

Elements of the Gothic in the Works of Judith Thompson

by

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Author's Declaration

I hereby declare that I am the sole author of this thesis. This is a true copy of the thesis, including any required final revisions, as accepted by my examiners.

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Abstract

This thesis is an examination of the Gothic elements present in a selection of works by Canadian playwright Judith Thompson. The Gothic genre is marked by continual flux and adaptation, ensuring that its ability to inspire terror, as well as its relevance as a form of cultural critique, remains undiminished. Gothic texts seek to uncover the anxieties and uncertainties that societies would prefer to repress, and then forcing a confrontation with those elements. Frequently this pattern of repression and return takes the form of various kinds of hauntings, as well as the monstrous. As this emphasis on the “return of the repressed” would suggest, psychoanalysis will figure prominently in my analysis of Thompson’s work and is woven throughout the four chapters. Chapter One concentrates on establishing a working definition of the Gothic, its history and development, and the three subcategories of the genre that I will be focusing on in the subsequent chapters: the postmodern Gothic, the feminist Gothic and the Canadian Gothic. All three Gothic subgenres share their affinity for translating late twentieth-century anxieties into the language of the Gothic. They also share a resistance to closure or solutions of any kind, even if such solutions would seem to be advantageous to the author’s putative ideological stance.

The works by Thompson I have chosen evidence her preoccupation with postmodern, feminist and contemporary Canadian concerns. She expresses these concerns in a unique style that blends contemporary literary techniques with the more timeless elements of the Gothic tradition.

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Chapter One: Mapping the World of Thompson's Gothic

i Introduction

The central question with which my thesis will engage is how the plays of Judith Thomson fit within the context of contemporary postmodernist, feminist and Canadian Gothic writing. Thompson's oeuvre contains many quintessentially Gothic elements in the most "traditional" sense of the genre. In general these elements include excess, anti-realism, anxiety, murder, madness, and hauntings. In addition, Thompson's plays contain a number of the requisite characteristics of what may be termed "Canadian Gothic." More specifically, these elements include the concept of "North," or "Northernness," the binary opposition of wilderness/ civilization, monstrous histories, post-colonial hauntings, and a permeating sense of spatial and cultural disorientation.

Before beginning to examine Thompson's plays in depth, a solid understanding of this variegated genre must be established. Like many literary genres, the Gothic is difficult to define, as it is well suited to multifarious interpretations in a variety of contexts. The Gothic is a profoundly subversive genre that critiques the status quo, much like postmodernism and feminism. This critique frequently takes the form of literary psychotherapy in which the troubled consciousness of the reader is confronted both with the horrors it has struggled to repress and with the artificiality and distorted nature of the various worldviews and cultural norms it has come to accept as "natural." Through this process, the Gothic attempts to force a realization of the harm of such constructs . Psychoanalysis is particularly suited to a study of the Gothic due to the deep anxiety that

runs through the heart of Gothic fictions. Anne Williams writes that “Most--perhaps *all*--Gothic conventions express some anxiety about ‘meaning’” (67). Anxiety and uncertainty, of various kinds, will figure largely in my study, as they are two of the key features identified by critics of various forms of the Gothic.

ii Dark Beginnings

Margot Northey writes in *The Haunted Wilderness*: “Occasionally a literary word begins to be useful as a critical term at the same time as it ceases to be useful as a historical term. Such is the case with ‘gothic’” (4). Its original application lay in the domains of art and architecture and was in fact originally used pejoratively to describe something seen as barbarous and unrefined. The term first entered into literary usage in the early eighteenth century to describe works that were characterized by what were perceived to be qualities of medieval romance and that stood in contrast to the classical style so pervasive in that period (4).

Gothic fiction arose after the Augustan period in literature, which lasted from the late seventeenth century through much of the eighteenth century. Augustanism is based on the notion that the arts are progressive, that the earliest artists imitated nature in a crude fashion, and that it is the task of subsequent artistic generations to refine primitive attempts at art. (Kaminski 49). A second principle which underlies Augustanism is that artistic refinement is connected to social refinement. The growing sophistication of a society influences the art that is produced, which in turn caters to and continues to cultivate that society (50). Such literary “politesse” began in France with the development of French “classicism” and the popularity of salon-bred sophistication. Subsequently, this notion of “polite letters” was adopted in England (51).

Jerrold Hogle, in the “Introduction” to *The Cambridge Companion to the Gothic*, reminds readers that despite its putatively mediaeval origins, “Gothic fiction is hardly ‘Gothic’ at all,” as it, at least in its original form, borrows from numerous pre-existing literary traditions, from ancient romance to Shakespearean plays. The first published work to identify itself as “A Gothic Story” was the “counterfeit medieval tale,” *The Castle of Otranto*, which appeared in 1764 (1). The genre exploded in popularity in the 1790s and remained vital until the 1830s, at which point the genre “scattered its ingredients” into several literary modes (1). These “ingredients” include a setting in “an antiquated or seemingly antiquated space,” which could be a castle, a ruined abbey, or even edifices comparatively recent, such as an old office building. Authors of the Gothic frequently locate their stories in ancient structures. Such spaces contain hidden secrets from the past that resurface to haunt the characters. These hauntings can be literal or figurative. In any case, they manifest past wrongs that can no longer remain hidden (2). As these Gothic tropes and devices continued to resurface and to be defined as Gothic in later literature, the term moved from the domain of the historical to that of the critical and “increasingly, ‘gothic’ came to stand for a certain mood of terror or horror, in which the dark mysteries of life were brought to the fore” (Northey 4). Fear, indeed, is a requisite element in any Gothic work, and the fear generated by the Gothic can refer to more than one kind of emotional experience. Hogle makes a distinction between “terror Gothic” and “horror Gothic. In the former, the object of terror is kept largely out of sight and the fear comes from anxiety and suspense. In the latter, the characters are faced with brutal physical or psychological violence, which shatters their established norms with shocking, even horrific consequences” (3).

In his seminal study, *The Gothic Flame*, Devendra Varma examines the origins of the Gothic and points out several important characteristics that will inform my own study of the Gothic. Varma credits the Gothic with reintroducing “emotion” into literature. He cites a shift in the artistic consciousness towards “‘nature’ ” and “‘feeling’,” beginning around 1725 in England. Following on the heels of the “sparkling” literary works of the Augustans and their “trim and brilliant salons,” poetry began to assume “a deepening colour of melancholy and frequented dark cemeteries haunted by the shades of the departed”; “death, loneliness, and ruinous profusion were a familiar and fascinating abode for the Gothic mind”(24). Varma views the Gothic novel as “a symptom of general reaction against the forces of an exhausted Augustanism,” which had “become paralyzed in a death-like rigour” (210). The late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries had been dominated by a strict concept of reason, which banished emotionality and mystery. I wish to quote Varma’s explanation for the rise of the Gothic at length, because he underlines the importance of exaggeration and artificiality to the effectiveness of the Gothic:

The late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries saw a new recognition of the heart’s emotions and a reassertion of the numinous. It was these factors that produced the ‘Gothic’ horrors. Like Love, Horror is an individual, primal emotion; and it was a revival of pure emotion that these authors essayed within the framework of the frowning castle and the smiling meadow, with plots designed solely for emotional effect. Their hankering for emotion after an ultra-reasonable age demanded the crudest, most violently contrasted expression. (211)

To better evoke its characteristic emotional extremes, the Gothic frequently employs artificiality of setting, creating settings or circumstances that seem constructed for the purposes of generating fear and horror (rather than a setting that resembles the readers' own world) as a means of powerfully manipulating the emotions of its readership. Varma explains how, in the minds of Gothic writers, life often comes to imitate art. The typical settings for Gothic novels involve "Gothic architecture, castles, convents, subterranean vaults, grated dungeons, and ruined piles" and "Inspired by this Gothic world of art, it [the Gothic] found sinister properties in the natural world" (17). Authors of the Gothic therefore "read" fear and menace into the natural world, and create fictional worlds that reflect this reading. The Gothic denaturalized the natural world by subjectively "reading" into it whatever significance its authors felt was germane to their purpose. In so doing, the Gothic aligns itself with postmodernism and feminism, both of which manipulate conceptions of reality in an attempt to show their readers that what they have taken for granted as "natural" really is not that natural at all and that all notions of reality are, to some degree, fictitious.

Like contemporary writers, early Gothic authors used explicit artificiality in their works to provoke the emotions and intellects of their audiences. Varma praises the efforts of these authors because, in his view, their work was "immensely stimulating to the cramped fantasy of the[post-Augustan] age, [and] these fictions alone were strong enough to break the limitations of polished intellectual poetry and restore the fanciful, the terrible, and the sublime" (210).

Jerrold Hogle is more ambivalent about the emancipatory potential of the Gothic. He believes that Gothic texts often "hesitate between the revolutionary and the

conservative” (13). The Gothic may raise the possibility of multiple perspectives and behaviours, particularly in people who have been cast as “other” or oppressed, but it frequently distances or destroys these figures, thereby reasserting conventional morality. In his words, “No other form of writing or theatre is as insistent as Gothic on juxtaposing potential revolution and possible reaction” (14), or is as consistent in narrating the triumph of the latter. Gothic texts raise “the most intense and important ambivalences in modern western culture,” but they ultimately move “these quandaries long ago or far away from us” (14). While Hogle does agree with Varma that the Gothic introduces an element of the sublime into literature, he argues that it does so in a way that reinforces the literature’s more conservative elements. Edmund Burke’s famous definition of the sublime supports this point. Burke qualified the sublime as being the quality found in anything that exposes one to the possibility of danger, pain, death or dissolution of the self. Artificial evocations of the sublime are as efficacious as real ones, and in fact may be preferable, as they produce the same sensations without exposing the person to true harm. While Burke was not writing specifically about the Gothic, Hogle explains how the Gothic achieves a similar effect to the Burkean sublime through its exaggeration of its “extreme fictionality” (15). The creation of extremes is key to both the sublime and the Gothic because the “extremes that sublime or Gothic images point toward... are distanced and blunted enough by transformative representations to be pleasant in their terror” (14). Thus the Gothic both draws readers toward that which may shatter our selves or identities and shields us from any possibility of destruction (15).

Varma’s argument points to the temporality and subjectivity of the Gothic and they are key to his notion of the genre’s emotionality. The flowering of the Gothic was

necessary to address the authors' and their readership's emotional needs, "which had not been met by the polished intellectualism of the Augustan age" (Varma 228). Gothic literature arises out of its specific historical and cultural contexts, but it also responds to and critiques them. Historical specificity has been noted by many critics of the Gothic as one of its essential qualities, as there is a need to constantly renegotiate and redefine the boundaries of the genre to fit a particular context. Such specificity, in the words of Valdine Clemens, "helps to explain why the power to shock readers tends to weaken over time. What is dreadful to one generation of Gothic readers does not remain dreadful to the next because there is a continual historical alteration in the precise characteristics of what is being repressed" (6). What a culture deems admissible or inadmissible is in constant flux because "psychic readjustment, individually and collectively, is an on-going process" (6). As a result of this continual readjustment, all Gothic traditions must continually evolve or risk losing their ability to elicit a visceral response from their readers, without which such texts risk becoming outmoded and even risible. Susanne Becker declares that the enduring relevance of the Gothic comes from its ability to "always contextualize what is most virulent and active in its time and culture" (256).

As Gothic tropes and devices continued to resurface and to be defined as Gothic in twentieth century literature and as the tradition evolved, it came to rely less and less on outward trappings, such as old world European settings, haunted houses and literal hauntings, yet certain elements remained, and the term itself [Gothic] became broadened: "Increasingly, 'gothic' came to stand for a certain mood of terror or horror, in which the dark mysteries of life were brought to the fore" (Northey 4). Northey asserts that a working definition of the Gothic must be expansive enough to include its many

variations, in addition to being applicable to both the eighteenth-century models and in later postmodern literature. Northey bases her usage of the term on certain commonalities critics have historically recognized as Gothic. These include “a subjective view of the dark side of life, seen through the distorting mirror of the self, with its submerged levels of psychic and spiritual experiences. Non-realistic and essentially symbolic in its approach, the gothic opens up various possibilities of psychological, spiritual, or social interpretations” (6).

Many critics of the Gothic favour a psychoanalytic approach in their analyses, as this theoretical paradigm seems particularly apposite to a genre in which much lurks beneath the literal and figurative surfaces. Such critics include Varma, whose claim that the subjective, temporal and emotional nature of the Gothic exposes the “exciting revelations of the unconscious” (210), advocates for a psychoanalytic reading of the Gothic. Psychoanalysis is especially relevant in the context of a study of the Gothic elements in Judith Thompson’s work because Thompson herself has explicitly stated in an interview with Judith Rudakoff, “I am a devoted Freudian in some ways. I’ve read all his work. I went through all of it in about a year and a half and audited a course on him” (37). Freud and his theories are central to many discussions of twentieth and twenty-first-century Gothic. Northey remarks that despite Freud’s never having written directly on the subject of the Gothic, “His teachings and those of his followers have had an indirect impact on the understanding of gothic literature, providing a psychological meaning for it” (5). Freud’s notion of the uncanny or “*unheimlich*” is particularly useful as a term that refers not merely to that which is frightening, but to “that class of frightening which leads back to what is known of old and long familiar” (“The Uncanny” 930). The uncanny may

be evoked in a number of different ways, one of which is the effacing of the distinction between reality and imagination (946). Freud himself acknowledged that the uncanny in literature “is a much more fertile province than the uncanny in real life”- due to the myriad opportunities that narrative provides for this type of uncertainty (950).

This Freudian approach is also taken up by Valdine Clemens in *The Return of the Repressed: Gothic Horror from The Castle of Otranto to Alien*. The Freudian phrase “return of the repressed” is identified by Clemens as key to “the fundamental dynamism of Gothic narratives” (3-4). Such a dynamism originates when “Something – some entity, knowledge, emotion, or feeling – which has been submerged or held at bay because it threatens the established order of things, develops a cumulative energy that demands its release and forces it into the realm of visibility where it must be acknowledged” (4). Clemens locates this repression in the unconscious fear that if whatever is being submerged were to come to light, it would overturn the established order.

The Gothic genre, while constantly evolving, always contains certain requisite elements of terror and horror. In all eras, the Gothic delves into the darker sides of human existence in an attempt to bring to the surface those elements of life that a culture or an individual consciousness has sought to repress. Earlier writers attempted to create fear through artificial and eerie old world European settings. Contemporary writers rely less on external settings and more on troubling psychological implications of the genre.

The three subgenres of the Gothic to be discussed in this work in relation to Thompson’s plays are the postmodern Gothic, the feminist Gothic and the Canadian Gothic. These new subcategories developed as the Gothic evolved and the genre’s

emphasis on terror, uncertainty and repression made it a logical choice to express the concerns of various writers. Such concerns include postmodern, feminist and Canadian cultural identity. Thompson's work shares these concerns and my analysis will focus on how she chooses to present them in her oeuvre.

iii Postmodernism

Overturing, or at the very least, criticizing, the established order is also the objective of postmodernism. Postmodern critics tend to focus on the subversive potential of the Gothic by underlining those aspects that rebel against aesthetic and ideological unity.

Like the Gothic, postmodernism has its origins in the criticism of Western Enlightenment "master narratives." Thomas Docherty writes in his "Introduction" to *Postmodernism: A Reader* that the Enlightenment endeavoured to emancipate humanity from myths and superstitions, especially those connected to the supposed mystery and magic of nature, "through the progressive operations of critical reason" (5). Mid-twentieth-century critics of the Enlightenment, such as Theodore Adorno and Max Horkheimer, objected to the methods used by the Enlightenment to rid human thought of animistic beliefs and superstition, methods that rejected any ideas that could not be comfortably consigned to boundaries and categories and which created an incredible sense of myopia because "that in nature which is unamenable to its formal or conceptual categories simply escapes consciousness entirely" (5-6). Obviously, such a notion is of great importance to the Gothic, which, from a psychoanalytic perspective, seems to bring to the surface matters that have been submerged in the unconscious.

Docherty concludes that “many of the debates around the issue of the postmodern not only have their sources in eighteenth-century controversies, but also recapitulate those earlier debates about the Enlightenment and reconsider them” (15). The Gothic represents one of the earliest challenges to the Enlightenment. It is therefore not surprising that it has proven its relevance in contemporary literature where these debates have resurfaced.

In *Gothic Forms of Feminine Fictions*, Susanne Becker argues that “Gothicism – or rather *neo-gothicism*- will signal the emancipatory possibilities of postmodern culture: we live again in times that are sensible to gothic forms of emotion and representation” (2). The current age is so receptive to the Gothic because of our historical perspective. If the Gothic presents us with frightening and disorienting images and concepts, the alternative is far more terrible in the opinion of Jean-François Lyotard, who writes that totality and unity are an illusion and the “price for such illusion is terror. The nineteenth and twentieth centuries have given us as much terror as we can take. We have paid a high enough price for the nostalgia of the whole and the one, for the reconciliation of the concept and the sensible, of the transparent and communicable experience” (46). The true horror does not lie in the ghastly trappings of the Gothic, but in the totalizing illusion of infinity against which the Gothic rages.

Becker believes the rise of the contemporary Gothic is due to the critical and cultural climate of the late twentieth-century. She attributes the Gothic’s “unchanged vitality in the present media age” (9) to the common element of literary anarchy found in the Gothic as well as in “the two most powerful political and aesthetic movements of the time: feminism and postmodernism” (1). All three share “a radical skepticism concerning

the universalizing humanist assumptions of modern thought and of classic realism. The gothic, of course, has from the first proudly celebrated its anti-realism” (1). This strain of subversive anti-realism characterizes much of Thompson’s work and links it to what Becker characterizes as “neo-gothicism” (2). Gothic literature of any era is linked to the postmodern through a deep sense of temporality. If, as Alan Lloyd Smith claims, postmodernism is an “inevitable” outcome of “modernist aesthetics,” it is a movement that belongs unquestionably to the contemporary age (6). Like the Gothic, postmodernism is shaped by the past, but it has an immediacy that makes it both a product of its time and a means of critiquing that time. Becker contends that the contemporary, neo-gothic genre has its roots in earlier Gothic literary forms, while at the same time belonging unquestionably to the present. The neo-gothic signals “the emancipatory possibilities of postmodern culture: we live in times that are sensible to gothic forms of emotion and representation” (2). Becker identifies the time span of neo-gothic “the politicized 1970’s, the conservative 1980’s and the millennium-ridden 1990’s. What connects these decades is a lack of orientation especially relating to everyday life” (4). Thompson’s work fits temporally and thematically with Becker’s statement, as her plays frequently feature scenes of modern life where the characters struggle to make sense of a reality that is becoming increasingly disjointed and terrifying.

The kind of uncertainty and indeterminacy identified by Becker and employed by Thompson is recognized by Smith as providing the vital link between the Gothic and the postmodern. He claims that if indeterminacy is “the stock in trade of the Gothic mode, [it] is surely the very *raison d’être* of the postmodern” (7). Gothic indeterminacy allows for the creation of mystery and suspense and also allows the Gothic to use its own self-

consciously exaggerated artificiality to attack those unconsciously artificial constructs in both society and literature. Postmodern indeterminacy is “an intellectual inevitability, following from the working through of modernist aesthetics towards a valorizing of partial orders in opposition to comprehensive structures and orderings” (7).

Susanne Becker’s argument that the Gothic and the postmodern share an intimate bond in terms of their function in contemporary literature is strongly corroborated by the definitions of postmodernism provided by Linda Hutcheon and Neil Besner. Perhaps the first similarity between the Gothic and postmodernism is that their definitions prove to be equally elusive and fraught with confusion, as is evidenced by Hutcheon’s and Besner’s attempts at defining the latter term.

In *The Politics of Postmodernism* Linda Hutcheon defines one of postmodernism’s most important qualities: “In general terms it takes the form of a self-conscious, self-contradictory, self-undermining statement. It is rather like saying something, whilst at the same time putting inverted commas around what is being said” (1). She identifies postmodernism’s primary concern as the de-naturalization of the many aspects of life we take for granted as being “natural.” These may include “capitalism, patriarchy, [and] liberal humanism,” which “are, in fact, ‘cultural’; made by us, not given to us. Even nature, postmodernism might point out, doesn’t grow on trees” (2). Like the stylized depictions of nature Varma identifies in Gothic texts, the postmodern depiction of the natural world is deliberately heightened and artificial.

Just as the Gothic attacks the unified, rational “master narratives” of Enlightenment reason, the postmodern assails the rigid narrative conventions of modernist literature. Besner argues that the postmodern “most often includes as a kind of

common denominator the category of reflexivity: that is, in this literary context, of writing that is aware of and explores its own condition and function as art, or that explores its medium – in the case of literature, language, and the ways in which language conveys, constructs, or evades meaning” (14). It is frequently taken to mean writing that questions the authority of the so-called centre, whether “the centre” means a central culture, or those fields of authority which exist within a work of art itself. These include “the unity of unified character, of dominant narrative voice ... the chronology and causality implied by a well-made plot” (15).

The self-reflexivity and meta-critical properties of postmodernism are often affected by the artificiality of the genre. Artificiality, so crucial to both the Gothic and the postmodern, is also of great importance to psychoanalysis. The uncanny, much like the Gothic and the postmodern, relies on the artificiality of its medium. For the uncanny to be effective, the reader must believe that the fictional world he or she is encountering follows a kind of real-world logic. When the uncanny is introduced, the reader’s expectations of verisimilitude are shattered. Gothic, postmodernist and psychoanalytic approaches share in the ability to unsettle the reader or viewer by causing him or her to question everyday realities. While the reader accepts that the work he or she is reading is fiction, the revelation of an unanticipated artificiality within the “reality” of this fictional world can disturb the reader’s preconceptions about the reality around him or her. In Gothic texts, consistency is maintained in the choices of characterization and setting is the desire to provoke horror and terror.

One of the numerous critics who engages with the anti-realist, non-linear elements that characterize Thompson’s work is Robert C. Nunn and he also uses psychoanalysis in

his study of spatial metaphors in her work. Nunn identifies metaphor in her plays as “specifically theatrical in that the dominant metaphors are always spatial ... that is, conceived in spatial terms and inviting realization on stage” (“Spatial Metaphor in the Plays of Judith Thompson” 20). He points to a production of *White Biting Dog* in which a multileveled set “functioned as a constant visual metaphor of the multiple layers of reality in the play” (27). Through his analysis of three of Thompson’s plays, *The Crackwalker*, *White Biting Dog*, and *I Am Yours*, he concludes that her use of spatial metaphors is an attempt to “explore the human condition on stage” (37). He senses in her work “a progression towards a stronger and stronger perception of social and psychological contradictions and oppositions ... Always there is a permeable barrier, a ‘screen door’ – the cracked surface in *The Crackwalker*, the door between the house and the sidewalk in *White Biting Dog*, the walls and doors in *I Am Yours*” (37). Nunn describes these permeable barriers in the language of psychoanalysis. On one side of the barriers is the “‘waking world’, where everything is clearly delineated and rational. It is the world of the ‘conscious’, where language functions as a way of organizing and codifying experience. On the other side is the utterly strange, yet uncannily familiar world of dream, nightmare, the ‘unconscious’, where opposites and contradictions coexist, where another language is spoken” (37-8).

Nunn’s analysis raises two very important issues that point to the underlying Gothicism of Thompson’s work. The first is his emphasis on the physical settings of the plays, or their “architecture.” The crucial importance of the stage sets to the narratives in the plays harkens back to the early Gothic’s evocation of a world of gloomy castles and ruined abbeys to both create mood and to propel the narrative. The sets create a

nightmarish world where reality and illusion blend terrifyingly into one. The second is Nunn's indebtedness to psychoanalysis. He alludes to Freud's ideas that the uncanny is frightening owing to its familiarity and that it may be evoked when reality and imagination become blurred, for which purpose literature is ideal. Nunn's psychoanalytic analysis of Thompson's plays reveals their Gothic dimensions by focusing on the ways in which the repressed returns to disturb and horrify both the characters and the audience.

iv Feminism

Feminism is the second half of Becker's neo-gothic dyad. Much like "Gothic" and "postmodern," "feminism" is a highly elusive term, but one may observe that its theories and practices are characterized by some element of subversion. There is no one unifying definition of feminism, and it is interpreted in varying ways by different writers. It evolves, as does the Gothic, in order to be relevant to a particular time. If it did not evolve, it would lose its efficacy because, like the Gothic and the postmodern, it constantly seeks to destabilize and undermine established cultural norms. Sometimes, the very norms it tries to subvert are ones established by a previous generation of feminist writers. Recent feminist writers have sought to distance themselves from their predecessors of the 1970s whose work was highly personal, serious, and often didactic. These new writers have taken care to remind their readers that there are in fact, not one, but many, feminisms (Becker 3).

Much has been written about the popularity of the Gothic with a female reader and authorship, and as Diana Wallace's essay "'The Haunting Idea': Female Gothic Metaphors and Feminist Theory" demonstrates, there is a very longstanding tradition of using Gothic language in feminist criticism. Citing essays that date as far back as the

seventeenth century, Wallace comments on how various feminist writers have used images of women “dead” or “buried” in an overbearing patriarchal society. She writes that feminist theory has been “haunted” by such metaphors for centuries and that their prevalence signals their force in voicing the concerns of women who feel as though they are being denied a complete subjectivity. Such imagery expresses the anxieties of the feminist writers who deploy it when they perceive the repression of an important element of society, in this case, women.

Anti-realism is common to Gothic, postmodern and feminist writing, and it has proven to be a contentious narrative strategy in all three. Juliann Fleenor writes in her introduction to *The Female Gothic* that “The Gothic has generally had a negative critical reception. From the first it has been seen as outside the mainstream of literature, and has frequently been pejoratively labeled as “feminine” (8). The charge of “feminine” stems from the genre’s perceived triviality and highly wrought emotionalism. This led to frequent comparisons of the Gothic novel to the realistic novel, which the critics held to be superior because it was “more real” (8). Despite critical attacks on the genre’s perceived lack of substance, it is precisely this anti-realism that has served both the Gothic and the postmodern so well. Feminist Gothic writers have attempted to undermine the pejorative labeling of Gothic anti-realism as “feminine” by turning its generic conventions to a feminist cause.

In modern feminist writing, the master narrative under attack is the idea of “Woman – the ‘natural’ or ideal feminine,” which is being “shifted to women – in all their historical difference” (Becker 6). Across different literary periods, Gothic writing, with its unforgettable images of the monstrous feminine, “foregrounds the hidden horrors

of a unifying, universalizing image of Woman ... In this sense, feminist gothic writing partakes in the more general postmodern challenges to the master narrative of the Subject” (7). Much as the Gothic texts use anti-realism to expose the unstable social constructs in general, feminist Gothic writing employs deliberate artificiality in their images of women to expose the fiction of a unifying idea of “Woman.”

Ironically, some feminist critics identified just such an attempt at universalization in early attempts to define a “Female Gothic,” a term first coined by Ellen Moers in her 1976 work, *Literary Women*. Moers identified the Female Gothic as a mode of Gothic written by women to give voice to female fears about patriarchal repression (Brabon and Ganz 5). While many critics quickly adopted these notions, by the 1990s this definition seemed to have outlived its usefulness. It was criticized for being too simplistic, partly because Moers tended to categorize *all* Gothic texts written by women as Female Gothic and because she attempted to universalize some type of archetypal female experience or principle (Wallace and Smith 1). The apparent passivity of the heroines in this type of writing was also viewed as promoting a kind of “victim feminism” (Brabon and Ganz 5).

Yet the attraction of the Gothic genre to feminist writers persists. This is largely due to the way in which the genre seems to stand as a “metaphor for female experience” (Fleenor 27). Experience occupies a prominent position in gender criticism. It is considered the process by which subjectivity is constructed for all social beings (Becker 21-22). This idea may be observed in the strain of feminist criticism which emphasizes action as a means of consciousness-raising through self awareness of one’s own habits (21-22). Self-awareness does not, however, prescribe an ideal form of subjectivity to which one should aspire. Rather, it insists that the process of self-consciously seizing

one's own agency is what is essential in feminist Gothic texts. Interestingly, Thompson seems to share this idea about the importance of process and admits to being unnerved by the revelations of its importance. She writes, "When I was in my twenties I read Aristotle's *Poetics*. I was very disturbed by his assertion that action was by far the most important part of a play, because character could only be defined by action. Until then, I had naively believed that character was defined by something the girls' magazines called 'personality' – or public persona. Such and such a person was 'nice' or 'bubbly' or 'shy' or 'quick-tempered'. This was who she was. What disturbed me most was that I knew Aristotle was right. And that meant I was nobody. Because I was a suburban girl who had done nothing" ("Epilepsy & the Snake" 83). Thompson's statement reveals her dawning awareness that subjectivity is constructed, and that without agency one may not be said to have a true character. The language she uses strongly indicates her rejection of a kind of master narrative imposed by the "girls' magazines." It appears that her reading of Aristotle made her cognizant of attempts to universalize "Woman" into a few basic types, none of which really define anything essential about a person's character. Thompson was clearly profoundly impacted by this revelation, stating that she felt she was "nobody" and had done "nothing" (83). This began to move her to an understanding that the character is not something that is ascribed to a person by an outsider, but rather something constructed by a process of interaction and negotiation with one's particular social and historical milieu. As Thompson was so profoundly disturbed by her reading of the *Poetics* it seems that an expression of this anxiety through the Gothic was a natural progression. Feminist Gothic writers frequently use their texts to voice the terror

experienced by women who feel as though they are being confined, literally or figuratively, and are thus unable to forge their own identities.

Jen Harvie, in her article “Constructing Fictions of an Essential Reality, or, ‘This Pickshur is Niiice’: Judith Thompson’s *Lion in the Streets*,” takes up many of the ideas proposed by Becker. She examines the way in which *Lion in the Streets*, like much of Thompson’s other work, “may be seen to combine a powerful level of realism with equally powerful deconstruction of reality” (47). For Harvie, the play’s postmodern combination of “the apparently real and the real problematized” allows Thompson to depict such social realities as age, gender, class and race, while simultaneously undermining these notions and casting doubts on our ideas of reality and objectivity. The play positions reality “not as essential, homogeneous, and therefore static, but as provisional, heterogeneous, and changeable” (48). This is important from a feminist point of view because it allows for a view of gender as both a reality and a social construct. As a reality, the construction of gender becomes recognizable as a condition of oppression and, therefore, something that may be confronted. As a social construct, gender may be perceived as “an ideologically loaded fiction . . . a myth of a static idea in a world which might more constructively be considered ever changing” (48).

Harvie takes a generally positive view of Thompson’s stylistic and ideological approach. Sherrill Grace in her essay “Going North on Judith Thompson’s *Sled*,” on the other hand, adopts a much more ambivalent and critical view. Grace criticizes Thompson for assuming a rebellious stance at the beginning of the play and then shrinking from her supposed ideological commitments by the end. Attempting rebellion and then reverting to conservatism before that rebellion can be fully realized is a common criticism of Gothic

texts. Through her critique of what she views as Thompson's conservatism, Grace would seem to agree with Hogle's assessment of the Gothic as more conservative than radical.

Grace focuses much of her feminist critique of the play on Thompson's presentation of "North," which, according to her, is a recurring "character" in many Canadian Gothic works. She examines the way in which the North has been conceptualized as female, and looks at what the implications of this gendering are for the female protagonists who encounter it, as well as the author who employs it. In this she echoes Margaret Atwood who identifies the literary North as "a sort of icy and savage femme fatale who will drive you crazy and claim you as her own" (*Strange Things* 108). What then, she asks, "happens if the 'you' that is being driven and/or claimed is not a man, but a woman?" (Atwood 109). Grace views Thompson's North/South binary as "gendered along the most conventional lines ... North = wilderness, mystery, otherness, and the feminine; South = civilization, familiar norms, and social reality, and the masculine" ("Going North" 64). Ultimately, she decides that "*Sled* is both extremely ambitious and, in most respects, deeply conservative" (68). The only escape in this play from the violent, masculine South is to be found in the peaceful, pure North, which is equated with death. Thompson's feminized North, Grace alleges, is merely a continuation of earlier Canadian literature's identification of woman with nature, and the accompanying male domination and exploitation of it/her. *Sled*, in her view, is an attempt at liberation that ultimately fails and instead reinforces the stylistic and ideological conservatism that entrapped the characters at the beginning. Such arguments are inevitable in any discussion about feminism. Whether or not a text may be considered feminist is individual and subjective, much like the feelings evoked by Gothic texts.

While both feminism and postmodernism attack cultural and ideological constructs, the former attempts to do so with a more clearly defined agenda: that of asserting that women have agency and can fight these constructs, even in small ways. Linda Hutcheon holds that postmodernism “is certainly political, but it is politically ambivalent, doubly encoded as both complicity and critique, so that it can be (and has been) recuperated by both the left and the right, each ignoring half of that double coding ... Postmodernism has not theorized agency; it has no strategies of resistance that would correspond to the feminist ones. Postmodernism manipulates, but does not transform signification; it disperses, but does not (re) construct the structures of subjectivity ... Feminisms must” (*Politics* 168). Feminism may employ many of the same techniques as postmodernism, but it goes further than the latter’s “ultimately compromised politics” (2).

v The Canadian Gothic

The final tradition to which Thompson’s work may be linked is the Canadian Gothic. Like “classical” Gothicism, postmodernism, and feminism, the Canadian Gothic seeks to unsettle the readers’ notions of cultural constructs. In this case, the constructs in question are those of Canada’s national mythology of the country as a homogenous and untroubled society with no dark secrets hidden in its past. While anxiety about national identity has troubled Canadian literature from its inception, the postmodern literature of the 1970s and afterwards in particular seeks to expose the fault lines running just underneath the surface of a supposedly unified and peaceful culture. In so doing, it reveals the many diverse cultural voices that were silenced in the creation of such a culture.

Neil Besner's definition of postmodernism, found in his introduction to *Postmodern Fiction in Canada*, discusses its Canadian cultural significance at some length and in a way that develops an understanding of how a distinctly Canadian Gothic tradition was able to develop in the context of certain national anxieties. Echoing Becker's notion of "radical skepticism" (1), Besner observes the presence of a "radical uncertainty, that has always, in various guises, attended the idea of 'Canada' - ... well before there was any 'Canada' like the one we know today," which "has made powerful demands and left deep marks on our literature" (9). He traces the emergence of postmodernism in Canadian literature to the celebration of the country's centenary in 1967. During this period, official multiculturalism policies were implemented and the conception of Canada as a "cultural mosaic" emerged. This new literature did not share its predecessor's nationalistic concerns. It "did not invoke a coherent idea of Canada that implicitly or explicitly questioned the traditional conception of Canada" (14). He also points to a "veritable explosion" of Canadian literature anthologies which contain writing "from outside our traditional, if always shaky concept of our centre" (14). The Canadian postmodern has assumed the role that has long been the domain of the Gothic: that of interrogating and destabilizing society's comfortable assumptions. In so doing, it reveals the tenuous nature of Canada's treasured national myths of an orderly, peaceful and cohesive society. Given the relative youth of the Canadian nation and its literary culture, it is understandable that there would be an attendant sense of instability and rootlessness in the members of what may be termed a settler culture, especially when they find themselves in an increasingly multicultural and by extension, non-European context. Besner claims that a "radical uncertainty has always, in various guises" accompanied "the

idea of 'Canada' – from well before confederation (9). The early settler society of Canada was troubled by a sense of never truly feeling at home in the “new world.” In contemporary Canadian society, as multiculturalism has become national policy, there is a growing sense that western, Euro-central traditions and values are becoming increasingly obsolete. This can cause a great deal of anxiety about the end of the pre-existing Canadian society, which was largely based on Western European models.

One of the ways in which earlier twentieth century literary critics attempted to deal with this “radical uncertainty” was an insistence on what they called the realism of Canadian literature. A discussion of Canadian Gothic, much like a discussion of the Canadian postmodern, must confront the critical “ghosts of Canadian realism” (Becker 90). When Margot Northey wrote *The Haunted Wilderness: The Gothic and Grotesque in Canadian Fiction* in 1976, she contended that the vast majority of critical studies tend to overemphasize the realism of the nation’s fiction, so much so that the success of Canadian literature is seen as owing to its strong realism. She traces this critical insistence to two main sources. The first is the reaction against the “seeming artificiality and shallow escapism of our early fiction” (Northey 3). The second is the increase in nationalism and the attempt to forge a distinctively Canadian cultural identity (3). This attempt to sharply delineate a Canadian identity through literature, arising from “the deep uncertainty implicit in the very idea of Canada,” lasted until at least the late 1960s (Besner 9).

The relative shortness of Canada’s recorded history, coupled with the proximity of the country’s birth as a nation to the advent of the “disruptions and dislocations” of North American modernity, means Canada is “at once fixated on the past and unable to

locate our own tradition” (Besner 10). At the end of the twentieth century, Canadian nationalistic anxieties gave way to different kinds of uncertainties, which, according to Besner, are “richer uncertainties” (10). He argues that contemporary Canadian literature is interested in exploring and interrogating the various constructs of Canada, rather than attempting to define national identity (11). The collapse of one vision of Canada (the source of much anxiety for some authors) need not mean the collapse of Canada. Rather, it necessitates a different idea of Canada, not just a new one. In the search for such a vision, Besner advises his readers to allow their conceptions of Canadian literature, along with a diverse Canadian culture, “its own inherent right to a plural, indirect, ambiguous, and in all of these ways a more essential voice in the narration of the unfinished Canadian story” (22).

Besner is here referring to the Canadian postmodern literature that grew out of earlier (pre-1960s) nationalistic concerns. Post-1967, another critical and literary movement began to emerge: postcolonialism. The 1970s are recognized by Susanne Becker as the beginning of “the most powerful critical and artistic pursuit of a Canadian postcolonial identity,” which followed on the heels of both nationalist and feminist movements (91). Diana Brydon views postcolonialism as distinct from postmodernism, particularly with respect to its use of history. Whereas postmodernism tends to focus on the difficulties of accessing and representing accurate versions of history, postcolonialism, while acknowledging the problem of accessibility, focuses on the reality of the past that has shaped the present (104-05). Canadian postcolonial identity is particularly rich and textured, owing to its “pluri-ethnic composition [that] allows for points of connection with some experiences elsewhere which when analyzed

comparatively may yield insights into how power operates other than by sheer force, in our own fairly comfortable world” (98).

While Linda Hutcheon, in “‘Circling the Downspout of Empire’: Post-Colonialism and Postmodernism,” notes that postcolonialism “possesses a strong political motivation” and postmodernism is “politically ambiguous” (72), her assessment of the titular subject of *The Canadian Postmodern* reveals how the country’s peripheral position internationally enables it to resist culturally centralizing impulses. Postmodern writers assume an “ex-centric” position with respect to their central cultures. They are invariably part of a dominant culture, yet they attempt to both underline and undermine established “universals” by pointing out their cultural particularism (3). Drawing on the arguments of both Brydon and Hutcheon, Canadian writers may be said to embrace diversity in a way that creates a space for a dialogue between a multitude of variously marginalized voices. Canada has very little sense of centrality, either geographic or ethnic, and may in fact, be said to be suspicious of any attempt at centralization (3). Hutcheon makes reference to Marshall McLuhan’s essay “Canada: The Borderline Case,” agreeing with his contention that borders do play a central role in Canada’s identity. McLuhan’s definition of the borderline anticipates the postmodern concept of identity with its insistence on continuous communication and (re)negotiation. In his words, “The borderline is an area of spiraling repetition and replay, of both inputs and feedback of both interlace and interface, an area of ‘double ends joined’, of rebirth and metamorphosis” (247). He credits Canada’s unfortified borderline with having “the effect of keeping Canadians in a perpetual philosophic mood which nourishes flexibility in the absence of strong commitments or definite goals ... Canada’s borderline encourages the

expenditure on communication of what might otherwise be spent on armament and fortification” (247). This emphasis on communication over fortifications is remarkable for the way it follows the trajectory of the development of the Canadian Gothic. Much as the Gothic genre itself has made the journey from the world of ruined castles and eerie landscapes to that of psychological torment and personal demons, the Canadian Gothic has evolved from the (apparently) physical fears of the world of garrisons and settlers to the cultural and historical anxieties that represent the legacies of Canadian national origins in a settler-invader culture.

Northrop Frye’s “Conclusion to the First Edition of *The Literary History of Canada*” introduced the term “garrison mentality,” and much like Freud’s work, has influenced Canadian Gothic scholarship without making any direct reference to Gothicism. The garrison mentality refers to a fervent desire for order characterized by a rigid adherence to established codes and hostility towards any alien influence. It is the mentality created in the small and isolated settlements that are on a “physical or psychological ‘frontier’, separated from one another and from their American and British cultural sources: communities that provide all that their members have in the way of distinctively human values,” but that are surrounded by “a huge, unthinking, menacing, and formidable physical setting” (Frye 351). Such a setting instills a deep sense of terror in its inhabitants, particularly when one of them feels him/herself becoming an individual, which means he or she is conscious of becoming psychologically separated from the safety of the tightly knit single-minded group (351). What Frye remarks in Canadian poetry may be just as easily applied to much prose literature: “I have long been impressed...by a tone of deep terror in regard to nature...It’s not a terror of the dangers

or discomforts or even the mysteries of nature, but a terror of the soul at something that these things manifest” (350). As a consequence of this spiritual dread, the mind is forced to cling tightly to its values in the interests of saving its sanity. Frye configures nature in Freudian terms as “the vast unconsciousness” which “seems to be an unanswerable denial of those values” (350). This confrontation with the terrors of the unconscious is a common thread running through much Gothic criticism.

While the setting serves to create an atmosphere of dread in early texts, later authors have been more concerned with exposing the psychological and moral roots of Gothic anxieties. Yet critics of contemporary works of the Canadian Gothic identify the anxieties outlined by Frye as belonging to early settler garrison culture in these works, albeit transmuted into new forms. Consequently, these critics refer back to Frye’s motifs to help unravel the threads of long-standing national anxiety running through the Canadian Gothic.

Frye’s influence looms large in other critical texts such as Gaile McGregor’s *The Wacousta Syndrome: Explorations in the Canadian Langscape*. The title is a reference to John Richardson’s prototypical early Canadian Gothic novel, a novel that perfectly embodies the concept of the “haunted wilderness.” In McGregor’s view, the fear of nature and the consequent Gothic mood of the novel are “not merely a function of particular circumstances that may be overcome by human courage and will;” they become instead “an inseparable part of the human condition” (7). Subsequent critics of the Canadian Gothic have ably translated these sentiments into a modern, and sometimes urban, context. The Canadian Gothic has been liberated from its no longer essential setting. Of course, the Gothic wilderness was never much more than a projection of the

characters' psyches, as far as Frye and his students are concerned. As Margaret Atwood writes in *The Journals of Susanna Moodie*, "whether the wilderness is / real or not / depends on who lives there" (13). The contemporary, equally ambiguous, face of Canadian Gothic is summed up by Cynthia Sugars and Gerry Turcotte in their introduction to *Unsettled Remains*:

the distinction between past and present, real and spectral, civilized and primitive, is tenuous and disjunctive. When these are conjoined with the postcolonial, it takes a variety of possible tacks: fears of territorial illegitimacy, anxieties about forgotten or occluded histories, resentment towards flawed or complicit ancestors, assertions of Aboriginal priority, explorations of hybrid cultural form, and interrogation of national belonging and citizenship. (ix)

Sugars and Turcotte's identification of historical anxieties echoes Homi K. Bhaba's conception of the "unhomely moment" which "sneaks upon you as steadily as your own shadow ... In a feverish stillness the intimate recesses of the domestic space become sites for history's most intricate invasions" (445). This *mélange* of the familiar and the frightening is also present in Freud's initial definition of the unhomely or *unheimlich*, which is characterized as the "class of frightening which leads back to what is known of old and long familiar" (930).

The unhomely quality of Canada's buried histories is central to Penny Farfan's essay "Monstrous History: Judith Thompson's *Sled*." While Thompson's earlier play, *Lion in the Street*, is characterized as an "exploration of the monstrous wilderness within the urban heart," *Sled* expands this concept into "an epic vision of contemporary Canada

and the history that has shaped it” (99). This history is made up of the multiple histories of the play’s characters who come from varied cultural backgrounds. All of these histories have been touched by the violence that “has been integral to Canada’s past” (99). The play thus becomes a microcosm of Canadian civilization as a whole. This country’s cultural legacy is that of a settler-invader nation, “which has been premised on violence from the earliest moment of European contact” (99). Secret histories or plots from the past have always played a significant role in Gothic literature (Becker 11). Secret histories are also key to a specifically Canadian Gothic where a buried history of violence and repression not only returns to haunt those living today, but also serves to propel the plot.

Through my study of Thompson’s plays, I demonstrate how this playwright employs elements of the Gothic in her own unique style, a style that draws on the traditions of postmodernism, feminism and the Canadian Gothic. Specifically, the elements I will focus on are the representations of anxiety and instability, subjectivity and agency, repression and anti-realism/excess in a selection of her plays and in one work of short fiction. The literary techniques Thompson employs have their roots in pre-existing modes, but she adapts them to serve her purpose to unfold a new cultural critique. The Gothic is an ideal vehicle for analyzing and attempting to open up to critical scrutiny deep-seated cultural anxieties. I will be weaving elements of psychoanalysis throughout my broader argument because, as Valdine Clemens notes, the Gothic “performs a...type of psychosocial therapy. That is, in frightening us out of our collective ‘wits,’ Gothic fiction can actually shock us into using them in more viable ways” (1).

In the following chapter I examine the postmodern Gothic elements of *The Crackwalker*, *White Biting Dog* and *Lion in the Streets*. I explore the ways in which Thompson's elaborate construction of artifice in these plays works to unsettle her audiences and to prompt them to realize that their own notions of reality are deeply problematic. In Chapter Three I probe Thompson's employment of a feminist Gothic, which grants women the agency to rage against an oppressive society in ways that are sometimes shocking and disturbing, but which do not provide clear solutions to their problems. In Chapter Four I analyze the Canadian Gothic elements in Thompson's exploration of the lingering trauma of recent and historical violence and oppression that haunt the Canadian nation.

Chapter Two: The Postmodern Gothic

i Introduction

The Gothic and the postmodern share many common aesthetic and ideological features, and are akin to one another intellectually as well as aesthetically. Allan Lloyd Smith claims that some critics consider them both to be “unacceptably vague and quite possibly even specious categorizations of tendencies or predilections” (6). The fact that both have provoked such virulent criticism attests to their effectiveness and subversiveness. They deserve critical attention by virtue of their contentious nature, which grants them a “curious parallel of a paradoxically legitimated illegitimacy” (6) because both have earned literary merit and attention through becoming an enduring source of critical aggravation.

Through my discussion of three Thompson plays, *The Crackwalker*, *White Biting Dog* and *Lion in the Streets*, I demonstrate how Thompson employs metaphors common to the Gothic and the postmodern, to shock and discomfit her audience. One of the most notable metaphors is that of the surface. Through her focus on surfaces and the illusions of control, order, and reason that they support, Thompson draws attention to the hallucinatory world of her characters, periodically allowing glimpses of the disorder that these surfaces vainly attempt to cover. In the process, she relies on what Becker characterizes as “gothic forms of emotion and representation.” Thompson’s plays provoke a strong, visceral reaction in her audiences, without necessarily telling them what to think. In this way, her plays may be considered to be affective. Following Stein, Hernandez and Trabasso, I define affect as being distinct from emotions because: “emotions require higher-order cognitive processes and encode a plan of action. Affective

responses do not require higher-order cognitive responses and do not encode a plan of action” (580).

To evoke such shock in her audiences, Thompson frequently blurs the lines between reality and illusion, a common device of the uncanny. The uncanny occurs when “something regarded as imaginary appears before us in reality” (Freud 946). While all authors and dramatists create worlds that readers/audiences recognize to be constructs, they do so in such a way that one expects these worlds to follow a kind of internal logic. The kind of artificiality Thompson employs in her plays is one that overturns the audience’s expectations about verisimilitude. The three plays under discussion begin in a way that raises the audience’s expectations that they will follow the same sort of logic as quotidian reality. They quickly diverge from this path, unsettling the audience’s expectations and provoking an immediate, automatic response.

In *The Crackwalker*, the play proceeds as a gritty, true to life portrait of Kingston’s lower classes until Alan’s encounter with the homeless Man on the street. While there have been indications of Alan’s instability and delusions all throughout the play, the nature of the overall “reality” of the world of the play has not been in question until the Man asks Alan for help. The man then starts speaking gibberish before making sexual advances towards Alan. The bizarre nature of this encounter hints at what is to come. To escape from the Man, Alan, “*jumps [from the street] back to Sandy’s living room*” (51).

White Biting Dog verges on hallucinogenic in its strangeness. In fact, the stage is literally set for the bizarre when the play begins with Cape asking, “Did it even happen?” and then recounting his tale of being saved from suicide by a talking dog (12). The

audience is never sure of exactly whether or not this and the rest of the bizarre dialogue is the result of the characters' deluded fantasies until Pony speaks "*in LOMIA's voice or LOMIA [speaks] through a screen*" (19). At this moment, the audience realizes that the reality of this play does not follow the same rules as that of the world around them.

The narrative structure of *Lion in the Streets* is non linear to the point of fragmentation. The audience is immediately aware that the play is "unrealistic" when the ghost of Isobel appears. The readers of the play realize that she is a ghost at once. If this fact is not immediately apparent to the audiences, they soon realize something is wrong when she starts describing her home and family and suddenly cries out: "But...when did tha be?...I think tha be very long years ago I think I be old. I think I be very old. Is my house but is not my house...I AM LOOOOOOOOOST!!" (16).

Unsettling the audience's expectations leads to questions about the "reality" of the play they are viewing. Such an experience is common to both the Gothic and the postmodern. Smith points out the widespread view that postmodernism is dominated by ontological questions about self and place. The Gothic has always foregrounded questions that have "bearing on the ontology of the text itself: in its tendency towards narrative digressions, oppositions of various stories and registers, disputes of veracity and in an excessiveness in language" (8). Thompson's plays do engage in questions about their own ontology by refusing to allow the audience a passive viewing experience in which they are able to settle comfortably into the reassuring narrative conventions they are anticipating.

ii Surfaces

Much has been made of surfaces in recent Gothic criticism. The Gothic emphasizes the aesthetics of the surface, relying on “its acts of representation and positioning, and its affectivity in relation to the reader” (Smith 9). Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick points out in her *Coherence of Gothic Conventions* that Gothic criticism tends to focus on the “depths” of texts, on the ways in which “superficial layers of convention and prohibition, called the ‘rational,’ conceal and repress a deep central well of primal material, ‘the irrational,’ which is the locus of the individual self” (11). The postmodern is also concerned with the surfaces in its texts and the psychological complexities associated with this elaborate construction of surfaces. Lloyd Smith recognizes the postmodern’s “aesthetics of the surface, dominated by the depthless image, divorced from attendant complications of reference. At the same time, the postmodernist aesthetic involves a manipulation of response in which free floating ‘intensifiers’ substitute for more coherent sets of feelings” (8). A study of the artificiality and the “surfaces” in Thompson’s plays points towards the psychology of the characters and to her larger thematic preoccupations, namely her desire to produce affective works that evoke strong but not entirely understandable and coherent sensations. There is a great deal of “depth” in her plays in precisely the sense that Sedgwick uses the term. In order to access it, one must understand something more of the workings of the Gothic and postmodernist aesthetics.

The use of surfaces in Gothic writing often suggests that they conceal something that cannot help but seep out and exceed the thin veneers that have been placed upon it. Becker asserts that excess is one of the Gothic’s most effective narrative strategies, one

that both ensures its enduring popularity and facilitates its attack on classical realism. She elaborates on her usage of the term “excess” as follows: “excess in moral terms, excess of realism into the supernatural but also formal excess. Of course, in the gothic world, anything might happen, and its excessive emotional experiences of desire, terror, and pleasure become reading-experiences of liberation” (1). Becker provides valuable insights into the ways in which excess functions in Thompson’s plays. On the surface, her plays appear to be “naturalistic” in terms of their ostensible fidelity to the details of real life, but the spectator watches this naturalism shift into bizarre, frequently nightmarish fantasy. Thompson’s plays do move from an ostensible narrative realism into the realm of the fantastic, thus heightening their emotional grip on the audience. Becker views excess as central to Gothic provocation, not just “the well-known moral provocation but also formal provocation of well-established narrative and cultural structures... These narrative ‘excesses’ seem to mock both readers’ expectations and conventional narrative” (25-26).

All three plays discussed in this chapter feature moments that overturn the audience’s expectations about the supposed realism of these works and which shock the audience into a realization of the shifting realities of the plays.

The Crackwalker, while less fantastical than *White Biting Dog* and *Lion in the Streets*, does toy with spatial dimensions in unsettling ways. For example, when Alan encounters the Man on the street, the latter makes sexual advances towards Alan, causing him to run. Immediately following this episode, the stage directions read: “ALAN *jumps back to SANDY’s living room*” (51). This scene seems to represent the nightmarish blurring of fantasy and reality, between which Alan has increasing difficulty

distinguishing. It foreshadows the next scene in which he confesses that he cannot rid himself of repulsive thoughts that threaten to overtake his reality and drive him to violence.

White Biting Dog begins in such a way as to create confusion as to whether or not the events in the narrative are meant to be believable, at least within the world of the play. The mentally disturbed protagonist Cape recounts his story of being saved from suicide by a talking dog, and while the audience may dismiss this, as well as Pony's assertion that she is psychic when she speaks in Cape's mother Lomia's voice while in a trance (19), the audience realizes that the play is not following real-world logic. This scene sets the stage for the ensuing uncertainty that permeates the play and makes the audience wonder how much of the narrative strangeness is meant to be taken at face value.

Lion in the Streets contains many instances of a reality that shifts into the fantastic, such as the scene where journalist Christine interviews Scarlett about her cerebral palsy. Scarlett responds with hostility, refusing to be viewed as a "freak" and telling Christine that she has a lover who visits her at night (46). The audience may initially dismiss her statements about her mysterious lover as delusions born of Scarlett's frustration with her disability. When the man actually appears, however, Scarlett gets up and the two "*dance romantically around the set*" (47), forcing the audience to reconsider their assumptions about Scarlett and her experience. In this scene, as well as in the rest of the play, Thompson appears to be engaging in a realistic fashion with social issues, such as the able-bodied viewer's perception of the disabled. Yet her injections of fantasy reveal that she is subordinating such issues to her larger, Gothic narrative.

Thompson's plays in production frequently rely heavily on the spatial dimensions of the sets. Robert C. Nunn writes in his "Spatial Metaphors in the Plays of Judith Thompson" that the sets for two productions (*The Crackwalker* and *White Biting Dog*) "have been multileveled and have called attention to vertical and horizontal dimensions and to walls and partitions between one part of the set and another. In the texts there are many metaphors of surfaces and what is beneath or behind the surfaces, always threatening to become visible" (20). Attention is drawn to the surfaces in Thompson's plays to focus attention on the frightening hidden dimensions that lurk just out of sight and which at all times threaten to resurface. Julie Adam also recognizes the ways in which directors and designers develop Thompson's themes of fragile boundaries by creating broken, multi-leveled surfaces, which represent not only the episodic nature of many of her plays, but also the "fragmented psyches" of the characters (43). She remarks that many of the plays' characters "inhabit the space that both separates and fuses illusion and reality" (45). This fusion of reality and illusion creates a sense of uncertainty in the audience as to whether what they are seeing will follow traditional narrative conventions, keeping them constantly alert. Blurring these lines lets Thompson unsettle and provoke her audiences in ways that established narrative techniques could not. Richard Knowles believes that if Thompson confined herself to "poetic naturalism...[she] would not have the reputation she does as the creator of disturbing and dislocating theatrical experiences" ("Fractured Subject" 7).

None of Thompson's plays allows the audience the comfort of either accepting what they see on stage at face value, or of remaining impassive in terms of their own

visceral response to the works. The very title of *The Crackwalker*, Thompson's first and seemingly most realistic play,

tells us something about the metaphors that figure in Judith Thompson's imagination. She has said that the play is not about poor people in Kingston, it is about 'the abyss' (Thompson, conversation), the depths that are hidden from us, the opaque surface, the cracks in the surfaces that give us dizzying glimpses of the abyss. ("Spatial Metaphor" 22)

The play's apparent verisimilitude is really a thin veneer in which the cracks are readily apparent. Julie Adam recounts how one production of *The Crackwalker* primed the audience for the disconcerting narrative twists to come by having "The Man" or "The Indian Man," as he is called, "uncomfortably close" to those in the front row (41). He was lying sprawled across what she terms the "invisible barrier between illusion and reality. One constantly had to remind oneself that this was an actor portraying a character" (41). Would it have been easier to accept his theatrical purpose if he seemed less real, she muses, and how would the audience react if a real street person were to come in and lie across the stage? When audiences become involved in a play, they encounter their own discomfort, which results from the "emotional, intellectual and moral uncertainty in experiencing changes in distance between life and art" (41). One cannot be a passive spectator once the action leaves its clearly demarcated space. When spatial conventions are toyed with and the action enters the auditorium, one is left to wonder if it is real or not (41).

Adam argues that through her constant readjustment of the so-called "fourth wall," Thompson is able to manipulate the aesthetic and emotional distance of her

audience from the drama (42). Through the use of exaggerated theatrical technique, spectators become emotionally and intellectually involved in her plays. According to Adam, “audiences frequently respond as if her plays were slice-of-life studies” (42). Yet the fidelity to “true life” sorts of events is an illusion. Although Thompson appears to be writing plays that present the audience with a gritty, yet sympathetic look at social misfits in Kingston, as the play progresses it becomes clear that the striking injections of the bizarre and the uncanny are meant to disturb the audience’s expectations and to startle them into reconsidering the ways in which they take “reality” for granted.

Audiences may respond as if the plays were true to life, but there remains some uncertainty in their minds as to how faithful the play is to real-world logic. This effect could not be achieved without an elaborate affective manipulation. None of this would be possible if the plays did not produce an immediate and deeply visceral impact, through Becker’s twinned formula of formal and emotional provocations.

iii The Crackwalker: Ruptured Realities

The Crackwalker is the least outwardly “artificial” of the three plays under discussion. Aside from the multileveled stage productions of the work, there are few textual clues as to the unreal nature of the play. One of the earliest indicators of the play’s manipulation of reality is the way in which the characters are continually created and recreated through the perspectives of the other characters. Their identities are not allowed to settle into a definitive form because new perspectives on and information about the characters are continually offered.

In *The Crackwalker*, the characters highlight the way in which the self is constructed. Throughout the play, the various figures are deeply concerned with others’

perceptions of them, as if external opinions and perceptions are what truly give them their identities. They show themselves as vulnerable to the judgements of others through their fierce resistance to being unfavourably characterized. In the case of Theresa, the audience is presented with a character who actually attempts to change herself based on a favourable, yet altogether far-fetched, assessment of her by Alan.

When the promiscuous, mentally challenged Theresa accuses her friend Sandy's foul-mouthed and abrasive husband, Joe, of rape, it is unclear whether she is telling the truth or not. When Sandy confronts Joe with the accusation, he is enraged to be so constructed and cannot believe his wife would think he is a rapist just because a "retard SAYS so" (30). He is not so much concerned with being called a rapist as he is with the fact that his wife feels she knows so little about him that she would believe the unreliable, mentally challenged Theresa over him.

Sandy asks Joe's friend Alan if she is "getting ugly lookin?...You know, mean lookin, uglier lookin...Did-did Joe ever say anything?" (42). Later on, when Sandy and Alan argue, Sandy tells him that he does not scare anyone. When he asks why, she responds, "Cause you're a whimp, that's why. Like one of them dogs that starts shakin when ya go to pet it" (44). Alan's response is, "Don't say nothing to Joe, eh?...About you thinking I'm like one of them dogs" (44). Clearly, how they are variously construed in the minds of the other characters, particularly Joe, is of profound importance to both of these figures. They are aware that these constructions are what will linger in the minds of the others, and they strive to free themselves from the unfavourable surface readings of their characters.

Theresa provides the play with its most striking instance of a character whose identity is under continuous, and often contradictory, revision. She opens the play with a direct address to the audience, angrily announcing that Bonnie Cain (presumably a friend of sorts) told Theresa's landlady that she was prostituting herself. According to Theresa, it was Bonnie who was doing it, and she was merely watching (19). Clearly, Theresa refuses to allow herself to be portrayed unfavourably by others or to be given a false character. When she arrives at Sandy's place, Sandy calls her a "retarded whore" (21). This and other comments by Sandy and Joe create one image of Theresa. Quite a different image is constructed when Theresa and Alan go to a bar and he tells her, "Jeez you're pretty. Just like a little angel...I know. I'm gonna call you my little angel from now on. People gonna see ya and they're gonna go 'There's Trese, she's Al's angel'" (33). Not only does Alan configure Theresa as an angel, but he assumes his doing so is sufficient for her to appear so in the eyes of others from that day forward. He then moves to a more extreme comparison, remarking that she now looks like "that Madonna lady; you know them pictures they got up in classrooms when you're a kid...Yuh look just like her. Just like the madonna. Cept the Madonna picture got a baby in it...She's holdin it right in her arms. You too, maybe, eh?" (35-6). Inspired by Alan's vision of her as a divine mother, Theresa decides against her social worker's request that she have her tubes tied (34). Alan's reconfiguring of Theresa as the Madonna leads Theresa to resist her social worker's attempt to physically alter her.

The religious imagery in the play testifies to the ways in which the outward construction of characters can lead to tragedy. It is also suitably Gothic. While many Gothic texts of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries were set in medieval,

Catholic Europe, Vijay Mishra points out that the representations of religion in these texts were “quite subversive, at times profoundly skeptical” (1). In *The Crackwalker* the danger of such religious imagery is that the deeply mentally unstable Alan believes in it, with disastrous consequences. He idolizes Theresa as a Madonna figure, but his basis for this comparison lies in his superficial perception of her physical resemblance to a religious icon. He is unable to see beyond this surface to the person below, although fissures do begin to appear in his construction as he is unable to maintain any consistency in his characterization of Theresa. Almost parodically, Alan calls Theresa his “angel madonna” (63) in one breath, and in the next, a “whore” (64). Theresa and ultimately the baby, Danny, are the ones who pay the highest price for Alan’s deluded fantasies when his mind finally snaps completely and he strangles the baby (65).

Using Catholic imagery ironically is part of Thompson’s creation of shocking or disturbing affect, because not only is the invocation of such imagery not linked to salvation, but it in fact leads to more horror. Thompson demonstrates that the dangers of falling victim to one’s illusions of the world, as well as those of others, include the kind of superficial world view constructed by characters who cannot cope with the complexity of reality. Theresa actually begins to believe Alan, at one point exclaiming “I do look like that madonna lady” and calling her baby “baby Jesus” (60-61). Enchanted with an image of herself as a holy mother, she is unable to see the danger of her situation. At the end of the play, however, she runs on stage proclaiming, “Stupid old bassard don’t go foolin with me you don’t even know who I look like even. You don’t even know who I lookin like” (71). Theresa manages to struggle free from the illusory perceptions of others by finally resisting others’ misperceptions of her. Theresa regains her resilience only when

she realizes the danger of others not being able truly to see her and when she sees the difference between herself and the idealized figure to which Alan compared her.

Thompson's portrayal of Alan's mental instability effectively creates a sense of the uncanny, with its accompanying fear that the repressed has returned. He recounts his hideous, recurring thoughts, including one of a cauliflower growing out of a woman's vagina. He asks the audience, "Did you ever start thinkin something, and it's like ugly...? And ya can't beat it out of your head?...It's not like bein crazy, it's just like thinkin one thing over and over and it kinda makes ya sick" (50). While the image is sickening in and of itself, his confession hints at his ineffective attempts to hold at bay an increasingly disturbed and disturbing view of the world that threatens to lead him to violence.

Alan appears to be epileptic, as there is a reference to him "takin a fit" (44) and to having foam on his mouth (50). Freud writes that epilepsy and madness produce an uncanny effect because a layman observes in them "the working of forces hitherto unsuspected in his fellow-men, but at the same time he is dimly aware of them in the remote corners of his own being" (946). Thompson refers to her own affliction with the condition in her interview with Marc Glassman: "I'm lucky because there's a thin screen between my conscious and unconscious life. Maybe that's the result of the epilepsy I had in my youth" (7). For Thompson, her epilepsy was a positive, creative gift, but she is aware of the suffering it can cause for others. She claims it also allows her to move easily between conscious states, itself an uncanny function. Alan's epilepsy leads to a number of instances of the uncanny in the play. The image of him having "cream" on his mouth is echoed in the milk on Danny's chin (51-52). The doppelganger, or double, according to Freud, was initially seen as a kind of assurance against death or the destruction of the

ego, in primary narcissism. Once this stage has been surpassed, however, “the ‘double’ reverses its aspect. From having been an assurance of immortality, it becomes an uncanny harbinger of death” (940). Poor Danny becomes an unwitting doppelganger of his deranged father. Like the original doppelganger, Danny’s status as a baby *should* make him a symbol of life, especially for a parent, but he quickly becomes the opposite. Even at his funeral, the child becomes a source of the uncanny. Despite his parents’ trying to cover up the murder by placing a wreath of flowers around his neck “to hide the strangle,” Sandy contends that the flowers “never hid it they just made ya look harder” (71).

The ruptures in the images that the character construct of one another are often created when the repressed cracks the outward surface. These ruptures offer a window on the characters’ unstable emotional states where all realities are tenuous. These lapses into the surreal and the extreme are linked to mental illness, but they are present not only because the play deals with mental illness, but also because they are the vehicle through which the play explores such illness. Thompson does not, however, allow the audience the comfort of thinking that their reality is substantially different from that of the troubled characters.

iv *White Biting Dog*: Crossing the Lines

White Biting Dog is far more phantasmagorical and artificial than *The Crackwalker*. Nunn points out, however, that the set for its first production resembled one for a previous production of *The Crackwalker*: “It too was multileveled and functioned as a constant visual metaphor of the multiple layers of reality in the play” (27). The contrast he sees between the two is that unlike *The Crackwalker*, “the most important spatial

dimension in this play [*White Biting Dog*] is the distinction between inside and outside,” referring both to the indoors and the outdoors and to the inside and outside of a person and that the play’s “metaphors of invasion and internal corruption are contradicted at the end of the play by metaphors of invasion and salvation” (27-28).

In *White Biting Dog*, Thompson self-consciously foregrounds the impossibility of the work. The stage directions declare, “This play must SPIN, not just turn around...Because of the extreme and deliberate musicality of the play, any attempts to go against the textual rhythms, such as the breaking up of an unbroken sentence, or the taking of a pause where none is written in are DISASTROUS” (no page). There is no room for deviation because the play must show itself at all times to be an elaborate construction, the extreme artificiality of which is not arbitrary but serves as its own highly ordered reality. The description of the character of Glidden in the *Dramatis Personae* bears witness to the desire to model the reality of his life on the image of the artificial: he “wants desperately for his life to be like a Norman Rockwell painting” (no page). The text of the play frequently refers to the ways in which language can construct meaning. Lomia, the eccentric matriarch, tells her son, Cape, that her lover Pascal has “chosen to whisper, because the English language is the language of death,” to which Pascal responds, “Like box cars-shut out, and kinda locks in” (23). The play attempts to free itself from the confines of traditional narrative language by profoundly unsettling the viewer’s expectations of its narrative reality. The very first line is “Did it ever happen?”(1). It is difficult to know how much of the play is meant to be “real,” even within its own strange world. While the audience is expecting to see an illusory world

represented on stage, when there are lapses in the coherence of the “reality” of that world the audience is unsure of exactly what they are seeing.

A case in point is Lomia. The audience is never sure if Lomia was and is as horrid as Cape portrays her. For example, he tells Pony that when he was a child, “she made me drink my own nosebleeds from fruity jam jars” (21). When he confronts his mother with this accusation, she is shocked: “Nosebleeds? Beef juice! It’s supposed to be very good for you” (73). Lomia may be a Gothic monster, or her son may just perceive her as one. Whatever the reality, both Cape and Pascal imagine her to be an all-consuming fiend who threatens their identities through her efforts to define them, which they resist with great force. Cape has changed his name from Sonny to Cape and when Lomia asks him when he did so, he responds that he changed it “When I got sick of the name you named me `cause your mind was a blank” (37). Ironically, Lomia replies that “it was just that your squished little face didn’t remind me of anything so I didn’t want to BRAND you” (37). What Cape interprets as meaningless was perhaps Lomia’s attempt to resist the constraints of language.

Pascal also attacks Lomia for the name she gives him. Even though he presumably adopted the name “Pascal,” along with his poet-punk persona, when he attempts to rupture their relationship, he insists on addressing her as his real self, as “me. Gord, Gordon from OAKVILLE... I –just blacked out and fell on the sidewalk and when I woke up, a...spell was broke. I’m different I’m Gord, Gord I got...different blood now” (85-6). Lomia did not give either of them their names, but both imagine her to be the source of their restrictive identities and attempt to construe her as a negative force in their lives that must be overcome. When Lomia accuses Pascal of being cruel, he cries, “YOU

MADE ME CRUEL....I—I—I still went to church when I first met you, I still took the communion host---” (87). Unfortunately, Pascal exits the play before the audience can learn whether or not he achieves some kind of “salvation.” His reliance on the outward symbols of religion has clearly not helped him.

A skeptical attitude towards religion leaves open the possibility of self-made salvation. Much as the postmodern asks its readers to make meaning for themselves, Thompson appears to allow her characters to create a fictive salvation for themselves, which they do with the sincerity of true believers. At the beginning of the play, Cape is calling out to the talking white dog who saved him from suicide and who sent him on a mission to save his father’s life. He sings, “oh Queen of dogs,” to the air of Agnus Dei (9). Shortly thereafter, he meets the psychic, Pony, who claims to have had an identical dog. For them, “Queenie” the dog becomes a symbol of salvation, their very own “lamb of God.” Thompson does seem to valorize this faith in some way, as it is Pony who gains strength from it until the end. When she asks Cape if the change he expected to occur once he had saved his father has occurred, he says no. Despite his earlier belief, he now concludes that “it hasn’t. And it won’t. The white dog never existed” (99). Pony refuses to sink into his despair, adamantly exclaiming “Oh yes she did. She did so exist” (99). Of course, whether or not “Queenie” is the key to salvation is unknown. The characterization of her dog whom the audience never sees, as a saviour does, however, create a sense of the uncanny, which arises “when a symbol takes over the full functions of the thing it symbolizes” (Freud 946). The dog has become a kind of divine being, at least in Pony’s imagination. The audience may be touched by her sincerity and even start to believe her, at least for the purposes of the play. Even if they catch themselves in the absurdity of this,

that does not deny the fact that the notion had power for them, if only momentarily. The uncertain portrayal of religion is reminiscent of the Gothic, in which one can never be sure whether the portrayal of religion is ironic or sincere, or perhaps a combination.

By the end of the play, Pony, who has been struggling with guilt about her involvement with Cape and the terrible feelings it has awoken in her, has killed herself. She did not, as her ghost explains to her father, do it “‘cause I couldn’t hack it...it was ‘cause...I was invaded...filled by the worst evil... ever imagined--I guess it happened when I fell in love, on account of I had to open my mouth so wide to let the love in that the evil came in, too” (106). She then announces her intention to enter into Cape and save him, as she promised she would in their last conversation before her suicide (102). Pony has not killed herself as a desperate last resort; rather, she has gracefully accepted the words that Glidden quoted his dying aunt as saying while pointing to a kettle on her deathbed: “Look at that kettle and think of me. I’m WATER now, I will be STEAM” (6). Pony is aware that permeability can be dangerous, as she herself has been filled with “evil” by allowing herself to become open to love, but she has consciously accepted the dissolution of herself in order to free both herself and Cape, at least in her mind, from the consequences of the evil that has invaded both of them. It is as though she has willed her own salvation through an acceptance of her ability both to penetrate and to be penetrated.

Pony’s attempt to liberate herself is somewhat similar to the potential salvation achieved by Lomia. Lomia is perhaps the most striking and dominant character in the play. One is never quite sure what to make of her, since the other characters and she herself, are constantly making her into different things. Even in the character’s

description, Thompson tells readers of the play that “Her clothes should not conform to the stereotype of a flamboyant woman” (n. p.). When she attempts to reconcile with Glidden, whom she abandoned, she reflects on her break with Pascal: “I thought I’d lost my power to hold—to--you know, enchant! I haven’t, have I? I’m--I mean I’m not just another middle-aged woman--” (102). Glidden comforts her by saying, “You’re a goddess, darl, a sphinx, and the best darn hostess” (103). It is hardly surprising that the self-obsessed Lomia would be so concerned with her outward allure, and the comments of the other characters, in conjunction with her name, cannot help but remind one of the poet John Keats’s beguiling “Lamia.” Yet, surprisingly, when Pony compliments her name, Lomia does not make a boastful reference to the poem. Instead, she says her name is like the word “LAMINATE” (28). This is unexpected and humorous, but it also indicates Lomia’s awareness of surfaces. She can appear as shallow and slippery as a laminated surface, but she gains depth merely by being aware of surfaces and their functions. If one is cognizant of surfaces, it follows that there is an understanding that there is something *beneath* those surfaces.

Indeed, Lomia’s self-obsession takes her far below her gaudy surface. She is consumed with her bodily processes, to the point that she indulges in such wild flights of fancy as the following: “I can hear my food digesting. I can hear it! I can hear it being broken by the enzymes and floating along in my bloodstream like cows in a flood in India” (84). Despite her inward fixations, she has tremendous difficulty in allowing feelings to penetrate her being. Cape accuses her of never feeling anything, “Not on the inside you know that” (56). She initially protests, before finally conceding that in fact she does not, but she wants to because, “I hate it in here, in this-thick-pitch--everything I do, I

do to get OUT” (56). It is once she is able to let genuine concern for another human being in, which only occurs with Glidden’s death, that there is hope for her liberation and redemption. In a seemingly meaningless gesture, she feels the fat on her stomach and then “feels a totally unfamiliar feeling; something inside her is cracking” and her body “must look as if some strange chemical has entered it” (105). At the very end, Cape asks her if she thinks anything that has happened will make any difference. She looks up and the stage direction reads: “*Her hope shows in her eyes*” (108). Thompson suggests that there is hope for both Lomia and Pony through an acceptance of their permeability, which allows a full range of human emotions to enter them.

This necessity for an acceptance extends to the play as a whole, in that the audience is only allowed to derive meaning from the play if they accept its strangeness and the shifting, permeable realities. True meaning can only be grasped when one realizes that reality is multifarious and that multiple understandings are not only possible, but necessary. Of course, such a process can be unsettling and uncanny, as the attempts to analyze the world from a distant, detached position. Pony and Lomia realize the destructiveness of this resistance to fully engage with the world and they literally open themselves to the world through their permeable bodies. The play exaggerates the physical body and its processes to the point of the grotesque to underline a particular kind of Gothic affectivity. Ellen Moers claims the intent of the Gothic is to scare in a purely visceral way: “Not...to reach down into the depths of the soul and purge it with pity and terror... but to get to the body itself, its glands, muscles, epidermis, and circulatory system” (90). Thompson attempts to “get under the skin” of her audience with the extreme physicality of the characters in this play, which functions metonymically for the

play as a whole. The audience cannot appreciate the play if they are unwilling to accept its shifting realities and allowing them to enter freely into their consciousness.

v *Lion in the Streets: Here and Not Here*

In *Lion in the Streets*, the surface that lends itself to authorial manipulation is the surface appearance of the play as a unified piece of social realism that exposes issues such as violence towards children and lack of concern for the disabled. Thompson quickly undermines any such expectations of realism by frequently rupturing the reality of the play and introducing fantastical elements. What results is a fractured, postmodern narrative, the instability of which creates Gothic terror in its characters and discomfort for the audience.

Harvie's examines the ways in which *Lion in the Streets* combines "a powerful level of realism with equally powerful deconstructions of reality" (47). Thompson's play begins with an address to the audience by Isobel, the ghost of a murdered Portuguese girl. At first glance, she may seem to be a "unified subject--a real person with real problems" (47). Her appearance onstage combined with her descriptions of her home and family, as well as her accent, make her seem all the more believable as a real person. Yet her very first speech dashes any preconceptions about her being a unified, real subject. Her first words are "Doan be scare. Doan be scare. Doan be scare of this pickshur. This pickshur is niiiice [sic], nice! I love this pickshur, this pickshur is mine!" (15). When she identifies her street, saying she and her siblings play with the neighborhood children, she has a revelation:

But...when did tha be? Tha not be now! Tha not be today! I think tha be very long years ago I think I be old. I think I be very old. Is my house but

is not my house is my street but is not my street my people is gone I am
lost. I am lost. I AM LOOOOOOOOOST!” (16)

Isobel presents the audience with the idea of artificiality immediately when she identifies the scene as a picture. She herself seems to believe in the reality of the representation, until she begins to reconsider her words and realizes that the street is unfamiliar in as many aspects as it is familiar. In reconsidering her identity, she becomes what Becker terms a “subject in process” (41). She constructs a sense of her identity as she goes along, becoming herself, rather than realizing who she is through an epiphany. By the end of her speech, she is aware that she is lost and that she is not who she thought she was. As the play progresses, Isobel becomes invisible to the other characters, which eventually leads her to the realization, “I am gone, I am dead, I AM DEADLY DEAD!...I am no more” (36). She experiences her horrible revelation when she overhears two friends, Joanne and Rhonda, talking in a bar. Joanne tells Rhonda that she has bone cancer, leading Isobel to scream (inaudibly) at her: “We are both picture now. WHO WILL TAKE US? WHO WILL TAKE US TO HEAVEN, HA?” (36-37).

In this scene, Isobel is aware of her liminal position and that she seems to be a ghostly representation of herself. This scene occurs just after Joanne has expressed her desire to commit suicide in the manner of the Pre-Raphaelite Ophelia on her bedroom wall poster, and then to have her pictures taken to hand out at her funeral (35). Rhonda responds that “it’s all very lovely and that, your picture...but that’s a picture, that’s a picture, you dimwit!...The real of it would be awful. You can’t become a picture, do you know what I mean? I mean you can’t ...BE...a picture, okay?” (36). Rhonda is attempting to tell Joanne that the reality of death would be very different from the

romantic image of death she desires. Death is ultimately unknowable and unamenable to control by human beings. For Joanne, however, it seems as though becoming a picture would afford her some degree of immortality, as she recalls observing her family, happily going about their business when she was not with them, and confesses, “I think...that’s life, that’s life goin on without me, it’ll be just like that, only I won’t be here with the groceries, I’ll be under the ground with my flesh fallin off my face and I just can’t take it” (34).

Both Isobel and Joanne struggle to construct subjectivities that will allow them an afterlife, whether in heaven or on earth. Death is a frighteningly uncanny idea for them. The uncanny or *unheimlich*—literally unhomely, was already made evident quite literally when Isobel exclaimed “Is my house but is not my house” (15). Joanne may also be said to be “unhomed” when she observes her family in her own home, quite happy without her (35). In the play, the intersection of *heimlich* and *unheimlich* in Isobel’s and Joanne’s confrontations with death reminds the viewer that the characters are not truly “at home” because they, and their settings, are fragile constructs that do not belong in the real world that the spectators inhabit.

Richard Knowles comments that *Lion*’s characters are “fragmented and discontinuous, and they are rarely contained within a single, unified action or linear plot. They tend, too, to be represented self-consciously as constructs undergoing crises of subjectivity” (“Fragmented Subject” 7). The play never allows for any kind of linear narrative, its only constants being the ghost of Isobel and the “relay” structure of the play in which a character from one scene is carried over into the next. The play exaggerates its seeming lack of structure whenever possible. Like Isobel, the other characters in the play

are self-consciously aware of their artificiality. For example, at one point, George, a friend of Sue, the character who rescues Isobel from bullies at the play's opening, is speaking to his wife, Laura, and suddenly he "*grabs a tablecloth and wraps it around his head, like a shawl, speaking in a Portuguese accent*" (25). He has somehow turned into Maria, Isobel's mother, and begins conversing with Laura, who is apparently completely unfazed by the transformation. In another scene, David, a waiter from Rhonda and Joanne's bar, wanders into a church on a whim, only to be greeted by Father Hayes who claims David is an altar boy who drowned as a child. David tells the priest that he is mistaken, but on his way out, his parting words are, "it was nice on the water, you know? It was neat, so calm, as I slipped underneath I wasn't scared, I'll tell ya. I wasn't scared a bit. The water was so...nice!" (42). Neither Father Hayes nor the audience can tell if David is making a morbid joke, or if he actually is a ghost. The "nice" at the end of his sentence echoes Isobel's "niiiiice" from the first scene, strongly hinting that he too is dead. It is impossible to know.

The scene with Father Hayes and David is characteristic of the fragmented structure of the play where various plot points are introduced and left unresolved. Richard Knowles quotes Thompson as saying during a panel discussion of the play, "I just couldn't cope with the idea of a huge body of narrative...I started to find that kind of narrative tedious, because your expectations are usually fulfilled" ("The Achievement of Grace" 34). This statement implies that Thompson chose such a structure to ensure her audience is never allowed to assume that they can rely on their knowledge of narrative convention to understand where the play's narrative is going. Both Harvie (55) and Knowles ("Fractured" 9) recognize that *Lion* constructs provisional realities that allow

the action to take place but that also remind the audience that these realities are not static and that change is possible. Hopefully this change will be positive, like Isobel's redemption at the end of the play. She is about to kill her murderer to finally enter heaven, when she chooses instead to forgive him. Harvie asserts that since the characters create their own realities, Isobel's achievement of grace is more of a "construction," which "requires not only an act of will on her part, but also on the part of the audience" (53). As Isobel tells the audience before her ascension, "I want you all to have your life" (63), and so it is up to the audience to create a "happy ending" for the narrative (Harvie 53).

The many intersecting narratives in the play create a sense of fragmentation on the structural level, which is replicated in the fractured subjectivities of the characters. This may appear disorienting, and even frightening, but it leads to a kind of liberation for the characters and even the audience. The terror and confusion experienced by the characters in the play help to perform a kind of psychological healing, similar to that practiced by contemporary psychoanalysts. As Anthony Elliott writes,

post-traditional psychoanalysis finds itself upon the paradoxes of postmodernism by fully considering the nature of psychic ambiguity, ambivalence and contingency. Confusion and contradiction are thus no longer cast as ideological distractions to creative living. On the contrary, in contemporary psychoanalysis through 'mirroring,' 'containing' and 'holding,' subjects are encouraged to explore disturbing and painful unconscious fantasy as the basis for a revised narrative of their torn selves. (25)

The fantastical elements in the play, far from providing a distraction from real-life social issues, in fact invite the characters and the audience to explore these issues in an imaginative way that can be more constructive than a more didactic approach.

As with *The Crackwalker* and *White Biting Dog*, religion in *Lion in the Streets* is treated with skepticism. When Isobel enters a cathedral, she asks a statue of the Virgin Mary to take her to heaven, but to no avail (37). At the same time, David enters the church not to seek spiritual solace, but to admire the architecture. His comment, “I love it, it’s so primitive” (37), is perhaps an echo of the initial usage of the term “Gothic,” when it denoted a barbarous and antiquated architectural style. This comment, coupled with his lavishly splashing himself with holy water, suggests the emptiness and falseness of the outward trappings of religion. Salvation may not be had at church, but it is to be found in the most unusual and quotidian places, as beleaguered day care worker Rhonda proclaims, “every bite of a jelly doughnut cleans out your soul it is a gift from GOD” (31). She makes this announcement in sheer exasperation during a confrontation with a sugar-hating mother and the scene is clearly comedic, but it does remind the audience that grace is where you find (or make) it.

vi Multiple Meanings

In choosing the Gothic genre, Thompson has found the ideal medium for provoking affect in her audiences. The Gothic is always most effective when it is most affective (Clemens 1). When audiences are moved by a text, even if they are moved to disgust, they are assured to not soon forget that work. The ideas of the author linger in the mind, prompting the audience to further reflection and perhaps to action. The Gothic operates as a kind of nightmare in giving the audience an indication that things are not as

they should be. It can reveal what the conscious mind has rejected, and it reveals the disastrous consequences of making the same decisions in response to the same experiences (3). Clemens also locates a parallel between the Gothic and nightmares in the way in which both rely on images to convey meaning (7). The reliance on images is reminiscent of the postmodern world of representation. Affect cannot guide a person to a particular course of action, or even to a particular emotion, but it does provoke the beginnings of emotion. In a similar fashion, postmodernism does not attempt to force meaning on its readers. Like Isobel, the audience is “unhomed” when their comfortable assumptions about narrative conventions are shattered. The play’s elaborate construction of artifice, reinforced by the picture motif, functions like other surfaces do in the other plays. The more acutely aware the audience becomes of the way in which the reality in the play is constructed, the more likely they are to examine the ways in which their own realities are constructed.

Owing to the confusion and disorientation in these plays, the audience may be said to be encountering in them the kind of literary madness Scott Brewster describes in his essay “Seeing Things: Gothic and the Madness of Interpretation.” “Reading Gothic makes us see things,” he declares, “in identifying irrationality or pathological disturbances in Gothic texts, we admit, even succumb, to the strange ‘logic’ of fictive madness” (281). While psychoanalysis traditionally tries to diagnose and cure madness, literal and textual, the analyst is never at a completely safe distance from the subject, since the analyst’s job is to linger on the symptoms of the “patient” (281). Brewster believes that the Gothic’s narrative structure is intertwined with the madness it represents and that one intensifies the other. Thus the “Gothic’s inexhaustible capacity to generate

readings resembles an excess of meaning” (281). Thompson’s plays invite the audience to construct their own meanings, once the affect provokes them to do so. The viewer may feel he/she is yielding to a kind of madness, as the works become increasingly difficult to follow as they proceed.

Brewster remarks that, from a literary perspective, pathology lies in the act of reading (or in this case, viewing), not in the author or in particular characters. The madness he identifies is “here,’ haunting and driving the act of reading” (285). The whole of *White Biting Dog* is like a theatrical descent into madness, and the audience may experience a fleeting sense of insanity in attempting to decide what is real. In *Lion in the Streets*, journalistic researcher Rodney is paid a visit by Michael, a childhood friend for whom he harboured some sexual feelings. When Michael verbally and then physically attacks him for his continued remembrance of their youthful kiss, Rodney stabs him to death. It is soon revealed by Rodney’s coworker Sherry that he was having “some kind of fit” and yelling at someone who was not there (55). Of course, the audience “saw things” along with Rodney, thus implicating them in his madness.

By prompting her audience to make multiple interpretations of her plays, Thompson ensures that they have a sense that surface realities are inadequate. It is not an easy process and it is one that is fraught with confusion. The meanings of her plays are not readily apparent and the structures she employs can seem at times to distance the audience further from the action, but also to bring them uncomfortably close to the action. This is characteristic of Gothic literature in general, as Sedgwick remarks, “the difficulty the story has in getting itself told is of the most obvious structural significance” (14). Meaning in Thompson’s plays may be said to be repressed and struggling to come

to the surface, and only through grasping the unstable perspectives offered by the plays can the audience come to recognize it. The audience is invited to delve beneath the surfaces and into the confusing, unsettling darkness of the impoverished, marginalized worlds that Thompson represents in order to reemerge with an enhanced sense of their own world. This is much like Elliott's notion of the frightening, yet ultimately rewarding search for wholeness in the fragmented self (*Subject to Ourselves* 25). Her use of fear is the kind of provocation Gothic texts have long employed in their impetus to provoke change. This returns to the concept of affect, which cannot promote change, but it can cause the audience to feel *something*. This is the first step towards personal and social change. The audience is not allowed to leave the theatre unaffected, no matter what preconceptions they had about the theatrical experience. By not allowing for passive, objective viewing experiences that permit the audience illusions of distance and objectivity, Thompson demonstrates the importance of reexamining one's own perspectives on the world and shows that assumptions of reality and rationality should never be taken for granted.

Chapter 3 Feminist Gothic

i Introduction

Many critics have commented on the popularity of the Gothic genre among female writers and readers as a literary form that is congenial to exploring female subjectivity and concerns about women's limited societal roles. In her introduction to *The Female Gothic*, Juliann Fleenor claims that since the Gothic has not been considered part of mainstream literature, it has appealed to the female writer who feels alienated from her culture (7). It is not surprising that feminist approaches to this literature have become popular among critics of the Gothic literature written by women. Much as the postmodern allows for stylistic emancipation from stilted literary forms and their accompanying unifying ideologies, the Gothic offers the opportunity to create new images of women and to question their conventional societal roles.

The Gothic has frequently employed images of femininity that defy expectations in one way or another. For example, the genre presents seemingly helpless heroines who, despite their apparent passivity, triumph over wicked, controlling male characters. The Gothic also presents readers with grotesque images of monstrous women and madwomen. Such images challenge received notions of what the "ideal" woman is "supposed to be," such as meek, passive and beautiful. Even when the presentation of women is not as exaggerated or monstrous as it is in some texts, there is often a sense of ambiguity, and even disgust, centred on the female body. Such feelings frequently come from the character herself. This disgust often originates in the heroine's confusion about her own rebellion. In her desire to escape from a restrictive society, the measures she takes to facilitate her escape can be shocking and horrifying, even to her. According to

Fleenor, when female Gothicists deal with the dichotomy of good and evil, they often do not choose to oppose an evil man to a good woman; rather, they position a good woman against an evil woman. In these works, “the ambivalence toward the female (good or evil) has been internalized. The ambivalence toward the female self leads to feelings of self-disgust and self-fear rather than fear and disgust of something outside her” (11).

While such notions may seem to undermine a feminist cause, it must be remembered that there is no one authoritative version of feminism, but rather many competing and even conflicting feminisms. Just as Lyotard’s postmodernism apprehends the terror in unity (46), so too does feminism recognize the horror of a unified notion of “Woman” (Becker 6). It is this horror that Gothic feminist texts foreground. The Gothic genre, with its peculiar brand of ambivalent feminism, suits an author such as Thompson who declares herself to be “an unfeminist feminist” (“One Twelfth” 24).

I argue that Thompson, like other feminist writers before her, uses the Gothic mode to expose the limited societal roles of women. The Gothic genre allows Thompson to better explore the ways in which femininity is constructed, as it offers a world where monstrous and frightening images of women disturb stereotypes of normative womanhood. Her varied representations of her female characters borrow from the female Gothic tradition to create a multifarious image of women that is outside the expectations of the audience and the other characters in the play.

Here I examine Thompson’s treatment of female subjectivity and agency, the abject and motherhood, as well as her attempt to interrogate the prescriptive and dominant ideas of the female subject without an attempt to offer an alternative. All of these topics are linked to Thompson’s ultimate refusal to make her female characters

fully developed, emancipated women who defy their societies whenever possible. The works on which I focus are the plays *White Biting Dog* and *I Am Yours* and her short story “Mouthful of Pearls.” In addition, I briefly examine two other texts, *Lion in the Streets* and *Sled*, as well as various autobiographical writings and interviews.

Thompson’s female characters neither conform to passive stereotypes, nor to the type of a stridently feminist heroine. In addition, Thompson presents no real solutions to the tremendous difficulties and horrors her characters face. This can be troubling to those who believe feminist texts should at least try to provide some semblance of closure or resolution, perhaps in the form of an “ideal” woman but, as Nunn observes, Thompson “does not explain or account for her characters. They are” (“Strangers to Ourselves” 29). The very treatment of the issues with which Thompson engages, such as violence against women, the trauma of birth and motherhood, as well as the stifling societal roles assigned to women, is enough of a focus for the time being. As she provokes her audience through her startling images and subject matter, Thompson asks her readers to reconsider the constructs of women that they may have taken for granted as being natural and normative.

ii Subjectivity/Agency

Subjectivity, and more specifically gendered subjectivity, is what Becker considers to be behind the structuring of women’s Gothic writing as a uniquely feminine form in three ways: the split subject “feminizes” the text into an “interrogative text,” the subject-in-process allows the text to be read as a story of gender construction, and the subject-in-relation to Gothic figures like the “monstrous feminine” attacks “the constraints of ‘Woman’: the feminine ideal in a specific cultural historical context” (41).

In many Gothic texts from all eras, female subjectivity offers ideological challenges to established orders, but contemporary, neo-gothic texts “self-reflexively highlight these processes as effects of subjectivity” (41).

An important way in which the Gothic explores female subjectivity is by complicating women’s status as victims of male violence. According to Helene Meyers, the contemporary Gothic is an ideal medium for discussing violence against women because the genre takes “gender oppression seriously without positioning women as pure victims. The Gothic, with its aesthetic links to both realism and postmodernism and its thematic emphasis on violence against women, becomes a site to negotiate between the scripts of ‘male vice and female virtue’” (xii). Feminist debates on violence against women centre on the relationship between terrifying, literal violations of the female body and the “theoretical states and limits of the female subject” (Meyers 2). The Gothic deals in otherness, violent transgressions of boundaries, and the excessive fear inherent in these processes; thus the genre easily becomes a channel for such debates about the difficulty and necessity of the refusal to be a victim (2).

Anne Wilson takes up this thread of the female victim in her afterword to *Sled*, “‘Crowding Round Her’: Violence and Female Subjectivity.” She identifies Thompson’s suggestion in *Sled* that violence is not a “simple matter of ‘evil’; rather, violence occurs within a social context and so is an exercise in power which is related to issues of power and gender” (128). In this play, Evangeline makes the choice to kill Jack, whose wife Annie was murdered by Evangeline’s half brother Kevin, to stop Jack from killing Kevin. According to Wilson, this is a crucial moment in the play because, unlike Kevin’s killing of Annie, in which he imagined her as an animal (*Sled* 31-32), Evangeline “never loses

sight that her killing of Jack is an act of violence against another person” (128). When Kevin kills in the play, first Annie and then his best friend Mike, a witness to the first murder, he insists on reducing his victims and on denying them “mobility and voice” (128). However, Evangeline’s status as victim is complicated throughout the play. While she is seemingly forced by Kevin into stripping to make money for them, she claims that she loves it and declares, “I’m Lucifer...and I just think it’s so funny that you think you’re this bad dude and I’m this poor little--” (77). Her ambivalent role as victim, as well as her attempt to find power in an exploitive role, recall the female Gothic’s emergence from the dichotomies and tensions caused by “the dialectic between the patriarchal society, and the woman’s role and the limitations inherent in both” (Fleenor 15). Her choices are difficult and even destructive, but Thompson insists that Evangeline not be reduced to mere victim status by continually reiterating Evangeline’s acknowledgement of her situation and that her actions are the result of her decisions alone.

Evangeline gloatingly aligns herself with evil through her declaration that she is “Lucifer,” and yet she is the first one to whom Annie’s ghost appears and the one whom Annie attempts to help find redemption. It is thanks to the visitation of another ghost, her mother’s, that Evangeline comes to realize that she is half Cree, and she attempts to learn more about her heritage, including the language. Through the help of these benevolent female ghosts, one of which was also a victim of Kevin’s violence, Evangeline begins to reexamine and recreate her identity as she attempts to transcend her status as either exploited female victim or heartless temptress/murderess. Female Gothic heroines have typically demonstrated such a divided self, demonstrating that “Good and evil are located

within the female self, and identity is both fixed and shifting as the heroine attempts to establish her identity” (Fleenor 15). At the end of the play, Evangeline leads Kevin to an icy death on the same hill where Annie was killed. In so doing, she frees herself from his manipulations, and establishes her identity as the older sister to his “little brother,” and as a Cree woman who speaks her language and embraces the spirits who have come for them (109). Evangeline’s identity as Kevin’s sister remains constant, even when he is absent from most of her life, having been kidnapped by his babysitter when he was a young child. When he does return, the two enter into an incestuous relationship, which Kevin controls and which precipitates Evangeline’s descent into a life defined by Kevin’s attempts to exploit her. Through the help of her spirit “guides,” Evangeline asserts herself and attempts to triumph over the male violence to which its perpetrators Jack and Kevin succumb. Of course, her victory over male violence is not complete, as the implication at the end of the play is that her flight to the north will ultimately lead to death. The victory Evangeline does achieve is her recognition of herself as a subject-in-process, who is striving towards a new, more fully integrated version of herself, even if such a self always remains out of reach. Her recognition comes in the form of her agency, which she willingly accepts, even when the consequences will be incredibly difficult.

Female subjectivity developed in the context of men’s violence against women is also profoundly important in *Lion in the Streets*. When Isobel realizes she has been murdered and is now a ghost, she panics and cries to the dying Joanne, “We are both pictures now...WHO WILL TAKE US TO HEAVEN, HA?” (36-37). For Isobel, the state of death is like that of a picture, unreal and deprived of true humanity. She becomes terrified that she can never be redeemed now that she realizes that she is not her living,

true self anymore. This is typical of the anxiety about identity experienced by the heroine of the female authored Gothic, whose split personality is represented as “a reflection of patriarchal values, not as she is. Perhaps she even questions whether she is anything but reflection” (Fleener 12). When she finally encounters her killer, Ben, he declares, “I’m hallucinat... You’re a picture” (63). Isobel replies twice simply “I’m Isobel” (63). She is about to kill him when she stops and forgives him instead, thus finally effecting her redemption and ascension into heaven. Her act of forgiveness is unexpected and it represents Isobel’s recognition that she controls her destiny and that she has the power to make the choices that determine her fate. Isobel is not bound to her fate as a vengeful spirit, as both her killer and the audience seem to expect. The decision Isobel makes is entirely her own, and it changes the outcome not only for her, but for the plot at large.

It is significant that Isobel is finally able to refute her identity as a picture in confronting the male aggressor who would reduce her to nothing but that. Thompson is here suggesting that to transcend male violence, women must assert their subjecthood, as Isobel does. In denying her status as a “picture,” Isobel is able to “take” her life back from her murderer (63). She is able to gain control over her situation when she learns that she has the ability to help and guide others. Before she is able to ascend to heaven, she forgives her killer, thus enabling her to take control of her destiny. Her final words to the audience, “I want you all to have your life” (63), represent her attempt to reach out to others to enable them to seize their own powerful subjectivity.

iii The Abject

According to Ellen Moers, the Gothic is intimately connected with the body and the genre’s intention is to provoke a physical reaction of horror and disgust in its readers

(90). When the Gothic preoccupation with the body extends to the female body, the heroine's looks and her relationship to them become a point of focus. Moers claims that the self-hatred and disgust in the female Gothic comes from the ways in which women's looks have been ruthlessly scrutinized from birth (108). She writes: "The savagery of girlhood accounts in part for the persistence of the Gothic mode into our own time; also the self-disgust, the self-hatred and the impetus to self-destruction," and while both sexes write about despair, "to give *visual* form to the fear of self... may well be more common in the writings of women than of men" (107).

Subjectivity in Thompson's texts is often achieved by her characters through an awareness of their bodies. Such awareness is not always positive and may be created through a sense of disgust or violent impulses or actions directed towards the female character's own body. Thompson's approach fits within the tradition of Gothic texts authored by women in which horror and discomfort are frequently located in the body of the heroine. Female Gothic authors rebel against narrow constraints of beauty and femininity by employing grotesque and ruinous images in their works. The ruin is a common motif in the female-authored Gothic, and while it is often viewed as a symbol of rebellion, Juliann Fleenor contends that it becomes doubly so "when it symbolizes both chaos or disorder and the woman herself... The ruin metaphor joins two contrasting meanings—of rebellion and of the female herself into an ambivalent symbol" (13).

The disgust towards the female subject, whether it comes from the male characters or it is directed by the heroine against herself, bears similarity to Julia Kristeva's notion of the abject, which is:

opposed to I...I endure it, for I imagine that such is the desire of the other. A massive and sudden emergence of uncanniness, harasses me as radically separate, loathsome. Not me. Not that. But not nothing, either. A 'something' That I do not recognize as a thing. (*The Powers of Horror 2*)

The female self can become revolted by her own rebelliousness and by the grotesqueness of her body, believing this "new" her is not the "real" her at all. More importantly, she can realize that the self she has been presenting to the world is the false self, even though it is socially acceptable. This can cause her to rage against her own body in protest against the society that has demanded that she fabricate this false version of herself, as self-destruction may be easier than an attack on an entire cultural mindset. Her self-destructive anger can also be seen to originate not in her frustration that her real self cannot measure up to the self that has been presented to society, but also in her recognition that her true self can possess characteristics that are undesirable to her as well.

Pony, in *White Biting Dog*, provides a striking example of a woman at war with herself. When she falls in love with the charming and amoral Cape, Pony becomes complicit with his plans, even when it means compromising her ethics, much to her eventual dismay. She asks, "why am I so ready to lie with ya and trick and cause trouble" and concludes it is because "I like doin it" (75). She even becomes afraid that she would harm her parent for his sake, as she feels "the old me is getting killed off by the new me...I'm scared...I've never felt two thoughts at once before" (78). Pony is demonstrating the kind of split subjectivity Fleenor characterizes as the province of the

female Gothic heroine. Pony wants to believe in her innate benevolence and ethics, but is also aware that there is a cruel, destructive side to her personality that she has attempted to sublimate. Pony does not fear the malign influence of Cape so much as she fears herself and what she is becoming. She attempts to combat this by assuring herself, “I’m not turning bad. I can’t be...I’m the girl that won the Miss Graciousness award” (83). Pony retreats to an image of herself as a “good girl” as she seeks validation for her belief that she is a good person. She draws upon a childhood award, as if an artificial title, won as a school prize, can stop her from changing.

Unable to find solace in her girlhood memories, Pony gives free reign to her self-disgust. She does so by stuffing herself with repulsive food, a gesture which links her self-loathing with Kristeva’s abject. According to Kristeva, “Food loathing is perhaps the most elementary form of abjection,” and recalling her own childhood aversion to milk cream, she describes the nausea that makes her

balk at that milk cream, separates me from the mother and father who proffer it. ‘I’ want none of that element, sign of their desire; ‘I’ do not want to listen, ‘I’ do not assimilate it, ‘I’ expel it. But since the food is not an ‘other’ for ‘me,’ who am only in their desire, I expel *myself*, I spit *myself* out, I abject *myself*. (13)

The child Kristeva’s disgust towards the cream gets directed inwards when she is unable to avoid consuming it, as her parents insist that she drink it. As a result, the revulsion evoked by the cream turns inward and she literally makes herself sick. Pony may be seen to undertake a similar form of abjection. In this case, the repulsive food she consumes symbolizes the revulsion she feels at the self which she rejects as not her. She is so

disgusted with herself that she is sure that if Cape and Glidden knew the truth, they would hate her because, “I’m not a nice girl like you think, see, I’m a pig girl, a slut slutty slut pig” (92). This is followed by her confession that, before Cape and Glidden entered, she ate their family dogs who were put in the freezer after being run over and killed. In her account, she covers the dog flesh in cake mix and “I eat it and I eat it and I eat it till I almost faint, till it’s coming out my tear ducts but I don’t care” (93). When she sees Cape and Glidden after having consumed their pets, she becomes so revolted that she violently vomits it all up.

The two warring halves of Pony express two poles of femininity, to which women are frequently limited: she is either “Miss Graciousness” or “pig girl.” At the same time, Pony’s self-rejection is not entirely a response to her society’s reductive treatment of women, for she herself has previously admitted to having “bad qualities,” and she tells Cape of the cruel bullying to which she subjected her childhood neighbour (60).

As she is stuffing herself with batter, Glidden kindly suggests she try Weight Watchers because it helped his wife who “used to be an eater too—you’ll pull through. Just thank bloody Christ you’re not in wartime” (91). Pony retorts, “Sir, I would give my eye-teeth to be in the war. At least I would know what the hell I was supposed to do” (92). This conversation underlines Pony’s uncertainty about her identity, as well as her probable concern that she is failing to meet her society’s perceived norm of a good woman.

Ultimately, she cannot reconcile the two halves of herself and she commits suicide. Her ghost tells her father in her final monologue that she was “filled by the worst evil” when she fell in love “on account of I had to open my mouth so wide to let love in

that the evil came in, too” (107). Pony sees her death as a triumph over this evil, telling her father that now she is dead, “the pain has stopped, and there’s still the old Pony to give to my husband: ‘cause he needs it...like a blood transfusion” (107). Pony’s suicide is not an act of weakness, but her ultimate achievement of agency and liberation.

Thompson states in an interview with Judith Rudakoff that Pony realizes she would kill for Cape, and that through taking her own life, she finds the strength to “conquer that radical evil. Now I’m certainly not advocating suicide. This is all in the abstract, metaphor. But I am talking about killing the radical evil, conquering it at extreme risk to yourself...there’s a side to people and to my character that would rather be all alone than be with a person who would cause you to do harm to others” (Rudakoff 4).

Suicide for Thompson symbolizes Pony’s triumph over a destructively controlling male who was turning her into something she refused to be. In this play, choosing death hearkens to Diane Long Hoeveler’s division of female-authored Gothic plots into “comic” and “tragic.” The tragic formulation of the Gothic “denies the viability of heterosexuality, rejects the reproductive female body, and explodes the work through the imagery of gender warfare” (17). While *White Biting Dog* certainly does not descend into gender warfare, Pony does, in a way, reject heterosexuality through her refusal to align herself romantically with Cape if it means she will become an accessory to his destructive behaviour. She realizes that being in a conventional sexual relationship with Cape would destroy her, yet she refers to him as her “husband” (107). Her desire to enter into him, now that she is a ghost, may also be seen as her attempt at the reversal of the penetrable, heterosexual female body in order to re-establish their relationship on her own terms. While the plot contains some elements of Hoeveler’s “tragic” Gothic, the resolution is

comic. The “comic” model of the Gothic “presents the sexes as finally complementary, rather than oppositional” (116). With her death, Pony and Cape can become complements, and Pony frees herself from the role of submissive girlfriend/wife. Of course, her solution may seem unpalatable to those who would like to see her triumph in life, and in the world in which Cape is living, rather than in a disembodied state. This is, however, typical of Thompson who does not attempt to attenuate the horrifying in her plays by providing simple solutions. There are solutions, but they may not be desirable. Rather, they represent the only kind of solutions possible in the kind of world she has created. In the world of *White Biting Dog*, the achievement of agency, even if it is achieved through committing suicide, represents the ultimate triumph for Pony.

iv Motherhood

Motherhood is very important to both the Kristevan abject and to Gothic texts by women in general, largely due to the way in which both Kristeva and these texts focus on the disgust and horror associated with birth and motherhood. This horror is foregrounded in women’s Gothic writing. Karen F. Stein believes male “disgust with woman’s sexuality, the male hatred and fear of woman’s awful procreative power and her ‘otherness’...lies at the root of the Female Gothic” (“Monsters and Madwomen” 123). Thompson seems to share this opinion, declaring “I think men are insanely jealous of female creativity, starting of course with our ability to create life. We cannot underestimate their hatred. So we need safe places...where we don’t have to fight the tedious, exhausting fight...Creating is dangerous” (“Look to the Lady” 69).

Motherhood and birth are frequently negative experiences in Gothic texts by women, and they often foreground the “drama of guilt, dread, and flight surrounding birth and its consequences,” which Ellen Moers identifies in the female-authored Gothic (93). Moers cites Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* as the original female Gothic work that engages with the trauma of birth and afterbirth. Yet while much of the horror surrounding birth in female-authored Gothic texts has to do with the male characters’ perceptions of birth, these texts ultimately deal with a confrontation with the female self rather than with a male. Fleenor claims that this literary confrontation symbolizes the confrontation of the female author with the fact that, as a female author, she is a mother to her texts, not a father, and she recognizes that “for her, a woman, she must play that role” (16). Interestingly, given Moers’s example of *Frankenstein*, Thompson speaks of creating her characters from an assortment of personality traits that combine to create “this Frankenstein’s monster, a character right out of parts” (“Inside Playwright Judith Thompson” 97).

For Thompson, the maternal aspect of her authorial role is never far from the surface, and she actively engages with it to create unease and horror in her audiences. She links the provocative excesses of her plays to her real-life status as woman and mother:

Theatre has to be embarrassing, and theatre has to be slovenly...When I have young babies, I like to let my breast milk leak through my blouse in public at nice restaurants...And the looks of disgust on people’s faces are the same looks on the people that walk out of my plays. I’ve let something leak that’s not supposed to be leaking. (“Look to the Lady” 68)

Equating her writing with her breast milk, as if she is writing from a uniquely feminine position, is what Cixous argues the writer of *écriture féminine* does: “She writes in white ink” (34). Thompson is attempting a new kind of writing that exceeds its formal and ideological boundaries, one that “leaks” into the consciousness of the audience. Her characters also exceed the limitations that have been placed on them and that attempt to define them as passive and uncomplicated women, both in the context of the plays and in the culture as a whole. The process is messy and disconcerting, but much as she flaunts her breast milk, Thompson forces the audience to face the uncomfortable Gothic realities of her female characters.

Why there is so much disgust surrounding maternity and birth in the Gothic may be explained by Kristeva’s theory of abjection, which suggests that the abject

confronts us with our earliest attempt to release the hold of *maternal* energy even before ex-isting outside of her, thanks to the autonomy of language. It is a violent, clumsy breaking away, with the constant risk of falling back under the sway of a power as securing as it is stifling.

(*Powers of Horror* 13)

Kelly Oliver, editor of *The Kristeva Reader*, further elucidates Kristeva’s idea:

The abject represents the first effort of the future subject to separate itself from the pre-Oedipal mother. Nausea, distaste, horror: these are the signs of a radical revulsion (or *expulsion*) which serves to situate the ‘I’, or more accurately to *create* a first, fragile sense of ‘I’ where before there was only emptiness. (238)

The trauma of birth and separation is reinterpreted by female Gothic authors in a way that allows them to attempt the creation of a new female subject.

v The New Female Subject

Anne Williams contends that even most feminist critics miss the subtleties of specifically feminine forms of Gothic writing (135). She criticizes what she views as a “realist bias” that can cause critics to focus on the genre’s social commentary rather than on “its medium, literary language, which deploys codes having a history and context of their own” (137-38). She uses the example of the “happy” ending of marriage in early Gothic romances, which she says should not be interpreted as a reconciliation of the female character to the status quo but rather as a literary phenomenon, insofar as it is meant to be read symbolically, not literally (138). While traditional marriage did not offer an escape for many women of the eighteenth-century, in the Gothic text, the heroine’s marriage to the “master” of the estate symbolizes her mastery of her reality, which is her place in the social order. The conventions of Gothic plots featuring female protagonists tend to be associated with the development of female consciousness within the confines of a society that severely restricts the roles of women (145).

Williams contends that feminists have been blind to the most crucial aspect of the female-centred Gothic plot: the empowering way it can validate the reasoning of its heroines. The female-authored Gothic does not just protest the conditions and assumptions of patriarchal culture but also offers a female self that is a more “fully human version of a self-gendered female,” who is able to find strength and fulfillment in her acceptance of herself as a woman and the different perspective this position offers her (138). Those critics who argue that Gothic heroines are passive and helpless fail to see

these traits as anything but negative, a position that reflects the view that “independence and conquest are the supreme signs of accomplishment” (139). The true accomplishment of the Gothic heroine, in Williams’s argument, is her ability to see things other than herself, which opens up the possibilities of love and fulfillment within the marriage plot. What is most important about this ability is that it allows her to perceive the reality of the world around her, a reality that has been altered in the minds of the other characters (145). The way in which the Gothic heroine creates perspective for herself lies in the different ways in which the male and female selves separate themselves from the mother.

For Williams, this distinction is directly linked to the development of the gaze. Williams writes of the many Gothic villains or hero-villains who have “piercing, penetrating eyes,” a characteristic she links to psychoanalytic explanations of the formation of the self that deal with gaze or perception (108). In the Lacanian mirror stage the gaze acts as a recognition of identity. While the identity reflected in the mirror appears to be whole, it is in fact divided because the image is already split or alienated from the subject that perceives its image (108). In Freud’s Oedipal crisis, the male subject, the “I,” perceives an absence. This sense of absence or lack is created through an early and abrupt separation from the mother, who remains in the unconscious as a supernatural figure of good or evil or a combination of both (108, 114). As a result, many male Gothic protagonists experience a sense of horror at the female “other” that makes the male subject perceive her as “uncannily powerful, a monster that the nascent self must escape at the cost of whatever violence seems necessary” (135)

Cape, in *White Biting Dog*, exhibits such disgust towards his mother, Lomia. He finds her physically repulsive, and this repulsion informs his whole relationship with her.

When Pony exclaims, “What a truly beautiful lady,” Cape’s response is, “Is she? All I’m aware of is her nose hairs” (41). While Lomia revolts him, he cannot escape her, commenting, “I never could leave a room she was in” (39). Like Kristeva’s subject, he struggles to create a sense of self out of an act of rejection, although he sometimes fails to complete the act.

Gothic authors like Thompson, however, use female protagonists to create a new subject based on a different relationship with the (m)other. Since the female subject is not subject to the Oedipal crisis, in Freud’s system, they are already “castrated,” or lacking. Therefore, the female subject “confronts her lack in innumerable ways” because she must separate from her mother and also reconcile herself with her status as a weak, deficient “other” (Williams 59). Williams posits that the female Gothic plot presents “an alternative to the Oedipal crisis in the formation of the speaking subject with different desires, who sees the world with a different eye/I. Since the ‘female’ gaze has *not* been created through conflict, division, and abrupt separation, she has a different relation to her own mother and to that cultural (m)other” (139). Kristeva also acknowledges the special sort of subjectivity that is created by motherhood and the unique position into which it puts women with respect to their own mothers. She writes, “By giving birth, the woman enters into contact with her mother, she becomes, she is her own mother; they are the same continuity differentiating itself” (“Maternal Body” 303). Kristeva argues in “Stabat Mater” that since neither the mother nor the fetus controls the pregnancy, the mother and fetus are not a unified subject but rather a subject-in-process that is subject to a spontaneous development (322). Pregnancy represents a new state of being, as it is “a splitting of the body, the division and coexistence of a self and other, of nature and

awareness, of physiology and speech” (“Women’s Time” 364). Like Williams, Kristeva views pregnancy and motherhood as unique processes that at times evoke horror and that can ultimately lead to the creation of a new type of female subject.

Thompson’s play *I Am Yours* centres around the trauma of birth and maternity, and does so in a way that leads to at least a partial redemption of the protagonist. The play begins with the protagonist, Dee, alone in her apartment, having her recurring nightmare about a “creature” behind the wall that she is trying to keep from entering her being (119). After her brief sexual encounter with her superintendent, Toilane, he refutes her claim that the sex was “nothing” by telling her she showed him her “animal” (136). The image of an “animal” or “creature” recurs throughout the play, forging a strong association between female sexuality and horror. The monstrous aspect of female sexuality is made explicit when Dee confesses to her sister, Mercy, that she has horrible dreams that cause her to have orgasms in her sleep (140).

An explanation of this association between monstrosity and female sexuality may lie in the play’s title, taken from a medieval German poem quoted by one of the play’s characters, which contains the following lines: “You are locked in my heart/The key is lost/You will have to stay inside it.../For always” (157). While this statement may be read as the expression of a romantic desire to always keep the beloved close, it also carries a sinister undertone of sexuality or sexual love as imprisoning. Dread of female sexuality, along with “female physiology, and female processes” is often symbolized in the female-centred Gothic by locked doors and enclosed spaces, signifying that female sexuality “has frequently been denied, even to women themselves” (Fleenor 13). Dee is uncomfortable with her sexuality and her procreative power, as is her sister, who asks the

pregnant Dee “Aren’t you afraid of what your ANIMAL might do?” (144). Mercy fears that the violent thoughts that Dee characterizes as her “animal” and that she has been struggling to repress will erupt into actual violence with the birth of the child. In this context, the “animal” has a slightly different meaning than the sense in which Toilane uses it when he refers to something wild and primal in Dee that excites him, although both uses of the word suggest something uncontrollable and possibly threatening inside Dee.

Early in the play, Dee finger paints a large black blob on a large canvas, “in a frenzied attempt to depict the ‘animal’ behind the wall that she fears” (*I Am Yours* 123). This canvas is later replaced by ones depicting the various stages of Dee’s pregnancy: a “grotesque painting of a ten-week-old fetus,” “a beautiful one of a four-month fetus” and yet another “grotesque” one of a nine-month fetus (143, 146, 164). The paintings make an explicit link between the “creature” behind the wall and Dee’s pregnancy, affirming the horror generated by both. When she feels the baby kicking, she sees “a lion breaking through the wall” (165). During labour, the animal is completely free and she cries out, a “lion is coming down to crush me...I’m gonna die” (170). Dee’s pregnancy and childbirth draw further parallels to the abject, which Kristeva notes, “confronts us...with those fragile states where man strays on the territories of *animal*” (*Powers of Horror* 12-13). It was through abjection that early societies attempted to remove certain areas of their culture away “from the threatening world of animals or animalism, which were imagined as representatives of sex and murder” (12-13). The horror of Dee’s giving birth also connects the play to the “drama of guilt, dread, and flight” that Moers believes

surrounds birth and its consequences in female-authored Gothic texts (93). It also echoes Thompson's statement that creation is "dangerous."

Pregnancy also reawakens memories of the anguished relationship between Dee and her dead mother. The horror of Dee's pregnancy is explained by Thompson as originating in the fact that Dee's "mother hated her and was jealous of her so she has no feeling for motherhood herself. She's terrified of anything taking over her, and this is represented by the animal behind the wall" (Tomc 8). Anxiety surrounding pregnancy in Gothic texts is often linked with the heroine's relationship to her mother. Fleenor comments on works in which the central conflict unfolds between the heroine and an all-powerful, devouring mother. The mother can be a double of the heroine who represents what she will become, for good or ill, if she heeds her sexual self and seeks the power of the mother through becoming pregnant.

The pregnancies and childbirth in these texts are sometimes undesired, and the processes are automatic, unconscious and beyond the female character's control. Pregnancy is a dramatic event that can lead to madness, and the birth can result in something monstrous. According to Fleenor, the conflict and fear associated with pregnancy is central to most women's lives, even if they never become pregnant themselves, for they are still the product of their mothers' pregnancies. The Gothic remains popular with female writers and readers because it confronts "one of the central enigmas of female existence, the relationship of mother and daughter," but without proposing any kind of escape or solution (16).

After giving birth, Dee becomes distressed, telling Mercy she wants to speak to her mother. Mercy tells her that she is dead, to which Dee responds, "I know, I know

she's dead...but I want to talk to her...I want...to tell her that I'm...sorry" (174). Diane Long Hoeveler writes that Gothic heroines find their voices only after they have redeemed their mothers (22). This would appear to be what Dee is attempting to do. Dee's childbirth ordeal has brought her into contact with her mother through the tumultuous emotions evoked by her pregnancy, which bring with them memories of her mother. The experience has given her the chance to ask her for forgiveness, even though, as Thompson suggests, it was her mother who was the destructive one.

According to the theories of both Kristeva and Williams, Dee may be viewed as entering into a new kind of subjecthood as a result of her pregnancy, one that reestablishes her link to the mother from whom she separated herself due to their strained relationship. Thompson's final description of Dee as a woman who "*feels purified--through--birth--and also through understanding her self-hatred, her guilt about her mother—she is now able to love after having grappled with her 'shadow' or 'animal'*" (176). While her pregnancy, right up to the birth of her child, has been deeply troubling, the ultimate act is one of purification, like Kristeva's description of ideal motherhood where "maternity becomes a true *creative act*" ("Women's Time" 364). Creativity is not limited to the creation of new life, but of a new way of looking at the world and the self and its relationship to the feminine/maternal other.

Unfortunately, Toilane and his mother kidnap the child while Dee is unconscious after giving birth. At the end of the play, she is searching for the child, but does not realize that it has been taken. While the birth may have been an act of cleansing for her, it is uncertain whether or not this effect will last, once Dee realizes that she has been

deprived of her child. The ambivalent ending signals that the Gothic trauma surrounding birth and afterbirth may only be beginning.

While Dee does not acknowledge her agency as powerfully as Evangeline or Isobel in *Sled* and *Lion in the Streets*, in asking for her mother's forgiveness, Dee does acknowledge that while her pregnancy and its attendant emotions may have been beyond her control, she has the ability to rid herself of the hatred that has been burdening her.

vi "Mouthful of Pearls"

Thompson's short story "Mouthful of Pearls" portrays the kind of ambivalent female Gothic rebellion in which the ruin metaphor stands for the heroine's horror at her own actions and at her own body. In this case, the heroine's body is not only the site of her rebellion, but also becomes the "ruin" as she destroys her physical appearance through furious, seemingly irrational actions meant to effect her escape from a predatory male.

Sonja is a formerly successful business woman who left her job and high-powered, luxury lifestyle to spend more time with her children. On a late night walk through a ravine, she is approached by a sinister stranger who asks her to walk with him. She resists, yet at the same time she tells him her life story and says she walks so that she can "think and know who I am" (71). She demands, "Do you know who you are... Where is your soul?" (71). This exchange hints at Sonja's simmering rage at the man's inability to see beyond her physical self. Through her solitary walks, Sonja is seeking to find out who she truly is. She therefore reacts with anger and frustration towards the man, rather than fear, when he begins to objectify her lasciviously. He tells her he wants to "kiss your pretty green eyes over and over" (72). She responds, "My eyes aren't green... You want

my eyes” (72). The man is, in a sense, attempting to control her gaze. He tells her he wants her eyes to look at him because she is beautiful, and when she asks him what he means by beautiful, he itemizes all the things that make her beautiful, including her “long blonde hair,” her “long dancer’s legs” and her “joyful bosom.” Sonja retorts: “My body will sag and die like everybody else’s...my joyful bosom will probably fill with cancer...And I’ll get cataracts over these crazy eyes. Then will I be beautiful?” (72). Her companion then insists they go into the bushes because he wants to “devour” her (72). He can kill her if he must, Sonja tells him, but she demands that he ask himself what he really wants from her. She confronts him by saying, “I’m talking to you. Talk to me, I’m a person” (73). Sonja is becoming increasingly distraught, not only from fear but also from frustration at being objectified. She wants to be seen as a whole person, not just a beautiful body. She has a soul, which is beyond the grasp of his crude, violent lust, and which he cannot acknowledge. Reaching her breaking point, she assures him, “You’ll never have me. You can tear my body apart with your knife but you’ll never reach me” (73). His response is, “Your eyes drives me wild” (73). Sonja angrily repeats: “You want my eyes?” Provokingly, he asks her why she is so angry, and this finally causes her to explode with rage:

Because I’m tired of it. I hate it. I HATE IT! Ever since I was ten years old the men have been staring at me, wanting to devour me, all because I have blonde hair and a big bust. I couldn’t walk down the street. Even down the aisle at church. In school, boys would whisper when I passed, and when they talked to me it was the way a wolf might talk to a rabbit, always with the devouring on their minds, always. I hate your

desire. (73)

Her encounter with the man has brought out all of her rage against those males who have objectified her. To her, the male gaze is a devouring predator, which is a suitably Gothic image. The penetrating gaze of the male hero or hero/villain in Gothic literature is “implicitly patriarchal” (Williams 108). The Freudian theory of the “‘I’ also privileges male sight, for the Oedipal crisis is precipitated by the perception of absence, creating therefore the basic categories of the ‘male/me’ and the ‘not-male/not-me’” (108). Thus the gaze divides the world into self and other, and in order to see the other, the male gaze must interpret it as relevant to itself and its desires (108-09). Sonja’s characterization of the male gaze as “devouring” implicitly echoes Williams’s notion of the male gaze as a boundary violation that leads, “eventually, to punishment—looks may *literally* ‘kill’” (145). The necessity of the male gaze to make the other relevant to itself if the other is to be seen is evidenced by the man’s insistence that Sonja has green eyes, even though they are not, because that is what he desires.

When her fury escalates, the man becomes more enticed and tells her he loves her flashing eyes: “I’d love those eyes to flash on my secret parts” (73). At this point, Sonja takes his hunting knife and cuts out her left eye. This horrifies the man, and he calls her a “crazy witch” and a “freak” (74). She then proceeds to cut off her hand so “it will touch you anytime you want. Anywhere you want” (74). She cuts off her lips so they will be able to “kiss you, to whisper in your ear” (74). The man runs off in disgust, with her body parts clinging to him. Through her self-mutilation, Sonja has effectively changed herself from an object of desire into a “freak” who repulses her potential victimizer.

In this story, Thompson literalizes the bodily dimension of feminist Gothic rebellion, and she goes to suitably Gothic extremes to do so. Like the heroines Fleenor identifies, however, Sonja eventually expresses horror at her own act of rebellion against male sexual violence. Her disfigurement expresses her anger at the men who have objectified her, but by directing the violence towards herself, rather than her attacker, she ultimately voices her own deep-seated disgust with herself. She falls to her knees, crying, “Why did I give into my rage, why did I do this?” (74). The implication is that her rage was always there, seething under the surface, and the man’s advances galvanized her fury at the socially pervasive sexism that has victimized her all her life. Making herself monstrous in appearance in the only way Sonja find to vent her rage at the devouring male gaze.

The madness she displays in this act, as well as her horrific physical transformation, are part of the female Gothic tradition of monsters and madwomen who represent the unleashing of the hidden side of the female self that is repressed in a society that demands passive, resigned women (Stein 123). While monsters symbolize an “unescapable stigma,” madness, “is a more subjective aberration which may be overcome when the character or society ceases to regard certain types of behaviour as monstrous or crazy” (123). Sonja is eventually sewn back together by doctors, but forever after she lives in pain and discomfort. Even so, her life becomes more peaceful “because no man ever looked at her again with devouring eyes” (75). The man from the ravine must also live in constant discomfort, as he is unable to look lustfully at women again without his eyes, mouth and hand being beset by terrible pain. “Unfortunately,” Thompson writes, “fear and pain were the only things that kept him from looking, for he still did not see

anything wrong with the way he looked at the girls” (75). There must be a monstrous reminder for the man to keep himself from staring predatorily at these women. In this case, the man, and by extension, a devouring male society in general, does not consider such behaviour unacceptable. Thus the stigma of the monstrous and the mad must remain in Sonja’s body and also be transferred to that of her tormentor. Unfortunately, the plot does not resolve the problem, for the man has not truly internalized the lesson from the encounter in the ravine. Thompson here seems to be suggesting that in the absence of true social change, Gothic horror functions as a kind of law that punishes those who would exploit women. It is not only a merely partial solution, but a largely undesirable one, if women must enact this horror upon themselves before it can impact their victimizers. The kind of solution proposed by Thompson may be rejected by some, as it comes at too high a price for the female characters. Thompson’s unpalatable suggestion seems to be that female victims of male violence can only escape from their attackers by visiting more violence upon themselves.

If this notion is connected to the concept of agency, however, it is possible to view such extremity as a forceful attempt by such victims to regain control over their abusers, as well as their lives in general. Sonja turns the punishing potential of the male gaze back on itself and the way in which she does so, through an uncanny attack of her severed body parts, fits with Colette Conroy’s definition of the abject in *The Handbook of the Gothic*, where she writes that “Abjection is an overpowering sensation of disgust and rejection that is caused by fragments and substances that cross boundaries between subjects...To experience horror or disgust in relation to the abject is to feel the law’s action on the body” (106). Sonja’s body parts cross the boundary between her feminine

“other” and the man’s unquestioned male “self,” and thus she reverses the male law that has constrained her since girlhood.

vii Conclusion

The feminist Gothic allows for a radically transformed female subject. Williams ties this subject to the French feminist discourses about *écriture féminine* and the possibility of a woman’s writing and of “writing as a woman” (53). In “The Laugh of the Medusa,” Hélène Cixous proclaims that “Woman must write herself: must write about women and bring women to writing from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies” (27). Thompson’s work features many women who have, literally or figuratively, been driven away from their bodies. Sonja and Pony are able to escape the destruction of male power through death and mutilation. Dee escapes, not from a male authority, but from the oppressive legacy of her mother, which alienated her from her body and sexuality, through becoming a mother herself. These female protagonists “rewrite” themselves into new subjects through their ordeals, although they use very different methods. Becker observes that Gothicism has always confronted “the *thematic enclosure* of the female subject” and that it is the object of feminist Gothic to “redefine gothic escape as platform for change” (19, 37). While the Gothic may attempt to lay the groundwork for a feminist escape, it leaves the solutions to the violence and sexism these women face ultimately out of reach. Gothic writing often does not achieve the desired social change that would solve the problems women face in an unequal society, but it can expose the horrors inherent in the position of women within their societies in an uncompromising fashion that does not attempt to disguise or rectify these horrors.

The feminist Gothic allows for an uncomfortable and ultimately illuminating exploration of a multitude of women's issues. Due to its predilection for the extreme and the grotesque, the Gothic provides an ideal medium for necessary feminist debates that are not constrained by the need for simple solutions. What is inherently liberating about the genre is the way in which it portrays a multitude of possible female selves and their unique ways of coping with their circumstances without didactically prescribing a certain type as the feminine ideal. Luce Irigaray suggests that while men consider women as never having fully resolved the Oedipal phase, and therefore must remain in the imaginary realm, occupying that realm is empowering because the liberated female imagination need not limit itself to any kind of unity (30). The Gothic is a highly imaginative, multifaceted genre that allows for such an exploration. Its lack of unity opens the Gothic up to innumerable possibilities, including those which are undesirable.

Chapter 4 The Canadian Gothic

i Introduction

The Gothic genre is often interpreted as transferring national and other large scale identities onto individual characters. In *Sled*, Judith Thompson undertakes the task of mapping historically rooted Canadian anxieties onto a small group of urban Torontonians. The way in which she does so is through an engagement with the conventions of the “Canadian Gothic,” a genre which has developed out of a particular historical and cultural context. The physical and mental borders of Canadian society have often been construed as shifting or unstable, and *Sled* manipulates the borders between past and present, “wilderness” and “civilization,” the living and the dead, as well as between individuals and cultures. Once these boundaries have been transgressed, there is room for a multiplicity of voices and identities that is both welcome and unnerving. Thompson uses the conventions of the Canadian Gothic to examine the lingering trauma of national and personal violence through the uncanny, which exposes the various hauntings that trouble the Canadian consciousness. Canada has historically been a site of violence and repression, and *Sled* uses its fictional violence as an opportunity for the audience to confront, at least to an extent, that historical violence.

Through an examination of wilderness and northern imagery, uncanny hauntings, unfixed boundaries and multiplicity, and the nature/civilization binary, I will demonstrate that Thompson employs the tropes of the Canadian Gothic to point to the unsettled fear and anxiety that lie at the heart of Canadian identity, without providing any way to put those fears to rest.

The passage of time, far from dissipating the initial fears of the colonialists, in fact often serves to unsettle those who feel that the traditional, Eurocentric centres of authority in Canada are being further eroded as time passes and people from other cultures begin to make the country their home and demand a voice. In Canada, as in other colonial nations, there is always the possibility of new identities that integrate elements from a wide variety of cultures. Unfortunately, for some, this opportunity presents a threat to the prevailing cultural and political authority of what they believe to be a unified European cultural front, and the response to this perceived threat is often a retreat to a hostile cultural protectionism.

The Canadian Gothic offers the chance to go beyond the colonial identities of the early settlers, by offering a multitude of possible new identities. At either end of this spectrum of identities are what Turcotte considers the two poles between which colonial identity situates itself: a reactionary, purely European identity and a completely new and fully multicultural identity that blends both old and new worlds. Unfortunately, it is often the case that such an identity usually collapses back onto the initial, conservative pole (56).

In *Sled*, Thompson forces the audience and her characters to confront the violence upon which the modern nation of Canada was founded, as well as the consequences of that violence that have rippled through each succeeding generation. *Sled* internalizes the anxieties about the wild and the urban, in addition to the conflicts between the “natural” and the “civilized” that have marked Canada, and locates these anxieties and conflicts in the troubled psyches of its characters.

ii The North/Wilderness

While the majority of the action in *Sled* takes place in Toronto, Annie's murder, the consequences of which are central to the plot's development, takes place in a northern setting. Northern imagery pervades the play, and by the end, the action has once again returned to its original northern wilderness setting. Sherrill Grace asserts that when Judith Thompson employs the trope of North in *Sled*, she is working with familiar constructs of "North," which were largely inspired by the art of the Group of Seven and which presented an image of a "mysterious, spiritually uplifting, if also overwhelming 'North'" (66). Such a North, based largely on the country north of Lake Superior in Algoma or in Algonquin Park, functions metonymically in Canadian literature generally as Canada and, according to Grace, is still portrayed as such by some Canadian writers. She considers it somewhat ironic that a play that focuses on a mystical North, in reality, takes place no further north than Algonquin Park. But Algonquin Park was the very location where Judith Thompson had a revelation about the numinous quality of the Canadian wilderness. Grace cites Thompson's own comments about her experience on a ski trail:

I was alone, with this exquisite stand of birch and the light going down
and I felt this rush of a kind of St. Francis of Assisi ecstasy, in
communion with nature, and I thought "only in Canada." At the same
time I felt this note of a deeper kind of danger. I felt fear with
a kind of ecstasy." (Thompson qtd. in Grace 63)

Thompson's comments demonstrate the kind of ambivalence towards nature that characterizes so much Canadian Gothic literature, with hints of the Burkean sensibility.

They also reveal how deeply intertwined the notions of an ecstatic yet dangerous nature are with the very idea of an essential Canadianness, at least in Thompson's mind.

Even though the majority of the action in *Sled* takes place in Toronto, the wilderness remains a haunting presence throughout the play. This inseparability of the wild and the urban recalls Gail McGregor's claim that the fear of nature and the consequent Gothic mode in Canadian literature is not related to "particular circumstances that may be overcome by human courage and will"; instead, they become "an inseparable part of the human condition" (7). The terrors that are Gothically symbolized by the wilderness represent fears that are so deeply rooted in Canadian identity that they persist even when large sections of that nature have been urbanized.

At the beginning of *Sled*, the stage directions read: "*A residential street, with mostly red brick houses with high pointed roofs, some three storey, but most, two-storey workers' houses. The houses, however, look as though they are in the middle of a forest. The birches [from the first scene] remain*" (15). Grace sees this intrusion of northern imagery as stressing the presence of North in the minds of the characters and reminding a southern, urban audience of the omnipresence of North in everything they do. The North always remains in the characters' minds as a location of possible escape from urban violence (60). Yet such an escape offers its own dangers, because in fleeing the dangers of the South, a character can be brought into direct confrontation with the hidden darkness of the self and the nation. Nature holds both an attraction and repulsion in Canadian literature. Its dark and dangerous territory is symbiotically related to the self, where the self has come from, and where it might go. In this way, the Gothic set in

remote and wild places does not offer an escape from the “real” world, but a confrontation with it (Turcotte, 18).

At the opening of the play, the audience sees Annie walking quickly and breathlessly through a birch forest. As she does so, “The music is mounting, ominous like a heart beating harder and faster but moving towards a dark euphoria” (13). The music hints at the “note of a deeper kind of danger” experienced by Thompson on the ski trail. The resemblance to a heartbeat may suggest that there is something about the North that is in the Canadian “blood stream,” that the North is somehow the vital heart of Canadian identity towards which authors and characters are irresistibly attracted, despite its lurking dangers. In this case, the “dark euphoria” may represent the desire for confrontation with something hidden in the self.

In *Sled*, confrontation is rarely only an individual’s confrontation with him or herself. It is extended to the confrontation of Canadians with their society. Through encounters with the wilderness, the characters confront the violence at the heart of Canadian identity. In “Monstrous History: Judith Thompson’s *Sled*,” Penney Farfan claims that while *Lion in the Streets* explored the “monstrous wilderness within the urban heart” of a community, *Sled* extends this same exploration “to an epic vision of contemporary Canada and the history that has shaped it” (98). Farfan views *Sled* as a testament to “Canada’s history as a settler-invader nation premised on violence from the earliest moment of European contact with the ‘new world’ and by its violent past through to the present day” (98).

The play’s central act of violence is Kevin’s murder of Annie. Pretending to his friend Mike that she is a moose, he shoots her when she is out for a solitary nature walk.

As he does so, he speaks Norse, which he claims he learned from his high school English teacher, who told him that he would have been Norse if he had lived a thousand years earlier (50). Farfan believes Thompson has her character lapse into an archaic European language when he murders Annie and takes her dress as a trophy to suggest that the first contact of the old and new world was “a barbarous moment of brutal conquest,” and that Kevin “functions as a monstrous avatar of Canadian history” (100, 98). Annie is associated with the natural world throughout the play, much as First Nations characters were in early Canadian literature. This association seems to suggest that, like them, she will encounter violence. While at the lodge, she sings a song about encountering a fox in Toronto (17-18). After hearing an owl in the middle of the night, she decides to go for a nature walk and during her walk, she attempts to talk to a moose (29-30). When Kevin kills her, he does so in a way that suggests the act is meant to show his dominance over nature. This is demonstrated by the fact that he calls her an animal, and then takes her dress as a trophy, as a hunter might take a pair of antlers.

This episode suggests that the violence of the first encounter between the “old” and the “new” worlds has not been successfully effaced, much as one might try to consign it to the past. The wilderness, which represents the site of this first contact and which continues to be haunted by it, has not been successfully contained by the city where all these characters live and develop their values. The city may have been superimposed onto the wilderness, but the city has created its own wilderness, which exists within its inhabitants (102).

The wilderness in *Sled* is portrayed with a deep sense of ambivalence in all respects. It bears the scars of its earlier colonial past, and the violence that Kevin enacts

there is visited upon both those who perpetuate it and those who seek reconciliation. Grace traces this ambivalence to Thompson's "conventional" gendering of the North/South binary in which the North stands for mystery, wilderness and the feminine and the South represents civilization, society and the masculine (64). Both Annie and Evangeline are associated with the North (64). Early in the play, when they are at the lodge where Annie is performing, Jack comments, "Maybe it's the nature, the snow, whatever. You're actually, I don't know, happy" (22). In a scene that precedes this one chronologically, Jack and Annie argue about their marriage and Annie says, "I'm going to work on it, I promise, I don't know, maybe if we go away, north to the country" (92). For Annie, the North represents escape and a chance for soul searching. She is blind to the dangers of the area, a mistake which costs her her life. Jack, who does not share her romantic notions, tells their neighbour Joe that "It's very dangerous in the woods up there. Annie thought, people think, it's like a...conservation area so they are safe. They think because they are in the woods, in their own country...they are safe. They're not safe" (39).

Unlike Annie and Evangeline who seek comfort in nature, Jack and Kevin view it as something dangerous that needs to be controlled. Kevin is not a product of Thompson's North, even though he was raised there by his babysitter who kidnapped him when he was very young. He truly belongs to the South, with its inherent alienation and lack of communion or community. Kevin attempts to dominate nature, as he will later attempt to dominate Evangeline sexually. His aggressiveness is symbolized by his snowmobile, or "sled," as he calls it. In his hands it becomes "synonymous with speed, violence, macho adventure, and death" (Grace 61). Before he murders his best friend

Mike, he announces: “I’m gonna tell you about the greatest sled of my life” (52). He proceeds to tell him of the incomparable exhilaration he experienced during a snowmobile trip through the Northwest Territories. For Kevin, the sled represents the thrill he experiences in violent conquest and his desire for dominance over both nature and people. His attitude towards the “sled” must be contrasted with Evangeline’s comments about feeling as though she is on an out of control sled, heading for disaster (84-85). Such comments reveal their different cultural backgrounds.

iii First Nations

The revelation of Evangeline’s Cree heritage by her mother’s ghost gives her a new sense of identity, one that links her to the indigenous inhabitants of Canada who were often cast as another facet of the country’s threatening natural landscape and who thus needed to be suppressed. Shortly after discovering her Native heritage, Evangeline comments to her neighbour Joe:

I just feel things are going in a certain way. And there’s nothin I can do to stop them. Like I’m in a sled, right? In a runaway sled goin down a mountain of ice, faster and faster and if I tip over I will break my neck and bones for sure but if I keep going, what’s at the bottom Joe is the lake. I’ll crack through the foot-thick ice in a moment and down into the frigid waters, stopping my heart and breath. (84-85)

In the opening notes to the published version of *Sled*, as well as in the play’s program, Thompson quotes a passage from Candace Savage’s *Aurora* that explains how legends tell of Inuit shamans who would climb onto a sled that descended from the sky and voyage to the moon to visit dead relatives or watch spirits playing ball in the Northern

Lights (8). Savage's explanation allows the audience to make the link between the sled image and death. Evangeline's comments above may indicate her initial uncertainty about her newfound identity. They may also indicate her understanding of the way in which her destiny, like that of her ancestors and the country itself, is hurtling towards inescapable violence. If the history of the First Nations is mirrored in that of Canada as a whole, then Evangeline is its living, contemporary embodiment, due not only to the violence she encounters, but also to the way in which the revelation of her suppressed Native origins radically changes her notions of her own identity.

Evangeline is not immediately connected with the North the way Annie is, but after learning about her heritage, her character and her destiny become more and more associated with the North, and in some ways her fate mirrors the fates of both early Canadian nature and the First Nations who inhabited it. After the revelation of her heritage, Evangeline tentatively begins a relationship with Jack, who describes her as "beautiful...And mysterious. A forest. In winter" (98). By the end of the play, Annie's spirit urges Evangeline to flee to the North after she shoots Jack to protect Kevin. Annie advises Evangeline to "just walk and disappear. It happens in Canada all the time, a disappearing woman, nobody minds. Just walk. Disappear" (105).

Annie's suggestion is troubling. Both women are victims of Kevin's violence; Annie has been murdered and Evangeline has been coerced into stripping and into an incestuous relationship. Here, Kevin's earlier victim appears as a guardian spirit to his more recent one, and yet she urges her towards death. Thus one suggestion of the end of the play is that violence can only be transcended through death and that no full resolution

of past violence is possible. Chillingly, her suggestions may also imply that when Native women “disappear” as a result of violence, the rest of Canada does not care.

When the pregnant Evangeline and Kevin reach the site where Annie was killed, Evangeline composes a letter to her unborn daughter, imagining her at eight years old and naming her “Annie Northstar.” She tells the child that she gave her to her friend to raise because, “I am doomed to walk, forever. And that’s no way for you to live” (106). So while Evangeline has managed to escape from the violence of the “civilized” South, her escape is into a North that has been irreparably scarred by the violence enacted there, thus making it an incomplete refuge.

This final scene also reveals the importance of Evangeline’s First Nations heritage to the play as a whole through her association with the Northern Lights. The lights are Thompson’s other central image in the play, along with the sled motif. According to Savage, the lights were of great importance to indigenous cultures. The Iroquois imagined them to be the entry point into the afterlife, and in circumpolar traditions, they represent the souls of those who died due to loss of blood (8). The Northern Lights in *Sled* are connected with death. When Kevin shoots Mike, the lights appear, “*lighting up KEVIN and darkening him, flashing across his face and body*” (51). He even asks his dying friend, as he slits his throat, “have you ever seen...? the lights?...You know...the Northern Lights?” (52). Much as his earlier use of Norse recalled the moment of European conquest, providing an uncanny connection between Kevin and the barbarism of Canadian history, his seemingly unconscious knowledge of the significance of the lights appears to connect him further with death in a way that is almost supernatural.

When Kevin and Evangeline reach the hill where Annie was killed, he is dying. The stage directions read: “*The Northern Lights light up the sky,*” and as he takes his last breath, the Lights “*surround them*” (109). Kevin tells Evangeline that he hears wolves and she responds, “No! It’s something else. Something kind...*Cheepyuk Neemeetowuk*. They finally come for us...Dancing spirits...They’re every bit as lovely as you said, Kev” (109). As Grace notes, Evangeline “indigenizes” the Lights by giving them their Cree name, but they are still associated with death (62). The ending of *Sled* remains troubling. Kevin, the source of violence and oppression in the play, is dead, but his death has not truly avenged the other characters. Annie is still dead, and the best help she can offer Evangeline is to guide her into the frozen north and eventually death. This ending seems to indicate that Canadian history is unfinished and that the violence enacted on the country’s soil returns in a monstrous cycle of Gothic horror that implicates both colonizer and colonized.

iv The Return of the Repressed

The notion of the cyclical nature of violence in the play evokes the idea of the return of the repressed. The literal and figurative hauntings in the play speak to the ways in which the “ghosts” of Canadian history return in many forms to serve as a constant reminder of the inescapability of the past.

Robert Nunn contends that *Sled* deals with the “interpenetration of the worlds of the living and the dead” and that “More than any other play of Judith Thompson’s, *Sled* is haunted” (“Strangers to Ourselves” 29). Through the presence of “literal” ghosts such as Annie and Evangeline’s mother, as well as the haunting memories of history, Thompson assures that “All the dead continue to be presences—albeit ghostly ones—within the

community” (Wilson 130). These haunting effects create a sense of unhomeliness at the heart of Thompson’s Canada. By creating a world where the boundaries between the living and the dead are fluid, Thompson sets the stage for the multiple instances of the uncanny she weaves throughout the text. Sherrill Grace refers to the Canada of the play as “*unheimlich*...our uncanny ‘home and native land’” (63).

The *unheimlich* is especially likely to manifest in relation to death and dead bodies because they relate to primitive superstitions about death that have supposedly been dismissed by a more enlightened age. Death is also a necessary component of the return of the repressed when an author chooses to express such a return through hauntings. The dead in *Sled* are both those people who have died recently as well as the past as a whole; a past that an uneasy nation hopes is metaphorically dead and buried. In resurrecting the ghosts of Canada’s distant and recent past, Thompson hopes the audience’s ensuing discomfort will serve as a form of rehabilitation to a repressed nation. She claims: “Our society is founded on denial. Denial of murdering the Native people, denial of oppressing women. Everything we do” (“Offending Your Audience” 50). She expresses her horror that the Nazis were ordinary people, in terms of their personal lives and attitudes; they were “just like us... That’s what I can’t get out of my head. We’re living in a pathological state of denial” (Wachtel 43). Thompson is haunted by the ghosts of history, as her comment that she cannot get this notion out of her head attests. She believes that experiencing horror, even vicariously through her plays, can be therapeutic: “as a culture, we can stop these things if we experience them, if we have to go through what other people have to go through” (43). Of course, this experience must frequently be imaginary.

The return of the repressed is not inherently negative or positive. It can frighten both the characters and the audience, but the experience of fear can force a confrontation with unsettled historical trauma. The hauntings in *Sled* evoke fear, but they also hold out the possibility for reconciliation. For example, Evangeline's mother's ghost reveals to Evangeline the identity of her father, which allows Evangeline to discover her Cree ancestry (67). Annie's ghost appears to Evangeline and, seeing the horror she faces, "reaches for her to give her strength on her journey" (60).

The "ghosts" can also take a more negative form, as in the metaphoric ghosts of Joe's father's violent yet accidental death, which return periodically to haunt him when he is "bringing home a bag of groceries from Fresh Farms, or walkin' to the bus up on Dupont" (49). Justin D. Edwards claims that Canadian writers return repeatedly to Gothic conventions to explore the positive and negative dimensions of spectralization (xxi). The Gothic, as employed by Canadian writers such as Thompson, creates a prevailing sense of unhomeliness that questions her characters' and her audience's assumptions about Canadian identity. She attempts to bring to the fore the tenuous and highly artificial constructions of Canada as a peaceful and unified nation. This notion is what Edwards refers to as "the spectral figure of [Canada's] own fabrication" that haunts the nation (vix). For Edwards, Canada is both real and imaginary or ghostly, both a material reality and a construct in the minds of its nation builders and its inhabitants. Its ghosts are both personal and political because the "modern consciousness internalizes the political just as it internalizes the spectral" (xx).

One of the central scenes in *Sled*, the so-called "Barbecue Dream scene," was cut by Thompson shortly before production. Despite having excised it from the final version

of the play, Thompson declares that the scene represents “the politics of the play. In a sense it is the springboard of the play for me intellectually” (Fletcher 85). This scene is important to an understanding of Thompson’s evocation of a Canada where violence, either imagined or remembered, is ever present.

During this scene, Jack, not yet knowing that his wife Annie has been murdered, dreams that they are hosting a barbecue for their neighbours, all of whom come from different cultural backgrounds. It begins congenially enough, but Kevin soon appears in a black balaclava and begins to make insinuations about the murder. His poison spreads and the other characters begin to reflect on the dangers and fragmentations of Canadian society. Annie states that she and Jack would never move from their neighbourhood and that they want to grow old there. Jack counters that he has wanted to move for “quite some time...Subway ticket taker killed on the weekend...People knifed and shot at parties every weekend. It’s getting way too rough. And the police, we’re hogtied, man, we can’t do anything. I want out. Where it’s peaceful...Anywhere but here” (Knowles, “Great Lines” 17). Many of the fears of the wilderness exists only in the imagination. Jack’s fears may also be imagined, especially since Annie loves her surroundings. It is also ironic that Jack has a violent temper and Annie even refers to rumours of his brutality when she alludes to his nickname “Diablo,” given to him by local youth (91). Jack is like an early settler-invader, one whose oppression of the land and its people haunts him in the form of imagined horrors lying around every corner. He hearkens back to an idealized Canadian past when, he believes, things were more civilized. Jack claims, “Fathers of confederation are pissed, man. Bloor and Bathurst they did not imagine. Jane

and Finch they could not conceive. Sir John A. is turning in his grave” (qtd. In Knowles 18).

A very different perspective on history is offered by the half-Cree Evangeline. Like Jack, she stresses violence, but her focus is on past violence, rather than present. While the others begin voicing their discontent with Canada, Evangeline says (half in English, half in Cree):

They frightened off our caribou herds. We respected the caribou. We used every part. We let the herds grow. The caribou needs foods. The settlers, they cleared the land. They built their houses, villages, high rises. They did not understand. Or if they did, they did not listen or care. (19)

For Evangeline, the haunting is one of a hidden history that has been covered over, much like the land itself. For the First Nations, the land is not haunted by memories of a wilderness destroyed, but of a home destroyed. Jack and Evangeline represent the kind of post-colonial Canadian Gothic hauntings identified by Sugars and Turcotte when they refer to “haunted minds rather than a haunted wilderness” and assert that how one experiences the haunting varies if one is from a settler or aboriginal culture (ix). If and how the country is haunted, Thompson suggests, depends on the cultural position from which one views it.

The spectres of Canada’s buried past continually resurface to haunt the various characters. Beyond the “literal” ghosts of Annie and Evangeline’s mother, there are the revenants of Canada’s buried cultures. “Bury” is actually the word Joe uses in his monologue for what he had to do to his language and culture (55). The reassertion of “foreign,” or non-English languages, which are evidence of cultures that refuse to be

colonized, is identified by Jack as “unhomely.” During the barbecue scene, he announces: “It’s not our city anymore...My family has been here five generations I feel like a stranger. A foreigner. I was walking by the Christie bus today and I looked and listened and there was no English. It’s not my city anymore” (qtd. in Knowles 17). Evangeline offers the Aboriginal perspective on being unhomed in one’s own country. When French Canadian Helen remarks that other languages are coming in, “Crushing us like—,” Evangeline replies, “Like my people were...crushed,” (19). She says “I am an alien in my own country. A stranger. I do not know who I am I do not belong anywhere” (20). It is significant that she speaks these words in Cree, which not only prevents the other characters from understanding but also expresses her resistance to the various “colonial” tongues the others speak. Her use of Cree may be seen as a kind of uncanny haunting, since Jack refers to being unhomed by foreign languages around him. Her lapse into Cree also recalls Edwards’s assertion that to be haunted is to be asked to pay a debt. In Canada, that debt is the legacy of colonialism. The voice of the colonized is forced into the colonial unconscious, which becomes absorbed into the national consciousness and returns from it again and again, across generations. Despite all efforts to silence or imprison this voice, it always returns to haunt the colonizer from its marginalized position (xxix). Evangeline’s voice remains a haunting presence in the background of this scene, and even if the other characters cannot understand her words, she persists, demanding finally to be heard. Evangeline’s earlier statements about the settlers’ wasteful destruction of the caribou and the land indicate her desire that this debt be paid, or at the very least, acknowledged.

The violence in the play may be seen to begin to spread beyond the actual act of murder and assume a more spectral quality. Ann Wilson suggests that the violence in *Sled*, while it does shatter individual lives and identities, becomes incorporated into “the weave of a community’s history,” and this does not shatter the community, but becomes part of its identity (130).

Violence serves an uncanny double function in the play because the uncanny may be evoked when an external act of violence corresponds to an inner suppressed thought (Walker, 87). The violence enacted by Kevin throughout the play takes on uncanny qualities because it seems to symbolize those acts of violence that have been suppressed by the national consciousness. Kevin’s behaviour is “evil,” which is in and of itself uncanny because, according to Nunn, his psychopathology is related to Freud’s notion that a person’s intentions to harm become uncanny when they seem to be aided by special powers (“Strangers” 9). His association with sleds and the Northern Lights, as well as his inevitable return from the North, suggest that Kevin is part of a larger, almost supernatural scheme. Annie even asks him in the barbecue scene: “Are you a banshee, BRINGING ME DEATH?” (qtd. in Knowles 20). Farfan posits that Kevin’s “uncanny” use of Norse when he murders Annie exceeds the realism of the play, despite his explanation of having learned it from a former teacher. Kevin serves an “uncanny double function” in the play because his return after being kidnapped recalls the return of repressed history of violence and oppression that set the stage for other violent wrenchings, “that have defined Canada’s development as a settler-invader nation and that continue to haunt its postcolonial present” (Farfan 101). His behaviour is both literal and symbolic and it defies its seemingly logical explanations. For example, his use of Norse

and his psychopathic behaviour might be viewed as being rooted in childhood trauma. Irrational evil can be found in many Canadian Gothic texts where “Characters...are forever confronting manifestations of a primal evil which goes beyond behaviourist or sociological explanations” (Northey 108).

The lines between victim and victimizer are blurred throughout *Sled*, creating a mood of Gothic uncanniness. Gerry Turcotte claims that both the Gothic and the uncanny frequently attempt to define themselves through their opposites or to incorporate those opposites. The Gothic “speaks at once of familiarity and difference, acknowledging the disorienting sameness at the centre of alterity, the uncanny way in which a mirror reflects and yet does not reflect exactly that which confronts it” (65). This last statement is embodied textually by Thompson in the scene where Kevin tries on the dress Annie was wearing when he shot her. After he does so, “*He looks in the mirror, terrified*” because Annie’s ghost has appeared as his reflection in the mirror” (61). This experience terrifies Kevin because this irrational moment of haunting forces him to confront his earlier act of irrational violence, making him a victim of his own act.

v Towards A New Canadian Subject

In *Sled*, the blurring of boundaries between past and present, living and dead, as well as those boundaries between cultures show the possibility of new identities that Canada presents, as well as the fear such possibility creates in the characters. Such fear is often generated in a colonial context when the settler consciousness suspects that the endless possibilities of recreating the self can actually lead to nothingness, a destruction of that self. Linked to this fear of nothingness is that of being unable to separate from the central culture if necessary (Turcotte 57). In *Sled*, Annie represents

such a fear when she speaks of her desire to reconnect with her Irish ancestry. She tells Jack that she wants to hear her “natural language” and that “If I were to meet a Delaney I know it would be...a very beautiful...it would help me” (87). She even tells their Francophone neighbour Helen, “If I was Francophone, I would be a separatist, I am sure. But English is not my natural language either. I want...my natural language” (qtd. in Knowles 18). Annie expresses her inability to fully separate from her “natural” culture, and feels she would experience the same emotions, regardless of what her origins might be. When Jack tells her that the original cultures of Canadians are in the past and they must move forward, she tells him, “I must look behind me...I cannot look forward if I don’t know where...” (19). Annie’s fear is that without a point of cultural origin, she has no identity. Her uncanny use of Gaelic during the barbecue scene when she foresees her own death (20). In the published play, in the scene just before her death, she identifies with distant ancestor on a plague ship she sees in a vision (*Sled* 30). Both of these links to her cultural history indicate her desire to return “home” at moments of great terror. When confronted with the nothingness of death, she retreats back to her imagined cultural past for comfort and reassurance.

Jack represents another kind of Canadian Gothic anxiety, that of someone who attempts to suppress their cultural identity to enter into a new identity as a “Canadian.” He tells Annie that he has no interest in reconnecting with his French-Canadian roots because “I am this now, THIS” (*Sled* 88). During the deleted barbecue scene, he says, “Who cares where we come from. We’re Canadian now” (qtd. in Knowles 19). He did not always feel this way; as a child he “was good as golden up till I was nine,” which is when he began to be bullied. He turned his anger and frustration towards his heritage,

which he violently rejected, a fact which may explain his violent temper in the present (42). Edwards considers Canadian anxieties about identity to be a form of abjection, in which fear is generated by the problematic nature of the relationship between the subject and the object and the permeable boundaries between categories (xxiv). If one considers the country's "elusive identity" as a state of abjection, then it must be repressed if one is to enter into the symbolic order so as to become stable subjects who are not continually "trapped in the process of becoming" (xxv-xxvi).

When the colonial mind finds itself between two possible identities- the old, Eurocentric self and a new, integrated multicultural identity- it frequently reverts to the initial, conservative position (Turcotte 56). During the barbecue scene, the character of Sam evinces this particular attitude when the others praise the multicultural spirit of harmony they have observed in their neighbourhood. He feels that the presence of various cultures and identities within Canada is contributing to violence and confusion and he replies, "Well it's all very nice but surely it's a recipe for, well, a Balkan situation...For chaos. I mean already our country is falling apart" (qtd. in Knowles 18). Sam expresses the general attitude that pervades this play. Thompson offers the possibility of multiplicity, as well as for reconciliation between cultures and between past and present, but neither is ever fully accepted. Turcotte writes that the Gothic encourages and holds together an impossible plurality of voices, meanings, ideologies, etc., and moves them forward towards a goal of closure, which is forever deferred. It "has always worked toward closure and to reconcile the extremes of its defining oppositions, although it has always been characterized by its *inability* to achieve this" and thus "elaborately suspends the ending" (54-55).

In *Sled*, the potential ending is the possibility of intercultural fusion and acceptance, which is raised, but never embraced. The dead linger on, attempting to teach the living about the past, including Evangeline's hidden aboriginal heritage, with the assumption that this will set the stage for healing, but sometimes the only resolution available is death.

The key fear in *Sled* is what Atwood calls "a fear on the part of Canadians knowing who they are" (*Survival* 16). The past is always threatening to rise to the surface to disorder the lives of the living. When Evangeline tells Joe of her premonitions about Kevin's return, she wonders if his kidnapper/adoptive mother finally confessed her crime because "people do that, you know, they get tired of keepin' somethin' buried" (37). This statement may be read as the underlying theme of this play. Thompson's motive for writing it is rooted in her exasperation with the occlusion of much of Canada's past. She wants to resurrect the past because the culture at large has become tired of keeping its knowledge buried.

Thompson opens the possibility for change, but leaves its achievement ultimately ambiguous. Though there is some resolution in the world of the play, in the Gothic, answers can only come from its "unreal, excessive world" (Becker 257). The closure she provides in the play only provokes further questions and uneasiness because there is no closure in reality, with respect to these issues. Through her uncomfortable ambiguity, she ensures that the Canadian national ghosts will continue to haunt her audiences so that they will be forced to face those sides of themselves and their country that they have chosen to ignore.

Conclusion

At the heart of Thompson's Gothicism lies a deep sense of indeterminacy. While she engages with issues as diverse as women's limited societal roles and the violence done to Canada's First Nations, she does so in a way that refuses to conform to prescribed solutions. Instead, she employs the Gothic to disturb and haunt the psyches of her audiences. All of the works examined in this thesis share in their stubborn refusal to offer easy solutions to the viewer.

Thompson's use of the Gothic links her to the genre's broader tradition. Since the eighteenth-century, the capacious nature of the Gothic has proven attractive to writers who longed to express those darker undercurrents they perceived running through their supposedly well-ordered societies. Gothic writers have ably translated deep-seated cultural anxieties into grotesque, excessive plots that provoke immediate, visceral responses from their audiences. The highly emotional nature of the Gothic renders it profoundly subjective, and it can elicit myriad responses from its readers or viewers. This is an enduring facet of its appeal. Varma credits the birth of the Gothic to a desire for "pure emotion" that followed on the heels of the stifling reasonableness of the literature from the first half of the eighteenth-century and which demanded "the crudes, most violently contrasted expression" (211). Such a yearning would seem to evidence a broader desire for subjectivity because, as Varma puts it, "Horror is an individual, primal emotion" (211). The Gothic speaks to the individual reader or viewer in different ways, opening itself up to the possibility of innumerable interpretations. This helps to explain its attractiveness to a wide range of authors from the genre's earliest days to the present. The highly subjective nature of the Gothic also means that it must constantly evolve if it

is to address effectively the individual anxieties and concerns of specific societies across various historical eras.

The Gothic's appeal to those who wish to shock individuals and societies out of comfortable complacencies is undeniable, but how successful it is at affecting actual change is debatable. According to Jerrold Hogle, the Gothic is remarkable for the way in which it vacillates between the conservative and the revolutionary and almost invariably collapses back onto the conservative pole (13).

The revolutionary effectiveness the Gothic is immaterial to my argument. I am concerned with the way Thompson, like those Gothic writers before her, use the genre dramatically to expose the darker side of human existence in a way that disturbs and haunts the consciousness of her audience, without providing prescriptive solutions. She does so through blending elements of the Gothic with those of postmodernism and feminism, as well as a reimagining of the Canadian Gothic. She also employs elements of the Freudian uncanny, which is recognized by critics as a common aspect of the Gothic.

Postmodernism, like the Gothic, arose out of a rejection of the constraints of the previous literary era, in this case, modernism. Postmodernism rejects any form of centralizing authority, be it ideological or narrative. The genre is notoriously slippery and elusive, but is generally agreed to be characterized by a sense of self-reflexivity. In *The Crackwalker*, *White Biting Dog* and *Lion in the Streets*, Thompson introduces multiple instances where the artificiality of the worlds of the plays becomes evident. Instead of striving for a sense of internally consistent verisimilitude within the plays, Thompson ensures that her audiences are aware of the element of artifice in what they are watching. This is true even of a play as seemingly unflinchingly realistic as *The*

Crackwalker. The Gothic, the postmodern and the uncanny share in their ability to unsettle readers and viewers by causing them to question accepted realities. As her audiences become disturbed by their theatrical encounters with artificial ruptured realities, they may then start to question the reality of their own world and to see the problems inherent in those supposed truths they had taken for granted.

These three plays contain a considerable emphasis on surfaces and the illusion of control they provide. The image of the surface in Thompson's work implies the existence of some darker elements that these surfaces are unsuccessfully attempting to hold at bay. These elements are typically repressed due to the painful and troubling emotions they provoke. Thompson states in an interview with Marc Glassman for *Canadian Screenwriter* that "We're a culture that makes larger emotions invisible. We suppress them. That's my draw, to bring those feelings to the surface to find out who we really are" (7). Once these frightening undercurrents break through the thin veneer of order, the audience is disturbed, but unsure of how best to react. The audience must determine what to do with those emotions that have been brought to the attention of their conscious minds. In this way, Thompson's plays may be said to have the effect of startle. According to Stein, Hernandez and Trabasso, when a person is startled, he or she needs time to process what change to their environment has produced their startled reaction before they are properly able to express that emotion (579).

The image of the shattered surface does not only apply to the larger realities of the plays, but also to the individual realities of the characters. Thompson's characters are frequently portrayed as being in a state of fragmented subjectivity, often on the verge of shattering completely.

White Biting Dog is a nightmarish fantasy in which characters struggle to define and maintain their own fragile subjectivities in the face of intense psychological torment. Cape and his mother reunite over his father's terminal illness, an event which awakens memories of their tortured relationship and accusations that may or may not be true. The ensuing conflict threatens to shatter both themselves and the selves of their respective lovers.

Lion in the Streets presents the viewer with a fragmented, relay-structured narrative. Narratives begin realistically and quickly slide into the realm of the fantastic without explanation or resolution, before slipping into the next. The sole recurring character is Isobel, the ghost of a young murdered Portuguese girl who is attempting to find redemption through an assertion of her subjectivity.

The Crackwalker is an ostensibly realistic look at a troubled segment of the Kingston lower classes. Thompson uses the play to warn of the danger of believing in one's own deluded versions of reality by rupturing the verisimilitude through lapses into terrifying surrealism. While the fantastic elements are minimal, Alan's descent into madness is precipitated by a tragic inability to distinguish between his vision of reality and that of the world around him.

In these plays, the Gothic functions as a kind of nightmare in which that which the conscious mind has rejected uncannily resurfaces. Here what has been rejected is all that does not fit within a narrow conception of reality; that which has been deemed to be unacceptable, unreal or even deranged. Once the audience is forced to confront these alternate realities, they may feel as though they are succumbing to a kind of literary madness where the real and unreal blur unpredictably. In typically postmodern fashion,

the audience is left on their own to determine the meaning of the plays, but it is clear that they must allow themselves to enter into the frightening realities of the plays' characters if they are to understand the multifaceted and contradictory nature of their own realities. While clearly unsettling, this process is ultimately rewarding as it can propel the audience towards an understanding that all conceptions of reality are inherently flawed and that none should be taken for granted.

Feminism, like the Gothic and the postmodern, evolves to suit the needs of a particular time period. Feminism is not one single unifying critical term. There are many "feminisms," some of which appear to be contradictory and even retrogressive. Yet this very contradictoriness is highly beneficial to a feminist cause, as it rejects any attempts at unifying women into one type. Just as postmodernism shatters notions of unifying ideological and structural "master narratives," feminism resists the reductive stereotypes of women. For many feminist writers, their fear of society's restrictive roles for women is an easy fit for the Gothic, with the genre's insistence on the horror that lies at the heart of a supposedly orderly society.

The Gothic's attractiveness to women writers has been noted since the genre's inception. These writers frequently turn its characteristic grotesque imagery to a feminist cause through the creation of horrifying constructions of femininity. Such images serve to remind readers that all notions of femininity are merely artificial. In this way the feminist Gothic resembles the postmodern because, as Linda Hutcheon writes, postmodernism offers a seemingly non-referential world of images to demonstrate that we can never truly know the real, only the representations we have made of it (*Politics* 31-34).

Unlike the postmodern, however, feminism has a more clearly defined agenda and its anti-realism is employed as an attack on fictitious and stifling evocations of womanhood. The terror of social confinement is often translated into literal images of confinement of the imperiled Gothic heroine. The monstrous female character represents one of the tactics chosen by feminist authors of the Gothic to rebel against her imprisonment.

The works by Judith Thompson I have chosen as best representative of her feminist Gothic sensibility are: *White Biting Dog*, *I Am Yours* and the short story "Mouthful of Pearls." In addition, I have briefly examined *Lion in the Street* and *Sled*. In these works she examines violence against women, the trauma of birth and motherhood and the confining social roles for women. None of these works present the audience with concrete solutions to the problems faced by the female protagonists. Thompson does grant her heroines the agency to rage against the pain and oppression they encounter and the ways in which they do so are suitably Gothic in the extreme and disturbing nature of these acts. In these works, Thompson attempts to write new, non prescriptive roles for women. Thompson's approach may be considered feminist in her refusal to conform her characters to comfortable types; rather, her work gains its power from its exploration of the horrifying ugliness of some forms of feminine rebellion. Her work resembles that of the contemporary feminist authors identified by Becker in which images of women are used subversively to cause readers to question the naturalness of these images, but definitive answers about women's roles remain out of reach. These writers highlight the ways in which gender and culture are constructed. Feminism and postmodernism

converge in these works in an assault on patriarchal master narratives of coherent, unified subjects, with their related prescribed ideal feminine (Becker 6).

Becker believes the Gothic is an ideal genre for writers with feminist concerns because the genre is preoccupied with issues of femininity, so much so that it becomes “powerful because it is so feminine” (2). Its enduring attractiveness to women writers may be explained by the fact that the genre has long been considered the one that “best represents female *experience*” (17). Female experience and by extension, female subjectivity, present a challenge to established ideological orders because they offer new perspectives that can radically clash with accepted standards of femininity. Each of these works by Thompson feature women who undergo traumatic experiences but who gain at least partial redemption through the achievement of agency.

In *Sled*, Evangeline gains strength in her ambivalent role as victim when she learns of her Cree heritage and begins to recognize the control she has over the formation of her own identity. Isobel in *Lion in the Street* also realizes she has power over her destiny when she discovers that the choice to forgive her murderer affords her the redemption she has so desperately sought

In *White Biting Dog*, Pony realizes that she is compromising her strict ethical code and turning into someone alien to herself by becoming romantically involved with the amoral Cape. In order to free herself from his influence and to regain control over her identity, she commits suicide.

I Am Yours highlights the typically Gothic horror that surround female sexuality and childbirth. Thompson examines the trauma of birth and motherhood when the protagonist Dee’s unwanted pregnancy triggers painful memories of her own mother, as

well as fears of how the birth will cause her to behave. Ultimately, she achieves a sense of peace and reconciliation when her child is born. How lasting this effect will be is questionable as the father of Dee's child and his mother kidnap the baby while she is unconscious and the play ends before she discovers this.

"A Mouthful of Pearls" represents the most dramatic and grotesque form of female rebellion in all of these works. A formerly successful career woman, Sonja has chosen to leave her high powered life behind to spend more time with her children. When she is pursued into a ravine by a predatory man, her lifetime of frustration at being objectified by males explodes into a horrifying self-mutilation. Sonja's violent act of rebellion terrifies her would be assailant and guarantees that no one will look at her with lust again.

These works underscore the typically ambivalent female rebellion found in Gothic texts. The disgust experienced by female protagonists at both their own bodies and their rebellions may be explained as a form of Kristevan abject in which the characters violently reject themselves when they feel as though they are not measuring up to certain societal standards and their rage is more easily turned against themselves than society.

There is another function of the abject in the Gothic, however. The theory of the Oedipal crisis states that the male subject and the male gaze were created through the violent rejection of the mother, a process which created an abiding sense of fear and disgust towards women in general. The female subject never underwent such a process, therefore she may be seen to have a very different relationship with her mother. Thus the female gaze has a unique way of looking at the world, one that perceives the things that the male gaze either misses or views with hostility. Thompson's women have the

privilege of a uniquely female perspective that gives them the resilience to fight against the various forms of oppression they face. The solutions they find are incomplete and, at times, unpalatable. The crucial feminist element in Thompson's works is that each of these characters takes the necessary steps towards seizing her own agency, even when the process of doing so goes to Gothic extremes.

The Canadian Gothic is the final manifestation of the Gothic found in Thompson's work. Many critics have recognized the prevalence of Gothic elements in Canadian literature, what Margot Northey calls the "dark blend of gothicism which stretches from earliest to most recent times" (3).

This branch of the Gothic evolved out of early European settler fears of the vast Canadian wilderness. While these fears ostensibly arose out of genuine fear of physical harm from the unknown dangers of the Canadian wild, twentieth-century literary critics like Northrop Frye recognized the deeper, psychological dimensions to such fears. Frye coined the term "garrison mentality" to describe the mindset of members of the tightly knit settler communities who held to each other to preserve as much of their European identities and values as possible whilst they were surrounded by nature, "the vast unconscious," which "seemed to be an unanswerable denial of those values" (350-51). Frye's observation is important not only because it acknowledges that such fears never really had anything to do with the wilderness at all, but also because it references the psychoanalytic aspect to the Canadian Gothic. Canadian history is predicated on violence and repression. Behind the unified, peaceful façade of the Canadian nation are the many individual histories of oppression that occurred to allow the country to create its

somewhat tenuous sense of unified identity. Yet these histories have not disappeared entirely and they resurface to haunt the nation from within.

Canadian identity has never been fixed and has been attended by a nagging sense of incompleteness. This unease has been exacerbated with the passage of time that has seen the country transform into a multicultural nation that speaks in a polyphony of voices. Post-1970 Canadian literature is no longer concerned with the fears of early settlers on the frontier, but even within a modern, urban setting, old anxieties about a fragmenting culture and an illegitimate claim to the land reemerge. In a multicultural society, however, those fears take on new dimensions as those groups feared and oppressed by early English settlers have gained their voices to express the other side of the Canadian national project.

This is especially true with respect to the First Nations who, in the colonial mind, were cast as another facet of the terrifying natural world that needed to be kept out and contained as ruthlessly as possible. Underlying the Euro-centric fear and hostility towards the indigenous inhabitants of the “New World” were feelings of unease and lack of belonging; the settlers knew they were on someone else’s land. To assert their dominance over the land and its people, the settlers tried to oppress Native voices, both through physical violence and through an attempt to eliminate all traces of these voices from the national narrative. Yet the colonialists would continue to be haunted by a sense of themselves as invaders who neither own nor belong to the land. With the passage of time, more and more diverse groups chose to make Canada their home, and while they were not subjected to the same violent hostility as the First Nations, their voices were subsumed to the larger vision of a homogenous, Anglophone Canada.

Sled functions as a microcosm of Canadian society, which maps national anxieties onto individual characters. In the play, the consequences of historical and personal violence dramatically affect the lives of the diverse characters that represent the various perspectives of which the Canadian nation is comprised. The lingering trauma of violence returns to haunt the present in unforeseen ways.

The play begins in the wilderness with the senseless murder of lounge singer Annie by the psychopathic Kevin. The murder metaphorically represents the violence of the first contact of the Europeans with the “New World.” Like those initial acts of violence, the effects of Annie’s murder ripple through the lives of others. Her death most notably affects Evangeline, Kevin’s half sister. Kevin’s flight from the scene of the murder reunites him with Evangeline whom he had not seen since he was kidnapped as a child. His return unleashes a series of events that cause Evangeline to discover her Cree ancestry, a fact that gives her strength when she is being exploited by Kevin. Unfortunately, her only escape is to flee to the north and almost certain death.

The “Barbecue Dream Scene,” which was cut from the final production of the play, is a dream by Annie’s husband Jack in which the couple invite their neighbours to a friendly get together. The gathering quickly sours when Kevin appears, making insinuations about Annie’s murder. The other guests begin to share their fears that the harmonious multicultural fabric of Canadian society will soon unravel, leading to alienation and violence. Evangeline offers the First Nations’ perspective when she compares the Euro-Canadian fears of being crushed to the actual fate of her ancestors.

Sled revisits the anxieties that continue to trouble the Canadian national subject. It traces the evolution of the Canadian Gothic by beginning in the genre’s original northern

wilderness setting and then proceeding to an urban environment where the ghosts (here, the literal ghost of Annie) of the violence enacted in the wilderness resurface. For the descendants of the settlers, there is a sense of “haunted minds rather than a haunted wilderness,” but for Aboriginal characters like Evangeline, “the sense of their wilderness being haunted by Europeans would seriously texture this perception” (Sugars and Turcotte ix). For all participants in the Canadian story and in that of *Sled* more specifically, life in the country is an uncanny experience. Thompson has expertly sketched an image of contemporary Canada that portrays the manifold nature of haunting that unhomes the descendants of both the settlers and the original inhabitants. According to Sugars and Turcotte, the uncanny occurs in a Canadian Gothic context when the borders between the past and the present, as well as the real and the spectral, dissolve. These borders help to preserve the fragile Canadian sense of identity (ix). This fear of the dissolution of boundaries also extends to those between people, a fear that becomes all the more acute in a multicultural context. While there is the possibility of a new self that blends the colonial with the indigenous, most often in the postcolonial Gothic (of which the Canadian Gothic is a part), there is a conservative retreat towards the initial colonial identity.

In *Sled*, Thompson opens up the possibility of multicultural reconciliation and rejuvenation, but it remains unrealized. She reexamines the unease at the heart of Canadian society, but is unable to soothe that anxiety. While not attempting to solve these deep-rooted problems, Thompson does present the issues in a new light, a fact that may prompt her audiences to reflect more deeply on them.

Ultimately, Thompson chooses not solve the problems she dresses in Gothic garb and offers to her audiences. These problems are too vast and complex to be resolved through a single theatrical experience. Thompson's wisdom lies in presenting the issues in such a shocking fashion that it forces her audiences to pay attention to them. Her use of Gothic affect also ensures that the images and the ideas presented in the plays will linger in the minds of her audience, haunting them until they are forced to confront them.

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