

**“The Thing We’re Already Afraid Of”: Metatextual Artifacts, Trope, and Subversion in
the Contemporary Horror Novel**

by

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Introduction: The History and Present Use of Metatextual Artifacts

I. Fiction and Believability

The history of the novel goes hand-in-hand with the history of epistolary writing, and thus with the quest for believability. The earliest novels published in English, those which we recognize as standing at the genre's origins, are largely formed of epistles, journal entries, and similarly intimate texts. This tendency to include fictional autobiography is deeply entwined with the novel's concern with realism. For instance, *Robinson Crusoe*, viewed as possibly the first true English novel, presented itself as the genuine diary of a shipwreck victim, while Samuel Richardson's *Clarissa* utilized the epistle to create an intensely detailed account of everyday life. The narrative of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, famously called the first work of science fiction, is framed entirely within a series of letters and written recollections. The novels of Jane Austen are so singular in part because they helped to define a turn *away* from the epistolary¹ and towards the discursive prose we recognize as standard today; and yet the most affecting, revealing plot points in many of Austen's novels (declarations of love, revelations of backstory, betrayals of trust) are largely relegated to the epistle.

Readers have often tended to conflate the novel as a form with the fictional, and yet there is an overwhelming desire – especially within its earliest works but continuing across its history – for truthfulness and believability of invention. It's almost as though, even with the suspension of disbelief necessitated by the consumption of a novel, there is a fear that it will not be believed. The epistle, then, functions as a tether to the reader: you are being addressed directly by the narrative and so you *must* believe. Ian Watt, in his *Rise of the Novel*, claims that the “use of the letter form . . . induced in the reader a continual sense of actual participation in the action which was until then unparalleled” (25). Forcing the reader into character-adjacency, including them

¹ This movement is evident even over the course of Austen's career: her earliest work, the novella *Lady Susan*, was written entirely in the epistolary form.

within the action of the narrative, allows not only for suspension of disbelief; it brings about implication in the story. The sense of intimacy created by the epistle reinforces the reader's confidence in the events of the narrative: the confidential nature of the form leads to a sense of involvement, and thus a greater investment of belief.

This investment through intimacy is the very nature of fictionalization itself. As Catherine Gallagher claims in "The Rise of Fictionality," "the will, which would allow a comparison of illusion and reality, is here said to be suspended, just as belief is said to be willingly suspended," but "the more engrossed we are in a novel, the more impossible it is to *believe* it, since we have lost the very capacity to believe anything" (348). As though in a dream, the reader is simultaneously a witness to, and a participant in, the story. The free space created by the suspension of disbelief—acceptance of the story on its own terms—enables a liminal state of being, which "conducts the reader to a greater responsiveness and more vivid perception, ...enabl[ing] a psychological state of ontological indifference, a temporary disregard for the fictional conditions of the pleasurable sensation" (349). Through its strange positioning between fact and fiction, narrative circumvents believability altogether and enters into an almost tangible state, taking up space in the vacuum created by the suspension of will. The reader is, both colloquially and experientially, absorbed in the text. In this space, caught between "greater responsiveness" and "indifference," dwelling in the gray area between internal and external narratives, the audience is made not only a character but a part of the story itself. Gallagher presents fictionalization as an illusory, liminal space within which the reader simultaneously inhabits the body of the narrative and their own physical body.

There is a trend in contemporary horror fiction of including within the text what I will be referring to as "(meta)textual artifacts" such as embedded letters, essays, and other writings by

the characters within the novels: the prefix meta meaning “characterized by a consciously ... self-referential, and often self-parodying style, whereby something reflects or represents the very characteristics it alludes to,” artifact suggesting “a non-material human construct,” something “made or modified by human workmanship” (as in Archaeological discoveries), as defined by the Oxford English Dictionary. These artifacts, from pseudoscientific essays to fictitious diaries, exist at least in part to draw the narrative closer to reality. To think more clearly about how these artifacts work, it will be useful to consider the literary taxonomy offered by theorist Gérard Genette. In his work, he breaks literary works down into the categories of text (the main communicative body of the work itself) and paratext (the additional pieces which are presented alongside this main body, from titles to illustrations to prefaces). He divides paratext into two categories: the peritext, that which “necessarily has a positioning ... in relationship to that of the text itself,” (263) such as a title, chapter note, or preface; and the epitext, “the messages which are situated, at least originally, outside the book” (264), such as interviews, correspondences, or journals. The paratexts of a novel offer a sort of “threshold” or “undecided zone” (Genette and Maclean 261) between the interior text and the exterior discourse, simultaneously commenting upon and included within the work itself. Genette’s paratext exists in “a zone not just of transition, but of transaction,” where information is given which allows for “a more pertinent reading” (261) of the text itself. Because of the authority given these texts by virtue of their inclusion in the novel, their actual author’s “identity matters little” (266); they may have been written posthumously, or they may have been included by a publisher or third party. As such, they exist in a fully liminal space: paratextual elements both inform and reside outside the scope of the text itself. The metatextual elements which I consider in horror fiction all fall under this

umbrella of the paratext, supplying (in various ways) commentary on the very novels they are included within.

Paratexts can effectively build readerly investment in the narrative. The epistle, for example, seems to align the reader with—or cast the reader *as*—a character within the novel. As Susan Stewart writes in “The Epistemology of the Horror Story,” “The reader is presented with a letter to be read at the same moment, within the same temporality, as it is read by the character ... on this page the shadow is our own: we have taken the victim's place” (39). There is an intentional compression of the distance between the narrative and its audience, and it is this confusion of narrative—the reader becomes the character and truth becomes fiction—that is leveraged to produce effective contemporary horror. These artifacts, then, also warp the image of the narrative: they necessarily fabricate a space where the divide between the real and the fictional is porous, where the role of the objective observer is overwritten by the impact of the narrative’s voice. The reader is made, as Gérard Genette writes in *Narrative Discourse*, one of “two protagonists: the narrator and [their] audience, real or implied” (31). The distance normally afforded by literature is collapsed, and the reader is absorbed into the fictionalized space of the narrative. As I will discuss later, for example, the essay embedded in Mónica Ojeda’s *Jawbone* allows the author to speak almost directly to the reader, producing an artifact that simultaneously exists in the story, forwarding the plot, and serves as a statement on her feelings towards the genre of contemporary horror. The real and the fictional are barely separated, with the reader playing the part both of the character receiving the essay and of the audience consuming the novel.

Drawing on Julia Kristeva’s theory of the abject from her 1982 essay *Powers of Horror*, we can see that it is this very confusion that makes these semi-epistolary writings so affecting.

They are, according to this line of thought, “[t]he in-between, the ambiguous, the composite” (4), intended to confuse the borders of self and other. The abject “draws [the reader] toward the place where meaning collapses” (2), blurring the line of demarcation between the self and other, or the known and unknown. The abject is most simply that which forces the viewer to confront “the border of [their] condition as a living being” (3), a traumatic version of the Lacanian “Real” that highlights the fragility of the human condition. Kristeva explains that “all literature ... seems ... rooted, no matter what its sociohistorical conditions might be, on the fragile border where identities do not exist or only barely so—double, fuzzy, heterogeneous, animal, metamorphosed, altered, abject” (207). She highlights poetry, especially as a form that deals with the abject, playing with meaning and form; it is “a language of want, of the fear that edges up to it and runs along its edges” (38). In the same way that the self is shocked by the confrontation of a corpse, the “‘I’ is expelled” (4), pulled away from the body and towards the character.

It seems no accident, then, that so many of these narratives full of metatextual artifacts center on young girls: Kristeva’s abjection is only emphasized by the narratives framed in these texts. The liminal state of female puberty—the in-between of the safety of childhood and the unknown of adulthood; the fluid space between being seen as an object of purity and as an object of lust; the zone between the role of the maiden and the role of the mother—is the perfect environment for horror to flourish.

II. Contemporary Horror and Sympathy

Horror necessitates both closeness and distance. An affective (or effective) piece of horror media will evoke readerly sympathy to the narrative—as with the goal of the epistle, horror aims to get the audience invested in the believability of the story on its own terms—and a

distance from it, a gap in the knowledge provided to allow for the suspense of the speculative. Because of the closeness and intimacy created by these epistolary, or artifact-filled, works, there is an inevitable bias formed. The character through whom the text is viewed, what Gérard Genette calls the novel's focalizer, facilitates the delivery of narrative information, and as such is the controller of the narrative itself. The focalizer of the novel is the perspective that the reader is given, the person with whom the narrative is aligned, and thus that character's own predilections are superimposed upon the story itself. If the character is naive, willfully or otherwise, then so too is the audience. If the character is prejudiced against another, the narrative itself will be colored by this. The narration, whether presented through this character or not, is nonetheless affected by them: if the novel were a film, for example, they would not be the camera itself but would control the framing of the shot. Horror as a genre is deeply concerned with perspective, both formally and thematically—by insinuating the reader so completely in the story, it becomes paramount to trust the perspective of the character with whom the narrative is aligned. The reader's questioning of this trust, then, aids in the building of tension which forms effective horror.

This closeness implicitly means that there is a distance from the truth of the narrative: the biased influence of the focalizer means that there are, necessarily, things left out of the text. These gaps in information, left to the imagination, help to create the tension of written horror. While in film suspense can be created with a glimpse of the monster, with a shot of a long, darkened hallway or with the sounds of a scream from just off screen, the novel requires very different techniques to provoke a similar response. By providing a biased narrative, a focalizer who shows only partial truths, the novel provides these flashes of the real truth, the horror of the story, without ruining the scare. This influenced narrative is akin to the beam of a flashlight,

illuminating only what is fully necessary, leaving the thrilling, pure, and ambiguous possibility of darkness around its edges. Effective horror relies not only on believability, and the sympathy of the reader but on the tension which is created by these biases. Metatextual artifacts serve to implicate the reader within the story, but also to distort the perspective of the narrative.

The conventions of the horror genre are frequently reimagined or adapted to provoke this same sense of ambiguous tension. Subgenres have classic stock tropes and archetypes: the slasher always includes a masked murderer seeking bloody revenge; the creature feature has a monster able to destroy a community in one fell swoop; the Gothic horror is set in a dilapidated castle surrounded by bleak, windswept moors. And these archetypes become clichés in their reiteration. When well done, these conventions supply a satisfying anticipation, as the audience watches exactly what they feared come to pass. This is largely why classics are able to remain classics. Stephen King's *The Shining* or William Friedkin's *The Exorcist* are not popular decades after their creation for their novelty in the eyes of contemporary audiences but because of the skill of their execution. The reason they contain such a plethora of these archetypal tropes is, in part, that they helped to define them. In the contemporary market, these strategies have been cannibalized and rewritten, allowing them to proliferate in such a way that they are almost universal.

One of these tropes, which has been analyzed endlessly since its naming in 1977, is that of the "Final Girl." First described in Carol J Clover's essential essay "Her Body, Himself: Gender in the Slasher Film," the Final Girl is an audience surrogate, originating in the slasher film, originally coined to distinguish the teenage girl who survives to the end of the bloodbath and can defeat the slasher by transforming into a more dangerous and capable version of herself. Clover's Final Girl is "boyish" with "smartness, gravity, competence ... and sexual reluctance

[which] set her apart from the other girls” (204), not a true representation of a woman or a fully imagined character but an “agreed-upon-fiction” (214). Clover imagines the horror viewer as overwhelmingly male, positing that the Final Girl provides an inoffensive character for them to project onto, allowing them to live out “the terrors and masochistic pleasures of . . . fantasy” without sacrificing “the structures of male competence and sexuality” (212).

With the acknowledgment of non-male horror fans, this reading loses some of its ground. Thus, the contemporary Final Girl is rewritten, transcending the bounds of expectation: she need not be virginal, heterosexual, adolescent, white, or indeed female at all. The evolution of horror allows for the simultaneous avoidance of, and indulgence in, convention. In fact, it revels in this ambiguity. By warping or breaking from well-established tropes, contemporary horror redefines itself for the modern audience, acknowledging in its nonconformity the nonconformity of its viewership. Similarly, the modern metatextual novel pays homage to its history, presenting the formal features—epistles and other artifacts which allow the audience to more effectively project onto and envelop themselves into the narrative—of the early novel while reframing them for the contemporary reader, allowing discussion of the more developed and nuanced landscape of contemporary literary horror.

Effective contemporary horror resides in a space between repetition and disorientation. It relies on the cannibalization, regurgitation, and exploitation of convention, yet it also depends upon the subsequent divergence from that convention. Good horror resides in this space between the familiar and unfamiliar, the tension between anticipation and fulfillment—or lack thereof. Even the most novice viewer, that hypothetical audience who has entirely escaped the cultural diffusion of horror knowledge, can quickly extrapolate the story’s direction through the bell curve of the standard plot—the narrative climb upwards to the all-important climax—and

archetypal atmosphere. If there is a long, dark hallway (the Chekov's gun of haunted house architecture), it can safely be assumed that there will be something lurking, unseen, at the other end. This expectation of conformity is only reinforced in the veteran horror buff, where the common-sense recognition of tropes evolves into the recognition of entire plotlines and subgenres. If there is a prank in a story's first act, one can infer the birth of a slasher, and the masked quest for revenge that will inevitably follow. With an encyclopedic knowledge of horror comes a home-field advantage: the comfort of cliché, that which has been rewritten to the point of parody, provides both the pleasure of expertise—the feeling that one has “mastered” horror—and of familiarity. When the story is familiar, the uncanny aspects of the break from expectation—fractures in the reader's suspension of disbelief—can be made even more effective. The horror fan can be estranged not only from their own body, absorbed into the narrative they so love, but estranged from the familiarity of the genre itself. Recognition of convention in the referential, subversive landscape of contemporary horror allows for an even more heightened experience of disorientation.

Pleasure in this tension of anticipation is only second to that pleasure generated with the deviation from convention. The sympathetic pleasure of horror, the physiological, somatic response, lies in this unfamiliarity. Departure from convention, the twisting of genre tropes, can disarm even the most seasoned audience. It is from this rupture, this breaking free of the cycle of expectation, that the pleasure of discomfort is most effective. To explain: the fictional—whether we are viewing cinema or reading novels—provides a dreamlike, theoretical space of pure experience. Fiction exists in a space akin to Freud's unconscious, where the audience is guided by narrative and through another's perspective. There is a necessary surrender of identity, a voluntary acquiescence to the stakes and reality of the story, which can be aided by the inclusion

of metatextual artifacts like the epistle. The events of the story are simultaneously happening and not happening to its audience; the viewer is at once a character and an outside observer; the reader is both having a purely imagined experience and a purely physiological response. The narrative “disrupt[s] ... body ownership and self familiarity” (Nicola Diamond 89), an effect made all the more powerful in a genre so concerned with embodiment and sensation, where the inside of the body is made the outside, where you are meant to feel the fear and pain of characters whose own empathy can get them killed.

In literature, this sympathetic response can be facilitated not only by the narrative itself, in the framing or perspective of scenes, but by the inclusion of paratext or metatextual artifacts. As Jeanne M Britton writes in her essay “Novelistic Sympathy in Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*,” “The novel proposes narrative ... as compensation for the impossibility of sympathy” (5). Formally, “the novel reproduces, in its acts of transcription, experiences of sympathy,” utilizing the epistle to “elicit a textual experience of sympathy that revives and duplicates the human experience of sympathy” (7), which is lost by the lack of visual connection. Horror literature, due to the limitations of its form, must necessarily use a different technique in its attempt to evoke a physiological, empathetic response from its audience. It seems that a return to the classical epistolary literary form, harkening back to horror’s Gothic literary roots, is becoming more prevalent in the contemporary as a way to bridge the gap of sympathy between narrative and reader.

III. Introduction to the Gothic

To discuss contemporary horror, it seems imperative to trace its origins, starting with a brief discussion of the Gothic, which could be referred to in a tongue-in-cheek manner as the mother of modern horror. Birthed in the late eighteenth century, Gothic literature blossomed

throughout the Victorian era, functioning as an outlet for the fears of rapid sociocultural advancements at the time. The Gothic is intrinsically tied to women, both through readership and theme, with recurring elements of the genre—childbirth, abuse, and entrapment in the domestic—allowing for exploration of fears which were and still are closely aligned with the female experience.

Those texts that we view today as exemplary of the Gothic genre as a whole — those most culturally relevant to the modern-day understanding of Gothic literature, if not the earliest texts of the genre — such as Mary Shelley’s novel *Frankenstein* (1818) and Bram Stoker’s *Dracula* (1897), regularly and powerfully include paratextual elements. They are both composed of letters, transcripts, and journal entries—reliant on layers of nested narratives to move the reader through the story, allowing insights not only into the novels’ heroes but also into their monsters. The Gothic’s concern with the past, and the influence of the past on the present, make the inclusion of letters within the text perfectly sensible. The epistle allows for an atemporal interjection, a view not only into the interiority of the character who writes it but into a different narrative time: it is the necessity of the letter that it is distanced, both spatially and chronologically, from its author. The letter is written and then delivered, and while it is experienced either at the same time as the recipient *or* the writer, it is impossible to experience it simultaneously with both.

Despite the Gothic’s interest in history, the genre itself is reliant on the idea of a fictionalized past, and the overlaying of present themes onto a historical backing. As Jerold E. Hogle explains in *The Cambridge Companion to Gothic Fiction*, just as Gothic architecture has nothing to do with the Goths for which it is named, “*Gothic* has long been a term used to project modern concerns into a deliberately vague, even fictionalized past. . . . the Gothic is inherently

connected to an exploitation of the emptied-out past to symbolize and disguise present concerns” (16). Gothic literature uses the visuals of the past as a setting for contemporary issues, a staging that allows for an even starker contrast between the two, highlighting the temporally and historically liminal state of these stories.

The Gothic influenced our very understanding of fear; for instance, Kristeva’s theory of the abject is very obviously rooted in prevalent themes of Gothic literature. Even in the earliest works of gothic fiction, there was a prominent female presence, whether in terms of character or author. The Gothic is deeply entwined with the liminal: it is simultaneously high- and lowbrow, and deals frequently with the “betwixt-and-between,” “dead-and-alive” (Hogle 7), “threats of and longings for gender-crossing, homosexuality or bisexuality, racial mixture, class fluidity, the child in the adult, timeless timeliness, and simultaneous evolution and devolution” (12). Hogle does a very thorough job of anchoring Kristeva’s theories on abjection and horror to the development of Gothic literature: “the Gothic is quite consistently about the connection of abject monster figures to the primal and engulfing morass of the maternal” (10), which is of course again tied back to the liminal nature of the Gothic form. The feminine or maternal, which is what Kristeva posits as the basis of abjection, is simultaneously “the ultimate Other and the ... ground of the self.” The stories of women and girls, especially those on the brink of puberty or motherhood, have always been formative to our understanding of fear. It cannot be ignored that so many of the fears of the nineteenth- and twentieth-century Gothic persist in horror today.

IV. *Carrie as Contemporary Gothic*

In the same way that it feels necessary to introduce the roots of horror as a whole, I feel that it is prudent to discuss the novel which seems to be the foundation of this trend of metatextual horror novels which are the basis of my argument. By no means is Stephen King’s

1974 novel *Carrie* the first of its kind with regard to the inclusion of paratext. But it is one with, according to Helen Marshall's "A Snapshot of an Age: The Publication History of *Carrie*," a "profound impact on the publishing industry," the most widespread and relevant novel which so clearly integrates not only these artifacts but also Gothic themes throughout.

King's first published novel, *Carrie* details a period in the life of the titular Carrie White, a high school girl alienated not only by her religious fanatic of a mother but also by her possession of telekinetic powers. Beginning with Carrie's "exceptionally late and traumatic commencement of the menstrual cycle" (King 11), the reader is thrust into the tragedy of her childhood. A laundry list of her many experiences of bullying, every time she had been made the butt of the joke, is presented: "the pinches, the legs outstretched in the school aisles to trip her up, the books knocked from her desk" (10). Thus ostracized from and by her peers, Carrie is invited to the Spring Ball, the school prom, as part of a cruel prank. She is elected prom queen by way of a rigged election. Just as she is about to be crowned, a bucket of pig's blood is dropped onto her head, humiliating Carrie and provoking her to enact violent revenge on her tormentors, using her supernatural abilities to lock the school gym and causing a chain reaction leading to a fire that ultimately destroys the high school in a massive explosion.

In exploring *Carrie* as a Gothic text, the formal elements of the novel cannot be ignored. The story is told through a combination of typical third person narration (though it does switch focalizers, revolving *around* but largely not *through* Carrie herself,) and a collection of fictionalized non-fiction documents: recurring excerpts from "White Committee" (a group established after the events of the novel to study telekinetic abilities like Carrie's); reviews, selections from the memoir of Sue Snell, a survivor of the massacre; and various other texts, including newspaper articles, letters, poetry, and school work written by Carrie herself. These

passages allow for scenes to exist outside of the temporal flow of the novel, written either before the events of the narrative proper or long after the fact. These artifacts also aid, as we have already discussed, in coaxing belief from the reader. The fictionalized nonfiction essay “The Shadow Exploded: Documented Facts and Specific Conclusions Derived from the Case of Carietta White,” for instance, is quoted throughout the novel, containing theoretical explanations for Carrie’s powers of telekinesis and using language and references recognizable to the reader to premise the novel’s supernatural aspects.

In much the same way that Shelley’s *Frankenstein* uses its contemporary pseudoscience to explain the creation within—the electric shock which reanimates the body understood by way of hypothetical galvanism—King here uses that which the reader already understands, at least in the most elementary way, to give credence to the otherwise unaccountable. “The Shadow Exploded” compares the genetic transmission of telekinetic ability to that of hemophilia, explaining the apparent “dominant/recessive pattern” (121) of its appearance. The author calls the scientific community to action: “isolating this gene must become one of medicine’s number-one priorities” (121). Through the use of these metatextual artifacts, the narrative foregrounds, again and again, its own claims of scientific grounding, making them all the more believable to the reader.

Thematically as well, *Carrie* is firmly placed within Gothic traditions. Carrie is presented in varying ways by the narrative into a liminal existence. She is, most obviously, a teenage girl, from the first page placed in the distinctive discomfort of pubescence. Not only is she a teenage girl but a newly menstruating one (Hogle’s “child in the adult”), faced with a novel and terrifying lack of control over her body. Illustrated perhaps most clearly in this first scene, she is extremely alienated from herself: the knowledge of menstruation—that it happens at all, let alone what it

means biologically—is kept from her by her mother in much the same way that her telekinetic abilities are. These things, as presented by the narrative, are linked, with a paratextual excerpt asserting that the traumatic late onset of her menstrual cycle is the “trigger” (11) for the manifestation of her latent abilities. Her powers are caused by her physical body. But they are also portrayed as such when discussed in the narrative: it is a “flex” of the mind, “almost like an elbow curling a dumbbell” (28). Carrie is constantly othered, both by other characters and by the narrative of the text itself. She is compared to animals, to lard, to excrement. This alienation in itself is not a Gothic theme, but the concept of othering—of such intense isolation that one becomes isolated from their very body—fits nicely into the genre’s conventions. The issue of motherhood, which both the Gothic and Kristeva so fixate on, is of course a major player in the narrative. On the subject of Carrie’s birth, “The Shadow Exploded” posits that her mother either “did not know she was pregnant, or even understand what the word entails,” or that “the concept ... had been blocked entirely from her mind [as she] may simply have refused to believe that such a thing could happen to her” (16). Mrs. White is shown time and time again to mistreat Carrie to the utmost degree (beating her, berating her, locking her in a closet,) and this paratextual excerpt allows the reader a view into the reasoning: she views Carrie’s conception, and by extension Carrie herself, as the byproduct of such a significant sin that it must be excised from the mind. Again, like *Frankenstein* and the creation within, we see *Carrie* playing into classic Gothic tropes: a creature created of sin is loathed by its creator; as a response to such loathing, it becomes impossible for the progeny to flourish while the mother survives.

Carrie, then, functions in the context of this paper as a sort of bridge. It inhabits simultaneously the space of the Gothic, drawing on classical attributes of the genre, and the space of contemporary horror. King’s writing is seminal and almost alarmingly universal,

well-known even outside of horror-buff circles, selling 4 million copies within two years and remaining on the *New York Times* bestseller list for fourteen weeks (Marshall 1). King brings the format of the Gothic novel to the forefront of cultural awareness—he is not the first but certainly one of the most noteworthy authors to apply this styling to a contemporary work. It is inarguable that he has significantly helped to shape the landscape of modern horror, and in doing so has allowed the further proliferation not only of Gothic themes but of Gothic forms—namely, the usage of these meta- or paratextual artifacts—in the present day.

My Heart Is a Chainsaw: Trope By Way of Metatext

I. Letters and Perspective

Stephen Graham Jones's *My Heart is a Chainsaw* provides metatextual commentary throughout, mainly through the protagonist and horror buff Jade's essay-slash-letters to her history teacher, placed as educational interludes between chapters. These essays are visually separated from the text of the narrative, written in a different font and style and lacking page numbers. They also are out of the temporal scope of the narrative, existing in a space separate from the timeline of narrative events. These sections are the only time that the reader is directly given access to Jade's interiority: while the text of the novel proper is written in close third person, the essays are written in the first person, allowing explicit view into her character and headspace. While the whole of the novel is internally focalized through her, the firsthand statements of the metatextual elements of *My Heart is a Chainsaw* are framed as a truer, more revealing view of Jade. In the narrative itself, the only view the reader is given to the incredibly referential, rambling, web-like way that Jade thinks occurs during moments of high tension. These extratextual passages are a perfect showcase for how much of her mind is devoted to the contextualization of her life within the clichés of horror. These essays, scattered throughout the text, serve (as their title implies) as a crash course in the slasher subgenre, both diegetically and nondiegetically. The most important distinction between the two is that only the reader actually consumes them all, while the characters either receive only the essays *or* the letter, and are never able to appreciate the full scope of these writings.

The only genuine letter in the novel is written to Letha Mondragon, the novel's "Final Girl" archetype. As mentioned earlier, this term originated in Carol J Clover's *Men, Women, and Chainsaws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film* in order to describe the trope of the last survivor of the slasher film, who is almost always a sweet, unassuming — and, of course, virginal —

teenage girl. In text, this letter both provides an incentive for the meeting of Jade, the novel's protagonist, and Letha, while also presenting the information that leads to the revelation of Jade's trauma – an instance of childhood sexual assault at the hands of her father — that ignited her love of the horror genre as an escapist coping mechanism. Metatextually, the letter provides an alignment of reader with Letha's character and places the novel within the literary tradition of the epistolary novel, while delicately foreshadowing the events which will play out over the course of Jade's story.

Beginning “Hello Letha Mondragon,” (108) and written in the second person, this letter immediately places the reader in conjunction with Letha, as she and the reader receive the letter in tandem. The essays, which are scattered throughout the text of the novel, are those which were given to Letha by Jade, “fold[ed]” (109) into the packet that was left for her. The audience and character receive the same information, in the same manner, thus providing both reader and character “bible and your map and guide and gospel” (109). The reader is made, as Gérard Genette writes in *Narrative Discourse*, one of “two protagonists: the narrator and [her] audience, real or implied” (31). The reader and Letha are made one in their role of audience, forcing them both to conform to Jade's expectation of the Final Girl. Mimicking the formatting of a slasher film, where the Final Girl is the audience's stand-in and main focus, both hero and victim, the reader of *Chainsaw* is positioned as such in conjunction with Letha. *A Bay of Blood*, the movie which Jade provides Letha, is contextualized within the tradition of slasher films mirrors the way that *Chainsaw* is placed within the literary tradition of novels communicating through epistles.

When the letter is received, Letha again serves as a stand-in for the reader. The epistle's liminal place outside of the flow of the narrative allows for temporal displacement: while Jade spends only so much time writing the letter, Letha is able to sit with it, to read the letter over “six

times" and see through to what Jade was "*really* saying" (164). Jade is fully immersed in the novel's reality, while Letha by contrast is much more rational and pragmatic, rooted in real-world logic and modes of thinking. The reader is asked here by the narrative to inhabit both Jade and Letha's viewpoints simultaneously. While the reader is inclined to believe Jade, as the character most closely aligned with the narration and point of view, Letha's skepticism is only reinforced by the supporting information the reader has absorbed throughout the rest of the novel. Where Jade operates under the rules of narrative, inside the fictionalized universe of the writing itself — where horror is real, a potential slasher is a genuine threat, and foreshadowing in epistle is kept subtextual — Letha operates within the narrative as though it is the real world. She feels justified in her reveal of "a personal letter" (167) because *crime* is real, and she functions both in text and metatextually as the reader. Letha cites real statistics, goes to people who will really be able to help, acts as though this is a true story, while Jade acts still as a character. Jade's perspective is the "gospel" (109) by which the reader exists in the text, but with Letha's intervention returns the reader's real-world rationality. In reading Jade's letter and the following confrontation, it is necessary to exist concurrently both in- and outside the diegetic narrative, acknowledging both Jade's (eventually proven correct) horrific, fictionalizing prognosis *and* Letha's factual understanding of trauma and its effects.

These textual artifacts also provide both diegetic and non-diegetic metatextual commentary on the slasher genre as a whole. The "Slasher 101" essays that Jade writes provide an outlet for her musings on horror genre tropes and broader societal themes – observations about revenge and empowerment within the slasher film, for instance – as well as offering unconscious commentary on the plot of the novel itself. Jade states in her letter to Letha that "slasher genre ... rules say that whoever is already chopping necks is going to use for disguise

the thing we're already afraid of" (109). The slasher genre is a representation of social fear: the threat of direct interpersonal violence borne of fear of the cultural outsider; the potentiality of revenge on the broader culture perpetrated by that outsider. Applied to the text of *My Heart is a Chainsaw*, though, "the thing we're already afraid of" is not just interpersonal but intimate violence. Jade hints early in her letter to Letha of her assault and subsequent pregnancy ("a doctor's appointment [she] couldn't do in [her hometown of] Proofrock" [108]), implying that the thing she is "already afraid of," and therefore fixated on, is this deeply intimate violence. As David Roas writes in his essay "The Female Fantastic vs. the Feminist Fantastic: Gender and the Transgression of the Real," "the fantastic text announces the presence of the unspeakable ... without being able to declare it. ... The fantastic traces a route of the unsaid and the unseen in culture" (7).

Amidst the fictionalized fears of *Chainsaw* – elaborate strings of murders perpetrated by masked millionaires – we also sense a tangible and realistic fear: Roas's "unspeakable," which is in fact the inciting action for the plot. In a text that otherwise revels in over-the-top classic slasher-flick inspired violence (the "fantastic"), it is all too conspicuous that this intimate violence goes "unsaid." Jade sees herself as an expert on the "slasher genre rules", and so that is not the thing she fears. Rather, she is afraid of the thing which has "already" happened to her, with this very expertise acting as a "disguise" for her fear.

The reader's perception of the novel is focalized through Jade, and so Jade is the author of the novel's reality. Jade works as the lens through which the reader understands the world of the story, but this lens is warped both by her unwillingness to accept her past and by extension through her consumption of horror, which allows her to rationalize her assault through the tropes and clichés of the genre. Because she refuses to recognize her trauma, it does not exist within the

narrative: it is only with the intervention of other characters that we can recognize something is missing from the narrative she presents. Later, when Jade is able to reveal the truth about her childhood assault, she finally steps outside of this fictionalization of her life: “it’s not just inside her, now, it’s out in the world, it’s real, it really happened” (366). The comfort of iterated genre, the predictable formula she uses to imagine justice in an unjust world, is dissolved with this sudden announcement of the previously unacknowledged: that “what Jade’s been doing all along ... [was] trying to shape an unwieldy string of dead people into a movie, just ... so she can feel some sense of control,” that “all her slasher homework has just been to delude herself” (354). As it is realized in Jade’s personal narrative, as she allows herself to acknowledge the root of her trauma, it is realized — literally made real — in the text and the narrative of the novel.

The letter allows the reader a view simultaneously inside and outside the narrative: it places the consumer as victim and viewer, implicating them in the narrative and forcing them to view it as a work of fiction. *Chainsaw* is a meta-narrative, relying on and supplementing the reader’s underlying knowledge of horror subgenre tropes to form an understanding of the text itself. Enjoyment of the novel by those previously experienced with these conventions is inevitably heightened as departure from these conventions creates the enjoyable tension expected of horror. The reader has expectations of Letha based on her positioning by Jade as the novel’s Final Girl, and the dramatic irony provided by this role means that the audience can speculate on her future based on this role. When these expectations are proven to be only partially correct — as Jade herself assumes the Final Girl’s role in Letha’s stead, becoming “different and more dangerous” (246); as she also assumes the slasher’s quest, taking long overdue revenge on her father — there is a unique pleasure in the twisting of these firmly established archetypes, especially in those who have an intimate knowledge of the genre.

My Heart is a Chainsaw seems to establish a divide between pleasurable and discomfiting horror. By evoking the tropes of the genre, Jones creates a sort of safe zone, where the familiar can be more comforting than fearful. The reveal of the protagonist's emotional drive, the assault at the hands of her father, is made all the more horrifying by contrast to the horror clichés that surround it. The stories of the slasher, the rape-revenge, and the horror-buff-who-saves-the-day have all been written before. Jade's beloved *Bay of Blood* (1971) is a quintessential slasher-revenge film, for example, while Mitchell Lichtenstein's *Teeth* (2007) realizes the *vagina dentata* myth to enact tangible revenge on assaulters. Randy Meeks of *Scream* (1996) and its sequel is probably the original horror-buff audience surrogate, and one of three characters to survive the bloodbath of the first film. These easily recognizable plots and archetypes, especially combined with Jade's preoccupation with Letha-as-Final-Girl, create an assumed portrait of the novel in the mind of the reader. *Chainsaw* is made more impactful by how completely it bends into these tropes, lulling the reader into the security of convention,— and then, in a sort of textual jumpscare, bringing in genuine and real-world fears that were, previously, completely written out of the text. The reader, who by association with both Jade and Letha has been firmly implicated in the text, is made to realize that they are not protected by the safety of convention. The world of *My Heart is a Chainsaw* is shown to be much less like the comfortable, clichéd horror which Jade so adores; much more like the cold, unjust and unpredictable world of reality.

II. Love Letters and Mimetic Desire

It is also easy to interpret *My Heart is a Chainsaw*'s letter as a love letter. Jade's "love affair" (175) with horror obviously exceeds the bounds of the screen: it is the thing that she has

long used to shape her perception of the world; it is the lens through which she filters every aspect of her life. As René Girard proposes in his theory of mimetic desire, human desire is developed through outside influence: “we desire what others desire because we imitate their desires” (Girard 122). The value assigned to the object of desire is created from the desire which others have for it; in short, desire is a learned behavior that is mimicked and reproduced and. Jade’s understanding of the world around her is so shaped by the horror she has consumed that her very desire is an imitation of these narratives. The model on which she bases her life is the slasher film, and so her desire is a reproduction of its desires: for a perfect girl to appear and save the day. The letter becomes not only a love letter to Letha but a love letter to the horror genre itself. Jade’s affection for horror is directly translated to — and in fact the very cause of — her affection for Letha.

Her attraction to Letha, even upon first meeting, is inextricably tied to Letha's perceived place within the canon of horror. She is “the new girl, the final girl” (46), “the focus, the star, the hero”; she is “at the swirling center of it all” (124), existing in a liminal “between-place” where “anything can happen” (100). Letha has the requisite “unerring sense” of the Final girl, “forever stumbling on eviscerated bodies, decapitated heads,” and she, of course, “looks like a model from a magazine” (151), both “princess” and “warrior” (41), making not only Jade’s “face glow ... with heat, with awareness, with knowledge, with possibility” but her “*heart*” (Jones 43) glow as well. Horror has shaped not only her interior view of the world, but the way she moves through it physically and affectively. It has trained her very emotional responses.

Letha represents not only an “airbrushed jack-off” fantasy (44), the perfect “[stand]-in for *male* desires” (Paszkievicz and Rusnak 2; emphasis added). She represents the perfect stand-in for Jade’s desires as well. Jade views Letha as a social and physical ideal precisely due to her

potential to flawlessly fill the role she has been assigned within Jade's fictionalized narrative. She is a perfect fit for Jade's Final Girl, and so she is the perfect girl for Jade. Letha is exactly what Jade wants in her story's Final Girl, even down to her lack of knowledge of the genre. Her *tabula rasa* status means that Jade can mold her to her precise narrative needs, attempting to train her in the way of the slasher even up to the final moments before conflict, where she agonizes over which "single movie ... can show Letha how to fight, how to survive, how to win [the next] night" (295).

Letha occupies a unique place in both the novel and in Jade's horror narrative. The bitterness that Jade feels towards the residents of Terra Nova—the upscale new housing development, separated not only by a lake but by millions of dollars from the failing main body of the small town of Proofrock—is all but irrelevant when it comes to Letha Mondragon. By their second meeting Jade is smitten, saying that "she's not falling in love with Terra Nova ... not all of it, anyway" (156), with the implication being that Jade *is* falling in love with the piece of Terra Nova that is represented by Letha. Letha is such a perfect potential Final Girl that her class is completely ignored: she escapes the resentment that Jade exhibits for everyone else in her tax bracket. As the narrative goes on and Jade inserts herself more into Letha's life, as she tries to encourage her to blossom into a full-fledged Final Girl, their relationship grows both metaphorically and physically closer. Jade, with a host of traumas involving physical touch, becomes more and more tactile with Letha as the novel progresses, almost constantly wishing for contact in the final chapters. In moments of highest tension, the two are intimately close, with "Jade's fingers to [Letha's] mouth," "[Jade's] lips right against Letha's neck" (325), "their fingers intertwine[d]" (336). Jade allows herself to be completely vulnerable with Letha, "sleeping right alongside her" (306), seeing it as "as safe as ... can be" (307) despite the slasher

convention that “proximity to the final girl greatly reduces your likelihood of survival” (306). In the same scene that Jade “is cringing away from . . . skin-to-skin contact” (368) with her father, she “wants to reach for Letha, to hold on to her, to be *held* by her” (381). For Jade, Letha occupies a space outside of social expectation. Their class divide and Jade’s typical desires for interaction are sidelined in favor of assigning Letha a leading role in Jade’s personal narrative, precisely due to Letha’s role in her constructed horror fantasy.

Letha is, it must be noted, *not* Clover’s perfect Final Girl. Clover’s “Her Body, Himself: Gender in the Slasher Film” presents the Final Girl as a surrogate for what she claims is the majority white male audience of the horror genre, a body that allows those who are largely able to avoid violence a way to still have the experience of it. The Final Girl that Clover’s writing describes is simply a “vehicle for [the male viewer’s] fantasies,” not a true character or representation of a woman but an “agreed-upon-fiction” (214). In this vein, it is necessary for the Final Girl to be not only as easy as possible for the audience to project their desires, including sexual desire, onto; they also must be as vulnerable as possible. As critics have noted, though, Clover’s framework ignores the intersection of race with gender, and “the capacity of horror film to mediate contemporary issues of race and racism, which are experienced . . . by an audience more diverse than the white male viewership Clover described” (Paszkiewicz and Rusnak 6). *Chainsaw*’s Letha is a black teenage girl, with the agency afforded by wealth, pushing against the boundaries that Clover’s writing established. If we are to read Jade herself as a secondary or alternative Final Girl, she is even further from Clover’s ideal. She is Native; she is (by necessity of the plot itself) not a virgin; she is explicitly queer. When imagining herself as a “normal” high schooler, she sees herself “writ[ing] love notes to whoever . . . Guy or girl” (Jones 101) with no preference. She has, in a way similar to a transgender person, abandoned her birth name,

transitioning from Jennifer to Jade or JD. She also does all she can to avoid a normative feminine presentation, even shaving her head in the final act—which she is narratively rewarded for, as with “no hair . . . to grab on to” (375) she is able to literally escape the grip of the novel’s killer.

Indeed, Jade is explicit in her gender nonconformity, though not in the way that Clover proposes the Final Girl should be, with easily consumable cis-hetero “boyish[ness]” (204) that allows the male audience to more easily inhabit her body. She represents a non-gender-normative figure, but in a way that “exceeds human categories,” with “femininity [that] is recycled and transformed” (Paszkievicz and Rusnak 3) rather than inverted to cater to a masculine audience. According to Paszkiewicz and Rusnak, “the male spectator is said to identify with the active subject of narration” (4), and so by creating a duo of girls who are near diametrically opposed to the white male audience that Clover proposes, *My Heart is a Chainsaw* places itself in contrast to these predetermined genre conventions. Jones’s Final Girl – or Girls, as the case may be – was not written for Clover’s audience of teenage boys but for the girls themselves.

Letha—not Clover’s, but *Jade’s* perfect Final Girl—serves simply as a conduit, a vehicle for the desire which she has learned from narrative observation. Jade’s apparent feelings for Letha, then, are not simply feelings for Letha. She is made a figurehead, a synecdoche for the entire genre in which Jade has assigned her a role. Letha is Jade’s love of horror made material, given shape by her own efforts. Jade is the author of the novel’s narrative, and so is herself the audience that is being catered to.

III. The Essay and Meta-Genre

Set outside of the text both visually and chronologically, the essays that appear throughout Stephen Graham Jones’s *My Heart is a Chainsaw* provide insight not only into their

author's mind but into the genre of the text. As mentioned earlier, Gérard Genette breaks literary works down into the categories of text, the main communicative body of the work itself, and paratext, the additional pieces which are presented alongside this main body. The paratexts of a novel are a sort of "threshold" or "undecided zone" between the textual narrative and the discourse surrounding it, residing in "a zone ... of *transaction*," (261) where information exists liminally, regarding the text from the outside at the same time that it influences it from within. The presentation of essays within *Chainsaw*, then, regardless of their inclusion within a fictionalized text, can be read as a real-world commentary both on the story of the novel itself and on the broader horror genre.

The essays of *My Heart is a Chainsaw* deliberately stand apart from the main text of the novel. They are printed in a different font than the text of the novel proper and are all headed by the underlined "Slashers 101," visually demarcating them as separate from the narrative they comment upon. The reader encounters them episodically, as their various topics become relevant to the themes of the text, though in-narrative time they are produced over the course of an entire high school career as History class assignments by Jade, the novel's protagonist and self-proclaimed horror movie aficionado. While large spans of time often stand between Jade's writing of these essays, they are presented regularly, though out of chronological order, to the reader. The reader experiences this disjointed, out-of-time quality in part by the non-pagination of these essay sections; it is as if the very pages are located outside of the story's space, nestled between the diegetic chapters. Contrasting the way in which the letter enforces the chronology of the plot upon the reader, with the reader experiencing the delivery of information in tandem with the character receiving said letter, these essays are free floating within the timeline of the

narrative, having already been both produced and experienced within the narrative space.

Chainsaw's essays exist outside of the temporal space of the story entirely.

The novel's first essay is cinematically placed between the cliffhanger of Jade's suicide attempt—the visceral image of “her blood . . . pooled on the surface of the gelid lake,” (Jones 32)—and the reveal of her survival and subsequent eight-week “spring break” “in a psych ward down in Idaho falls” (35). This introductory lesson to Jade's “Slasher 101” course—written, of course, during the previous October to “honor [her] church's holy days” (33)—offers an overview of the subgenre, explaining the most basic driving force of the slasher: “REVENGE plain and simple” (33). She references eight seminal slasher titles in the short two-page essay, attempting to pack the reader (whether fictional character or otherwise) as full of horror knowledge as the pages themselves are. This first essay almost immediately departs from any discussion of history, slasher or otherwise, choosing to focus instead on theme and motif, as “what's first and almost first isn't as important as what's INSIDE” (33); the reader's attention is drawn immediately, then, to an element of horror completely divorced from chronology or history. It becomes immediately apparent that the framework the narrative sets out for these essays—they are assignments for a History class—is nearly irrelevant. Even the form is not what would be expected from a standard academic essay, with writing full of contractions, colloquialisms, and both first- and second-person pronouns. Their stylings as History papers simply provide an excuse to fit them into the narrative space, as they are otherwise located outside of it completely.

As the narrative draws to a close, the final essay of the novel works to collapse the distance which has been created by the inclusion of these artifacts. It is placed again in a liminal zone, an uncertain gap between Jade's potential death (this time crushed inside “a pile of rotting

elk,” “a mound of corpses” (322), on the run from the novel’s slasher) and the reveal of her survival the next day, just before the novel’s penultimate chapters. Written for the Friday the 13th just before spring break, this essay is the last before Jade’s suicide attempt, and so it is also the last before the timeline of the novel itself. It seems to narrow the chronological gap between the metatext and the text proper, as this final essay in the novel is also “the very end of [Jade’s] extra credit career” (328) marking the only time that the order in which the essays were written is reproduced in the same order in text.

The fear of *My Heart is a Chainsaw* is derived only partially from the horror itself. The generally brief descriptions of gore or violence throughout, no matter how visceral – as in Jade’s two mortally close calls, the recreations of her favorite film’s climaxes, or any of the novel’s death scenes – generate temporary discomfort or disgust but not the lasting thread of tension produced by true horror. Rather, Jones creates genuine fear in *Chainsaw* by using these essays to create suspense. The entire novel is written in the present tense, mimicking the way in which a horror movie is viewed: experienced at the time that it is viewed, in tandem with the characters, with “audience time and narrative time collapse[d] into each other,” with “no possibility of a transcendent position” (Stewart 34), as the reader is incorporated into the narrative. The metatextual artifacts, then, completely out of time in the narrative, serve as involuntary intermissions – space to decompress and digest, to explore the broader implications of the events of the story itself – for the reader to take up this “transcendent position.” The temporal displacement of the essays, and the expectations formed by the constant discussion of the slasher, especially in the early chapters of the novel, creates inevitable anticipation in the reader. The gaps in knowledge formed by this distorted chronology are compounded by the overeducation on

the slasher subgenre's conventions and plotting, encouraging the reader to assume the direction of the narrative and preemptively dread the turning of the page.

The essays, which grow longer and longer as the novel continues, become more and more cumulative, requiring close reading even at the novel's climax. Placed at moments of high intensity – especially those in-between liminal states where the stakes are highest – the metatextual elements of the narrative stall the reader, forcing a pause in the flow of the story. This dilation of time, the manufacturing of distance between events in the narrative, seems to counter the formula of the slasher — a genre that relies so intensely on the building of narrative tension. Typically, Freud's Masterplot is the model that we use to visualize the arc of a story, with rising and falling actions directly preceding and following a narrative climax. Susan Winnett, in her "Coming Unstrung: Women, Men, Narrative, and Principles of Pleasure," takes exception to the idea that narrative desire is entirely reliant on the bell curve of build and then climax, pointing out that this map of pleasure means that narrative "desire would be, even at its inception, desire for the end" (5). The essays of *Chainsaw*, then, serve to simultaneously bring the reader closer to the horror genre, educating them on the conventions within while deliberately separating them from the typical structure of the horror plot. They allow not only space to foreshadow and build depth into the text of the novel, but *time* to evoke the reactions which the author desires. Still, the suspense – the true terror of not knowing – of the slasher film is recreated on the page, at the same time that very page is educating the reader on the intricacies of the slasher film.

As *Chainsaw* itself draws to a close, there is less need for the manufactured space between narrative and the metatextual artifacts as the knowledge gap – the deficit between the characters' experiences and the readers' experiences – lessens. It is the only essay of the

“Slasher” crash course that exceeds the History extra-credit paper’s 2-page limit, filling a full extra page. The metatextual space, the fictionalized non-fiction of Jade’s horror musings, begins to encroach on the narrative itself, carving out more space for the celebration of, rather than the experience of, horror. While Jade seems to have accepted the end of her “Slasher 101” career, it is almost as though the narrative itself has not, trying to buy more time before the requisite bloodbath of the novel’s final act.

Just like the letter of *My Heart is a Chainsaw*, these essays work to draw the reader away from reality. Rather than bring the audience closer to the story by way of character, though, these essays seem to give closer insight into the genre of horror itself. Serving as both a diegetic and non-diegetic crash course on the slasher subgenre, they collapse the space between the reader and the tropes and clichés that they explain, allowing the audience to more clearly understand their utilization within the novel itself. They effectively establish *Chainsaw* within the broader canon of horror media, which Jones expands outside of literature entirely, focusing rather on the theory of the horror film. These essays are clearly well researched, tracing the evolution of the slasher all the way back to its foundation in the Italian Giallo – “which is a word that means yellow and a name that means ‘trashy movie with a bodycount’ ... like a proto slasher” (Jones, 157) – discussing the development of every aspect of the subgenre, from the quintessential mask to the inevitable unmasking. This referential, almost obsessive knowledge of the horror genre seems in itself to be a reference to the meta-horror films that became so popular at the turn of the century – including the parodic and genre-aware *Cabin in the Woods* (2011); *Behind the Mask: The Rise of Leslie Vernon* (2006), with its titular horror-buff-turned-killer; and the film that is widely credited with being the originator of the meta-horror subgenre, Wes Craven’s *Scream* (1996), which is of course referenced in the first “Slashers 101” installment. Jones writes a

narrative that is too aware of its predecessors not to be self-conscious of its place, and in enforcing this consciousness it fully envelops the reader into the genre it inhabits.

These essays, though delivered through a fictionalized frame and by a fictionalized author, allow the novel's author space to comment on the genre of horror and the nature of fear itself. They work to bring the reader closer to the genre of the text, carving out an area not only within the narrative space but the narrative *time* to consider the broader scope of horror; they distance from the story at the same time that they give intimate insight into its very formulation. These essays simultaneously break and maintain the tension so integral to the horror plot, alienating the reader from the text, both temporally and epistemologically, in order to bring the reader closer to the text with deeper understanding.

Jawbone: Subversion of Form to Communicate the Incommunicable

I. Essays and the Formal Object

Like *My Heart is a Chainsaw*, Mónica Ojeda *Jawbone*, translated by Sarah Booker, is deeply concerned with the conventions of the horror genre. The story centers on the violent, co-dependent relationship between two teenage girls, Annelise and Fernanda, and a teacher at their exclusive all-girls school, Miss Clara. Annelise and Fernanda are obsessed with horror in all forms, from classic films and Gothic literature to online Creepypastas² and snuff videos. The reader is allowed only disjointed flashes of their histories: the murky circumstances surrounding the death of Fernanda's younger brother; Annelise's fraught relationship with her mother; a violent encounter with two of Clara's past students that deeply traumatized her. Upon discovering an abandoned house in the woods with their group of friends, their fascination with horror blossoms into Annelise's creation of a new religion centered on femininity, puberty, and the fear inherent to both these states.

The novel itself is a collage of many different temporal spaces and forms, varying wildly in style and length from chapter to chapter. Some chapters feature traditionally formatted prose narration, while others present the reader with one-sided transcripts of therapy sessions or artifacts consisting of embedded lists or poetry—and in one case, an entire academic essay—written by the novel's characters. These extra texts are presented quite literally as paratext, supplying “a more pertinent reading” (Genette 261) without being necessarily integral to the story itself. They act as a supplement to the narrative sections, allowing insight both into character and into the themes of the novel itself. The wide variety of these texts, the distortion of the standard form of the novel, show many facets of the characters within, themselves lending a

² A portmanteau of “creepy” and “cospypasta” (a term for viral copy-and-pasted text), referring to user-generated, online horror stories akin to urban legends.

certain suspense to the narrative as more and more pieces of the story are magnified and revealed.

Jawbone fits more smoothly with Julia Kristeva's theory of the abject than either of the two novels thus far discussed, specifically with its use of distorted syntax and hyphenated compounds—and Ojeda certainly is familiar with the themes of Kristeva's writings, quoting *Powers of Horror* in one of the novel's ten epigraphs. Ojeda's writing, like Kristeva, is deeply fascinated not only with the boundaries of the self generally but with the instances of the relationship between mother and child specifically. *Jawbone*, even in the traditionally formatted sections, is deeply poetic, offering profound and disturbing prose from even the most mundane images. It perfectly encapsulates Kristeva's discussion of poetry as an abject form: the fear or *feeling* within the text dependent on "neither narrative nor theme but a recasting of syntax and vocabulary" (141). As Annelise puts it herself, "poetry is really scary" (Ojeda 193). In her Translator's Note at the end of the novel—a much less metatextual instance of paratext—Sarah Booker notes that Ojeda's extensive use of hyphenated compound words ("sleeping-angel-of-history voice") reflects not only the tone of the adolescent girls in the novel but their "subversive, anti-authority urges" (263).

Indeed, the novel takes advantage not only of broader forms but specific, word-to-word instances of syntactical "recasting" to reframe the meanings of language itself. French feminist critic Hélène Cixous, in her 1975 essay "The Laugh of the Medusa," proposes an inherently feminine form, *écriture féminine*, or "new insurgent writing" (880), which counters the rules of what she calls the "phallogocentric tradition" (879) of literature. She charges women with producing writing based on feminine pleasure and bodily experiences, avoiding the structure (and strictures) of masculine reason and rhetoric in favor of more fluid, unconventional,

stream-of-consciousness styles. To return to Winnett's "Coming Unstrung," she apparently takes inspiration from Cixous, countering the popular conception that the pleasure of the novel is aligned with Freud's masculine pleasure principle—the idea that the pleasure of reading is comparable to the male climax. Winnett takes exception to the idea that narrative desire is the "desire for the end" (5)—entirely reliant on the bell curve of build and then climax rather than pleasure derived from the experience of reading in itself. In contrast, her morphologically feminine plot follows a cycle of "tension and resolution" (5), representing the form of female, rather than male, pleasure.

These arguments, though following a somewhat outdated and bioessentialist binary mode of thinking about gendered experiences, are nonetheless still valuable in examining the history of feminist, embodied writing. This history allows insight into the reasoning for the non-chronological, temporally overlapping form of the narrative of *Jawbone*. The novel begins after the narrative climax (in "tomorrow, today, the future-present" [41]), quickly shifting to a reveal of the inciting action; this disorienting temporal movement continues throughout. Kristeva's abject exists where literature's "makeup changes; its linearity is shattered, [where] it proceeds by flashes, enigmas, short cuts, incompleteness, tangles, and cuts" (141), just as Ojeda organizes (by disorganizing) the story of *Jawbone*. We can infer, then, that form is something absolutely integral to the understanding of Ojeda's work.

Formally, the most unique and distinct section of *Jawbone* is the *Moby Dick* essay at the center of the novel. Like the essays scattered throughout *My Heart is a Chainsaw*, it allows insight past the bounds of narrative, into the author's thoughts on the horror genre. One of the longest continuous sections in the novel, it is stylized as a school paper, with academic heading and all. This essay also represents the only moment in the narrative that the novel allows the

reader such blatant access to Annelise's interiority, without mediation through the perspectives of other characters. Generally, we see her as others see her; now, we get access to her interests and fears without, or at least with less, mediation. We see her as flawed in a way that Fernanda is unable to see for the majority of the novel, convincing but constantly contradictory. As one of many examples, she declares what she will write on in her essay and in the next line explains that, "in reality, [it] ... won't be an essay" (179). Annelise is also entirely self-assured, even when she contradicts herself. She writes in an unconventional, non-academic form, refusing to write to "imaginary readers" (179), preferring to address a concrete person as it is "more honest than pretending" (180). This only reaffirms Fernanda's statement to her therapist earlier in the novel: that she can be "possessed by the things she makes up"; that "Anne's imagination is realer than you or my parents or even me" (117). Annelise is so convinced of her own imagination and its reality that she looks down on conventional essayists and their quest to appeal to the anonymous, fictional masses. Even as the essay begins to lapse from whatever semblance of academic tone it possessed, becoming a memoir recounting swathes of Annelise's childhood, it does not focus entirely on her, "ask[ing] that you keep reading," (187) consistently including rhetorical questions for her audience: "Do you remember?" (184) "Don't you think?" (188) "Understand?" (196). The form is almost fluid, constantly shifting and refusing to be pinned down. Ojeda, through Annelise, presents an artifact that refuses to fit into the framework which we would expect from something meant to be simply an academic argument, or in fact any other easily defined form.

This unclassifiable form serves to depict the abject, or ineffable, nature of horror that the essay discusses. Annelise, unlike *Chainsaw's* Jade, is not occupied with the formulaic scare of the slasher: "nothing to do with ghosts, demons, zombies, vampires, or other dangerous creatures

that can be destroyed,” (Ojeda 181). Rather, she concerns herself with those things that can’t “be seen, only imagined”; those things that provoke a feeling of “inquietude” (180). The essay attempts to communicate something that she dubs “white horror,” encapsulating Kristeva’s abject specifically through the lens of pubescence, of the “kind of possession” (185) when “what’s most beautiful and most horrible comes to the surface” (188). This is the closest the reader is allowed to an explicit thesis statement from Ojeda herself. Annelise draws inspiration from H.P. Lovecraft’s cosmic horror, which explores themes of human insignificance and fear in the face of the incomprehensible. Cosmic horror, the essay explains, is reliant entirely on the media that portrays it: “nothing recounted in them can be seen, only imagined ... that’s why it provokes so much fear” (180). To adapt Lovecraft, for example, “they’d have to sacrifice the horror ... it’d be a movie ‘about’ and not ‘of’” (181). This interest in portraying horror legitimately, in a genuinely skin-crawling way, is at the core of *Jawbone*. It is the reason that Ojeda leans so heavily into portrayals of the abject and uncanny; of things that are “close enough that we *should* comprehend [them], but nevertheless, we can’t” (182). It is the reason that the writing itself is so preoccupied with breaking and reshaping the bounds of expectation.

Just as the girls are enamored with the abandoned house at the core of Annelise’s religion for the way “its beauty resided ... in its insinuated horrors,” (12) or Clara longs to tell her dead mother the way that “fear ... was biological and had an / inhuman language” (82), Ojeda allows the implications of horror creeping along the edges of the narrative to supply most of the dread within. The reader is only allowed flashes of the events that traumatized Clara in such a way that she could no longer touch her students; we are never given a full picture. The implication of cannibalism spreads throughout the novel from the title onwards—metaphorical or otherwise—but it never comes to fruition with anything but a series of bruises. The question of

what happened to Fernanda's younger brother, who drowned in a pool as a child, is never answered in any concrete way, with everyone but Annelise asserting that it was an accidental death. Ojeda lets these inferred horrors color the narrative. Yet by keeping them just out of sight, she maintains the imagined fear that is so integral to cosmic and white horror. She is able to ensure that the novel remains in the gray, liminal space of novelistic sympathy: a story "of," and not "about," horror. *My Heart is a Chainsaw*, for example, is a novel that Annelise would probably classify as "about" horror: the self-conscious reflexiveness of Jade's essays and in-narrative acknowledgment of tropes means that it is too aware of itself to be anything else. The suspense of *Chainsaw* is derived from the plot—reliant on stock tropes and taking advantage of the reader's possible awareness of those conventions, and subsequently changing them to produce narrative tension—while the suspense in *Jawbone* is derived from the subversion of style—from the defiance of expectation regarding epistemology and a traditional understanding of language or form.

II. The Letter/Essay and the Ineffable

Of course, as Annelise states outright, *Jawbone's* essay is also a letter. This combining or warping of the academic and the personal is entirely fitting in a novel so convoluted, where everything, from the language used to the timeline of the plot, is so intrinsically twisted. It also perfectly reflects Annelise's disregard for expectations: she takes a distanced, objective, clinical form, and turns it into something close and subjective, addressed to one specific reader. Annelise states directly that "this won't be an essay but a confession" (179), implicating not only her feelings of guilt over the dissolution of her relationship with Fernanda but a sense of religious testament. Confessional writing as a genre, as inspired by Saint Augustine's aptly named

Confessions, intimates deeply personal, autobiographical writing, disclosing especially shameful or impactful events. As the name implies, it is deeply related to the Catholic practice of confession: the divulging of sin and desire to an outside party. This spiritual insinuation is fitting, as this is a personalized manifesto, intended to convert the recipient to Annelise's religion of the White God.

Miss Clara, the literature teacher to whom this "letter/essay" (181) is addressed, represents not only the reader. Again, the essay makes frequent use of second-person pronouns to implicate involvement, charging *you* directly with responding to the text (and sometimes becoming almost interactive, intimating closeness and imploring you to continue reading). She also acts as a stand-in for the concept of language or literature itself. Annelise claims that the essay is only what it is because of Clara's influence; that it is written for her "literature teacher, who rips [it] from my body, from the center of my mind" (180); who, through literature, has opened "inhospitable and invisible doors in our heads" from which there is "no turning back" (182). This mirrors how she talks about literature itself, as something "really scary" though it is "only imagined," (180) existing only behind those "invisible doors." The relationship between Annelise and Clara is deeply intimate, as evidenced by the confessional nature of the letter, but defies easy classification, something amorphous outside of either platonic or familial. "It's normal to lie to your friends" (198), Annelise writes, and she has no problem hiding her gift with language from her mother, but is completely comfortable exposing these secrets to Clara.

In the same way that Jade's letter in *My Heart is a Chainsaw* can be understood as a love letter to the horror genre, Annelise's letter can be read as a love letter to the impact of literature. She is fascinated, even obsessed with the ways that literature, through the suspension of disbelief, can approach the real, in the same way that she can make the imagined into reality,

convincing both herself and others of its existence through language. It is through literature, through fear, and through understanding Clara as a proxy, that Annelise is able to come to a greater understanding of herself. “That incompleteness and indefiniteness,” (192) the almost incommunicable nature of puberty that so disgusts Clara, also disgusts Annelise. The unpredictable and unclean, “primordial” and “possessed” in-between state is so terrifying because it is impossible to quantify and contain, seeping out and in danger of “stain[ing]” (188) not only themselves but those around them. This is the “white” of Annelise’s “white horror”; as she explains, “there’s no one more pervertible or contaminable than a teenager,” (189) embodying both “purity and putrefaction” (188) simultaneously. “God is fear” (189), explains Annelise, and the fear is derived from the ineffability of that white state. Writing “comes easily to” (189) Annelise, and she readily acknowledges that she’s very “good with words” (192). The written word is the realm in which she and Clara are most comfortable, their native language, and those things that evade the scope of language are not only annoying to them; they actively terrify. Thus, the characters are drawn to literature, like *Moby Dick* and the works of Lovecraft, that come closest to capturing these incommunicable concepts. These works “unite pleasure with pain and fear,” (200) encapsulating not only the pleasure of literature itself but of the specific, almost spiritual fear which arises when one is confronted with the unimaginable. The amorphous nature of desire, for Annelise, is inextricably linked with the sensation of fear. Her attitude towards literature, towards the written word that comes so close to expressing that which by nature cannot be expressed, is almost fanatical, mirroring the way that she cares for those around her.

Conclusion

Up to this point, my essay has concerned itself with literary texts. My own relationship with horror, however, began with film—a not uncommon fact, to be sure. Growing up, I wasn't exposed to much fear except for whatever I could come up with in my head. I was a deeply anxious child—I had nightmares about being cornered by jerking, wide-eyed puppets for weeks after I first watched Spielberg's *E.T.*—who grew into a deeply anxious adult. My parents, despite their deep love for speculative fiction, are squeamish about nearly all representations of violence and as a consequence are not horror buffs by any stretch of the imagination. By contrast, my brother, two years older than me (just enough, as a child, to make him seem frightfully adventurous), had a penchant for gore-filled action-horror flicks. Sometimes, when our mother was away for the weekend, he would be able to convince our dad to rent something a little scarier from our small-town family video store. I hated these nights endlessly and usually could only last halfway through the film before scurrying, tail tucked between my legs, back to my room to hide from whatever movie monster he'd chosen to torment me with this time.

This changed at the age of fourteen, when I was introduced to my good friend Carrie White. I'd had some casual encounters with horror movies that I enjoyed with friends, piled onto couches late at night in someone's living room. But Brian de Palma's 1976 *Carrie* was the first horror movie I watched alone and loved. I was drawn to the beautiful, rich colors, to the sweeping soundtrack, and to Carrie herself. In the uncomfortable, in-between space of puberty, I saw myself as fully out of the ordinary—a monster incapable of blending into the social fabric of my peers. Of course, now I have essentially realized that this is a universal constant, that it's an inherent part of the teenage experience to feel out of place and freakish. Yet as a pubescent teen I believed I was fully unique in this regard. *Carrie* offered a figure I felt I could relate to. Carrie

White was weird in a genuine way, a true outcast, and her emotions were real, tangible things that had to be acknowledged under penalty of death, which meant a lot to me as a fairly quiet and nervous kid, whose own feelings were largely ignored. I latched on to her and to any other media that I felt could represent me as a “weird girl”: those characters who could be narratively rewarded for—or, at the very least, empowered by—their strangeness.

I spent the rest of my high school career devouring any and every horror film I could get my hands on, but my favorites to this day remain those about outcast teenage girls: John Fawcett’s *Ginger Snaps*, Andrew Fleming’s *The Craft*, Lucky McKee’s *May*. Even after escaping the bubble of adolescent angst, I still love to see media depicting the strange, obsessive, and monstrous girls that I identified so strongly with as a girl myself. I didn’t actually read *Carrie* until I graduated, in the summer between high school and my freshman year of college. To my enormous disappointment, I didn’t enjoy it in the way I thought I would; maybe because of the love affair I had built up in my own head with Sissy Spacek’s wide-eyed and uncanny depiction. It did, however, shock me into remembering that there was a whole world of horror outside of film: novels that were evolved far beyond the urban legends recorded in the *Scary Stories to Tell in the Dark* books that I had been unable to avoid as a child.

In many ways, I think a love for the horror film necessarily predates a love for the horror novel. The way we enjoy horror is almost inherently social, borne from a love of the campfire ghost story—the interactive elements and implicit inclusion in the narrative—and fostered by the tradition of sleepover movie nights and retellings during lunch breaks. Even before horror itself is enjoyable the social experience is enjoyable, the impact of the fear lessened by the shared viewing and ability to make light of the situation. In contrast, the horror novel is a much lonelier, more solitary experience, joined by others neither through physically nor visually. As I’ve

previously discussed, in many of these contemporary horror novels, knowledge of the genre in film is not required but does broaden the understanding and enjoyment of the story. The authors are not only well-read but well-watched, experts in the realm of horror.

As the current cultural attitude towards horror becomes more and more favorable, there is a desire to make these works more consumable to those who have only shallowly interacted with the genre. Metatextual artifacts may present a way to appeal not just to established horror fans but also to those who have little experience with horror: they enable those seasoned in horror tropes to appreciate the metacommentary of the authors, and they work to more firmly draw the reader into the narrative space, implicating them firmly within the story and providing horror novices an easy entry point to the requisite sympathy necessary to enjoy the genre. Additionally, the ties to the epistolary and Gothic traditions of these metatextual forms give credence to horror as a literary subject, helping the genre to escape the perception (much like its Gothic predecessors in their time) of lowbrow genre fiction—unsubstantial stories meant only to entertain with no thought necessary on the part of the reader. Horror has deeply intimate ties not only to literary but to philosophical history. In order to write compelling horror, the author must be well versed in the work of their contemporaries and predecessors, self-aware of their place in the most self-aware of genres.

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