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Gothic Overtones: The Female Monster in Margaret Atwood's "Lusus Naturae"

Manuela López Ramírez[1]

Abstract. In "Lusus Naturae," Margaret Atwood shows her predilection for the machinations of Gothic fiction. She resorts to gothic conventions to express female experience and explore the psychological but also the physical victimisation of the woman in a patriarchal system. Atwood employs the female monster metaphor to depict the passage from adolescence to womanhood through a girl who undergoes a metamorphosis into a "vampire" as a result of a disease, porphyria. The vampire as a liminal gothic figure, disrupts the boundaries between reality and fantasy/supernatural, human and inhuman/animal, life and death, good and evil, femme fatale and virgin maiden. By means of the metaphor of the vampire woman, Atwood unveils and contests the construction of a patriarchal gender ideology, which has appalling familial and social implications.
Keywords: Female Gothic, vampire, monster, femininity, patriarchal

[es] Matices góticos: El monstruo femenino en Margaret Atwood's "Lusus Naturae"

Resumen. En "Lusus Naturae," Margaret Atwood muestra su predilección por la maquinaciones de la ficción gótica. Ella recurre a las convenciones góticas para expresar la experiencia femenina y explorar la victimización psicológica pero también física de la mujer en un sistema patriarcal. Atwood emplea la metáfora del monstruo femenino para representar el paso de la adolescencia a la madurez a través de una niña que sufre una metamorfosis en un "vampiro" como resultado de una enfermedad, la porfiria. El vampiro, como figura gótica liminal, altera los límites entre realidad y fantasía/sobrenatural, humano e inhumano/animal, vida y muerte, bien y mal, femme fatale y doncella virgen. A través de la metáfora de la mujer vampiro, Atwood desvela y cuestiona la construcción de una ideología patriarcal de género, que tiene terrible implicaciones familiares y sociales.
Palabras clave: Gótico femenino, vampiro, monstruo, feminidad, patriarcal

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[1] Independent scholar
ORCID: 0000-0001-5503-8290
Email: lopez.ramirez.manuela@gmail.com

> I've long been interested in the differences between astonishing 'tales' and realistic 'stories,' with one borderline being the supernatural. What might happen when tale meets story—when the legend-stuff of vampire tales meets the solid fact of a disease that mimics vampirism, such as porphyria. As the illness progresses, she had fits and a lot of pain. How would the pre-modern family handle it? And what about the narrator, who is human despite what others may think of her?
>
> Margaret Atwood, "Lusus Naturae" (2014)

1. Introduction

As Ellen Moers affirms, the Gothic has been and continues to be an important genre for women writers (1963: 2). Female Gothic has been used to explore female identity and women's revolt against the patriarchal system. It portrays an image of the woman that answers to the term "defective femininity," alluding to the difficulty in conforming to a female ideal, which is more of a a masculine fantasy than a feminine (Johnson 1992: 10). Margaret Atwood's interest "in the non-rational [. . .] suggests a predilection for the machinations of Gothic fiction" (Friesen 1990: 1), which can be seen in her novels *Surfacing* (1972), *Lady Oracle* (1976), *Bodily Harm* (1981), or *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985).[2]

Female Gothicists, as Juliann Fleenor states, had used the anti-rationalistic Gothic to render and contest the patriarchal world in which they lived, conveying a horror that was at the female body and even female rebellion (1983: 13). Actually, as Marianne Noble argues, the Gothic is a site where the repressive construction of gender roles is produced and derogatory attitudes towards women are questioned: "Gothic implements of torture [. . .] represent the terror tactics of gender construction, and the genre's characteristically perverse cravings and anxieties represent identifications and desires whose repression is essential for appropriate genders" (1998: 165).

Gail Friesen features Atwood's gothic heroines as defined by "an inherent duality" in their toughness and yet vulnerability, detachment but also involvement in their own problem-filled chaotic lives (1990: 12). Her gothic revision

> reflects the changing emphasis of an emerging feminist movement which tends to present the female as the agent of her own destiny, including her ability to be evil [. . .]. Her fiction examines the perceptions of helplessness and the damaging 'victim' fantasies inherent in the gothic sensibility. (1990: 13).

Atwood creates a resilient gothic heroine whose quest by definition is an elusive one, but which undermines the core concepts of patriarchy.

In "Canadian Monsters: Some Aspects of the Supernatural in Canadian Fiction" (1977), Atwood contends that her interest in Canadian monsters is partially the consequence of her "attempts to write ghost stories" (1982: 229). She postulates that magic and monsters are not usually associated with Canadian literature. Canada has been traditionally characterized as "a dull place, devoid of romantic interest and rhetorical excess, with not enough blood spilled on the soil to make it fertile, and above all, ghostless" (1982: 230-31). She categorizes Canadian monsters as "nonhuman," "semihuman," and "human but magical" (1982: 240). Atwood, whose oeuvre is crowded with magic, monsters, and reincarnations, considers that "powerful women, and there are many of them in literature, are usually given a supernatural aura. They are witches, Wonder Women or Grendel's mothers. They are monsters. They are not quite human" (1978: 31). Her monstrosity tropes, connected particularly to women, disrupt the boundaries between reality and fantasy/supernatural (Kuhn 2005: 40). The female monster metaphor is rhetorically very useful to depict female identity and to reflect on the darkness of the world women live in, warning about societal injustice against females and showing the difficulties women cope with on their self-discovery journey in a patriarchal society.

As Ruth Anolik highlights, "[o]ne way contemporary writers oppose the positioning of female as victim is by recovering and celebrating the figure of the female monster, creating the female monster-hero" (2007: 234). In Canadian literature, women are portrayed both as victims and monstrous old hags (Friesen 1990: 9). In many tales, the wicked and evil woman ("female monster") has the form of a witch/crone, nevertheless, the traditional Canadian heroine, Atwood proposes, is a Rapunzel-like character ("passive and confined princess") subjected to the patriarchal order: "The single most pervasive image evoked in the popular mind by the term fairy tale is probably that of a maiden in distress leaning from tower window and searching the horizon for a rescuer" (Bottigheimer 1987: 101). Female imprisonment, very common in fairy tales, indicates fear of women's power (Wilson 1993: 138). Although fairy tale enclosure/isolation has been viewed as a remnant of archaic or exotic sequestrations experienced by pubescent girls and adolescent boys before marriage, for

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[2] Margot Northey uses the term "sociological gothic" to refer to "the paradoxical blend of social realism and gothic fantasy in *Surfacing"* (1976: 62).

Ruth Bottigheimer, the fairy tale tower is “a socially created architectural structure” (1987: 101-2). Likewise, Atwood points out that females’ internalization of their cultural values enslaves their minds (1972: 209).

“Lusus Naturae,” which originally appeared in *McSweeney’s Enchanted Chamber of Astonishing Stories,* a collection of explicitly anti-realist tales, has clear Gothic undertones. This short story is about an ill-fated girl who suffers from a genetic abnormality that transforms her into a “vampire.” Her family brings a foreign doctor to cure her, but instead he calls her a freak of nature. They assume their daughter is cursed. Eventually, they stage her death and bribe a priest to perform her funeral. Her family members, finally, either die or abandon her. In the end, the girl is discovered and hunted down.

This tale written in the first-person is told by an unnamed girl who leads us through her nightmarish world. Her namelessness has an allegorical value. She does not have a self-defined identity: her self is equated to her monstrosity, while her invisibility is emphasized. Thus, Atwood creates a myth of the female monster, an epitome of “flawed” femininity. The physical traits that characterize her as a “vampire”—yellow eyes, pink teeth, red fingernails, long dark hair sprouting on her chest and arms (126)—, a genetic abnormality that materializes at the age of seven, makes her more and more grotesque.[3]

Atwood’s story is a Bildungsroman that focuses on a young woman’s rite of passage into womanhood. This tale deals with a doomed virgin vampire girl (“princess”) with a split and alienated self, who undergoes social and familial victimization as a result of an illness. As Eli Mandel says about *Surfacing*, it is about a maiden surrounded by a “variety of dark threats, either psychological or hidden in the social structure” (1983: 57). Atwood examines the adolescent transition period of young women, concentrating on the physical and emotional changes, female sexuality and agency.[4] The representation of a monstrous girl discloses social and cultural concepts about the female body and femininity. Atwood employs gothic conventions to express female experience and expose the psychological and physical victimization of the woman. The girl’s monstrosity unsettles the patriarchal order, while it shows the social constrains of femininity.

By her monsterization and vilification, the vampire girl’s humanity is denied. The heroine is psychologically, but also literally, imprisoned in a negative self-image. The ordinary world of a seven-year-old girl becomes a gothic ordeal due to her disease, ensuing transformation and its aftermath. The girl, a sort of Rapunzel character, lives a life of social isolation and ostracism, but as a female monster, she will never be freed from her psychological prison-tower. Rejection and exclusion are associated with “failed” femininity, and beauty. Ugly/deformed women cannot be good. Disfigurement is a mark of evil that makes the girl unnatural and inhuman, a victim of her own body.

In “Lusus Naturae,” Atwood reveals her fascination with the liminal gothic figure of the female monster, a victim of society’s monsterization, and yet, a powerful and threatening creature. Parallels can be drawn between the vampire girl’s passage to womanhood this tale renders with the myths of the vampire and Frankenstein, and Frank Kafka’s *The Metamorphosis*. Atwood’s young woman is presented symbolically, but also parodically, as a vampire, while sharing aspects with the Creature and with Kafka’s hideous insect/vermin. Atwood depicts monstrousness as the very essence of a young female’s experience during her development into early adulthood. The trope of the monster woman unveils the construction of a particular gender ideology, which has appalling familial and social ramifications.

2. The myth of the vampire: Liminality and animal-like nature

“Lusus Naturae” can be described as a modern tale of a young female “vampire,” a feminist narrative that questions the patriarchal system. The vampire is a symbolic and multi-faceted fluid figure: “The vampire myth can and has been contextualized within discourses of gender, sexuality, race, class, capitalism, foreignness, colonization, and industrialization” (2004: 118). Vampires are abject liminal figures that disrupt and blur the borders of dualistic systems of representation: human/inhuman, man/animal. They are ambivalent creatures, powerful and dangerous.

Barbara Creed portrays the female vampire as the most abject being, “bodies without souls’ (the vampire) […]. Were-creatures, whose bodies signify a collapse of the boundaries between human and animal” (1993: 10). Julia Kristeva in *Powers of Horror* defines abjection as that which does not “respect borders, positions, rules” and also “disturbs identity, system order” (1982: 4). The Gothic figure of the vampire crosses physical, psychological and cultural boundaries: human/animal, life/death, good/evil, natural/supernatural. Vampires inspire terror because they pose the threat of borderlessness:

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3 Margaret Atwood (2014). *Stone Mattress*. London: Virago (all subsequent quotations from this edition will be identified by the page number included in parentheses in the text).

4 In feminist theory, female agency refers to women’s capacity to define themselves in their own terms and act accordingly, which may lead to social change as it will allow women to challenge and rebel against gender oppression.

> The abject threatens life; it must be 'radically excluded' from the place of the living subject, propelled away from the body and deposited on the other side of an imaginary border which separates the self from that which threatens the self. (1993: 9)

In drinking their victims' blood and killing them, vampires are polluted with death. They lose their souls as they devour the soulless corpse (1993: 10). Creed states some concerns regarding the discourse about abjection: "[S]exual immorality and perversion; corporeal alteration, decay and death; human sacrifice; murder; the corpse [. . .] the feminine body" (1993: 9).

Atwood keeps her narrative on the threshold of fantasy and the supernatural. She carefully plans her writing so ambiguity is always present in the reader's mind, while every supernatural element can be explained rationally. Atwood says, "I'm more of the Mrs. [Ann] Radcliffe school than I am of the *Dracula* school" (Williams 2014). The girl's brief physical description and behaviour mirror that of vampires in Gothic tradition. Nonetheless, we are told that she suffers a medical condition called porphyria that affects the nervous system or the skin, and may account for her anomalous bodily features. Patients with acute skin porphyria may present symptoms, such as discoloured teeth or gum and eye abnormalities.

In "Lusus Naturae," the girl, in her monstrous physiognomy, embodies animality, which is interconnected with sexuality and female power. She has internalized the others' gaze and has taken on an animal behaviour, emitting nonhuman sounds (mewing, growling), an expression of feeling alienated, of not belonging. Dracula is closely linked to animals and can morph into a dog, a wolf, a bat. He can mesmerize animals into doing what he wants. Animals also react "differently" around the girl. Dogs would howl at her, but never attacked her, as "they didn't know who [she] was" (131). Like other female vampires, in the scene of the kiss, the girl is pictured as a "man-eating predator."

The vampire girl is also identified with her cat. Actually, he always keeps her company, shadowing her, the only living creature that would want to be close to her. That may be the real reason for her animal-like behaviour. He would lick her, as she smelled of old dried-up blood. At the fake funeral, she is likened to him when the veil she is shrouded in is said to hide her whiskers. Hence, the vampire girl must be evil, as cats have been historically viewed as evil incarnations.[5] In some old traditions, vampires shapeshift into common animals like cats. In Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu's vampire story, *Carmilla*, the eponymous character, a lesbian vampire, takes the form of a monstrous black cat. Dracula is associated with images of big cats as well (Fukuhara 2017: 90). Cats also have a long relationship with witches, whose magical powers stem from the devil.[6] As their familiar spirits, cats often shared a common destiny with their owners, burn at the stake. The girl knows that the cat will partake of her fate, "[w]hatever they do to me, they'll do to him as well" (133).

Vampires can be killed if exposed to sun for long enough. After her counterfeited death, the girl lives in a darkened room during the day and roams in the forest at night. Therefore, she cannot stand sunlight, and becomes a creature of the night. Besides, variegate porphyria is characterized by skin photosensitivity, redness and swelling. Blisters or itching might also happen on sun-exposed body surfaces. Also, vampires are typically thought to be attired in black clothes. When the male lover sees the girl flee, she is wearing a black dress. In addition, when the girl sees the lovers, she is picking blackberries that, according to folklore, have been reckoned as a Devil's fruit.[7] Another persistent belief is that vampires are repelled by garlic. The girl's grandmother sticks garlic cloves round her doorframe to fend off vampires. Moreover, in vampire stories, the borders between life and death are totally blurred. After her transformation in a "vampire," the monster girl lives in a twilight zone between the living and the dead: she becomes more of an apparition or a ghost than a real human being.

Central to the vampire myth is the need to consume blood. Indeed, "the vampire's blood-feasting is [. . .] highly metaphorical, it is also a *literal* act of eating: the act of consumption is at the very center of vampire legend and literature" (Silver 2004: 118). The girl is taken to a doctor who declares her "lusus naturae," loose translation from Latin as "freak of nature." He tells her parents that "[s]he'll want to drink blood. Chicken blood will do, or the blood of a cow. Don't let her have too much" (126). His last words suggest vampires' craving for blood, called "the thirst." The blood of animals, a poor substitute, keeps them alive but do not quench their insatiable desire. Only human blood can make vampires fully satisfied, and they need it to reach their full potential. Another trait of vampires is the inability to cast a reflection. Inside the house, the girl would try a mirror, but she could not "see" herself, she saw something that "was not [herself]: it looked nothing like the kind and pretty girl [she] knew [herself] to be, at heart" (131). From that time onwards, she would avoid mirrors so as not to see her unrecognizable monstrous body.

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[5] In the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, the church was determined to eradicate paganism in Europe, so the gods of older religions were turned into the devils and demons of Christianity. Cats were respected in Egypt, Norse mythology and many cultures.

[6] The Christian Church wanted to get rid of pagan witches by spreading rumours about their evil powers. Witches usually had a cat as a companion which, consequently, were regarded as devils too.

[7] The legend of the Archangel Michael, for whom the day September 29 is named, connects blackberries and the Devil. Michael defeated Lucifer, who was banished from heaven. When he bounced onto the floor of hell, he landed in a thorny blackberry bush. He got so mad that he spit on the bush and cursed its fruit. https://www.nationalgeographic.com/culture/article/michaelmas-the-day-the-devil-spit-on-your-blackberries

Vampires can cause fear and death among humans, as they need victims to survive, to feed on them. The female vampire is a cannibalistic bloodsucking creature that drains men from their life force and manhood, emasculating them. Cannibalism hints at the woman's role as a gothic femme fatale/a dangerous animal. One day, the girl discerns a male lover asleep in the crushed grass, "as if laid out on a platter" (132), like a "prey," and she approaches him. She bites him on the neck, which she means as a kiss. Right after the "kiss," the girl wonders what has prompted her to bite the man, lust or hunger, "How could [she] tell the difference?" (132). As in Angela Carter's "The Lady of the House of Love," the Countess, like the vampire girl, "[w]hen she was a little girl, she [. . .] contented herself entirely with baby rabbits," "[b]ut now she is a woman, she must have men" (1980: 96).

This scene reminds us of that in "Sleeping Beauty," and later reproduced in "Snow White," in which the awakening kiss stands for the girl's initiation into adult sexuality.[8] In fairy tales, the prince would save the princess, the damsel in distress, with a kiss while, in vampire stories, the female vampire's deadly unquenchable animal desire to devour and consume her victim symbolizes her sexual drive. Fukuhara contends that the "chaotic amalgamation of animality and sexuality [. . .] [is] the very essence of monstrosity in *Dracula*" (2017: 92):

> [T]he female vampire illustrates, in hyperbolic form, cultural anxieties about women and hunger, in which hunger is symbolically related to women's predatory sexuality and aggression [. . .] female vampires are overtly and aggressively sexual, using their beauty and seductiveness to prey on both men and other women; in each case, the female vampire's hunger is inseparable from her sexual desire [. . .]. By connecting the vampires' overt sexuality with their insatiable hunger, Stoker and Le Fanu imply that women's hunger, as a sign of transgressive desires, is fearful in and of itself, and that women's bodies reflect their sexual propensities (Silver 2004: 117-118).

Even if the vampire girl hardens herself to loneliness, the sexual encounter dissolves it. The vampire girl craves love and companionship. She yearns for a true rapport with another human being. In her sexual naiveté, she is ignorant of what love or sexuality is, deeming possible that she may join the lovers.

In the kiss scene, Atwood challenges the conventional construction of gender and female agency. Man and woman patriarchal roles are reversed.[9] The male lover appears feminized. He plays the typical female role as the submissive prey of the vampire woman. Conversely, the girl, no longer acquiescent, metaphorically, wishes to consummate the sexual act. Creed points out that the female vampire does not respect or follow the conventional rules for sexual conduct. Her lust for blood makes her the sexual aggressor instead of the more traditionally "proper passive recipient" (1993: 61). Withstanding, this sexual rendezvous is a failed act, since the male lover does not wake up to fall in love with the girl as in the fairy tale, but to escape in horror.

Monstrosity has been paramount to the construction of femininity, as otherness, in the patriarchal discourse. In the Female Gothic, the woman who does not comply with her gender role is portrayed as a mythological monster. She is demonised as vampire, succubus, gorgon, harpy, witch, etc., aligning her with animals. Creed argues that female, in particular lesbian, vampires cross boundaries between those who perform proper gender roles and those who do not, and between "normal" and "abnormal" sexual desires (1993: 11). When female vampires' sexual instincts are exposed (as in *Dracula's* Lucy), vampire hunters horrify, expressing males' attitude towards female sexuality, as well as their repressed sexual impulses.[10] Creed asserts that "[t]he presence of the monstrous-feminine [. . .] speaks to us more about male fears than about female desire or feminine subjectivity" (2007: 7): "Thus the conventional code of the monster as female Other, as source of fear and danger, is created from a hegemonic perspective of the male who fears female power" (Anolik 2007: 234).

3. The myth of Frankenstein: Motherhood and social alienation

The question of motherhood is at the core of the Female Gothic. Like Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, "Lusus Naturae" tackles the ambivalent feelings mothers may have toward their children. Moers says that "[*Frankenstein*] is most interesting, most powerful, and most feminine: in the motif of revulsion against newborn life and the drama of guilt, dread and flight surrounding birth and its consequences" (1963: 90). The mother-daughter conflict and the confrontation within "the female self" are also paramount in the Gothic narrative (Fleenor 1983: 15-16). Atwood's story, like the myth of Demeter and Persephone, deals with the pattern of severed mother-daughter relationship, in which either a daughter is violently separated from her

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8 Shumpei Fukuhara underscores how vampirism and rabies are interlocked and both associated with sexuality (2017: 91).

9 *Dracula* and other classic novels of vampire fiction are often characterized by inverted gender roles, as in female vampires' power of sexual penetration.

10 According to Fukuhara, vampirism, as a rabies-like infection, represents the relation of an animal-like sexuality otherwise hidden beneath the mask of civilization (2017: 92).

mother, a mother abandons her daughter, or a mother is just absent. Both *Frankenstein* and "Lusus Naturae" delve into parental responsibility and abandonment.

The monstrous girl is finally deserted by her mother, who wants to sell the farm and move in with her other daughter. She has stayed with her vampire child out of a sense of moral obligation. When the monster girl tells her mother that she can manage alone, her mother is "grateful, pour soul. She had an attachment to me, as if to a hangnail, a wart; I was hers. But she was glad to be rid of me. She'd had enough duty for a lifetime" (130). After that, the monster girl begins to explore the full extent of her power. She needs to search for her true identity and place in the world. As Monika Kosa claims, regarding some of Atwood's novels, the writer "incorporate[s] elements from *Frankenstein* to reflect (on) contemporary anxieties, to insist on the fluid discursivity of monstrosity", as well as on other issues of contemporaneity (2020: 128).[11]

The monster girl and the Creature become the ultimate outcasts who, utterly shunned by humanity, need to survive on their own. They feel excruciating loneliness and absolute social alienation. Forsaken by their creators and bereft of human contact, they share their namelessness and their lack of personal or social identity. They endure the disdain their closest people feel for them. Ever since her transformation, the girl has lived for the most part isolated in her room reading Pushkin, Lord Byron and John Keats, which has allowed her to learn about the life she is missing, "blighted love," "defiance," "the sweetness of death" (129). Likewise, the Creature starts to understand the world through Felix's reading of *Ruins of Empire* and comes across crucial texts, such as *Paradise Lost*, which mark his life. In their solitude, both the Creature and the girl have time to reflect on their harrowing experiences, realizing that they are deformed and forlorn. They learn the hard way that the pleasures of family life and community are not for them.

"Lusus Naturae" shows how there is no escape from monstrousness. People cannot look beyond monstrosity, hideous appearances, and find inner beauty. The Creature attempts to reveal himself to the cottagers hoping that they could see his gentleness. He tries first, unsuccessfully, with the blind De Lacey, as he would not be prejudiced against him. On the other hand, the monster girl, notwithstanding her abhorrent physical aspect, also embodies qualities such as kindness, compliance, or innocence. Actually, her animal-like nature is subverted when her unsullied humanity is disclosed. Even in the most adverse situations, she accepts her destiny without anger. She characterizes herself as one of a "forgiving temperament," never feeling the need to take revenge or fight back. On the contrary, throughout the whole tale, she expresses her understanding of other people's emotions and acts of rejection towards her, even to the point of believing that the angry mob who chase her "have the best of intentions at heart" (133). The Creature, nevertheless, devotes his life to exert vengeance on all the human beings that have wronged him, especially his creator.

Physical defects are not the only cause of monsters' ostracism, it is also their uniqueness. The Creature longs for companionship. He first takes refuge in a small hovel adjacent to a cottage so as to watch his fellow men. He observes its occupants through a crack in the wall. He even asks Dr. Frankenstein to create a female monster just like him to be his mate, promising to renounce violence, and permanently vanish into the wilderness with her, far from civilization. In "Lusus Naturae," the monster girl keeps away from humans, who flee at her sight when she wanders in the forest. However, like the Creature, she feels curiosity and beholds two young lovers whom she mistakes, due to her ignorance of the world, for kindred individuals with traits similar to hers. They also behave furtively, emit animal sounds, and even bite each other. She assumes they must be in the preliminary stages of what she has become, as they are not as hairy as she is. They may have sought each other's company too. The girl's powerful and desperate desire for social conviviality and affection will lead her to death.

Societal gender concepts, such as purity and sexual innocence, are key to Atwood's work of fiction. She depicts the girl in the context of the angel (virgin)/monster binary. Female Gothic has contested women's traditional portrayal as a desexualized angel. Brides, like angels, are associated with virginity and sexual naiveté. The girl is likened to a bride on different occasions. The priest affirms that God has chosen her as a "a sort of bride" (128). The Christian concept of bride of God is connected to victimization. The priest tells her that she is called on a path of suffering and purification of the soul that will be rewarded later in Heaven. For her fake last rites, the girl is dressed as a "bride," in a white gown and covered with a white veiling, "fitting for a virgin" (128), patriarchal symbol of pureness and chastity. Ironically, the veil, conventionally expected to ward off evil spirits, is used to hide "one." Her mother proclaims that she looks like an angel, "no man would want to pollute [her], and then [she] would go straight to Heaven" (128). The notion of her pretended sanctity is highlighted when the family inform the neighbours that she "had died in a saintly manner" (128). They make her room into a shrine to her memory by hanging a picture of her, when she still looked human, on her room door.

Atwood's reshaping of the Gothic genre has to do with the realities of a hostile world for the female heroine. Some critics, such as Northrop Frye, have talked about the impact of the Canadian menacing harsh landscape, an ideal gothic setting, on the woman's experience (1971: 225). Atwood herself characterizes with

[11] Monika Kosa bases her arguments on the following novels: *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985), *The MaddAddam Trilogy* (*Oryx and Crake* (2003), *The Year of the Flood* (2009), *MaddAddam* (2013)), and *The Heart Goes Last* (2015).

the term "paranoid schizophrenia" the dichotomous love/hate relationship to this threatening wilderness (1970: 62). Canadian nature as female (monster) mirrors the image of the woman (Friesen 1990: 9), symbolically embodying the gothic horrors the heroine faces and her shattered identity. When the girl is abandoned, she does not just stay home, she ventures further into the forest so as to reduce the risk of encountering other people. Like the Creature, in the wild, she can forget her deformity and her loneliness. There, she is almost happy.

Victimization is one of the most persistent motifs of Atwood's oeuvre. Communities need someone or something to blame for the evil and misfortunes in their lives. "Monsters" are viewed as malignant and menacing. Richard Beck points out that, both in appearance and behaviour, they activate feelings of revulsion and disgust that will justify acts of social exclusion or violence (2011: 93): "The 'monster' tends to be the nadir of sociomoral disgust [. . .] monsters are subhuman and malevolent, a source of social threat and danger. This is important to note as the category of 'monster' tends to mask the mechanism of social scapegoating" (2011: 93). According to David Gilmore,

> The monster then represents all that is beyond human control, the uncontrollable and the unruly that threaten the moral order [. . .] in ritualized violence, such as occurs in gothic fiction, horror movies, and village festivals, the hypothetical *victime émissaire* (scapegoat or sacrificial victim) acts as a symbolic target for the therapeutic displacement of pent-up aggressions (2003: 20-11).

It does not matter, the girl believes, if she asserts that "[she is] a human being" (133). She has been categorized as "monster," "a lusus naturae." In her last reflection, she qualifies the mechanism of scapegoating as an inexorable social evil: "When demons are required someone will always be found to supply the part, and whether you step forward or are pushed is all the same in the end" (133).

When the villagers learn what has happened with the male lover, they speculate and find out the truth. They set in motion to hunt the evil monster down. So, as in *Frankenstein* films, they march towards her house at dusk with long stakes and torches.[12] Debbie Williams and Kalyn Prince argue that, in the scapegoating process, the punisher, the mob, becomes the hero, while the victim, the monster, is the villain. Notwithstanding, the hero "can become monstrous in wrangling with the monster [. . .] [a] monster' recognized as 'simply misunderstood rather than evil' causes the hero to be 'demonized'" (2018: 26). People see the vampire girl as a menace that must be annihilated. And yet, they are more of a monster than she is. They are the real villains.

Gothic horrors are often connected to scientists and scientific experimentation. Science, religion and superstition provide the backdrop for the monster girl's story. As in *Frankenstein*, science plays a paramount role in "Lusus Naturae." In Atwood's tale, the girl's family brings in a doctor to restore her health (looks), which might symbolize the need that patriarchy imposes on women to fit into the ideal of femininity. The "monster" girl needs to be cured of her monstrosity. The doctor, who just sees her as a freak of nature, wants to take her with him to the city so other doctors can examine her as well. The way he approaches her sickness is distant and inhuman. In the face of the family and girl's ordeal, he just tries to make her the object of medical and scientific experimentation. In answer to his cold observations, her father can only say that she is a human being. "Lusus Naturae," like *Frankenstein*, shows us the dangers and boundaries of scientific curiosity, whose unnerving outcome can be detachment from human life.

Her family, on the other hand, see the girl as evil, by reason of their religious and superstitious beliefs. Her own grandmother engages in superstitious rituals and performs a sort of exorcism on her. She uses puffball and stump water.[13] She holds the girl's head under the water where the dirty clothes are soaking while praying at the same time. This way, she wants to expel the demon inside her, which she is convinced "had flown in through [her] mouth and was lodge near [her] breastbone" (126).

4. Kafkian echoes: Metamorphosis, "rite of passage," and broken family bonds

At its core, "Lusus Naturae" is, like Frank Kafka's *The Metamorphosis*, a Gothic story about the metamorphosis into a monster, but also a tale about monstering. Like Gregor Samsa, the girl experiences a transformation from a lovely girl to a monster, a "vampire," who nobody wants. The girl, though, does not turn into a blood-sucking creature overnight, as does Gregor. Their physiognomies alter completely, and they metamorphose into unsightly disfigured inhuman beings. And yet, Gregor and the vampire girl seem to accept this new condition and just try to go about their lives as best they can. Nevertheless, she misses when, as an ordinary child, she was shown affection and love. Like Gregor, who behaves increasingly more like an insect, the girl becomes progressively more like a vampire in her social and eating habits. In their incapacity to communicate, a parallel can be drawn with animals' behaviour. As Cristina Nicolae writes, "[l]anguage is seen [as] an attribute of

[12] The angry mob holding long stakes (or pitchforks) and/or torches is a trope used in many of Frankenstein films, which may have propelled the motif to its current cultural status.

[13] It reminds of a superstitious cure for warts explained in Mark Twain's *Adventures of Tom Sawyer*.

humans and the loss of this ability underlines the very idea of loss of human condition/identity" (2015: 145). Now, the girl craves different food than when she was "human," and gets used to dwelling in dark spaces and roaming in the wild. Despite their animality, Gregor and the vampire girl keep their humanity.

The vampire girl's metamorphosis is a gothic metaphor for the passage from adolescence to womanhood. During adolescence, teenagers experience physical and psychological changes, among others sexual awakening. The vampire's liminality can be associated with this crucial transitional period of human life. The girl's transformation starts at the age of seven, number that represents the woman's life cycle, when her reproductive system begins to develop. The female monster is also linked with the moon.[14] She presumes that her present shifts "along with the moon" (129). The three Moon phases echo women's life stages, reminiscent of the Triple Goddess' aspects: the waxing moon is the maiden, the full moon is the mother, and the waning moon is the crone. The spurious funeral can be construed as a symbolic ritual of initiation. The initiand is dressed as a bride-to-be, as in modern cultures, initiatory rites blend into marriage ceremonies. Men are usually initiated in groups, nonetheless, in many societies, women's initiation takes place individually at the time of the menarche (usually at 14). The ritual of the passage signals the "death" of the child and the "birth" of the woman.

Craving for blood can be related to menstruation, which signals the sexual maturation of the adolescent female body. Thus, the girl's new monstrosity is equated with the changes of puberty, and menstruation can be seen as a curse. Dyan Elliott's book *Fallen Bodies* (1999) tackles how the female menstruating body has been widely viewed as a symbol of contamination and metaphorical contagion. These ideas allowed men to simultaneously control women and remain dissociated from their reproductive cycles. The monster woman has traditionally been reputed as potentially pollutant. Laura Grenfell defines the threat posed by Carmilla, and other female vampires, as linked to menstrual blood (2003: 153). She uses Kristeva's theory of the "abject" to describe menstruation as marking "the place of that which cannot be completely known, contained or controlled by science or knowledge and hence it affronts our notions of subjectivity" (2003: 152). In the fake burial, the people in the community do not get near the coffin, as they fear being infected.

Feeling ugly (like a monster) or invisible (misunderstood) are common aspects in adolescence, especially for girls, when mind and body seem to be in a continuous struggle. The vampire girl's innocent psyche is in discord with her threatening monstrous body while, as Charles Taylor writes,

> our identity is partly shaped by recognition or its absence often by the *mis*recognition of others, and so a person or group of people can suffer real damage, real distortion, if the people or society around them mirror back to them a confining or demeaning or contemptible picture of themselves. Nonrecognition or misrecognition can inflict harm, can be a form of oppression, imprisoning someone in a false, distorted, and reduced mode of being (1992: 25).

At this pivotal time of her life, the monster girl is experiencing physical as well as psychological growth. She has to assume new adult responsibilities. Taking care of yourself and sexual initiation are critical steps in a youngster's life.

The Gothic genre has expressed "concern with the building and nurturing of families" (Gross 1989: 91). As in *The Metamorphosis*, Atwood deals with how the vampire girl's transformation alters dramatically family relationships and tests the limits of familial love and affection. Teenagers feel alienated and misunderstood, particularly by their next of kin. All the family members start gradually to treat the vampire girl as what she looks like, a monster. As Carl Rhodes and Robert Westwood state regarding Kafka's novel:

> For the rest of his family this is not just Gregor's metamorphosis, but a metamorphosis of their relations with him; most especially [their] relations of exchange and reciprocity. Gregor's transformation is one that moves him from being the person who they know as "one of them" to being radically different, face-less and no-human. *The Metamorphosis* is a story of ethics, or more precisely about the ambiguous and unbearable demands of ethics as they relate to reciprocity and generosity (2016: 236).

"Lusus Naturae," like *The Metamorphosis*, forces us to rethink the limitations of the apparently most reliable and unconditional form of love, familial love. Families are supposed to rely on and support each other. We can always turn to them when everyone else fails us. After her vampirization, the girl's family struggle with their feelings of revulsion and disgust towards her, trying to justify their emotions and actions. They see her disease as a malediction and a form of punishment. Her mother asserts that "'[t]here was nothing wrong with [her daughter]'" (125) when she was born. She was a lovely baby. That was a reproach, a judgment: "What had she done wrong?"(125).

Monstrosity can be defined in terms of social and familial rejection and exclusion. The extreme transformation the girl undergoes causes emotional distancing with those around her, while the girl longs for

[14] As a shapeshifter "monster" and in her connection to the moon, the girl can also be likened to a werewolf.

love and affection. Her father still treats her like a human being. He would insist on teaching her to read, but keeping distances. He would never again nestle her into the crook of his arm. Her mother also used to hug her and brushed her hair, but when it began to come out in handfuls, she stopped entirely.[15] Like Gregor, the vampire girl has a sister, a pretty girl, who only cares about herself. She knows that she will not be able to get married if anyone finds out about her freak sister. Conversely, Gregor's sister, Grete, initially takes on the role of her brother's caretaker. However, eventually, she is the one who proposes to get rid of him. Both sisters have all their life ahead of them, while their monster siblings do not.

The stigmatization the girl suffers comes largely from the matrilineal family members, her grandmother, her mother, and in particular her sister. This repudiation could be correlated with women's connivance with the patriarchal order. In *The Metamorphosis,* just Grete gets into Gregor's room to feed him and clean up. Likewise, after the girl's counterfeited death, only her mother enters her room to bring in some food and take away the chamber pot, leaving as quickly as she can. The situation reaches a point when the vampire girl is completely ostracized. No one in her family can tolerate her presence. Her condition wears them down. Like Gregor, when the girl lives with her family, she is not just literally imprisoned, but also emotionally detached from those who should love her. As it finally happens with Gregor's family, the vampire girl realizes that the pity her mother felt at first has turned into resentment and guilt. She eventually blames her daughter, making her responsible for "an act of malice" committed against her (129). Ironically, porphyria is genetic in nature and, consequently, her parents' "fault."

Atwood's tale tackles human imperfection through the vampire girl's family members and explores the circumstances under which they adopt drastic resolutions regarding her. At the beginning of the story, the girl's family is highly concerned about what their neighbours might say if they saw her. They fear that the community could get to know about her monstrosity. They would discuss, "endlessly," about "[w]hat could be done with [her]" (125). Being of almost high society, they are terrified of what her appearance could mean to their status. Confining her to a room was not enough to keep the prying neighbours away. For this reason, the family take a difficult decision: they will feign her death. After that, her sister marries off well climbing up the social ladder. The girl esteems that "her coffin was a rung on her ladder!" (129).

Time passes by and the girl's father dies. A stranger offers her mother to buy the farm. She has reached a breaking point when she believes that she has done enough already, which reminds us of Grete's words when they finally decide to get rid of Gregor: "We have done all that's humanly possible to look after it and be patient. I don't think anyone could accuse us of doing anything wrong" (Kafka 2015: 153). In the end, family bonds cannot triumph over the repugnance the family members feel at being related to a monster. Not even her family can trascend the girl's monstrosity and see the good in her. As Rhodes and Westwood write about *The Metamorphosis*: "Extreme alterity does not spawn ethics in this case in that Gregor has lost his face, lost his humanity and as such has exceeded the limits of generosity" (2016: 242).

The vampire girl, who wants to spare her mother suffering and stop being a burden to her, tells her to take up the offer and go. When the farm is sold, the girl deserted by everyone has to fend for herself. She resolves to become a ghostly apparition so as to scare the new residents off. Knowing the house better than the new tenants, the girl can walk in the night touching a face with her red-nailed hand, or making the sound of a rusted hinged. Eventually, they take off, leaving the house, which is branded as haunted, to her. The female monster will never be accepted by society and no prince will ever rescue her. Therefore, unlike Gregor Samsa, who is trapped in his home, the girl starts challenging herself and exploring the world around. She begins to frighten people in the forest to keep them away. One night she just peered into a window and the young woman inside aghast exclaimed that she had seen "[a] thing" (130). The girl wonders "[i]n what way is a thing not a person?" (130). Ciaran O'Connor contends that "*The Metamorphosis* [. . .] warns us that there are those in the world that will make the assumption that a change in our situation in some way removes us from them as human beings" (2012: 56). The total rupture of family bonds is exemplified by the vampire girl's sister and her husband's participation in the lynch mob that eventually kills her.

5. Conclusion

The female Gothic genre allows women authors to write, from a position of Otherness, about those formerly unspeakable aspects of their lives. In fact, the Gothic, one of the best narrative modes for females, addresses "the terrors lurking for women within patriarchal social arrangements" (Williams 1995: 7), unveiling and contesting a patriarchal discourse which make women feel alienated and powerless. Atwood unravels the fictional possibilities of the female monster metaphor unmasking the identity, familial and social problems women encounter in a patriarchal system. As in Carter's "The Lady of the House of Love," the vampire girl is a gothic trope that centers its lens on the passage from adolescence to womanhood. Atwood discloses unsettling

[15] Loss of hair, traditionally a symbol of femininity, is another symptom in chronic porphyrias, as well as shortening of digits, and nails, or even severe skin scarring and progressive disappearance of ears, lips, and nose.

social aspects of adolescence, identity and body development. In this stage, the girl is no longer a lovable and compliant child. At this age, teenagers revolt against adults' authority to assert their own "monstrous" identity, hence, negotiating their inner conflicts.

Atwood uncovers the discrepancy between the soulless female monsters that patriarchy claims some "abnormal" women are, and the humanity of the vampire girl in spite of her ghastly demeanour. She brings light to the contradictions inherent in the patriarchal construction of women's identity, gender roles and sexuality, which leads to the monster woman concept that, in her liminality, blurs and threatens boundaries. The vampire girl is depicted as human/animal, dead/alive, innocent and angelical/wicked and evil, a vulnerable girl/a vamp, natural/supernatural. Atwood reveals how "femininity is a role, a concept imposed upon women by male systems of representations. In this masquerade of femininity, the woman loses herself, and loses herself by playing on her femininity" (Irigaray 1996: 84). Femininity is socially created, "a dark construction that imprison women and turn them into living dead creatures" (Rodríguez-Salas 2008: 121). Atwood presents female gender roles as a site of terror and questions those stereotypes assigned to women that do not really define them: "The monster signals a surreptitious refusal of these imperatives of a conventional gender identity" (Copati 2018: 47). Females have to overcome the artificial notion of femininity imposed upon them or imputed to them.

Atwood reverses the vampire tale by shaping a female "vampire" who undergoes human cruelty. To stop being victims, women must realize that they are being victimized. The female monster/vampire discloses social inequality and the need of social changes. In the violence she is subjected to, Atwood makes us wonder who the real monsters are. While the girl is portrayed as a dangerous animal, the villagers, her persecutors, stand for civilization. Thus, the apparent beastliness of the female vampire mirrors back at them and reflects their animality. Both family and society are to blame for her fate.

The vampire girl, an undead being, defies the notions and limits of life and death. She wonders how surprising it would be if she will look like an angel when she is in Heaven, or if the angels will look like her. She envisions herself as a legend, "an upside-down saint," whose "finger bones will be sold as dark relics" (133). As René Girard underscores, ritual victims are usually non-members of a community, creatures like animals and outsiders, "imbued with sacredness" (1988: 270). Cultural contradictions are not alien to societies: monsters are feared and hated, but they are also admired and employed in rituals as objects of both veneration and persecution (Gilmore 2003: 20). Death will turn the girl's monstrous body, no longer a threat, into sacred religious artefacts to be revered and worshipped. Through her relics, the vampire girl will become immortal.

The monstrous girl has an inexorable destiny, death, since there is no place for a female monster in society. There is no happy ending to this story. For her leap to death, the girl puts on the white burial bridal dress, and the white veil. She will set herself on fire and fall from the rooftop, "like a comet" (133).[16] People, as "sorcerers," will say superstitious charms against evil over her ashes to make sure that she is truly dead this time, and that she will not rise up, as vampires do.

In "Lusus Naturae," the patriarchal order is subverted because the "princess" is not saved by a man, as in fairy tales. Neither does she find her place in the world, as in the traditional Bildungsroman. Some contemporary examples illustrate how women's subversive agency can be shown through rebellion or resistance. Atwood seems to suggest another alternative form of female agency, embracing abjection and, ultimately, death. In choosing to die, the vampire girl rejects a passive and amenable feminine role and displays courage to leave the world that denigrates and repudiates her. In this last final decision, she becomes a whole woman, free from patriarchal constrictions. Women must destroy the image of the female monster that patriarchy has created for them. Only its annihilation can make the emergence of the new woman possible. Atwood manages to challenge and expose the monsterization of the woman by metaphorizing females' victimization and oppression at the heart of the patriarchal discourse and practices.

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[16] The girl sees herself as a comet, historically regarded as a message from the gods, which inspires fear and awe. Her immolation also reminds us of witches' executions.

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