening event, the narrator describes her mental readiness:

I compose myself. My self is a thing I must now compose, as one composes speech. What I must present is a thing made, not something born. (*Handmaid*, p. 76)

This deliberate creation of a self, of an acceptable self, is the final stage in the removal of the body from the sphere of the individual to include it as an acceptable and expected product of society. She is not an occurrence from within the sphere of nature but is a constructed object, made from the fragments of her broken life. Like speech which is also composed, this self is duplicitous, carefully formed with intentions screened and controlled. Judith Halberstam in her study *Skin Shows* deals with the importance of the interaction between the surface of the body: the skin, and what lies beneath. She states that ‘without the sense that the soul is buried deep within, the body becomes all surface’<sup>118</sup> and illuminates the dilemma which faces Offred in the struggle to maintain a sense of self, to hold the fragments together. For each time she looks in the mirror, she is confronted by a controlled exterior, bearing no relation to the turmoil beneath the surface. Gothic concerns with surfaces and depths are here played out on the body as it is broken into two distinct elements: the outer façade and the inner, central core of the self, to suffer the consequences of this separation.

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<sup>118</sup> Halberstam, *Skin Shows*, p. 73

While waiting, the narrator ponders her situation:

I used to think of my body as an instrument, of pleasure, or a means of transportation, or an implement for the accomplishment of my will. I could use it to run, push buttons, of one sort or another, make things happen. There were limits but my body was nevertheless lithe, single, solid, one with me.

Now the flesh arranges itself differently. I'm a cloud, congealed around a central object, the shape of a pear, which is hard and more real than I am and glows red within its translucent wrapping. Inside is a space, huge as the sky at night and dark and curved like that, though black-red rather than black. (*Handmaid*, pp. 83-84)

This reminiscence of past experiences serves to remind her of all that she has lost, the coherence of her body and the ability to choose and act. Her present situation means that nothing about her matters but that 'central object, the shape of a pear' which dictates whether she will be considered a success or a failure, whether *she* will be worthwhile or not. This fragment, this isolated part of her body is the one centre of her bodily existence, pushing all other concerns of selfhood to the margins. Her womb has become the only fragment of her body that matters and this allows it to grow metaphorically to become 'huge' and 'dark' and capable of enveloping all of her.

On her way to a Handmaid birth in the red Birthmobile, Offred considers the possibility that the baby may be born an Unbaby; so damaged is the environment that there is a one-in-four chance of this occurring, and she considers this in relation to her own body – an 'Unbody'.



I can't think of myself, my body, sometimes, without seeing the skeleton: how I must appear to an electron. A cradle of life, made out of bones; and within, hazards, warped proteins, bad crystals jagged as glass. Women took medicines, pills, men sprayed trees, cows ate grass, all that souped-up piss flowed into the rivers. (*Handmaid*, p. 122)

The human body has become the Other through the use and abuse of science. No longer part of a known and nameable whole, the body has become broken into parts constituted of poisoned elements from the progress of science. This 'Unbody' is also described in the language of danger; 'hazards', 'warped', 'bad' and 'jagged' are just a few of the chosen words which convey the danger trapped inside the flesh and bones. 'Warped' suggests some form of normality which has been corrupted and transformed to the bodily of this description of toxins and bones.

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### **Fetishised Flesh**

Offred begins to meet secretly with the Commander, although he surprises her by seemingly only wanting to play Scrabble. On her second visit to the Commander things transpire as they usually would until the end of the second game of Scrabble, when he offers her a woman's magazine, holds it out to her as some kind of precious element.

What was in them was promise. They dealt in transformations; they suggested an endless series of possibilities, extending like the reflections in two mirrors set facing one another, stretching on, replica after replica, to the vanishing point. They suggested one adventure after another, one wardrobe after another, one improvement after another, one man after another. They suggested rejuvenation, pain overcome and transcended, endless love. The real promise in them was immortality.

This was what he was holding, without knowing it. (*Handmaid*, p. 165)

The very bodily identification of the magazines is the illusion that is proffered to Offred, that her body can become the transformed object she can see in the magazine. The image of the mirror is central not only to the breaking apart of Offred's bodily sense of self, but of the reconstruction of who she could imagine herself to be. Within the scheme of these magazines she is able to forget the true existence of her life and instead project herself into their pages. In his study *Fetish: An Erotics of Culture*, Henry Krips explores the impact of the gaze for Screen theory, using this as a backdrop for his own theoretical explorations of 'the intersection of the social and the individual'<sup>119</sup> through a focus on the fetish and the gaze. Krips suggests that

The gaze is the mechanism through which the image imposes its meanings and thus creates constitutive effects. As in the case of Foucault's panopticon, the scrutiny characteristic of the gaze appears to come from outside the subject but in fact is a mediated form of self-scrutiny. Screen theory identifies the mechanism of the gaze with the form of self-(mis)recognition described in Lacan's account of the mirror stage.<sup>120</sup>

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119 Krips, *Fetish*, p. 98

120 Krips, *Fetish*, p. 98

The Gothic device of the mirror here allows Offred the illusory pleasure of seeing herself represented in these magazines, believing her life to be represented here. Despite the fact that Offred describes the images that fall within her gaze as ‘two mirrors set facing one another, stretching on, replica after replica, to the vanishing point’, she fails to see the deception in this replication: the mirroring of her own life only in the forced and fake existence of all other handmaids, until she reaches the point where she is no longer viable and will therefore vanish. This continual reflection and distortion is the mechanism through which Offred views her life; her gaze falls on so many who are like her that her own identity is swamped by the gaze of other images of herself. In an ironic twist on the lives of the women in the magazines, the repeated image of handmaids suggests none of the freedom associated with the lives of the magazine inhabitants. While her life does reflect the impact of the gaze, it holds no possibility for ‘rejuvenation, pain overcome and transcended, endless love’.

The images in the magazine are like the ‘abhuman’ described by Kelly Hurley:

The abhuman subject is a not-quite-human subject, characterised by its morphic variability, continually in danger of becoming not-itself. The prefix ‘ab-’ signals a movement away from a site or condition, and thus a loss. But a movement away from is also a movement towards – towards a site or condition as yet unspecified – and thus entails both a threat and a promise.<sup>121</sup>

The description of the images in the magazine highlights their ambiguity and close proximity to otherness.

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<sup>121</sup> Hurley, *Gothic Body*, pp. 3–4



Those candid eyes, shadowed with makeup, yes, but like the eyes of cats, fixed for the pounce. No quailing, no clinging there, not in those caped and rough tweeds, those boots that came to the knee. Pirates, these women, with their ladylike briefcases for the loot and their horsy, acquisitive teeth.  
(*Handmaid*, p. 165)

The threat and promise embodied by the pictures of these women signal their proximity to the ab-human. The pretence and charade involved in the dressing-up and the disguise of make-up is suggestive of that ‘danger of becoming not-itself’ which Hurley identifies in her consideration of the morphic capabilities which underline the definition of the ab-human. The danger in this instance is not only in the magazines themselves, but extends to the situation of the narrator as she views these images and the inference they have for her own situation.

The danger of the mirror recurs as a theme, threatening the body with disintegration, with being broken into so many parts by so many gazes that it vanishes beyond meaning and existence. The morphic characteristics of the magazine are at one and the same time a threat and a promise, suggesting to Offred possibilities she has almost ceased to imagine, and yet offering the horror of a disappearance of self into the corporality of a bodily monstrosity.

Offred has become more relaxed during her secret meetings with the Commander and they now discuss more and more taboo topics. They discuss the arranged marriages

between Angels, front line troops returned from battle, and the young daughters of Commanders.

We've given them more than we've taken away, said the Commander. Think of the trouble they had before. Don't you remember the singles bars, the indignity of high-school blind dates? The meat market...Some of them were desperate, they starved themselves thin or pumped their breasts full of silicone, had their noses cut off. Think of the human misery...This way they all get a man, nobody's left out...This way they're protected, they can fulfil their biological destinies in peace. With full support and encouragement. Now, tell me. You're an intelligent person, I like to hear what you think. What did we overlook?

Love, I say.

Love? said the Commander. What kind of love?

Falling in love, I said.

...arranged marriages have always worked out just as well, if not better...Those years were just an anomaly, historically speaking, the Commander said, just a fluke. All we've done is return things to Nature's norm. (*Handmaid*, pp. 231-232)

The Commander claims that the present situation is one of normality, a return to the natural cycle and the focus on 'biological destiny' and reproduction. In his description of things as they were before, the focus is on the body as an organ of disruption, a force to be reckoned with and controlled by the invocation of 'nature'. In an attempt to find happiness, he claims that women waged war on their bodies, cutting them up, starving them and pumping them full of unnatural substances. In the new era they are free from such pressure and able to 'fulfil their biological destiny' to breed and function as women only. Their bodies have been taken away from them, hijacked by society to be used as breeding machines, devoid of aesthetic pleasure and outwith their control to shape and

command. By making claims that the way things are for Offred is the natural state, the Commander is able to imprison the body in a one-dimensional space dedicated to reproduction and deny all other aspects to bodily identity. He claims this is a space of safety, where the body is unmolested by individual whims, where it can be harnessed and allowed to reach its full and natural potential. But in placing the body within this space, the individual is denied the opportunity to define their own misery, to dictate the pleasures and pains of their own body. This represents a move away from the natural cycle towards a perversion of procreation, a removal of it from the fullest sphere of life.

In a further examination of the destruction of the human body and identity, Atwood explores the interchangeability of each Handmaiden for any other. After the morning's events, Offred walks to meet Ofglen for their routine afternoon shopping trip, except that the Handmaid who meets her at the end of the driveway is not Ofglen, or at least not the Ofglen she knows. She foolishly asks this new Handmaid where Ofglen is:

'I am Ofglen,' the woman says. Word perfect. And of course she is, the new one, and Ofglen, wherever she is, is no longer Ofglen. I never did know her real name. That is how you can get lost, in a sea of names. It wouldn't be easy to find her, now. (*Handmaid*, p. 295)

This erosion of identity is a frightening aspect of the regime common in all Dystopias. Yet in *The Handmaid's Tale*, naming and the power it holds are tightly bound to the body, or rather, to the fragmented physical body. These Handmaids do not lose their names in a general process of the erosion of human identity prevalent in Dystopian societies, but instead the loss of identity is focused on only one part of their bodies: that



essential to reproduction. The loss of their names is indirectly related to their erosion as whole and integrated individuals. As they are only important as breeding machines, their names only matter to delineate to whom that part of their body belongs, to delineate whose child they are likely to produce. They are also entirely interchangeable for another Handmaid with a working womb, who will then become the new body part of that particular Commander. So the 'new' Ofglen is in every important way exactly the same as the woman she replaces, and her name is as appropriate for her as it is obsolete for the Handmaiden she just replaced.

But what this also means is that Offred's friend Ofglen is gone, hanged she is told by the new version of her friend, before the Eye's van came for her. For this to happen so soon after Ofglen's suspect actions at a Salvaging, when an apparent rapist was delivered into the hands of the crowd of women, only to be put out of his misery by a swift kick from Ofglen as she recognised him as a member of the resistance, is a dark warning to Offred, since her association with Ofglen was much too close for comfort in the present circumstances. In response to believing she has escaped the same fate as Ofglen, Offred makes many rash promises to a God that has all but abandoned her.

I'll obliterate myself, if that's what you really want; I'll empty myself, truly, become a chalice.

I'll give up Nick, I'll forget about the others, I'll stop complaining. I'll accept my lot. I'll sacrifice. I'll repent. I'll abdicate. I'll renounce.

I know this can't be right but I think it anyway. Everything they taught at the Red Centre, everything I've resisted comes flooding in. I don't want pain. I don't want to be a dancer, my feet in the air, my head a faceless oblong of white cloth. I don't want to be a doll hung up on the Wall,

I don't want to be a wingless angel. I want to keep on living, in any form. I resign my body freely, to the uses of others. They can do what they like with me. I am abject. I feel, for the first time, their true power. (*Handmaid*, p. 298)

This acceptance of life 'in any form' is the true Gothic Dystopian project: to reduce a human being to a collection of body parts which still wants to go on existing and is willing to do so in any way and under any regime, so fragmented is the sense of self. Offred offers to 'obliterate' herself, implying such meanings as: 'Obliterate: To remove an organ or another body part completely, as by surgery, disease, or radiation. Reduced to nothingness'.<sup>122</sup> The connotations of some kind of medical procedure shed new light on the willingness of Offred to abandon all sense of bodily unity and subject herself to any and all of the procedures deemed necessary to fulfil the one and only function left to her on earth. The other act she is ready and willing to undertake is that of reducing herself to nothingness, to act to become a negative, a lack in every sense. It is her compliance with such a project, such a procedure that brings home to her for the first time the true power and object of all her training, the true aims of the society in which she now exists 'in any form' they see fit.

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<sup>122</sup> <http://dictionary.reference.com/search?q=obliterate> 01/08/04

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## Destruction

The destruction of the human body is figured in *A Clockwork Orange* through the experiences of Alex when exposed to the effects of drugs and his treatment. While the drugs are a voluntary surrender of self, the treatment he undergoes is not entirely of his own volition and thus the impact is outwith his control. Kelly Hurley's study *The Gothic Body* undertakes an account of the treatment of human bodies in Gothic novels of the late nineteenth century, stating that 'Gothic manifests a new set of generic strategies...which function maximally to enact the defamiliarization and violent reconstitution of the human subject'.<sup>123</sup> Alex's actions epitomise the defamiliarisation on which Hurley places central importance in the Gothic schematic.

You'd lay there after you'd drunk the old moloko and then you got the messel that everything all round you was sort of in the past. You could viddy it all right, all of it, very clear – tables, the stereo, the lights, the sharps and the malchicks – but it was like some veschch that used to be there but was not there not no more. And you were sort of hypnotized by your boot or shoe or a finger-nail as it might be, and at the same time you were sort of picked up by the old scruff and shook like you might be a cat. You got shook and shook till there was nothing left. You lost your name and your body and your self and you just didn't care... (*A Clockwork Orange*, p. 5)

The disappearance of self featured here operates in a scheme of Gothic resonance, where the fragmentation of the individual results in a loss of bodily identity, brought about by

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<sup>123</sup> Hurley, *Gothic Body*, p. 4



the ingestion of drugs. Not only does bodily integrity fade from recognition, but the space in which that body exists is also 'not there any more'. The effects of the drugs are to reduce the body to fragmented parts rather than a whole and unified entity. The continued use of such drugs is captured in the vision of a later customer of the Korova Milkbar:

It was probable that this was his third or fourth lot that evening, for he had that pale inhuman look, like he'd become a *thing*, and like his litso was really a piece of chalk carved. (*A Clockwork Orange*, p. 21)

This more sinister example of the impact of drugs on the body resonates with the horror of the living dead, 'pale' and 'inhuman', yet still part of the human race. Fragmentation taken to the extreme here, leads to the loss of humanity entirely, to the creation of monsters from human forms. Loss is felt in the erasure of human qualities, the reduction to 'thing-ness'. The crumbly and insubstantial characteristics of chalk make it an important choice to describe the face of this *thing* that was once human. The infinitely malleable yet fragile qualities of chalk convey the dangerous effects of these drugs which erode the frail stability of the human body.

While the human form is broken apart by drugs, the voluntary nature of drug-taking and its short-term effects make the process seem lacking in threat or danger. The same cannot be said of the treatment which Alex undertakes in order to cure him of his love of violence. As Alex's treatment progresses, his increasing pain and discomfort become

part of the important task of destruction in order to violently reconstruct his bodily integrity:

Then I noticed, in all my pain and sickness, what music it was that like crackled and boomed on the sound-track, and it was Ludwig van, the last movement of the Fifth Symphony, and I creeched like bezoomny at that. 'Stop!' I creeched. 'Stop, you grahzny disgusting sods. It's a sin, that's what it is, a filthy unforgivable sin, you bratchnies!'... 'What's all this about sin, eh?'

'That,' I said, very sick. 'Using Ludwig van like that. He did no harm to anyone. Beethoven just wrote music.' And then I was really sick and they had to bring a bowl that was in the shape of like a kidney.

'Music,' said Dr Brodsky, like musing. 'So you're keen on music. I know nothing about it myself. It's a useful emotional heightener, that's all I know. Well, well. What do you think about that, eh, Branom?'

'It can't be helped,' said Dr Branom. 'Each man kills the thing he loves, as the poet-prisoner said. Here's the punishment element, perhaps. The Governor will be pleased.' (*Clockwork*, p. 85)

Unlike previous films which made Alex feel sick, this time with the accompaniment of the music he is actually sick for the first time. His violent bodily reaction displays the strength of his feelings towards the music that inspires him to commit acts of violence, a phenomenon recognised by Dr Brodsky whose only understanding of music is as a clinical device, which is what it becomes at his hands. In order to reconstruct Alex in a way which is acceptable to the mass of society, he must be broken down into his constituent elements and then reassembled in an acceptable order, with the undesirable elements removed. Unfortunately for Alex, music and violence are so closely associated in his mind, that to completely reject violence requires the sacrifice of his love of music.

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## Final Fragments

Every direction one turned, scientists pointed toward the possibility, even inevitability, of changes within the physical or social environment that would irrevocably reshape the human form and human culture.<sup>124</sup>

As Gothic Dystopias, each of these texts offers the glimpse of a possible future, while at the same time providing graphic representations of fictional fragmented bodies.

Successful fragmentation renders to pieces carefully constructed wholes, allowing for a re-assembly of these pieces in the course of the Dystopian narrative. Not only are readers confronted with broken apart individuals, but with structures such as family and kinship utterly destroyed and made redundant. Such dark visions impact upon the structuring of culture and society in the scheme of these Dystopian narratives, fulfilling the nightmare promise of the end of humanity.

Across the globe, ferocious postperestroika capitalism yanks the rug out from under the nation-state, while the planet spits up signs and symptoms of terminal distress. Boundaries dissolve, and we drift into the no-man's zones between synthetic and organic life, between actual and virtual environments, between local communities and global flows of goods, information, labor, and capital. With pills modifying personality, machines modifying bodies, and synthetic pleasures and networked minds engineering a more fluid and inverted sense of self, the boundaries of our identities are mutating as well. The horizon melts into a limitless question mark, and like the

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<sup>124</sup> Hurley, *Gothic Body*, p. 65



cartographers of old, we glimpse yawning monstrosities and mind-forged utopias beyond the edges of our paltry and provisional maps.<sup>125</sup>

The vision offered by Eric Davis in *Techgnosis* is one shared by Gothic Dystopias. The prevalence of the unknown and the destruction of the individual human body define this new genre which combines the horror and terror of Gothic landscapes and monstrosities with the Dystopian awareness that the body is subject to the whim of political power and is set to suffer as a result of shifts in statehood and acts of war.

The bourgeois family is the scene of ghostly return, where guilty secrets of past transgressions and uncertain class origins are the sources of anxiety. The modern city, industrial, gloomy and labyrinthine, is the locus of horror, violence and corruption. Scientific discoveries provide the instruments of terror, and crime and the criminal mind present new threatening figures of social and individual disintegration.<sup>126</sup>

Family is a core battleground for the Gothic Dystopia of the twentieth century and it is the site of horror and terror at the loss of identity, as we witness family disintegrate into cloning and procreation mutate into production. Family also becomes the catalyst for destruction and fragmentation not only of this unit of society but of the individuals who could perpetuate its existence. In its place we have fragmented bodies and individuals under threat and intent on their own survival. The backdrop to this in Dystopian Gothic novels is the cityscape of postindustrial ruin or of ultra-modern horror. These dark spaces offer no comfort or shelter and serve to further fragment the fragile bonds between

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<sup>125</sup> Erik Davis, *Techgnosis: myth, magic + mysticism in the age of information*, (New York: Three Rivers Press, 1998), p. 1

<sup>126</sup> Botting, *Gothic*, p. 114

individuals and to alienate them from the comforts of nature. Underlying this existence is the promise of science, the dream turned nightmare of the hope for something better, of the end to pain and suffering. Instead, this sanitized and anaesthetised world provides only more opportunity for control and less chance of individuality and contentment. Science, which offered so much, has delivered so little to curtail the fragmentation of lives, society and the sanctity of the human body. The Gothic Dystopia is the vision of the future as nightmare, populated by dreams of a long-dead era before the contamination of modernity.

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