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### The Narrative of Agency in *High Lonesome Sound*

The Gothic genre has existed since 1764 with the publication of Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto*. Since its introduction, the genre has had an emphasis on female narratives, which have evolved as societal attitudes toward female roles have changed. However, that evolution seemed to have stalled following second wave feminism. My Appalachian Gothic novel *High, Lonesome Sound* is a postfeminist narrative of agency where the heroine wins by choosing to choose her power.

According to Luckhurst, early critics of gothics were quite concerned about the genre's female fan base: "The rage for what were termed 'terror novels' by the 1790s was denounced in the critical journals of the period as a danger to the rational and moral probity of their predominantly female readers" (75). In addition to threatening the virtue of soft-headed women, Gothics were associated with the rejection of traditions: "The anti-bourgeois tradition concerns the individual's quest for value through freedom from and rejection of traditional structures. ... The Gothic as a mode can be used to reinforce either perspective, although it lends itself to the anti-bourgeois" (Palmer 167). However, according to Munford and Waters, even with its rejection of traditional structures as it related to females, Gothics tended to cast heroines into the classic role of victim: "The archetypal Gothic victim, shoring her up in the intestinal passages of

a patriarchal labyrinth from which there is no escape, where she will inevitably fall prey to one disaster or another” (135). Disaster via the hands of patriarchal society, these stories seem to say, was simply a woman’s cross to bear in life. This resigned attitude toward victimhood differs from the tropes of the horror novels, which tend to have a male-dominated audience, where, according to Barrette, “much of the attraction comes from a complete lack of agency, of power.” However, regaining that agency is part of the catharsis of those male-driven stories: “We also love the rush of satisfaction when, in many stories, the protagonist somehow manages to overcome the odds” (Barrette 2). But in the Gothic genre--Horror’s histrionic cousin--the opposite seems to be true. Female protagonists may survive the monster but will never overcome their true oppressor: society. They are not allowed to regain agency lost because they never had agency to begin with. It could be argued that these were narratives of empathy that helped female readers find kindred spirits in the victimized heroines of Gothic novels. However, as Gothics evolved, the feminine narratives shifted to reflect the political place of women of their time--from traditional narratives of empathy to narratives of anxiety in mid-20<sup>th</sup> century Gothics to narratives of rejection in second wave feminist Gothics. However, the Gothics of today have not yet evolved to reflect a postfeminist society.

The common tropes of traditional Gothic novels fall into two main categories. According to Harris, in addition to setting and atmosphere tropes, true Gothic also features women in distress who are threatened by powerful and impulsive, tyrannical males. The threat of physical violence to heroines is also pervasive (2). The second category of tropes includes conventions of the Romantic tradition. The tension between a heroine’s true love and her father’s control, illicit love or lust threatening a virtuous heroine, and conflicts involving unrequited love speak to a heroine’s lack of agency in matters of the heart (4). These traditional Gothic tropes reflected the

complex sexual and power politics of a woman's life. As stated before, in pre-feminist Gothic, there is a sense that female readers could escape into these books to find heroines who, like them, felt threatened by powers larger than themselves. However, as the genre evolved into subgenres, such as the Southern Gothics made popular by William Faulkner and Flannery O'Connor, settings evolved and themes particular to the antebellum South arose, but the trope of females in peril from the men in their lives remained consistent. In Cormac McCarthy's Appalachian Gothic *Suttree*, the hero Hazel, becomes involved with the unnamed daughter of a river family, but "when she is killed by a rockslide he returns to the city" and later he "falls in with a whore and lives well on her earnings" (Barrette 71). In both of these examples, female characters are either victims of tragedy or society who only serve to help the hero through a transformative arc. They have no agency.

Following the first wave of feminism, Gothics morphed from narratives of empathy to narratives of anxiety, which explored female fears about independence. A perfect example is Shirley Jackson's *The Haunting of Hill House* and its heroine Eleanor Vance. Stephen King's analysis of this novel includes the following description of this anxious heroine: "She is a woman who has been profoundly stunted by her upbringing and family life. When we are inside her mind ... we may find ourselves thinking of that old Oriental custom of foot-binding--only it is not Eleanor's feet that have been bound; it is that part of her mind where the ability to live any sort of independent life must begin" (428). King argues that Eleanor's narcissism is to blame for her descent into madness. However, it could also be argued that she is an example of a woman for whom independence is simply too great a burden to bear: "She feels the irresistible force of the spirits and longs, finally, to submit to them" (427). She was a woman raised in a society that does not prepare women for independence. Thus, once she wins it, she is incapable of handling

the psychological pressures. Submitting to Hill House and insanity allows her to escape those pressures. Theodora is the foil to Eleanor in the story, and she is everything Eleanor is not-- outgoing and independent, and she is free of family ties and obligations. She's also a lesbian. Jackson seems to imply that Theo's rejection of family and societal pressure to conform is more prepared for the pressures of liberation. It is worth noting that *The Haunting of Hill House* was written in 1959, on the eve of second wave feminism and the sexual revolution, which began less than two years following the book's publication. Theo is a second wave feminist, while Eleanor is a victim heroine from the Gothic of old thrust into a new world where she finally has choices but can't deal with the pressures.

As Gothic novels continued to evolve with the rise of second-wave feminism, there was a shift from the narrative of anxiety to the narrative of rejection. This mode encouraged women to opt out of traditional patriarchal institutions, such as marriage. Theo of *Hill House* was an early example of this sort of heroine, but the true height came with a teenaged girl who was good at killing vampires, Buffy the Vampire Slayer. It took almost two generations for this new type of heroine to appear: "It is not until post-9/11 that we begin to see 'empowered heroines'-- struggling with conventional domestic arrangements--investigate alternative systems of support that might be more accommodating of female independence" (Munford and Waters, 138). Buffy's Scooby Gang is the perfect example of a second-wave heroine turning toward her family of choice. Buffy is also a perfect example of how these heroines also tended to reject traditional female roles in favor of more masculine modes of behavior. "The early generation of postfeminist heroines in *Xena: Warrior Princess*, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, *Dark Angel*, and *Alias* were physically formidable as well as mentally astute" and tended to use somatic power versus intuitive powers found in later, softer Urban Fantasy heroines (140). It's important to

remember that these “somatic” heroines were the product of a genre dominated by Generation X female (and sometimes male) authors raised during second wave feminism. Those stories encouraged women to take back their power, using a more aggressive mode of behavior, such as those seen in the “tough chick wearing leather” archetype so common in Urban Fantasy.

But as we now find ourselves what Munford and Waters call a “postfeminist landscape,” a new type of narrative is needed in the Gothic genre. With the recent decline for the market of the female-centric Urban Fantasy genre, that is to say, supernatural novels written by female authors about female heroines, a vacuum in the market exists for supernatural narratives of feminine agency, which were a hallmark of Urban Fantasy. The majority of female-led Urban Fantasy novels were written in the vein of second wave feminist attitudes toward rejection of monogamy and aggressive feminine behavior. It begs the question of whether readers became fatigued with the glut of second wave heroines and went in search of a new type of heroine that reflected the post-feminist ideal of more flexible gender roles. The time is ripe for an evolution to a more inclusive type of narrative that doesn’t demand women to be sword-wielding Amazons to claim their power. In *High Lonesome Sound*, my Appalachian Gothic novel, I have attempted to create a truly postfeminist heroine in Ruby Barret.

Ruby is from a long line of female intuitives, who can hear the mountain’s song and do folk magic. However, following the death of her mother, eighteen-year-old Ruby can no longer hear that song and feels trapped in her small mountain town. She wants to leave, but her abusive father poses a real threat to her two younger sisters. This conflict reflects problems common for the postfeminist woman. In Waters’ article “The Horrors of Home: Femininity and Feminism in the Suburban Gothic,” she comments on this common type of conflict for postfeminist women: “Torn between fulfilling her own needs and carrying out her responsibilities to others --both

living and dead--her condition speaks to the increasingly complex negotiations that women are required to undertake as they try to balance personal, familial, domestic, and professional obligation” (quoted in Munford and Waters 141-142). So far, Ruby’s character could be seen as a typical Gothic heroine lacking agency, but the shift comes as she faces an evil being that threatens Moon Hollow, in part because of the actions of Ruby’s own father.

In order to own her power and become a post-feminist heroine, Ruby must become differentiated. However, she is still convinced that Moon Hollow and the people in it are the source of her problems. She feels trapped by her responsibility to her family and friends, and she is afraid to assert her own needs. In the moments before she finally comes into her power, she finally realizes: “Home. This was her home. Often it was a dysfunctional home. Sometimes it was a painful one. But laughter also lived in this home, and joy. She didn’t need to leave Moon Hollow to find herself. She just needed to allow herself to be at home here” (451). According to Munford and Waters, this is a rejection of the second wave feminist ideal that to find freedom a woman must first reject familial obligations: “Particular elements of second wave have hewn the female subject into the archetypal Gothic victim, shoring her up in the intestinal passages of a patriarchal labyrinth from which there is no escape, where she will inevitably fall prey to one disaster or another” (135). The narrative of rejection offers only two solutions: escape (which Munford and Waters claim is not possible) or acceptance of her fate. However, Ruby chooses a third, postfeminist path. Owning her power allows her to make choices within the framework of her reality instead of forcing her to either escape or give up. Earlier Gothics didn’t offer this choice because women didn’t have the same options as postfeminist women or even second wavers. In addition, Ruby must reject the legacy of victimhood and rejection she inherited from her mother and grandmother: “This wasn’t her mama’s song or the song of her granny, either.

The melody and words were her song, alone.” (452). With her song infused with her innate power, she defeats the demon and his revenant minions and saves the lives of her friends and family. Once the smoke clears, she chooses to stay in Moon Hollow, honoring her responsibilities to protect those she loves while living in a way that prioritizes her needs as a differentiated woman. She is no longer a victim nor must she become a refugee. She is a woman with agency.

*High Lonesome Sound* is a narrative of agency because it proves heroines are able to defeat both real and metaphorical monsters without sacrificing themselves to the obligations of motherhood or monogamy. She chooses those bonds just as she chooses her fate. She does not have to rely on a gang of friends to give her permission to be herself. She is not the sword-wielding second wave heroine of an Urban Fantasy, the tearful damsel in distress of a historic gothic, nor neurotic heroine driven mad by the pressures of independence. She can have both healthy relationships within her community of birth and live life on her own terms.

The Gothic genre has a rich tradition of exploring women’s roles in society. The heroines found in the different schools of Gothic reflected the attitudes of their time about how women should navigate the realities of their society. Prefeminist Gothics asked women to simply abide. Nineteenth century Gothics explored anxieties about their independence. Second wave feminist Gothic required heroines to reject in order to thrive. But the field is now open for heroines who use their power to choose to overcome society’s monsters. *High Lonesome Sound* is hopefully the first of many narratives of agency in the postfeminist Gothic genre.

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