

“A house as old as this”: Domestic Horror in Del Toro’s *Crimson Peak*

Diana Marques

CEAUL-ULisboa, Portugal

Ana Rita Martins

CEAUL-ULisboa, Portugal

Abstract

The importance of ‘place’ in human experience has been widely recognised by scholarship in different fields of study (Smith 1987; Martin 2014; McAndrew 2020) that have pointed out how one’s sense of place and of personal identity are deeply linked. In this context, one of the most relevant places is the house in which one grows up and lives. Traditionally, the home has been depicted as a haven, a shelter from the menaces of the outside world, to where one can safely withdraw. However, what happens when the home creates feelings of horror and oppression, and becomes a site of conflict and brutality?

Guillermo Del Toro’s 2015 gothic film Crimson Peak delves into these questions by introducing a house, Allerdale Hall, and a family, the Sharpes, haunted by a cruel past that is both alive and impossible to forget. In this paper, we intend to show how, by resorting to well-known gothic tropes, Crimson Peak subverts the audience’s expectations of home and forces us to question whether the latter can be a safe space. We also aim to discuss the role of the main female characters whom Del Toro seems to model after the Victorian ideal of womanhood, ‘the angel in the house’, Edith Cushing (Mia Wasikowska), and its/her antagonist, ‘the fallen woman’ and ‘the madwoman in the attic’, Lucille Sharpe (Jessica Chastain), whose sexuality threatens socially accepted norms.

Keywords: Home, Horror, Monstrosity, Space, Femininity.

Introduction: The Home in Gothic Literature

The Gothic, as a literary and artistic movement, emerges in the eighteenth century during the Romantic era, a time of great social, political, economic, and industrial revolutions. The allure of the past and its popular traditions, of a time of magic and mystery, closer to a simpler way of life, in due course leads many to seriously consider the aristocracy’s decay, making it abundantly clear that a transition is on its way. As a social shift seems to be taking place, great changes in what concerns concepts like property, government, and society are also happening. What is more, ideals associated with nature, art, and subjectivity are reassessed, all of which help turn the Gothic into a genre that can reflect people’s anxieties and fears (Botting 2012, 13-14).

The term ‘gothic’ is used for the first time in *The Castle of Otranto* (1764), by Horace Walpole. Considered the first Gothic novel, this work is responsible for

some conventions that became fundamental in later Gothic literary works, such as the use of old, historical settings that often recall medieval times; supernatural or ghostly elements; a melancholic atmosphere; a secret that must be kept. Since the last decades of the eighteenth century, the popularity of Gothic literature has greatly increased, and some of the most important and symbolic works of the genre were published: *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794), and *The Italian* (1797), by Ann Radcliffe, *The Monk* (1796), by Matthew Gregory Lewis, and *Frankenstein* (1818), by Mary Shelley, to mention but a few. In these narratives, the home takes on one of the most distinct and central roles. Whether it is a mansion, a castle or a family home, the house might be the backdrop against which the narrative unfolds or it may even be a character, acquiring a highly symbolic meaning. In literary works, the home is oftentimes a place of shelter, stability, and familiar comfort, and can serve to protect characters from the dangers of the outside world. In the Victorian era, the home appears as a place of refuge in the face of significant social, cultural, and technological changes. However, in Gothic literature it is a haunted place that threatens the characters’ very survival and, thereby, it is a place of horror, which questions the conventional view of the domestic sphere as an idyllic space. On the contrary, the Gothic home is a place of ruin, decadence, and is often in a state of abandonment; it can also be a place of female oppression and control in a period during which female emancipation and women’s rights began to be discussed. As a result, misery, unhappiness, and corruption pervade the Gothic home and can also materialize from within. According to Tamara Wagner, “[d]epicting a Gothic home offered a strategy either to reaffirm or to puncture the idea of a domestic shelter from all these threats” (2014, 110).

What is more, Gothic horror might manifest itself anywhere, a point that makes this genre both disturbing and frightening since its potential is augmented by the fact that there is nowhere to run. Tamara Wagner argues that there are three models of the Gothic “at home” in Victorian fiction; they are:

- (1) the Gothic of what Ruskin terms “that outer world,” a Gothic that helps to establish the home as a shelter by force of contrast, and which is arguably the most straightforward function that Gothic paradigms have in relationship to the Victorian home; (2) a domestic Gothic that not only pervades, but may even originate within the outwardly placid home; and (3) a parodied or mock-Gothic that self-reflexively plays with established paradigms, often while the narrative as a whole harnesses Gothic terror within a homely setting nonetheless. (2014, 111)

Given the goals we aim to achieve in this analysis of the film *Crimson Peak* (Guillermo del Toro, 2015), the model that best applies to Allerdale Hall is the second as most elements associated with horror and the supernatural take place inside the mansion, which in turn is linked to the Sharpe family and the horrific acts committed by them *inside* their home. In the film, the private sphere, so often sanctified through the female figure that safeguards society's traditional values, is subverted and presented as a violent, dangerous place dominated by two female characters who mirror and contrast each other: Edith Cushing (Mia Wasikowska) and Lucille Sharpe (Jessica Chastain).

The Home in *Crimson Peak*: Domestic Horror and Femininity

Directed by acclaimed Mexican director Guillermo del Toro, the feature film *Crimson Peak* begins with a close-up shot of one of the main female characters, Edith Cushing. As the camera slowly focuses on Edith, her loose blonde hair and bloodied face, hands, and clothes stand out; the first words she utters, "Ghosts are real. This much I know" (*Crimson Peak*), foreshadow this is a 'story with ghosts in it', though not necessarily, as Edith at one point clarifies, a ghost story. The funeral of Edith's mother (Doug Jones) follows the first scene, and it becomes apparent that the young woman before us seems to be haunted by the supernatural since her childhood years, namely by the spirits of the dead. In fact, one of the many souls that communicates with Edith is her mother who, at the beginning of the narrative, returns from the dead to warn her young daughter about the dangers of the mansion also known as Allerdale Hall, "My child, when the time comes, beware of Crimson Peak" (*Crimson Peak*). The Sharpe family manor is thus identified as a threatening space that not only dominates the film but also troubles the lives of the main characters.

The mother's warning comes too soon, though, and when fourteen years later Edith meets Sir Thomas Sharpe (Tom Hiddleston), an English baronet, and his sister, Lady Lucille Sharpe, she is far from suspecting the risks associated with such an encounter. In fact, although Thomas and Edith's first meeting seems fortuitous, the heroine later realizes it was planned by the Sharpe siblings whose goal is not, as it turns out, to recover their family's lands and fortune through the acquisition of legitimate funding, but through marriage, namely between Thomas and wealthy heiresses like Edith. What is more, when Thomas attends a business meeting with a group of investors in Buffalo, New York, Carter Cushing (Jim Beaver), a successful businessman and Edith's father, mentions that the Sharpe had already tried (and failed) to secure funding for Thomas' digging machine in other big cities, specifically London, Edinburgh, and Milan, which correspond to the cities of origin of Thomas' late wives. Without quite understanding why, Carter Cushing is suspicious of Thomas, claiming that "[t]here's something about him that I don't like. What? I don't know" (*Crimson Peak*).

As the single heirs of Allerdale Hall, a decaying mansion in Cumberland, England, the siblings seem determined to keep the Sharpe house and lands, as well as the family's perverted secrets. As already mentioned, the home plays a key role in Gothic literature where it is often a place of imprisonment and female oppression, especially during the Victorian period. The home can thus be viewed as a place of tyranny, violence, persecution, and abuse which, as argued by Musap, helps us to better understand how private spaces reinforce patriarchal structures (2017, 5). Representations of the Gothic home also allow us to think about the female experience given that they subvert traditional portrayals of the domestic or private sphere. By depicting failed mothers and decayed houses as well as documenting the disintegration of sentimental ideas about family life and domesticity, Gothic narratives focus on the corruption of the domestic ideal, ultimately revealing it is nothing more than an ideological construction (Musap 2017, 6). Such themes have a long tradition in Gothic literature and are found in well-known works like *Jane Eyre* (1847), by Charlotte Brontë; *Bleak House* (1853), by Charles Dickens; *The Turn of the Screw* (1898), by Henry James; and even in the twentieth century, in contemporary Gothic novels, like *Rebecca* (1938), by Daphne Du Maurier; or *The Haunting of Hill House* (1959), by Shirley Jackson, to name but a few. Del Toro's feature film, *Crimson Peak*, may be added to this list of Gothic fiction since it not only makes use of the same themes but also pays special attention to female characters and the haunted house. However, unlike conventional Gothic narratives where women are passive victims that willingly accept to be governed by someone else (Day 1985, 18), that is, a male character, in Del Toro's work women are the driving forces, in particular Edith Sharpe, né Cushing, and Lucille Sharpe.

Edith, the film's narrator, is a young woman determined to have a successful career as a writer. Little concerned about securing an advantageous marriage, the American heiress is a modern woman of strong opinions and defined goals that include publishing a Gothic novel like one of her favourite authors, Mary Shelley. Yet, while these attributes distinguish her from the typical heroine of Gothic fiction, Edith moves in a male-dominated world. Although Edith seeks to become independent and avoids acting according to social norms that dictate she should marry a man of equal (or possibly higher) standing – a figure embodied by her childhood friend and suitor, Dr Alan McMichael (Charlie Hunnam) – she also incarnates the polarised view Victorian society had of women: they were either 'angels in the house' (saints) or 'fallen women' (sinners). Edith, a modest, naïve young woman, embodies the 'angel in the house', an idea conveyed not only through her light-coloured wardrobe, but also through her long, blond hair, blue eyes, and delicate features¹. The contrast between her and Lucille, the dark, violent side of femininity in *Crimson Peak*, is apparent from their first dialogue, which signals that the latter plays the role of the 'fallen woman'.

After accompanying Thomas Sharpe to a party at the McMichaels', which is followed by Alan's request that she should remain cautious, Edith meets Thomas and Lucille at a park in the city where the two women talk about butterflies, moths, and the natural world. The scene is particularly relevant because the butterfly is a symbol for Edith:

Lucille Sharpe: [Looking at the dead butterflies] They're dying. They take the heat from the sun, and when it deserts them, they die.

(...)

Lucille Sharpe: [Looking at Edith] Beautiful things are fragile... At home, we have only black moths. Formidable creatures, to be sure, but they lack beauty. They thrive on the dark and cold.

Edith Cushing: What do they feed on?

Lucille Sharpe: Butterflies, I'm afraid.

(*Crimson Peak*, 2015)

On the one hand, the exchange implies that – just like the butterflies dying on the lawn – Edith too will not survive for long outside Buffalo, her safe space. On the other, it suggests Lucille is like the moths that inhabit Allerdale Hall: magnificent and resilient, but unpleasant to the eye, she too can only prosper in the darkness. Shortly after, the camera closes in on a butterfly being devoured by ants – another symbolic moment that serves to highlight the danger Edith is in. Notwithstanding, it is only when she marries Thomas, following her father's death, and moves to Allerdale Hall that Edith stands in direct conflict with Lucille.

The first time the audience catches a glimpse of Allerdale Hall, the Sharpe's family home, is after Edith and Thomas' marriage, which takes place off-screen, when they travel to England to start their life together. The mansion is a stark contrast to the sets seen so far: spaces in Buffalo are generally aired, well-lit, and seemingly bathed by a golden light that conveys comfort and security, while Allerdale Hall is cold, dark, and imposing. Perhaps this is because the audience's perception of the manor is mediated by the American heiress who had never lived outside of Buffalo, her 'home', a sheltered, familiar world. Located in a land of red clay where nothing grows, Allerdale Hall stands for a new, unknown place, which may represent the dangers and hardships of living in a mysterious, remote place with people who are, in fact, strangers.

Hence, the film introduces two binary landscapes: on the one hand, the narrative begins in a modern, American city but, on the other, most of the action takes place in a dated, decaying house in the English countryside. Furthermore, the Sharpe's property seems to stand within a heterotopic dimension² where the supernatural finds a place to become visible (Galiné 2015, 80). If Buffalo is a bustling city full of light – the symbol of a nation on its way to significant technological breakthroughs – the Sharpe's home, which Thomas unsuccessfully tries to bring into the era of technological progress, represents ancient Victorian families, whose fame and fortune are the result of hereditary privilege. This point is highlighted by Carter Cushing who, during their meeting, tells the English

baronet that, "[t]he men at this table, all of us, came up through honest, hard work. [...] In America we bank on effort, not privilege. That is how we built this country" (*Crimson Peak*, 2015).

When the newlyweds walk into Allerdale Hall for the first time, the point-of-view shot is taken from within the house and once more the contrast between light and dark is noticeable. The outside of the house is well-lit, but the inside is dark; along with the characters, the audience can hear the creaking floorboard that has started to collapse on account of the mines below. According to Marine Galiné, Allerdale Hall is a liminal space where the Gothic identity is revealed through its aesthetic construction: *Crimson Peak* is dark and majestic, but it is also "empty, cold and damp, and of course [a] dark castle" (2015, 80). Like many other Gothic houses, it too is inhabited by a past that is both alive and impossible to forget. Eric Savoy argues that mansions, like the one that belongs to the Sharpe family, personify the Freudian *unheimlich* that is fated to return and become uncanny after remaining hidden for so long (1998, 9). The moment Edith enters the house also has a significant meaning because the house is a living entity, a view supported by Galiné who claims that "[i]t is first shown as a decaying entity being penetrated by a foreign female body destined to regenerate it, when Thomas and Edith are seen crossing the threshold of the main hall, with the camera shooting from the inside" (2015, 80). Much like Edith feels threatened by this new, alien place, the house and Lucille feel intimidated by this person walking into their lives, especially because the latter represents an old, dysfunctional order, while the first symbolises a new, progressive social order (Galiné 2015, 80).

As Edith explores the mansion, its interior is disclosed through a low-angle shot that highlights the influence the house has over its inhabitants, especially Edith who is in a more vulnerable position. The shot reveals Edith's point of view as it shifts to focus on the open ceiling and the snow falling indoors. In these first moments, Thomas explains that "with the cold and the rain it is impossible to stop the damp and erosion, and with the mines down below, well, the wood is rotting, and the house is sinking" (*Crimson Peak*). The sequence of scenes that introduces Allerdale Hall to the heroine (and the audience) ends with a high-angle shot from the balustrade, on the top floor, of a young woman alone, standing at the centre of the mansion's entrance, which seems to suggest the house itself is watching Edith. At the same time, the audience's attention is drawn to her frailty and petiteness in such a grand, imposing place.

Finally, this sequence exemplifies the ideas put forth by Gaston Bachelard in his well-known work, *The Poetics of Space* (*Poétique de l'Espace*, 1957), where the philosopher argues that topoanalysis, that is, the psychological study of human identity as it relates to physical locations, is key to reach the outermost corners of the human subconscious (1972, 24-25). According to Bachelard, the home, as the first refuge, the first shelter from outside threats, is an essential part of people's lives, "[w]ithout it, man would be a

dispersed being. It maintains him through the storms of the heavens and through those of life. It is body and soul. It is the human being's first world. [...] Life begins well, it begins enclosed, protected, all warm in the bosom of the 'house'" (1972, 7). In spite of that, *Crimson Peak* is hardly a place of shelter and safety; on the contrary, because of the brutal nature of the events that took place inside its walls, the dangers lie within the house, not outside. Bachelard further suggests that a parallel can be established between the structure of a house and the structure of the human mind itself. In this framework, the attic stands for reason, while the cellar symbolizes the irrational, the subconscious that lies hidden in the dark. Hence, the house can be read as a symbol of the human psyche.

However, albeit agreeing that Allerdale Hall plays with these concepts, it should be noted that the "home [on the whole] in the gothic in general, and in *Crimson Peak* in particular, is a place of tyranny, oppression and persecution" (Galinié 2015, 81). The Sharpe's manor is the locus of memories and ghosts, where secrets are kept both in the attic and in the cellar. Indeed, it is only when Edith goes to the cellar that she gains access to past events that in turn allow her to free herself from Allerdale Hall and the Sharpe siblings (Galinié 2015, 81). Having witnessed all kinds of atrocities, the cellar is a rather violent part of the house, and it is also where Lucille has hidden the bodies of her victims: her own mother and Thomas's three dead wives. If Bachelard's analysis is to be taken into account, the cellar is "the *dark entity* of the house" (1972, 18) where Lucille's monstrous crimes are hidden from sight. Yet, it is in this very same place that Edith can finally begin to understand what is happening as she finds out more about the Sharpe family. In turn, the attic, which Bachelard equates with reason, hides a secret too: Lucille's bedroom and, as Edith finds out, the siblings' incestuous relationship. The fact that the attic hides transgressions serves to challenge its supposed rationality and, simultaneously, reveals the unstable nature of the house's true proprietor, Lucille (Musap 2017, 7). All things considered, the audience can anticipate that both the top and the bottom floors hide obscure secrets that will be brought to light as the plot unfolds.

Once inside the house, the threats that lie in wait present themselves not only through the ghosts that inhabit *Crimson Peak*, but also through a growing feeling of discomfort caused by the odd sounds Edith hears: the creaking floor, hushed voices, and the hollowing wind. The colour palette chosen for the interior of the house is equally significant as it accentuates the hostility of the mansion and the dark nature of its secrets. The mansion's rooms and hallways, full of shadows, and dark green, red, and ochre hues, reminds us of Terence Fisher and Mario Bava's cinematic work while the use of colour and saturation evoke John Atkinson Grimshaw and Caspar David Friedrich's paintings (*IGN*)³. In *Crimson Peak*, del Toro invokes the kind of aesthetics found in prior horror films and pays them tribute while inscribing his own film onto the genre. According to the director,

these elements confer a sense of old to the film even though he resorts to contemporary filming techniques, namely digital special effects. The use of specific colours and saturation is, del Toro recognises, crucial to his storytelling. On this point, we would add that in addition to making a relevant contribution to the film's aesthetics, the colour palette used also has a symbolic meaning, which we believe is attested by the clothes worn by the two main female characters: Edith only dresses light-coloured outfits in white and/or yellow, and Lucille, much like Thomas, is always seen in dark attires.

Edith Cushing's colour of choice, white, is traditionally associated with light and, therefore, Good; it has roots in the human psyche and can be used to inspire admiration and reverence, but also fear (St. Clair 2016, 39). Often linked with chastity, especially when worn by women, white is the colour of initiation or passage, of the first part of a journey, or of transformation (Chevalier and Gheerbrant 1982, 128-130). Black, on the other hand, is its opposing colour which, much like the first, can be positioned at the extreme ends of the chromatic scheme; it may signify the absence of colour or the sum of all colours (Chevalier and Gheerbrant 1982, 541). Preferred by the Sharpes, black is more frequently associated with the primordial darkness, chaos, and death – all readings that help the audience understand the symbolic construction of Allerdale Hall and of the characters that inhabit it. The director's conscious use of colour is even more noticeable when, after witnessing a ghost emerge from the floor and (seemingly) begin to chase her, Edith is taken into her room and comforted by Thomas and Lucille. While the siblings stand over her clad in black, Edith, who is dressed in her trademark white, sits in-between them, while a light seems to radiate from above. In addition to the colour contrast, this scene shows the vulnerable position Edith is in as she is manipulated by the Sharpes, poisoned by Lucille, and remains unaware of the horrors that have taken place in *Crimson Peak*. When she attempts to leave, Lucille simply replies: "Edith, this is your home now. You have nowhere else to go" (*Crimson Peak*, 2015), which confirms Edith's (and the audience's) feelings of confinement. What is more, the scene where Edith walks down the mansion's immense halls alone in the middle of the night with nothing but a white gown, her long blonde hair loose, as she holds a candlestick to light the way, is a reinterpretation of the gothic heroine who wonders around great castles, running away from oppressive male figures. The film thus seems to suggest that Edith is the light that will finally uncover the Sharpes' dark secrets.

Another relevant aspect is the fact that the ghosts who inhabit Allerdale Hall are all crimson-coloured, resembling bloodied, mangled bodies. Aside from being an obvious reference to their horrific deaths, the use of this colour calls to mind feelings of aggression, which may possibly be because red has been the colour of danger and interdiction for ages (Pastoureau 2019, 218). The ghosts can hence be interpreted as a cautionary sign, warning Edith of the great danger

she is in. According to Pastoureau, even though red is the colour of seduction, eroticism, and femininity, it has also been symbolically used to prescribe, proscribe, condemn, and punish certain behaviours (2019, 222). As a result, it is not surprising that red is the colour of the film's female ghosts⁴ who, despite their menacing appearance, all try to warn Edith about the dangers lying in wait and urge her to find out who they are. One might further speculate that the ghosts symbolise the Sharpes' obsessive desire to remain in Allerdale Hall and what they are willing to do to fulfil that wish. Galiné claims that "[...] their mother, the murdered brides (Pamela Upton, Margaret McDermott and Enola Sciotti) and even Lucille's new-born all testify to the siblings' unresolved relationship with their own family (name), sterility and mortality" (2020, 86).

Finally, in addition to black, red is a colour associated with Lucille Sharpe, who is first introduced playing the piano at a party held at the McMichaels family home. Wearing a dark red dress, Lucille stands out among the crowd of young, upper-class American women whose modern attires, especially Edith's glamorous white dress, seem to highlight the former's old-fashioned choice of wardrobe. Once again, the colour palette of the two female characters gives away their opposing status, which is also reinforced in the scene they share at a park in Buffalo: while Lucille wears a black dress with a red flower in plain sight, Edith is in her characteristically yellow and white colours⁵.

Besides the use of colour, the rivalry between the two main female characters is felt throughout the whole film, though some scenes make it clearer, as for instance when Edith and Thomas arrive at Allerdale Hall and Edith – now presumably the owner of the house along with her husband – asks Lucille for a copy of the mansion's keys. However, Lucille refuses to give them to her claiming there are rooms that are simply too dangerous for Edith to walk into. Lucille's refusal is followed by a close-up of her hands avidly clutching the keys around her waist, which seems to reinforce her connection to the house as if the two are one being who oversees and controls everything. In fact, there are numerous shots of Lucille possessively holding the keys, a choice that both highlights how the two are linked and suggests it is Lucille, the 'keeper of the keys', to use Galiné's term, who controls *Crimson Peak* and, therefore, those who inhabit it.

The association between Lucille and Allerdale Hall is progressively noticeable as the plot unfolds. First, Lucille's choice of wardrobe is revealing since, as mentioned, both the house and Lady Sharpe share the same dark colour palette, suggesting that "Lucille's body is subsumed into the castle, both being monstrous entities uniting in a disturbing chimera" (Galiné 2020, 82). Second, the recurrent close-ups of Lucille's face when she seems to be spying on Edith (in addition to the ones where she is seen holding the keys) help convey the idea that she can physically merge with the house. One of such instances is seen when Edith and Thomas share their first passionate kiss in his bedroom in the attic while several dolls watch them. Seconds later, Lucille walks into the room with tea, a sequence

that seems to imply that everything in the house is an extension of Lucille's watchful eyes. In fact, the only time Lucille loses track of the newlyweds and, ergo, control over them is when they spend a night together in a room at the post office. Outside Allerdale Hall and its restraining gaze, Edith and Thomas consummate their marriage but upon returning home Edith must face Lucille who quickly realises they slept together and angrily shouts at Edith, "[t]his is all a game to you" (*Crimson Peak*, 2015). At this point, Edith pretends to feel sick, and while Lucille gets her tea, the first steals a key with the name 'Enola' engraved on it, which the American hopes will let her open a trunk she had already found in the cellar.

In possession of Enola's key, Edith is able to open Enola's trunk to find a gramophone. She also notices several closed wells, but after she breaks one of the locks there seems to be nothing there except red clay. Once Edith leaves though, the audience realises something, or someone, is hidden in these wells. At the same time, Lucille notices she is missing a key and knows Edith must have taken it – it is this one moment, when her control over the house momentarily waivers, that leads to the beginning of the fall of Allerdale Hall. Later that day, Edith listens to Enola Sciotti's recording and realises she too is being poisoned, which helps explain why she has been feeling sick. Edith attempts to leave only to be pushed back into Allerdale Hall by a snowstorm. The way Edith is filmed from this point onwards, as her health markedly declines, accentuates the house's (and Lucille's) power and control as well as the American's vulnerability: shot from afar, Edith moves slowly on a wheelchair through the dark hallways whose arches resemble claws. At the end of what seems to be a long corridor, Enola's ghost, now carrying a baby, reveals itself to Edith who, no longer afraid, asks what she wants from her. Enola's spirit does not speak but merely points to the attic where the siblings are sharing an intimate moment. The significance of the room in the attic is thus revealed, symbolizing the unconscious mind where the characters' darkest secrets are kept. Once she finally grasps what is happening, Edith once more attempts to run away only to be chased by Lucille who forcefully takes her crimson family ring back and pushes the first from one of the top floors.

In this scene, the house's three floors allow the audience to realise each character has been playing three very different roles all along: Edith, lying unconscious on the entrance's floor below, is shot from a high angle that highlights her frailty; Thomas, in the middle, is in an in-between role and seems to have little influence over what is happening (and happened before); finally, on top of the stairs, Lucille, shot from a low angle, shows her true colours and takes on the role of the lady of the house whose control over everything and everyone is absolute. The fact that Lucille is depicted for the first time with her hair down and in white undergarments conveys the idea that there are no more masks, no secrets to hide her true nature. What is more, the three positions the characters take disclose the power dynamics between

them and underscore the opposition between the two main female characters: Edith is the haunted heroine traditionally found in Gothic novels while Lucille mirrors 'the madwoman in the attic' who is let loose by del Toro in *Crimson Peak*.

Lucille thus becomes the real villain, and, unlike conventional Gothic novels, the main male character is revealed to be another victim of her scheming. Of course, Thomas can hardly be seen as just a victim since he actively and willingly cooperates with his sister and lover; he is the one who seduces Pamela Upton, Margaret McDermott and Enola Sciotti and takes them to *Crimson Peak* where he knows Lucille will poison them. Yet, he is incapable of killing someone with his own hands; instead, as he acknowledges to Edith while they dance at the McMichaels party in Buffalo, "I've always closed my eyes to things that made me uncomfortable. It makes everything easier" (*Crimson Peak*). Thomas also shares several features typically associated with femininity: he is compassionate, empathetic, and submissive to Lucille (Pedro 2020, 88) which reinforces the idea that gender roles are inverted in *Crimson Peak*. As a result, while the female characters (Edith and Lucille) play an active role, the male characters (Thomas and Alan) are mostly passive⁸.

Interestingly, when the English baronet falls in love with Edith, he starts to ponder on his past traumas and understands he does not have to hold on to the mistakes or sins he committed earlier in life. Much like Edith tells him on the night they spend together, "The past, Thomas. You're always looking to the past. You won't find me there. I'm here" (*Crimson Peak*). The American heiress' words suggest that Thomas' present and presumably his future is beside her. Having realised that he can have a life outside Allerdale Hall, he eventually turns on his sister, telling her they can choose to be free instead, "We can leave, Lucille, leave Allerdale Hall. We can start a new life" (*Crimson Peak*).

Lucille, on the other hand, is unable to leave the Sharpes' ancestral home. Her life (and death) is (are) intimately associated with *Crimson Peak* whose very existence seems to be a mirror of Lucille's violent and sexually transgressive predispositions. Indeed, Lucille is powerless to overcome the deep trauma caused by her mother's violence and her father's absence, becoming a more brutal version of the mother she hated. When questioned by her brother if they really must kill Edith, Lucille insists they have to protect themselves first and reveals she is willing to commit any crime, no matter how atrocious, to remain with Thomas, and protect their freedom and way of life. It is thus clear that she is the character with the greatest agency in the narrative since she is the one who not only commits the murders, but also selects the victims and encourages her brother to keep up the killings. While Thomas' love for Edith allows him to free himself from a cycle of violence, which is made clear by his refusal to kill Alan and his attempt to save Edith, Lucille's love for her brother is so perverted that she is beyond redemption. Lucille seems aware of the horrific nature of her feelings for Thomas when she confesses

to Edith that the reason behind all the deaths is not money but love, "The marriages were for money, of course. But the horror... the horror was for love. The things we do for love like this are ugly, mad, full of sweat and regret. This love burns you and maims you and twists you inside out. It is a monstrous love and it makes monsters of us all" (*Crimson Peak*).

The love between the siblings is unequivocally labelled by del Toro as monstrous which means it is not a transgressive love that challenges socially accepted norms, but a love that corrupts, kills, and destroys everything, including the lovers themselves. Lucille's love for Thomas gives her strength to persevere especially because, unlike her brother, Lucille is very much aware of the fact that, like the moths that inhabit the mansion's attic, the love between them cannot flourish outside Allerdale Hall. So, Lucille fights for them to stay in the family home where her control is absolute until the young American heiress arrives. Almost like a ray of light in the darkness, Edith lays bare the horrendous nature of the siblings' relationship, tearing them apart. What is more, by refusing to be a victim, she becomes the real threat to Lucille's authority and power.

In the film's last scenes, the family home once again plays a crucial role since it is in the attic *and* in the cellar that Edith can free herself from the Sharpes: the American stabs Lucille in the attic with the pen her father had bought for her, implying the heiress is also seeking revenge for Carter Cushing's murder. In addition, in a fit of rage Lucille kills her brother in the bedroom they shared after realising he is no longer in love with her – a discovery that seems to be the final blow for Lucille who, now truly the 'madwoman in the attic, – is ready to go on a murderous rampage one last time. As Edith rushes to save herself and her friend Alan, that had arrived at Allerdale Hall in the hopes of exposing the Sharpes' secrets and convince Edith to return to Buffalo with him, Lucille runs after her. At this point, a crimson ooze seems to be running down the house's walls, making it clear that crimson is not only the colour of the land beneath their feet and of the ghosts that inhabit the Sharpes' home, but also – and perhaps more significantly in this scene – it is the blood of the house itself that will inevitably die with Thomas and Lucille. Yet, the final confrontation between the two female leads does not take place indoors but out in the open. On the grounds where Thomas' machine lies dormant, the old and the new, the familiar and the stranger face each other in a fight to the death as it becomes clear that only one can survive this encounter.

In the film's last scene, Allerdale Hall is shot both from the outside and the inside: its once imponent presence lies in ruins and the audience is made to admire this extraordinary place. The family home is left without a single living resident but remains alive and majestic as it slowly collapses on itself and becomes inhabited only by ghosts. The last ghost the audience sees is Lucille herself playing the piano, forever trapped in *Crimson Peak*, her home and resting place. Now completely fused together with the house, she is its rightful lady and owner. Furthermore, and as Musap points out,

(...) Lucille is degraded into an inhabitable object and refused the possibility of ascendance. She is punished for her violent desires and the disruption of the patriarchal system through the incestuous relationship between herself and Thomas and through the internalization of patriarchal norms by assuming the position of the male villain. (2017, 12)

Allerdale Hall becomes the grave of all those who inhabited it, except for Edith who escapes. It also ultimately challenges and subverts the audience's expectations: despite its initial promise of stability and security, del Toro's family home is threatening and disturbing, leaving us to wonder about the collapse of the most intimate places of all – the home.

Endnotes

¹ Cf. John Everett Millais, *The Bridesmaid* (1851).

² In *Of Other Spaces (Des Espaces Autres)*, 1967) Michel Foucault uses the term heterotopia to describe spaces with multiple layers of meaning, or which are associated with other locations, and whose complexity is oftentimes hard to grasp.

³ Del Toro himself has acknowledged that his use of colour in *Crimson Peak* was influenced by several directors, artists, and production companies, namely *The Curse of the Werewolf* (1961), directed by Terence Fisher, *Black Sabbath* (1963), directed by Mario Bava, and the British film production company, Hammer Film Productions Ltd. Regarding other artists, the Mexican director has mentioned *Der Wanderer über dem Nebelmeer* (1818), by Caspar David Friedrich; *Old English House, Moonlight After Rain* (1883), and *A Golden Beam* (n/d), by John Atkinson Grimshaw.

⁴ The only exception is Thomas' ghost who appears nearly at the end of the film to help Edith when she finally faces off Lucille. In fact, even though he too was killed by his sister inside the mansion, Thomas is the only white ghost and the only one who is seen outside the family home, which suggests that in death he was finally able to free himself from the horrors committed against him in his childhood and by him in his adulthood.

⁵ In this scene Lucille is wearing a ring with a crimson stone, the same one Thomas uses to propose to Edith. The ring is a symbol of the Sharpe's aristocratic ancestry but also of their ruin and is one of the very few valuable items they have left.

⁶ The figure of the 'madwoman in the attic', to use Charlotte Brontë's term in *Jane Eyre* (1847), is one of the most identifiable themes in Gothic literature and is associated with the stereotype that those who cannot fit in society, whether because they are physically disabled or have mental health problems, are hidden away.

⁷ Edith, on the contrary, claims she does not want to close her eyes, "I want to keep them open" (*Crimson Peak*), a comment that shows she is one the most active characters in the film. Moreover, Edith's rejection indicates her refusal to become, as expected from a female character in Gothic fiction, another passive victim and asserts her independence.

⁸ The only exception to the rule seems to be Edith's father whose instincts lead him to investigate the Sharpe family, which allows him to unveil at least part of their secrets but causes his death at Lucille's hands.

Works Cited

Bachelard, Gaston. 1969. *The Poetics of Space*. Translated from French by Maria Jolas. Boston, Beacon Press.

Botting, Fred. 2012. "In Gothic Darkly: Heterotopia, History, Culture". In *A New Companion to the Gothic*. Edited by D. Punter, 13-24. Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell.

Chevalier, Jean, and Alain Gheerbrant. 1982. *O Dicionário dos Símbolos*. Translated from French by Cristina Rodriguez and Artur Guerra. Lisboa, Teorema.

Day, William Patrick. 1985. *In the Circle of Fear and Desire: A Study of Gothic Fantasy*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Galiné, Marine. 2020. "Capture a Feeling of the Old": Guillermo Del Toro's *Crimson Peak* (2015) and the Victorian Gothic". *Polysèmes*, vol. 23: 78-93.

"The Influences of *Crimson Peak*", *IGN*, Youtube, October 17, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ghLINZ-w0Y>

Lukancic, Khara D. "Modifying the Gothic: Gender in *Crimson Peak*." MA thesis, Southern Illinois University Carbondale, 2018. https://opensiuc.lib.siu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=2135&context=gs_rp

Michlin, Monica. 2012. "The Haunted House in Contemporary Filmic and Literary Gothic Narratives of Trauma". *Transatlantica*, vol. 1: 1-24.

Musap, Emilia. 2017. "Monstrous Domesticity – Home as a Site of Oppression in *Crimson Peak*". *SIC – Journal of Literature, Culture and Literary Translation*, vol. 8, no. 1: 1-14.

Pastoreau, Michel. 2019. *Vermelho. História de uma Cor*. Translated from French by José Alfaro. Lisbon: Orfeu Negro.

Pedro, Dina. 2020. "Challenging the Victorian Nuclear Family Myth: The Incest Trope in Guillermo del Toro's *Crimson Peak*". *ATLANTIS: Journal of the Spanish Association of Anglo-American Studies*, vol. 42, no. 1: 76-93.

Savoy, Eric. 1998. "The Face of the Tenant – A Theory of American Gothic". *American Gothic – New Interventions in a National Narrative*. Edited by R. K. Martin and E. Savoy, 3-19. Iowa: University of Iowa Press.

St. Clair, Kassia. 2016. *The Secret Lives of Colour*. London: John Murray Publishers.

Wagner, Tamara. 2014. "Gothic and the Victorian Home". *The Gothic World*. Edited by Glennis Byron and Dale Townshend, 110-20. New York: Routledge.

Weeber, Rose-Anaïs. 2018. "Crimson Peak: Guillermo del Toro's Visual Tribute to Gothic Literature". *Caietele Echinoc*, vol. 35: 115-26.

Films

Crimson Peak. 2015. Directed by Guillermo del Toro. USA: Universal Pictures. DVD.