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**Monstrous Mothers: Containment, Labor, and the Gothic Feminine in Modern Film and
Television**

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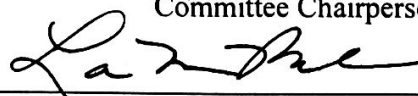
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ABSTRACT OF THESIS

AUTHOR: Tabor Sterling Haws

TITLE: Monstrous Mothers: Containment, Labor, and the Gothic Feminine in Modern Film and Television

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This thesis examines how recent Gothic media portray motherhood and emotional labor as forms of containment, turning the cultural ideal of the “good mother” into a source of horror. Drawing on Fred Botting’s concept of the Gothic as “a writing of excess,” Julia Kristeva’s theory of abjection, and Barbara Creed’s theory of the monstrous-feminine, the project explores how cultural pressures around beauty, care, and emotional stability shape women’s roles in modern film and television. Feminist thinkers such as Adrienne Rich and Sharon Hays show how motherhood is treated as “natural,” even though it demands impossible emotional and physical labor. I argue that Coralie Fargeat’s film *The Substance* (2024), Mike Flanagan’s Netflix series *The Haunting of Hill House* (2018), Jac Shaeffer’s Disney+ series *WandaVision* and *Agatha All Along* (2021, 2024), and Sam Raimi’s film *Doctor Strange in the Multiverse of Madness* (2022) reveal how maternal containment, the expectation that women hold the body, home, and world together, creates the modern monstrous mother. Employing qualitative textual and contextual analysis, I integrate close reading, audience and critical reception, and auteur commentary to trace how Gothic narratives shift containment from the physical to the emotional and ideological. Each work reimagines monstrosity through maternal labor: *The Substance* ties it to the body, *Hill House* to domestic duty, and the Marvel works to emotional regulation and authorship. The findings confirm that the Gothic now locates horror in endurance itself—the quiet, relentless

work of holding everything together. This shows that even feminist creators reproduce the same systems of control they seek to resist, revealing how motherhood remains a cultural mechanism of containment. Future studies might extend this framework to other depictions of maternal labor across media, exploring how empathy and care continue to disguise control.

Introduction

Monstrous mothers haunt modern culture. From body-horror cinema and haunted houses to superhero universes, the maternal figure repeatedly returns as a site of fear, fascination, and cultural anxiety. Scholarship on the Gothic has long shown how the genre explores excess and transgression, placing social fears onto figures that blur boundaries between self and other, purity and pollution, or care and threat. Still, while Barbara Creed's theory of the monstrous-feminine and Julia Kristeva's theory of abjection remain foundational, their focus often falls on archetypal images such as the archaic mother, the monstrous womb, and the bleeding body. This thesis argues that twenty-first-century gothic media extend those frameworks by reimagining monstrosity as a crisis of maternal containment. This crisis emerges through the cultural demand that mothers hold together bodies, emotions, families, and ideals under conditions that inevitably collapse.

My project, therefore, traces how recent Gothic texts depict maternal monstrosity as the breaking point of that demand: a crisis of containment, care, and refusal. By analyzing Elisabeth Sparkle in *The Substance* (2024), Shirley Crain in *The Haunting of Hill House* (2018), Wanda Maximoff in *WandaVision* (2021), and Agatha Harkness in *Agatha All Along* (2024), I show how contemporary stories use the Gothic to depict mothers who refuse or fail to meet expectations of sacrificial endurance. These figures are monstrous not simply because they bleed, reproduce, or devour, but because they expose the limits of cultural fantasies about motherhood itself, revealing how contemporary feminism remains caught between symbolic ideals of maternal sacrifice and the material contradictions of women's lives.

To do this, I situate the Gothic alongside key feminist critiques of motherhood as an institution. As Adrienne Rich explains, the "institution of motherhood" operates as a system that

frames maternal instinct, selflessness, and relational duty as women's "highest mission," while reproducing patriarchal order and limiting autonomy. Building on this, Sharon Hays identifies what she calls the ideology of "intensive mothering," in which women are expected to be ever-present caregivers while simultaneously navigating late-capitalist demands of productivity and competition. Likewise, contributors to *Intensive Mothering: The Cultural Contradictions of Modern Motherhood*, edited by Linda Rose Ennis, challenge the assumption that maternal practices stem from "natural" love, revealing instead how the label of "natural" makes certain forms of emotional and physical labor invisible and inevitable. These ideas form the foundation for my later analysis of how the Gothic exposes such contradictions. For now, they serve to position the genre as a site where cultural scripts of care and control begin to fracture. The sections that follow establish the theoretical groundwork for this claim. I begin by outlining the Gothic tradition as a genre of excess and boundary transgression. I then turn to Creed and Kristeva to define the monstrous-feminine and abjection, integrating insights from queer Gothic scholarship to clarify why maternity becomes a privileged site of threat. Together, these frameworks prepare a shift to contemporary motherhood, where I examine how the maternal moves from "natural" biology to ideological and emotional labor that Gothic texts render as crisis.

The Gothic Tradition: Excess, Transgression, and Boundaries

The Gothic has long been defined by its fascination with excess, transgression, and the unsettling collapse of social and symbolic boundaries. Fred Botting famously characterizes the genre as "a writing of excess" that pushes against the edges of reason, morality, and social order (1). Its atmosphere is populated with "spectres, monsters, demons, corpses, skeletons... scientists,

fathers, husbands, madmen, criminals and the monstrous double” (1–2). These figures dramatize the fears a culture projects onto bodies and identities deemed irrational or uncanny, threatening to destabilize the rational order. This preoccupation with destabilization is intensified by Gothic affect. As Botting notes, “Imagination and emotional effects exceed reason. Passion, excitement and sensation transgress social proprieties and moral laws” (3). In other words, the Gothic thrives on both aesthetic and emotional surplus, unsettling categories that seem stable elsewhere. Read as discourse, the Gothic also operates within what Mahinur Uygur calls a society’s “regime of truth,” the set of discourses a culture “accepts and makes function as true” (47–48). Gothic fiction both consolidates and exposes these regimes: its patterns of narration and representation lay bare the “power mechanisms that operate within its discourse,” where the genre’s basic function has often been to “domesticate and therefore disempower” the alien and threatening (48). In this sense, excess is not only an aesthetic mode; it is a way of staging how truths are produced, enforced, and resisted.

Yet, Botting is careful to point out that Gothic transgression is never purely liberatory. It carries a paradoxical function. He describes it as “a powerful means to reassert the values of society, virtue and propriety: transgression, by crossing the social and aesthetic limits, serves to reinforce or underline their value and necessity, restoring or defining limits” (7). Excess is not only destabilizing, but also regulatory, producing the very limits it seems to threaten. The dialectic of terror and horror makes this clear. Terror provokes “the pleasures of imaginatively transcending or overcoming fear and thereby renewing and heightening a sense of self and social value” (9). Horror, by contrast, “describes the movement of contraction and recoil” (10). The Gothic, therefore, does not simply dissolve boundaries. Instead, it stages their collapse in order to reconstitute them, both unsettling and reasserting cultural order.

This dialectic makes the Gothic's obsession with boundaries all the more revealing. As Sarah Parker observes, the genre is "all concerned with boundaries" (8). Boundaries in Gothic fiction do not simply mark lines of separation; they become the very stage on which transgression and reassertion are played out. This is why Gothic monsters so often appear at thresholds. Christina Schneider emphasizes that they represent "social fears and problems" (2), figures that embody the anxieties of what happens when those lines are crossed or blurred. In this way, monstrosity becomes a form of cultural scapegoating. It externalizes whatever threatens the social body and stages the collapse of distinctions between inside and outside, self and other, reason and excess. Creed presses this logic further by asking, "What is the relationship between physical states, bodily wastes (even if metaphoric ones), and the horrific—in particular, the monstrous-feminine?" ("Horror" 212). Her provocation clarifies what is at stake. The Gothic's economy of excess is inseparable from its concern with the maternal body, figured as the first site of horror, pollution, and cultural anxiety. In this way, Gothic transgression is not only a matter of social fears in the abstract, but also of cultural fantasies about motherhood and the boundaries it polices. Put differently, Gothic monstrosity materializes at the line where social truth is enforced. As Christina Schneider notes, citing Paul Goetsch, the monster "dwells at the gates of difference" and "polices the border between inside and outside, known and unknown" (qtd. in Schneider 2). Such figures do not merely trespass. Instead, they test, stretch, and expose the border's work. This is the prehistory of the containment script that will preoccupy this thesis, for when borders must be kept intact, someone, often the maternal figure, is tasked with holding the line.

The historical development of the Gothic only underscores this point. Nineteenth-century works absorbed Darwinian and criminological discourses that "identified the bestial in the

human” (Botting 12), staging anxieties about degeneration and evolution in monstrous form. In the twentieth century, psychoanalysis reoriented Gothic fears around sexuality and the maternal body, as Freud infamously linked the terror of Medusa’s head to the “equally horrifying sight of the mother’s genitals” (“Horror” 212). His interpretation framed female sexuality as castration threat, placing maternal anatomy at the center of cultural horror. By the 1970s, cinema extended this grammar of excess into spectacular visual language, as seen in *Carrie* (1976), where humiliation, menstruation, and abjection converge in the iconic shower and bloodbath sequences. As Creed notes, the film repeatedly figures women as “pigs,” with blood that “runs down Carrie’s body” at moments of intense feeling (219–20). In such scenes, biology itself becomes the privileged register for staging boundary crisis.

If these earlier iterations pathologized sexuality and the maternal body as sites of horror, more recent queer Gothic scholarship reframes the genre’s fixation on blurred boundaries through a different lens. Laura Westengard identifies “the enduring and pervasive relationship between the Gothic and non-heteronormative genders and sexuality,” where queerness functions as “a refusal to be neatly defined” (260). In other words, the same instability that once read as contamination can also mark a refusal of disciplinary norms. Seen with Uygur’s “regimes of truth” in mind, the Gothic becomes a stage on which boundary enforcement is dramatized and, at times, undone. This shift underscores the broader point that the Gothic’s most enduring monsters are those that unsettle systems by eroding the lines on which identity and order depend. That continuity explains why the maternal body so reliably returns as a locus of horror. It is already the site where boundaries, such as the self and other, are first mapped and most easily undone.

The Monstrous-Feminine and Abjection

If the Gothic thrives on excess and boundary collapse, then the monstrous-feminine is its most enduring figure. Creed, building on Kristeva's *Powers of Horror*, defines abjection as "that which does not 'respect borders, positions, rules,' that which 'disturbs identity, system, order'" (*The Monstrous-Feminine* 10). Abjection unsettles the symbolic order precisely because it dissolves the distinctions that sustain it. Horror cinema dramatizes this collapse through its fixation on bodily fluids, decay, and sexual transgression. As Creed explains, its recurring images are "grounded in ancient religious and historical notions of abjection," and they often take the form of "religious 'abominations,'" such as "sexual immorality and perversion; corporeal alteration, decay, and death; human sacrifice; murder; the corpse; bodily wastes; the feminine body and incest" (11). These examples show that abjection is not incidental to horror, but more so forms the grammar through which the monstrous is imagined.

What ties these abominations together is their relation to the maternal body. In her earlier essay, Creed makes this point explicit. Abjection is "rooted historically (in the history of religions) and subjectively (in the structuration of the subject's identity), in the cathexis of maternal function—mother, woman, reproduction" ("Horror" 213). The maternal body, in other words, is never a neutral biological fact. It is already marked by taboo, by the psychic threat of engulfment, and by cultural fantasies of contamination. Kristeva herself illustrates this intimacy when she recalls her disgust at the thin skin that forms on heated milk. She writes, "Food loathing is perhaps the most elementary and most archaic form of abjection" (2). That thin layer provokes nausea that "separates [her] from the mother and father who proffer it" and forces her into an act of violent self-expulsion. She states, "I expel myself, I spit myself out, I abject myself within the same motion through which 'I' claim to establish myself" (3). For both Kristeva and

Creed, this experience dramatizes the instability of separation from the mother. The child's attempt to establish boundaries is, as Kristeva elsewhere describes it, "a violent, clumsy breaking away, with the constant risk of falling back under the sway of a power as securing as it is stifling" (13). In this dynamic, the mother becomes abject, for her body no longer signifies only nurture, but also the threat of engulfment. Kristeva pushes this further by describing maternal authority as the "trustee of that mapping of the self's clean and proper body," distinguished from paternal law (72). The mother thus occupies a paradoxical position, as she is the origin of bodily order, but also the figure most likely to destabilize it. As the one who first enforces distinctions between clean and unclean, proper and improper, she becomes both the original border figure and the first monster of separation and identity.

Historically, the monstrous-feminine has often been routed through sexuality, most familiarly in the figure of the "lesbian vampire," whose predation literalizes patriarchal anxieties about female desire and gender deviance (Uygur 51–52). Seen in this way, the monstrous-feminine is not reducible to stock figures like the witch, the vampire, or the femme fatale. Rather, it names the cultural inscription of the maternal as a body that is both inside and outside, nurturing and suffocating, sustaining and contaminating. More recent scholarship complicates this trajectory by showing how maternal horror extends beyond archetypes of menstruation and castration. Christine Bousfield argues that maternal revulsion reflects cultural disgust toward the maternal body itself, making maternal ambivalence a site of wider cultural anxiety. Sarah Arnold, in *Maternal Horror Film*, emphasizes that mothers in horror function as contradictory figures who oscillate between sacrifice and monstrosity, exposing the instability of cultural ideals of care. Elisabeth Bronfen, in *Over Her Dead Body*, demonstrates how maternal death structures Gothic fears about femininity and loss, suggesting that horror often depends on maternal absence

as much as presence. Taken together, these interventions suggest that maternal monstrosity is increasingly articulated not only through biological markers, but also through the management and breakdown of containment, or the work of holding borders, affects, and relations in place. In other words, monstrosity emerges more from the impossible cultural labor demanded of mothers. In shifting the emphasis from sexual deviance to maternal containment, my analysis tracks how the Gothic's border crises migrate from the spectacle of desire to the labor of keeping the world intact.

Contemporary Motherhood: Institution, Contradiction, and the Myth of the “Natural”

If abjection names the psychic violence of separation and the cultural policing of borders, contemporary motherhood names the institution where that policing is naturalized and delegated as women's work. To understand why the maternal so reliably returns as a Gothic site of boundary crisis, we need to shift from biology to institution. Adrienne Rich distinguishes “the institution of motherhood” from the lived experience of mothering, noting that it “is not identical with bearing and caring for children, any more than the institution of heterosexuality is identical with intimacy and love” (42). Instead, both create the “prescriptions and the conditions in which choices are made or blocked; they are not ‘reality’ but they have shaped the circumstances of our lives” (42). Rich stresses that these prescriptions demand “maternal ‘instinct’ rather than intelligence, selflessness rather than self-realization, relation to others rather than the creation of self” (42). What gets framed as sacred and natural is, in fact, a system designed to limit women's autonomy and reproduce patriarchal order. This lays the ground for my use of containment, as I do not use it as a neutral descriptor of maternal care, but rather a socially enforced script that requires women to hold bodies, emotions, households, and moral order together quietly, competently, and without allowing excess or disorder to show. Crucially, the designation of

“natural” is part of that enforcement. Rich argues that patriarchy depends on treating both motherhood and heterosexuality “as axioms, as ‘nature’ itself, not open to question” (43). The Gothic is useful here because it literalizes the violence of that axiom, for what looks like nature is in fact cultural labor that exceeds human limits. When we later see a mother embalming a sister’s body or conjuring a perfect family through magic, the horror is not only the blood or the spell. Instead, it is the ideological demand that she keep everything intact.

Sharon Hays updates this logic for modernity by identifying the ideology of “intensive mothering,” which collides with the structures of late-capitalist work. She describes how “an employed woman faces the possibility of losing out on job promotions... all those mornings when she arrives with less than her whole ‘body and soul’ to dedicate to the job,” even as she is expected to remain “cool-headed and competitive at work but warm-hearted and nurturing at home” (10). Hays frames this not as individual failure but as part of a larger societal contradiction, in which the “nurturing, moral” ideology of motherhood stands in tension with a culture that values efficiency, impersonality, and competitive gain above all else (10). Read through the Gothic, containment becomes the way these contradictions are smoothed over, as the mother functions as the hidden buffer that absorbs conflict so the social world can continue to appear orderly. Hays also dismantles the comfort of calling maternal feeling “natural.” While many parents claim their practices flow from the love they “naturally” feel for children, Hays emphasizes that such practices are “no more natural or inevitable than those that follow from a mother’s lactation” (14). What counts as the “right” way to nurture is culturally policed, unevenly distributed, and historically contingent. For this project, the stakes are clear, for if there is nothing self-evident about how to love, feed, or raise a child, then the horror of the maternal in

contemporary texts often lies in watching characters forced to enact a single correct script until it breaks them.

To place all of this in a modern context, neoliberalism intensifies this bind. As Kim Huisman and Elizabeth Joy note, since the 1980s, there has been an “erosion of the social safety net for families and an attendant shift toward increased privatization and individual responsibility” (91). Because of these changes, neoliberalism places “increased economic pressures on families and obscures structural inequalities. What often is framed as a choice, is often not a choice at all” (91). In their study, Huisman and Joy find that many mothers describe internalizing the stay-at-home ideal even while working out of necessity, and they report feeling scrutinized for how well they meet “good mother” norms (91, 93). The rhetoric of individual choice exacerbates the contradiction, as “our culture ‘attributes responsibility for the condition of motherhood to the individual, not to the system’” (94). Within Gothic logic, this is the ambiance in which containment curdles into abjection. *When* a woman cannot keep the self, the family, or the world perfectly coherent, the mess is read as hers.

Taken together, these ideas show how containment works as the cultural script at the heart of this thesis. Containment works on an emotional level, where mothers are expected to turn anger, grief, shame, and fear into calming care, even when doing so means erasing themselves. It also works on the body, where mothers are expected to keep bodies clean, proper, youthful, or unthreatening, and horror often shows this pressure through images of leaking, wounding, or uncanny doubles. Finally, it works on a social level, in the hidden labor of managing households, families, and moral order in situations where any visible failure is harshly

punished. Seen this way, the Gothic does not just recycle old taboos. It shows how the idea of what is “natural” breaks down under cultural contradictions and turns into monstrosity. Overall, across these frameworks, the Gothic emerges as both progressive and reactionary, exposing the contradictions it also relies upon. Its monsters threaten to unravel social order even as they reaffirm it. The twenty-first-century texts I examine take up this ambivalence through the figure of the mother, revealing how containment operates as both protection and punishment. Whether through the self-replicating body of *The Substance*, the moral composure of *Hill House*, or the magical endurance of Wanda and Agatha, these narratives show that the Gothic’s power lies not in resolving contradiction, but in exposing the cultural costs of sustaining it.

Because these works are recent and self-conscious about their messages, their contradictions appear in how they were made and received as much as in their stories. Each joins a wider conversation about emotion, endurance, and care that involves their directors, critics, and audiences. Coralie Fargeat, Mike Flanagan, and Jac Schaeffer, in some capacity, each frame their projects as explorations of empathy, empowerment, or grief, yet many viewers and reviewers reacted with discomfort when those emotions turned destructive or overwhelming. My analysis brings these reactions into the discussion to show how the same pressure to contain feeling that shapes the narratives also shapes the responses to them. In each case, the effort to express or redeem emotion ends up reaffirming control, revealing how deeply the logic of containment structures both story and audience expectation.

This framework also structures the order of my chapters. I begin with *The Substance*, which literalizes neoliberal containment as bio-horror through Elisabeth’s aging body and the fantasy of her endlessly “improvable” double. This case grounds the project in the most physical iteration of the monstrous-feminine while opening onto questions of what is counted as “natural”

or desirable. From there, I turn to *The Haunting of Hill House*, where Shirley's dual role as mother and mortician collapses the line between familial care and death-work, revealing containment as both emotional and domestic labor. Finally, I examine Wanda and Agatha in *WandaVision*, *Doctor Strange in the Multiverse of Madness*, and *Agatha All Along*, where maternal shame, endurance, and refusal become Gothic allegories of world-breaking power. Across these chapters, I argue that twenty-first-century Gothic media reveal the myth of the "natural" as the engine of maternal horror, transforming endurance itself into the modern spectacle of monstrosity.

Chapter 1

Elisabeth Sparkle: The Violence of Renewal in *The Substance*

This chapter analyzes Coralie Fargeat's *The Substance* and how its portrayal of Elisabeth Sparkle turns self-renewal into a Gothic performance of feminine containment. Through her bodily division into her younger double, Sue, the film literalizes the cultural demand that women hold themselves together no matter the cost. The result is a vision of empowerment sustained through self-destruction, where beauty, control, and endurance become instruments of punishment rather than liberation. The film's reception was sharply divided between those who praised its extremity as feminist critique and those who saw it as indulgent spectacle. This tension clarifies how *The Substance* occupies an uneasy place within feminist horror, exposing the violence of perfection while repeating its imagery. The analysis that follows traces how the film translates this contradiction into Gothic form: first through the body, reading Elisabeth's transformation as an abject act of self-containment, and then through ideology, where maintenance, care, and emotional labor sustain the illusion of control. Together, these readings reveal how Fargeat's film turns the fantasy of "becoming your best self" into a horror story about survival. By transforming empowerment into exhaustion, *The Substance* establishes the framework for this thesis, in which the Gothic's true terror lies not in transgression but in the endless work of holding oneself—and the world—together.

Aging, Beauty, and the Monstrous Maternal Body

Contemporary culture treats the aging female body as a site of both erasure and hypervisibility. As Laura Hurd Clarke and Meredith Griffin observe, older women are told that "if you put it into a sentence—be young or you're not counted" (660). This demand for youth is

not merely aesthetic but existential, for women's social legibility depends upon being visibly desirable. One woman interviewed by Clarke and Griffin reflected, "We won't love women if they're not lovely. Our society says that from the beginning... as you get older, you get less and less okay, and people look at you less and less" (660–61). What begins as a pressure to "look young, youthful, perky" becomes a condition of survival, as the refusal or failure to maintain youth renders women invisible, or worse, disposable. Clarke and Griffin note that women are simultaneously erased and exposed, since "possession of physical markers of ageing, such as "grey hair, wrinkles, and sagging skin," rendered the women "more visible as objects of discrimination as they highlighted the women's deviation from youthful beauty standards (669). Visibility, then, becomes punishment, and invisibility becomes exile. These contradictions reveal the cruelty of a system that first constructs femininity as spectacle and then disavows the bodies that no longer fit its frame.

The ideological force behind this cycle of erasure lies in "the machinery of femininity," which Francesca Cesarano describes as a system "of constant self-objectification, set up in a context in which women's bodies are always to some extent deficient and in need of modification" (650). Beauty, framed as choice, becomes a form of compulsory self-correction. The language of empowerment conceals the double bind of participation, for in order to flourish within oppressive contexts, women enter what Serene Khader terms "flourishing trade-offs." Cesarano elaborates on this term, stating that these women "may prioritize flourishing in one domain above flourishing in another or... temporarily compromise their well-being as a means to achieve higher-order goals" (655). These trade-offs expose the illusion of autonomy at the heart of cosmetic and bodily labor. Even when undertaken as self-care or self-expression, such practices require women to harm or diminish themselves to remain socially viable. Cesarano

reminds us that “women, in general, are presented with only a few viable paths to flourishing that do not involve some form of self-deprivation or self-harm” (656). In other words, femininity becomes a constant project of fixing and improving the self, where failure to conform risks social and financial punishment. The violence is located in the demand that women must perform it to exist.

This coercive ideal of self-improvement, often marketed as empowerment, has long been critiqued by feminist theorists of beauty and visual culture. Sheila Jeffreys argues that “beauty practices are... not about women’s individual choice... but... a most important aspect of women’s oppression” (6). Yet, as Kathy Davis counters, cosmetic interventions can also allow women “to renegotiate their relationship to [the] body and, in so doing, construct a different sense of self” (54). The ambivalence here is instructive, as beauty work simultaneously subjugates and sustains, providing the very sense of control that structural inequality denies. Citing Bernadetta Wegenstein, Alessandra K. Heggenstaller and colleagues reframe this paradox through Wegenstein’s notion of “the cosmetic gaze,” an extension of the male gaze in which “disarticulated bodies” are “‘sutured’ together and presented, as well as ‘experienced as beautiful’” (qtd. in Heggenstaller et al. 55). The fragmentation of the female body, its reduction to parts for display or reconstruction, reveals how femininity is technologized and commodified. What emerges from these competing accounts is not a singular truth about beauty, but a collective recognition that femininity, as a cultural category, demands self-surveillance to the point of disembodiment. To be a woman is to internalize the gaze that measures her worth.

The same gaze that fragments the female body also polices its reproductive potential. Maria Aline Ferreira traces this logic through the figure of the “pregnant crone,” describing how “women past their reproductive years... who dare to become pregnant... are still predominantly

looked upon as grotesque figures who do not accept their limitations, making a spectacle out of themselves” (13). The grotesque body, for Mikhail Bakhtin, embodies contradiction. He writes, “There is nothing completed, nothing calm and stable in the bodies of these old hags. They combine a senile, decaying and deformed flesh with the flesh of new life, conceived but as yet unformed... It is the epitome of incompleteness” (25-26). This incomplete body, or what Bakhtin calls “pregnant death, a death that gives birth,” transgresses the boundary between decay and creation (26). Jane M. Ussher connects this abjection to the “uncontained fecund body,” which “signifies association with the animal world... and stands as the antithesis of the clean, contained, proper body” (qtd. in Ferreira 26). When female reproduction escapes containment, whether through age, excess, or autonomy, it evokes disgust precisely because it destabilizes the fantasy of control. The same culture that celebrates youthful sexuality condemns fertility and aging when they fall outside narrow norms, turning the maternal body into a symbol of excess and disorder. As Diane Purkiss explains, the witch embodies this fear, as she is both desirable and polluting, her power both creative and threatening (qtd. in Ferreira 27). The “monstrous maternal,” then, is not just a metaphor for unruly femininity, but a long-standing social pattern that equates women’s vitality with danger.

This association between reproduction and monstrosity finds its institutional expression in the medicalization of birth. Nicola Moffat argues that “the science of birth—obstetrics, gynaecology, and (most especially) teratology—is born from fiction” (25). From its inception, modern reproductive science defined itself by expelling the feminine as monstrous. As Moffat explains, “Gynaecology and obstetrics are sciences formed on the basis that women’s sexual health before, during, and after childbirth require medicalized regulation” (30). The technologies that make reproduction visible, such as ultrasounds, have become “symbols of a penetrative,

destructive, and patriarchal discourse” (31). Through such instruments, the female body becomes a landscape to be surveyed and corrected, its mysteries rendered manageable through intrusion. The myth of the “natural” female body, invoked to justify these practices, conceals an apparatus of surveillance that disciplines women into compliance. The monstrous, here, is not what escapes science but what science creates in its attempt to define normalcy.

Yet, medical containment also breeds the fantasy of self-sufficient reproduction. Mary C. Ingram-Waters shows how discourses surrounding cloning and parthenogenesis expose cultural panic over reproductive autonomy. She cites Ian Wilmut et al.’s warning that parthenogenesis “could, if applied to humans, realize the ultrafeminist goal of the self-replicating female” (qtd. in Ingram-Waters 144). This anxiety stems from what feminist scholars call the erasure of the maternal body, as “NRGTs reduce women to merely vessels for reproductive purposes while embryos are reduced to DNA” (146–47). The imagined horror of the self-replicating woman, one who generates life without male intervention, reveals how deeply patriarchal authority depends on the containment of female creativity. In feminist science fiction like Sally Miller Gearhart’s *The Wanderground*, as Ingram-Waters notes, such parthenogenetic figures are “frightening because their difference threatens the moral status quo” (150). The possibility of reproduction without dependence on men destabilizes not only gender hierarchies, but the symbolic order that sustains them. To label these figures monstrous is to reaffirm the boundaries their existence dissolves.

The repression of female autonomy is mirrored in the psychological containment of maternal emotion. Claire Kahane distinguishes between anger, “a more contained affect,” and rage, which “puts the self beyond the ego/object relationship... in a total surrender of the boundaries of self” (338). Rage, especially maternal rage, violates the cultural script that mothers

be endlessly nurturing. Marianne Hirsch observes that “a mother cannot articulate anger as a mother; to do so she must step out of a culturally circumscribed role which commands mothers to be caring and nurturing” (170). This silencing of aggression reproduces what Adrienne Harris calls “the transmission of dissociated aggression,” in which mothers internalize their own unspoken violence, passing it to daughters as psychic inheritance (296-97). The maternal psyche, like the maternal body, is required to contain more than it can hold. When it ruptures, society names it monstrous rather than human. In this framework, monstrosity becomes the external form of internal pressure, the visible symptom of what cultural norms refuse to acknowledge.

Taken together, these frameworks reveal a consistent logic, in which the feminine body is celebrated only when it can be consumed, disciplined, or renewed. Youth and beauty are treated as moral imperatives; aging, reproduction, and rage are cast as signs of disorder. The contradictions embedded in these expectations, such as being autonomous yet compliant, visible yet contained, and natural yet perfected, form the conditions from which modern horror emerges. The monstrous maternal figure exposes these contradictions by embodying them, transforming cultural anxieties about the body into visceral spectacle. In modern horror cinema, few texts illustrate this collision of beauty, age, and abjection as starkly as *The Substance*, which renders the violence of self-renewal literal. Its narrative of bodily replacement and decay stages the very contradictions outlined here, translating feminist theory into flesh. It is within this cultural and theoretical landscape that the following analysis situates its reading of Fargeat’s film.

Film Background: *The Substance* as Feminine Containment and Renewal

While *The Substance* presents itself as sleek science-fiction horror, it unfolds as a distinctly Gothic tale about aging, self-surveillance, and the collapse of bodily boundaries. The

film follows Elisabeth Sparkle, a former fitness celebrity who is fired from her television show on her fiftieth birthday for being “too old.” Publicly celebrated as an icon of health and beauty, Elisabeth’s body becomes a site of social disgust the moment it ceases to signify youth. The glossy surfaces of her penthouse and her billboard smile conceal the deeper Gothic landscape beneath, such as isolation, humiliation, and a desperate longing to remain seen. When a mysterious company offers her “The Substance,” a serum that promises renewal, she accepts the offer as a lifeline. What she creates, however, is not a new self but a double, Sue, who embodies everything her culture demands and everything Elisabeth can no longer be.

As Sue takes control, Elisabeth’s fantasy of self-reinvention turns into a nightmare of bodily containment. The women must switch places every seven days, sustaining the illusion of youth through injections of “stabilizer fluid” extracted from Elisabeth’s flesh. When Sue begins to steal extra time, Elisabeth’s body decays, her skin splitting and her limbs twisting as if age itself were a contagious disease. The rules that promise balance become instruments of punishment, enforcing the very patriarchal order the film claims to transcend. This dynamic mirrors what my thesis calls the Gothic’s dialectic of excess, a transgression that ultimately reasserts the limits it violates. In Fargeat’s vision, self-improvement is indistinguishable from self-consumption. The desire to be endlessly new corrodes the body from within, transforming empowerment into a ritual of extraction.

The relationship between Elisabeth and Sue echoes the Gothic’s long obsession with doubling, such as the *doppelgänger*. But here, the double is not a supernatural apparition; she is the logical outcome of neoliberal femininity. The supplier’s warning that “there is no ‘she’ and ‘you,’ you are one” collapses all illusion of autonomy. Elisabeth and Sue become two halves of a single cultural subject: the woman who must perfect herself and the woman who must be

sacrificed for that perfection. Their secret room, their injections, and their alternating cycles of glamour and decay stage the modern “regime of truth” that defines femininity as containment, holding the self together no matter how violently it splits. The horror lies not in the violation of order, but in the unbearable maintenance of it.

By the film’s end, the cycle of renewal devours itself. Elisabeth refuses to kill Sue, crying, “I need you because I hate myself. You’re the only lovable part of me.” This refusal collapses their identities into a grotesque fusion, the creature known as “Monstro Elisasue.” This abject body, dripping and pleading before a live audience, turns the spectacle of beauty into Gothic tragedy. Like the haunted mother or decaying mansion of older Gothic forms, Elisabeth’s body becomes the site where social truth breaks down, as women must be ageless, desirable, and whole to deserve visibility. *The Substance* thus translates the Gothic’s fascination with excess into the language of neoliberal selfhood. Its final image, with Elisabeth’s smiling face melting into a puddle on the Hollywood Walk of Fame, renders visible the horror at the heart of containment, as the labor of staying perfect can only end in dissolution. As this chapter will show, Fargeat’s film literalizes the monstrous-feminine as the exhaustion of a culture that demands women renew themselves until nothing remains. However, before diving into this more, it is important to note that the film was released to both acclaim and controversy, and it quickly became a flashpoint for debates about whether feminist horror can truly escape the images it critiques. The following section outlines this emerging critical conversation before turning to the film’s Gothic and maternal dimensions.

Critical Conversation: Feminist Satire or Misfire?

Since its premiere at the 2024 Cannes Film Festival, *The Substance* has provoked one of the most polarized critical receptions of any recent feminist horror film. Its audacious visual language, which can be described as grotesque, hyper-stylized, and insistently corporeal, has drawn both praise and condemnation. *The Guardian* aptly captured the divide in its title: “Is The Substance brilliant feminist critique or a soulless mess?” The film’s premise offers what reviewer Adrian Horton called “a woman’s brutal self-annihilation for a pervasive idea of beauty.” For some, this is what makes *The Substance* brilliant because it transforms the abstract violence of patriarchal beauty standards into flesh. For others, its extremity slides into “self-satisfied excess,” a spectacle of suffering that mistakes boldness for depth. Across reviews, the same paradox recurs, for *The Substance* “needles” its audience precisely because it cannot decide whether its images liberate women from objectification or simply aestheticize their destruction.

From the *BBC*, Miriam Balanescu’s analysis situates the film within a lineage of what critics call “psycho-biddy” or “hagsploitation” cinema, along with films like *Sunset Boulevard* (1950) and *Strait-Jacket* (1964) that turn aging women into objects of horror. In this view, Fargeat’s use of prosthetics and gore reanimates those tropes rather than dismantling them. Reviewer Hilary A. White noted that *The Substance* “makes the older female body appear terrifying” in its portrayal of Elisabeth, and that “the camera is really leering at [Margaret Qualley],” who plays the younger double Sue, without “enough ironic distance... between the message of the film and these constant sweaty, up-close body shots” to distinguish critique from indulgence. Such readings echo long-standing feminist concerns about the “male gaze” in horror. By this, when violence and nudity are rendered with such precision, can they ever escape voyeurism? *Little White Lies* reviewer Hannah Strong offered an even harsher verdict, calling the

film “as shallow as the very thing it’s critiquing.” Its author argues that Fargeat’s camera, which “leers and lingers” over Qualley’s body, replicates “the history of horror’s exploitation of women’s bodies rather than subverts it.” In this framing, *The Substance* becomes trapped in the same machinery of femininity it seeks to expose, in which it becomes a sterile imitation of Hollywood’s cosmetic surface, its critique flattened by aesthetic excess.

Yet, other critics and Fargeat herself argue that the film’s extremity is the point. In an interview with *Vogue*, Fargeat describes *The Substance* as “fundamentally about the violence of control,” and says the nudity had to “show our vulnerability with our own bodies,” distinguishing between private looking—bathroom—and public looking—Sue “in front of the camera and everyone is looking at [her] ass” (Suh). She acknowledges that she wanted to “explode and shatter everything in a violent and uncompromising way,” suggesting that excess functions as both method and message. For Fargeat, the final act, in which Elisabeth’s disintegrating body fuses grotesquely with Sue’s, represents not degradation, but release. Fargeat explains, “It’s when she’s totally deformed and monstrous that she doesn’t care what she looks like. In fact, it’s the only time she likes what she sees.” The audience’s revulsion toward that image becomes, in her view, the true indictment of the culture that produced it. The film’s “tsunami” of violence, she argues, is necessary to expose the magnitude of beauty’s cruelty.

Across these competing accounts, the same tension persists, as it brings into question how a film can critique the spectacle of the female body without recreating it. *The Substance* wagers that pushing this spectacle to its breaking point might expose the violence behind it. For supporters, the film’s excess serves as a confrontation with the unbearable cost of beauty; for detractors, it becomes recursion, an aestheticization of the very oppression it seeks to condemn. Whether the result is liberation or indulgence, the film’s controversy crystallizes the paradox at

the center of contemporary feminist horror, in that the cultural machinery it seeks to resist remains the very apparatus through which it must speak. This critical tension provides the context for the analysis that follows. By examining how *The Substance* uses abjection, containment, and doubling to literalize the violence of self-renewal, the next section will explore how Fargeat's film converts cultural fantasies of control into Gothic spectacle, revealing, in the process, how the labor of feminine perfection becomes indistinguishable from its destruction.

Embodying the Monstrous-Feminine

The Substance begins with an act of creation that looks like expulsion. The premise of a woman generating a younger version of herself lets the film stage what abjection names as the casting off of what must be rejected to preserve a fragile order. The scene does not ask the viewer to infer this logic. It shows it in a body that opens and releases a second body that is at once self and other. The chapter's lens treats this as a Gothic problem about boundaries rather than a novelty of special effects. What is at stake is how a culture makes biological rhetoric do ideological work and how that work returns to the body as injury.

The script states the ideological rule clearly when Harvey tells Elisabeth at lunch that renewal is nonnegotiable. He says, "Renewal is inevitable. It's nature's way. You either renew or you disappear. At 50, it stops. And that's not me saying so. That's biology." The line converts a producer's decision into a fact of life and uses the word biology to close the question before it can be argued. Cesarano explains the coercion that follows from this kind of claim. She writes that when people already disadvantaged face norms, ignoring what it costs them to comply "may add a second form of injustice on top of structural injustice... It forces those who would suffer the most from non-complying with the norms to resist them" (Cesarano 655). Harvey's policy

fits this description. Elisabeth can either accept erasure or try to restore youth at her own expense. Either way, the outcome is the same, for women must bear the cost of being seen as worthy. The transformation sequence grows out of this logic, showing that what follows is not a personal breakdown, but the physical evidence of a cultural rule.

Elisabeth injects The Substance serum at home and convulses as her back splits and Sue emerges. The shot sequence does not frame this as neutral change. It marks it as a maternal event that troubles the cultural story that aging femininity should recede. Ferreira's account of how the older maternal body is coded gives this image a precise name. She writes that the "older womb" becomes a sign of excess and transgression and of something that "should be hidden, a dangerous place that devours and castrates" (25). Elisabeth's torn back uses that code to make a point. Renewal comes from a site the culture already fears and would prefer to cover. The film therefore ties the promise of youth to the very figure that the beauty regime treats as unacceptable. Instead of a clean replacement of the old with the new, the scene insists that the new is carried by the old and remains dependent on it. The result is that abjection arrives as labor rather than spectacle. The body is made to do the ideological work that Harvey called biology.

The way the film frames creation also draws on a long habit of relocating creative control from the messy body to an imagined site of order. Moffat describes this shift as a move that privileges intellectual or technical authorship over "abject bodily functions," turning "the mind" into "the site for a masculine reproductive ability that opposes the corporeality of feminine birth" (25). Elisabeth's injection tries to stage that separation. The product promises a technical solution to age and a clean pathway to a better self. However, Sue's emergence is not clean. The second body appears only through rupture and only through a body that must continue to supply it. The scene blocks the fantasy that creation can ever be detached from the flesh that enables it. What

looks like mastery instead becomes dependence. The film emphasizes this reversal to keep the focus on containment and cost, rather than on scientific novelty.

The rule that governs the rest of the narrative makes this dependence explicit. Over the phone, the supplier warns Elisabeth, “Remember there is no ‘she’ and ‘you’, you are one. Respect the balance and you won’t have any more inconveniences.” The language reduces identity to a management task and names the penalty for breaking the schedule as bodily collapse. Melanie Klein gives the psychic mechanism for why this arrangement feels like feeding an appetite that cannot end. She writes that the infant’s longing for an “inexhaustible and always present breast cannot ever be fully satisfied,” and as a result of this failure, “hatred and aggressive feelings are aroused and he becomes dominated by the impulses to destroy the object” (212). The film turns that dynamic into procedure. Sue’s desirability depends on extractions from Elisabeth, and any attempt to seize more time as Sue ages the original body in visible, localized ways. The swollen finger, the varicose leg, the spreading bruise around the eye, and the infected puncture sites are not random horrors. They mark the cost of maintaining the new image. Kahane’s account helps explain the supplier’s warning because the demand to “respect the balance” turns maternal dependence into a strict schedule that pretends to be neutral but still enforces one-way sacrifice. Elisabeth must keep Sue alive, and every act of care is carved into her skin. The film treats that writing as the point, since it insists that the law Harvey called biology is only true because a body pays for it.

This section, therefore, sets the terms for the rest of the chapter. The film states a rule of renewal as if it were nature and then shows a body enforcing it on itself. The birth of Sue through Elisabeth’s torn back uses Ferreira’s description of the older maternal body to mark the act as culturally excessive rather than miraculous. Moffat’s account of relocated creativity clarifies why

the serum cannot deliver a clean fix and why the body reasserts itself as the site of cost. Kahane's summary of infantile demand explains the supplier's schedule and why extraction will always increase rather than resolve the pressure. With those parts in place, containment is not only a feature of the plot. It is the method by which the culture's rule takes hold of a person and keeps taking. This prepares the following section, which follows the same logic out of the body and into the social organization of feminine labor so that the work of keeping the image intact can be seen as work rather than as fate.

Cultural Constructions of Motherhood and the Gothic Labor of Containment

If the previous section exposes the biological violence of containment, this section turns to its ideological form. *The Substance* shifts from flesh to system, from the wound to the structure that demands endurance. Here, containment, elsewhere a cultural script requiring women to hold bodies, emotions, and order together, becomes a literal job description. Elisabeth's transformation ritualizes that script until it devours her. The film's horror lies in showing that what appears as discipline or self-care is actually obedience to an inherited institution that calls itself nature. The stabilizer ritual, in which Elisabeth drains her own flesh to feed Sue, stages that obedience with brutal clarity. Each extraction enacts the logic of maintenance disguised as love. The scene visualizes neoliberal containment, the shift of social contradiction onto the private body. The work of sustaining life, youth, and emotional equilibrium falls solely to Elisabeth, whose failure is treated as personal collapse rather than systemic impossibility. Her decaying body thus literalizes the invisible labor that keeps patriarchal order intact.

Cesarano's account of body modification explains why the cost of this labor must remain hidden. She observes that "when the costs of change are too high and exclusively befall the most vulnerable, it is necessary to reconsider... new ways to offset these costs for those who are oppressed by the social norms that we wish to challenge" (660). *The Substance* refuses that concealment. Each time Elisabeth draws stabilizer fluid from her arm to sustain Sue's glow, the film measures the price of conformity in blood. At this point, the ritual stops looking like survival and becomes a performance of self-sacrifice. The Gothic's role here is to make the hidden consequences of social norms impossible to ignore. The tubes connecting the two women show that what looks like personal choice is really an exchange. Elisabeth gives, and Sue receives.

Clarke and Griffin describe how this exchange functions in everyday beauty culture. They write about how women's "beauty-work efforts and acceptance of social norms concerning feminine beauty further entrenched the stereotypes concerning older women and physical attractiveness, and ultimately reinforced the loss of social value that they fought so fervently to retain" (669–70). Elisabeth's endless feeding of Sue repeats that loop. Every act meant to restore her worth erases her further. The stabilizer tubes create what can be best described as invisible visibility, in which the older woman must work harder to appear, yet her work ensures her disappearance. By translating that sociological cycle into body horror, Fargeat shows that beauty's maintenance is itself monstrous. The film's gore does not exaggerate reality; it restores the violence that polite images exclude. The Gothic's function here is diagnostic, for it is to reveal containment not as affection, but as endless expenditure.

Sue's growing autonomy completes this ideological circuit. Her disgust toward Elisabeth's aging skin and her refusal to switch back, calling her "gross, old, fat, [and]

disgusting” in the process, turn the fantasy of renewal into a cycle of consumption. Elisabeth becomes the unseen labor that keeps a perfected self alive, which is a self that now rejects the body it came from. This dynamic reflects the previously discussed “ultrafeminist goal of the self-replicating female” that Wilmut and colleagues describe, capturing the fantasy of self-creation that drives the film’s logic. Fargeat stages that idea within the cultural conditions that Rich and Hays describe, where the work of reproduction has shifted from bearing children to endlessly reproducing the self. Sue’s supposed independence erases the line between biological and ideological containment, since the woman must now create her own youth, discipline, and worth as proof of autonomy. The result is not freedom from the maternal role but its privatized continuation. The film’s Gothic irony is that parthenogenesis, imagined as a break from patriarchy, becomes the very mechanism that allows patriarchal self-maintenance to survive. The double consumes the mother because the institution demands that women keep giving birth to their own perfection.

Nicola Moffat’s reading of *Frankenstein* clarifies the gender logic of this reversal. “*Frankenstein* thus subverts the monstrosity of feminine birth by instead proposing the monstrosity of masculine creativity... demonstrating the lack of control we have over our creations, whatever those may be” (26). *The Substance* repeats that subversion through the feminine body. The serum promises mastery over age, which is the ultimate creative control, but the result is uncontrollable. The horror lies not in failed science but in the revelation that the fantasy of control itself is patriarchal. By turning technological mastery into a maternal process that devours itself, Fargeat shows how neoliberal empowerment repeats masculine ideals of precision, productivity, and self-discipline. Sue’s radiant perfection is achieved through that logic, while Elisabeth’s decay marks the cost of maintaining it. In this way, the film replaces

scientific experimentation with beauty culture, showing that both are driven by the same desire for control and perfection.

The strain of this containment reaches its breaking point in the kitchen scene. Watching Sue's talk-show interview, Elisabeth hears her double claim, "I just try to be myself, to be sincere and grateful for all that I have." Elisabeth laughs, throws food, and seals the windows with newspaper to block out Sue's billboard, shouting, "You wouldn't exist without me!" Her rage is not just anger but recognition of her own disappearance. Joan Rivière's account of maternal aggression explains this eruption, stating, "Aggression and hate boiling up within are felt to be uncontrollable; they seem to explode within us; people can feel like bursting with rage, burning to seize what they want" (qtd. in Kahane 338). Elisabeth's outburst stages that explosion. The kitchen, a symbol of nourishment, becomes the Gothic chamber where emotional labor turns violent. The frantic camera movement mirrors her collapse between care and destruction. The film does not punish her anger. Instead, it treats it as the truth of the institution she serves. So, rather than her breakdown being written off as madness, this can instead be seen as the final stage of containment, in which when love must hide every conflict, rage becomes the only language left.

This section thus widens the frame from the body's collapse to the culture that requires it. Containment emerges as ideological labor performed under the sign of nature and choice. By merging Rich's institution of motherhood with Hays's intensive mothering and Huisman and Joy's neoliberal privatization, *The Substance* visualizes the system that turns maternal responsibility into solitary endurance. Through Elisabeth's extraction rituals, Sue's self-replication, and the kitchen's eruption, Fargeat transforms invisible maintenance into spectacle. The Gothic refuses to soften that exposure, as it insists that the labor of keeping perfection intact

is itself the site of horror. Having traced containment from womb to institution, the chapter can now turn outward to the critical conversation that debates whether this spectacle functions as feminist revelation or as repetition of the very violence it shows.

The Failure of Feminist Satire and the Return of Containment

Across both its bodily horror and its ideological allegory, *The Substance* promises liberation through exposure, but ends by reinscribing the same systems it critiques. The film begins by treating abjection as revelation, as the grotesque birth of Sue exposes how the body enforces cultural rules under the guise of biology. By the midpoint, this same rule becomes routine, for Elisabeth's stabilizer extractions turn maintenance into a ritual of obedience, where the body pays for its own survival. These two movements, one physical and one social, show how containment shifts from the biological to the ideological. However, when the film translates this insight into spectacle, it falls into the same trap identified by critics at *The Guardian*, *BBC*, and *Little White Lies*. Its violence is so extreme, and its suffering so prolonged, that the film's critique of exploitation risks becoming exploitation itself.

This failure is not simply aesthetic. It is structural, and it stems from how the film's Gothic excess converts ideological critique into bodily punishment. Consider the repeated images of consumption and decay that dominate the second half of the film, such as Sue draining stabilizer fluid until Elisabeth's skin bruises and her limbs deform, Elisabeth clawing at her reflection in the mirror, or her kitchen breakdown where care collapses into rage. These moments build on the earlier analysis of containment as labor, but when placed against Fargeat's claim that she wanted to show "our vulnerability with our own bodies," they also clarify why the satire collapses. The camera lingers so intently on Elisabeth's deterioration that vulnerability becomes

humiliation. Instead of dismantling the system that devalues women's aging bodies, the film reproduces its gaze. The Gothic strategy of "shattering everything," as Fargeat put it, becomes indistinguishable from the spectacle of a woman being shattered for the audience's scrutiny.

This contradiction surfaces most clearly in the film's dialogue. Going back to Harvey's early statement that "you either renew or you disappear" establishes the rule that drives both the narrative and the film's politics. He calls this biology, but it is really commerce disguised as nature. The earlier sections of this chapter have shown how that rhetoric transforms into the film's moral law, forcing Elisabeth to sustain Sue at her own expense. Eventually, Sue screams, "This balance is not working! Why do we have to keep it even? We clearly don't have the same needs!" By this time, the film has exposed the impossibility of equality within an unequal system. Yet, the visuals that accompany these scenes, particularly Sue's glowing perfection against Elisabeth's decaying body, turn critique into hierarchy. Sue's disgust mirrors the culture's disgust, and the camera reinforces it. Even when the dialogue rejects the system, the imagery still sides with youth and beauty. In this way, *The Substance* repeats what the Gothic often does with women's transgression, as it aestheticizes the punishment while claiming to critique it.

The film's excess also erases the complexity of the maternal metaphor it constructs. When Elisabeth cries that Sue is the "only lovable part of [her]," the dialogue articulates the split between selfhood and image that defines neoliberal femininity. It captures, in one sentence, how self-renewal demands self-erasure. Yet, this insight dissolves when the film literalizes that split into physical violence. Sue attacks Elisabeth after she attempts to kill her, such as by kicking Elisabeth through the portrait, choking her, and smashing her face into the mirror, visualizing the triumph of youth over age, beauty over decay, and the image over the body. Instead of exposing that binary as a cultural invention, the film restages it as natural law. In the end, when Harvey

describes Sue as his “my most beautiful creation,” the line collapses satire into confirmation, as he has unknowingly produced what will later become a physical monster—Monstro Elisae. The man who enforced the rules of renewal stands as their final author, presiding over the monster that his system produced. Fargeat intends this to indict the industry’s dehumanization of women, but the image itself of a disfigured female body begging to be seen replays the very spectacle of degradation that has always sustained the Gothic’s monstrous feminine.

This repetition aligns with what my thesis identifies as the Gothic’s double movement, in which it is transgression that ultimately reasserts control. The film crosses every possible boundary, such as biological, moral, and aesthetic boundaries, but each rupture restores the same hierarchy between the ideal and the abject. At the New Year’s Eve show that Sue is hosting, she emerges as Monstro Elisae. The audience’s horror at her appearance, and the crowd’s cries of “monster” and “freak,” confirm that the spectacle has not undone beauty’s rules but redrawn them in blood. When Elisabeth’s face melts into a puddle on her Walk of Fame star, the Gothic promise of liberation through excess collapses into the image of total containment. She literally becomes waste, erased by the next day’s cleaning. The final shot of a janitor scrubbing her star resets the world to order, erasing all trace of rebellion. What was meant to be a feminist outburst ends as another act of control.

This ending also clarifies why the film’s satire fails to escape the cultural contradictions of motherhood. *The Substance* constructs Elisabeth as both creator and caregiver, responsible for nurturing Sue even as Sue destroys her. Every act of renewal requires Elisabeth’s sacrifice. Her labor, like that of the “good mother” Huisman and Joy describe in my thesis introduction, remains invisible until it collapses. However, instead of critiquing the ideology that demands such endurance, the film turns that collapse into horror. The older, caregiving mother figure

becomes the monster that must die for the younger self to live. In this sense, the film does not disrupt the institution of motherhood; it exaggerates its cruelties. The cultural script of selfless maintenance persists, now written in wounds. Elisabeth's inability to stop and the emphasis that "the balance just needs to be respected" mirrors how mothers internalize blame for systemic contradictions they cannot resolve. The Gothic's task should be to reveal that impossibility, but *The Substance* ends by making it personal again, returning failure to the body of the woman rather than the culture that demands her perfection.

Reading the film beside its reception shows how visible this contradiction is to its audience. Reviewers who called it "self-satisfied excess" or "as shallow as the thing it critiques" are not rejecting its feminist premise; they are recognizing how its execution betrays it. The spectacle of Elisabeth's suffering, however sincere Fargeat's intent, reproduces the disciplinary gaze that defines both horror and beauty culture. Even the moments that could serve as quiet resistance, such as Elisabeth's laughter as she seals the windows and her mocking of Sue's interview, are framed as breakdowns, rather than clarity. The viewer is invited to recoil from her rather than identify with her exhaustion. This is the precise failure that my thesis sees as central to the Gothic mode, which is that excess exposes the system's cruelty while reaffirming its power. Fargeat's film understands the violence of containment but cannot imagine an alternative to it, so it turns rebellion into spectacle and then wipes the stage clean.

In the end, *The Substance* reflects the paradox at the center of modern feminist horror. It seeks to free the female body from objectification through extremity but relies on the same visual vocabulary that objectifies it. Its attempt to critique neoliberal femininity results in a narrative that punishes the woman who cannot keep renewing herself. The Gothic framework makes this failure legible. As the introduction to this thesis establishes, the genre's excess has always been

double-edged, for it transgresses in order to restore. Fargeat's use of that excess, though ambitious, demonstrates the limits of representation when critique depends on repetition. By visualizing empowerment as mutilation, the film reinscribes the link between femininity, motherhood, monstrosity, and collapse that defines patriarchal containment. Therefore, *The Substance* occupies an uneasy position within contemporary feminist Gothic media. It understands the problem, dramatizes it with precision, and yet falls back into the same spectacle it aims to condemn. Its final image of a woman's face dissolving into the pavement, erased by the next day's labor turns exposure into closure. In doing so, it mirrors the broader cultural contradiction that this thesis traces, which is the demand that women sustain the illusion of order, even as that work destroys them. As my next chapter will show, this same logic persists when containment leaves the body and enters the home. In *The Haunting of Hill House*, Shirley Crain's domestic and emotional labor extends the cycle that Elisabeth's body literalized. The maternal figure no longer bleeds to hold herself together; she polishes, arranges, and embalms. Both narratives reveal that the Gothic's true horror lies not in transgression but in endurance, or the quiet, continuous work of keeping the world from falling apart.

Chapter 2

Shirley Crain: Monstrosity as Care in *The Haunting of Hill House*

This chapter examines Flanagan's *The Haunting of Hill House* and how its portrayal of Shirley Crain turns domestic virtue into a source of Gothic horror. Through her dual role as mortician and mother, Shirley transforms care, composure, and emotional control into acts of containment. The series replaces the Gothic's traditional focus on visible chaos with a quieter form of repression, where horror is expressed through restraint rather than excess. *Hill House* domesticates the Gothic through the figure of Shirley, translating monstrosity into propriety and horror into maintenance. The analysis that follows traces how Flanagan's visual and emotional realism turns abjection *outward*: from the body to the home, from physical transgression to affective discipline. The first section explores how Shirley's mortuary work and family relationships render care indistinguishable from repression, while the final section situates this reading within the show's critical reception and Flanagan's stated goal of "healing through empathy." Together, these discussions reveal that the series' apparent sentimentality is itself Gothic, in which the promise of emotional catharsis rests upon the quiet endurance of women who hold everything together. By reworking death, grief, and motherhood into instruments of order, *The Haunting of Hill House* exposes how modern Gothic media redefines monstrosity through containment rather than collapse.

Trauma, Gendered Emotion, and Domestic Containment

Contemporary trauma research helps name how "control" and "composure" are often survival tactics that can harden into lifelong scripts. As Cheyenne Downey and Aoife Crummy write, "If trauma has been inflicted on a child by their parent(s), their core belief system

recognizes that a secure attachment style has not been formed and is deficient in protection, prompting emotional hesitation” (1). Their study distinguishes coping from defense, noting that denial can be seen as a “defense mechanism rather than a coping strategy because the victim refuses to reflect on an experience in order to protect their wellbeing,” meanwhile coping “persuade[s] the survivor to engage in a specific activity to combat the influence of the adversities” (2). This difference is important throughout the chapter, since the Gothic often presents defense as virtue and turns survival habits into moral order.

Psychological research on gendered emotion clarifies how those defense habits get socially rewarded. Tara M. Chaplin observes, “women show greater emotion expression overall, and in particular positive emotions, and internalizing negative emotions such as sadness and anxiety” (1), and that girls “are expected to display greater levels of most emotions, particularly positive emotions such as happiness, and internalizing negative emotions, including sadness, fear, anxiety, shame, and guilt” because these displays “facilitate rather than threaten relationships” (5). Chaplin adds that children “are more likely to behave in a ‘socially acceptable’ manner with persons they do not know well and, therefore, are more likely to adhere to gender roles” (8), while girls may smile for unfamiliar observers “in order to ‘please’ an adult experimenter or in order to reduce social tension” (8–9). Read together with Downey and Crummy, this research frames a recurring Gothic pattern where “good” femininity equals emotional inwardness and social smoothness, which can mask unprocessed harm.

Domesticity studies and Gothic parody show how these emotional norms are policed inside women’s communities. Kerstin-Anja M nderlein argues that women “had to be reined in and made to conform... [and] the social strictures that were placed on women were not only enforced on them by men, but also by some women” (2). Citing Deborah Kaplan, she notes,

“Women tended to remain loyal to the ideology of domesticity... They consented to their own subordination because domestic femininity was inextricably connected to high social status” (qtd. in Munderlein 2). The upshot for Gothic contexts is that conformity and containment are produced not only by patriarchal figures, but by intra-female surveillance that converts propriety into belonging. Within literary genealogies of the Gothic home, these pressures become architectural. J. Jody Cooper quotes Donna Heiland’s observation that “patriarchy is not only the subject of gothic novels, but is itself a gothic structure” (qtd. in Cooper 89). Cooper continues, noting that “characters who resist a gothic patriarchy” tend to “fare better in their struggle against a gothic patriarchy,” but if they are female, then “one’s success would depend on superseding the cultural restrictions imposed by the old dominant order,” and the “struggle leads to an end more reconciliatory than victorious” (98). This idea of reconciliation without victory shapes how this chapter approaches healing arcs, closure scenes, and the aesthetics of resolution in *Hill House*.

The marital Gothic sharpens how containment attaches to gender, sex, and the home. Jane Mitchell writes, “The gothic literary genre... has always been a natural home for both monsters and binary depictions of womanhood,” and that female Gothic, especially the “marital gothic,” “exposes the rage of women entrapped in traditional, reductive and confining notions of femaleness, and the uncanny environment of the institution of marriage itself” (53). She adds, “Any woman who defies normal expectations of marriage—home and motherhood—or demonstrates an awareness of her own sexuality or interest in sex, is vilified and forced into abject space” (67). She goes on to state that “even within marriage, the wife who enjoys sex ends up either dead or incarcerated” (67). This framework will later ground how sexuality, propriety,

and punishment function within *Hill House*, particularly when the show reveals that Shirley had an affair.

Ideology of reading and domesticity further frames how “goodness” is manufactured. Timothy L. Carens reminds us that nineteenth-century culture used idolatry discourse to discipline women’s imaginations, warning that romantic reading could seduce them away from domestic roles. He clarifies, “The figure of idolatry... expresses the fear that women might discover in romantic narratives a medium through which to indulge rebellious or wayward impulses” (241–42), and, most starkly, the “need to control how and what women read responds to a fear at the heart of patriarchal culture, that women might decide to reject the role that has been fashioned for them as subservient wives and dutiful mothers” (247). Carens concludes, “More fearful still is the notion that such women might not be content simply to imagine such visions but rather will insist on attempting... to turn them into concrete forms” (265). In this chapter, those “concrete forms” appear not only in choices and relationships, but in the material labor of domestic presentation—the work of managing bodies, rooms, and rituals.

Finally, postfeminist spectrality offers a vocabulary for how unfinished histories inhabit contemporary heroines without necessarily delivering rupture. Nelly Strehlau notes, “Postfeminism is... a time or sensibility haunted by the ghost of feminism that it wants to (purports to) relegate to the past” (39), while María del Pilar Blanco and Esther Peeran add that “categories of subjectification like gender, sexuality, and race can themselves be conceived as spectral” (qtd. in Strehlau 41). Strehlau’s television case studies emphasize that reckoning often aims for fragile peace rather than structural transformation. In series like *Any Day Now* and *Grey’s Anatomy*, the return of maternal ghosts leads to partial reconciliation, rather than structural change. Across her examples, she argues that such hauntings ensure a cautious,

emotionally restorative resolution for female characters. This chapter uses that framework to examine how reconciliation and containment operate together as aesthetic and ethical ideals in twenty-first-century Gothic television.

Taken together, these threads establish the conceptual scaffold for the chapter. Trauma research explains why control looks like care. Gendered emotion research shows how inwardness is rewarded as maturity. Domestic studies reveal how women help enforce those norms. The marital Gothic and idolatry discourse clarify how desire, reading, and domestic labor are organized into systems that punish refusal. Postfeminist spectrality gives a name to conciliatory hauntings that settle for fragile peace. The sections that follow situate the series within this terrain and map the critical debate over its aims and effects.

Series Background: *The Haunting of Hill House* as Gothic Containment

The Haunting of Hill House reimagines Shirley Jackson's 1959 novel as a ten-episode Gothic family drama that merges the haunted house tradition with an intimate study of grief, trauma, and containment. The series alternates between two timelines: the Crain children's time growing up in the Hill House and their fractured adult lives decades later. Rather than isolating terror within the walls of the house, Flanagan transforms the Gothic setting into an emotional architecture, where domestic spaces are haunted not just by spirits, but by the psychic residue of family history. Each Crain sibling embodies a different strategy for surviving the unspeakable: Steven intellectualizes it, Theo suppresses it through emotional detachment, Luke seeks to escape it through addiction, Nell collapses under its weight, and Shirley attempts to control it through order and precision. Their father, Hugh, mirrors this impulse, maintaining silence about what happened in the house to "protect" his children, while their mother Olivia's descent into

madness marks the original collapse of containment that defines the family's later dysfunction. Hill House becomes both a literal and psychological inheritance, its ghosts standing in for what cannot be buried.

The series situates this family tragedy within a larger Gothic lineage, where domestic ideals unravel under the strain of emotional excess. Tying back to what Botting describes, the Gothic is a writing of excess that exposes the instability of reason and the fragility of order. Flanagan's approach reflects that tradition while updating it for a postmodern context. Hill House becomes a metaphor for the interior lives of its inhabitants, structured around the impossibility of separating past from present. The house "stands by itself against its hills," as Jackson originally wrote, but in the series, it also stands as an emblem of the family psyche, "holding darkness within, not willing to surrender it" (Jackson 3). Time collapses in on itself, a formal structure that visualizes trauma's repetition and the impossibility of closure. Through this temporal distortion, the Crains' attempts at control, such as Shirley's perfectionism, Steven's rationalism, Theo's gloves, Luke's rituals, become performances of denial. These efforts to contain pain only tighten its grip, a dynamic central to the Gothic logic of repression and return.

In adapting Jackson's novel, Flanagan expands the story's psychological focus into a generational narrative about grief and emotional labor. In an interview with *Vulture*, Flanagan described the series as "an excellent way to recontextualize what [he] loved about the book" through the lens of "familial horror," seeking to merge the supernatural with psychological realism, translating Shirley Jackson's haunted domestic space into a contemporary meditation on grief, trauma, and memory (Abrams). "Ghosts," he said, "are the ones we create in ourselves." In doing so, Flanagan sought to reposition horror as an extension of the human psyche, arguing that the true terror of Hill House lies not in the building, but in the emotional residue that follows its

survivors. Flanagan's vision was therefore an almost therapeutic confrontation, as it became a story about learning to live with loss through reconciliation rather than destruction. Building on Botting's formulation of Gothic excess as a force that ultimately restores order, Flanagan's version of *Hill House* does the same. It turns emotional breakdown into resolution and presents horror as a way of restoring balance rather than breaking it.

This emphasis on emotional healing proved both the series' strength and its greatest point of contention. Emily Nussbaum of *The New Yorker* condemned what it called the show's "corn syrup in its veins instead of blood," arguing that Flanagan had drained the Gothic of its "raw feminine perversity" and replaced it with "Goop-y self-help truisms about bereavement and healing." For Nussbaum, Jackson's original text, which is an unsettling exploration of female alienation, repression, and psychic collapse, was sanitized in translation. Where Jackson's Eleanor was "a true-blue weirdo," funny, observant, and full of rage, Flanagan's ensemble becomes a catalog of trauma types whose suffering is moralized into lessons about closure. The review singles out Olivia Crain, thanks to Carla Gugino's performance, as the only figure who retains the Gothic's dangerous vitality, describing her as "a terrifying diva" whose charisma "resists the story's attempts to simplify matters." In this framing, Flanagan's adaptation transforms Jackson's perverse femininity into digestible sentimentality, an act of aesthetic and moral smoothing that recasts abjection as healing. However, his discomfort also exposes a deeper shift, in which Gothic transgression has become emotional management. What once appeared as bodily excess now manifests as the labor of controlling emotion, a task closely tied to modern ideals of femininity and motherhood.

Other critics voiced similar ambivalence. *CinePunked* reviewer Rachael Kelly praised the series as a "reimagining" rather than a mere adaptation, noting that it "selects isolated images,

impressions and namesakes from Jackson's work" to construct a new narrative about "loss, mental breakdown and post-traumatic survival." Yet, Kelly also accused the show of "male-ification," replacing Jackson's female-centered narrative of desperation with Steven Crain's detached perspective. The reviewer writes that the novel's "silent, screaming core, a story about "the demands of duty and the sacrifice of self," is displaced by a framework in which male rationality mediates female trauma. The sisters, the piece acknowledges, are "complex, well-realised," but their arcs are undermined by a finale that abandons ambiguity for sentimentality. Describing the tenth episode as "the series' weakest link," the critic argues that Flanagan's decision to remove an originally scripted final image for the series, which was deemed "too cruel," betrays an unwillingness to embrace horror's moral instability. "What results," they conclude, "is a dubious kind of resolution that makes a liar out of what has gone before." In refusing cruelty, Flanagan performs the Gothic's movement of contraction and recoil that Botting describes, sealing chaos back into order. The series' therapeutic ending thus enacts the very boundary-making impulse that the Gothic traditionally disrupts.

This impulse toward restoration draws sharper ideological criticism from *BuzzFeed News*, in which Sadie Graham argues that the series "believes deeply in the sanctity of the family unit," recasting Jackson's critique of domestic power into a sentimental defense of it. Graham contends that where Jackson's novel "asks whether the structure of the family is itself horrifying," Flanagan's version frames familial dissolution as the ultimate horror and reconciliation as redemption. This shift reflects a broader trend in contemporary prestige horror, where Gothic critique gives way to the language of therapy culture. "Its interest," Graham writes, "is in trauma and healing, not power—as if trauma and healing have nothing to do with power." By erasing the queer tensions and social hierarchies central to Jackson's text, especially

Eleanor's complex desire for Theodora, the adaptation replaces subversive ambiguity with moral closure. The result is a domestic moral fable in which the family must endure, even if endurance requires the suppression of the instability that once made the Gothic uncanny.

These converging perspectives reveal how *Hill House* negotiates the Gothic's central paradox. If Jackson's novel used terror to expose the claustrophobia of womanhood and the violence of belonging, Flanagan's version reabsorbs that terror into sentimental realism. However, this very containment clarifies the Gothic's endurance as a discourse of regulation. What critics read as sentimentality can be understood instead as the genre's contemporary expression of control, or the transformation of horror into affective labor. Flanagan's ghosts do not threaten social order; they teach it how to survive itself. His reimaged Hill House becomes the regime of truth that Uygur describes, a moral architecture where emotional transparency and forgiveness are naturalized as virtue. The maternal script Rich and Hays describe—quiet endurance, self-erasure, the work of keeping everything intact—finds its modern allegory here, in a haunted house that heals through repression.

This dynamic is most visible in how audiences interpret Shirley Crain. Popular commentary often reproduces the adaptation's moralizing framework, translating her repression into judgment. A *Reddit* post titled "Unpopular opinion: Shirley is by far the worst Crain sibling" described her as "a liar, a hypocrite, a control freak, and a cheater." The language echoes the show's own discomfort with containment, conflating emotional regulation with moral hypocrisy. What critical reception pieces like *BuzzFeed News* identify on a structural level, such as Flanagan's conflation of control and pathology, reappears in miniature within audience reactions. Culturally, Shirley becomes the Gothic's new monster of order: condemned not for losing control, but for maintaining it too well. Still, not all readings conform to this punitive lens. A *TV*

Obsessive article by J.C. Hotchkiss offers an empathetic counterpoint, interpreting Shirley not as cold or superior but as an emotional “fixer,” someone who “takes on the pain of others so they will not have to feel it.” Her anger “keeps her company and attaches itself to her,” functioning as both armor and burden. In this reading, Shirley embodies the Gothic labor of care, as she contains death, grief, and disorder to preserve the illusion of stability for others. Her profession as a mortician literalizes this dynamic, transforming emotional control into aesthetic reconstruction, an impulse also magnified in *The Substance*, where care and bodily maintenance also become sites of horror. Unlike Steven’s exploitative storytelling or Theo’s defensive withdrawal, Shirley’s containment becomes her haunting. Hotchkiss’ interpretation thus restores the complexity flattened in popular discourse, positioning Shirley as a figure of abject empathy rather than moral failure.

Taken together, these responses trace the fault lines between Jackson’s Gothic instability and Flanagan’s therapeutic revision. Where critics such as Kelly, Nussbaum, and Graham accuse the adaptation of domesticating the Gothic’s female and queer disruptions, Hotchkiss recovers in Shirley the residue of that disturbance. She remains, within the show’s polished world of grief management and closure, a reminder that horror cannot be fully resolved. The way people react to Shirley, either judging her as self-righteous or recognizing her fatigue, shows the central contradiction in Flanagan’s work, for the very qualities that seem virtuous are also what make her monstrous. In making containment its moral center, *Hill House* turns the very labor of maintaining order into the site of its deepest horror. The following section situates Shirley among the Crain women to show how her quiet discipline, unlike Olivia’s descent into madness, Nell’s self-destruction, or Theo’s sensual transgression, transforms repression itself into the Gothic’s most modern expression of excess.

Locating Shirley Among the Crain Women

Before turning to sustained analysis, it is necessary to clarify why this chapter focuses on Shirley Crain rather than on the more overtly “monstrous” female figures within *The Haunting of Hill House*. Among the Crain women, each manifests a different iteration of the Gothic feminine, embodying familiar archetypes of madness, possession, and abjection. Yet, read through the broader Gothic dialectic of excess and containment, their differences reveal a continuum between visible monstrosity and internalized order. The Gothic’s fascination with boundary collapse, as Botting reminds us, also serves to restore and enforce those same boundaries. Each Crain woman stages this process differently by breaking, crossing, or maintaining the limits of selfhood, domesticity, and maternal care.

Olivia Crain, the matriarch, most visibly embodies the Gothic maternal monster. Her descent into psychosis and attempted filicide dramatizes what Zachary Sheldon calls the “abject mother—simultaneously attracting and disgusting viewers” (45). Once defined by nurture, Olivia’s identity becomes consumed by delusion, aligning her with the archetypal Gothic mother whose instinct to protect collapses into destruction. Sheldon adds that Olivia is “enmeshed in a system of relations from which she cannot be disentangled” and that her “animalistic” behavior visualizes a total collapse of containment (47–48). Critics such as Djuna Hallsworth extend this logic to the setting itself, describing Hill House as a “metaphor for the mother’s body” (20–21). The house becomes a psychic architecture of maternity, as it is inviting, enclosing, and ultimately consuming. Through Olivia, the maternal self dissolves into the home, producing the Gothic excess that later demands symbolic repair.

Eleanor “Nell” Crain, Shirley’s youngest sister, assumes the role of the tragic Gothic heroine undone by inherited trauma. Bound to her spectral double, “the Bent-Neck Lady,” she enacts what Sheldon terms “the temporal collapse of past, present, and future” (51). Her mirrored death repeats her mother’s trauma, showing how the family’s pain never ends. Richard Pascal characterizes Hill House as a “monstrous maternal force that prevents her from gaining agency and returns her to a state of complete dependency” (469). In Nell, the abject feminine becomes cyclical rather than singular, as it is a wound that is passed down rather than healed. Her tragedy represents the Gothic’s fusion of family and fate, where obligation becomes destiny and containment fails through collapse.

Shirley’s other younger sister, Theo Crain, occupies a more liminal position. She is both gifted and guarded, as she is psychically sensitive, emotionally distant, and sexually ambiguous. Her gloves, which she uses to block unwanted psychic contact, externalize what Sheldon calls “the enactment and identification of the normal/abject border of the world” (52). When she removes them in “Touch,” her exposure to a child’s trauma temporarily disables her control, showing how empathy threatens self-containment. Theo’s queerness, like her clairvoyance, positions her at the threshold of the abject: a woman whose insight and intimacy blur moral and bodily boundaries. As Sana Ayed Chebil observes of the broader tradition of the “femme fatale,” a transgressive figure that destabilizes social orders (114). Theo’s existence is thus defined by permeability, for she both experiences and resists emotional contagion.

Overall, Olivia, Nell, and Theo each stage overt forms of Gothic excess. Madness, suicide, and supernatural sensitivity externalize how this thesis interprets as the monstrous feminine, which is the visible breakdown of bodily, temporal, and emotional containment. Shirley Crain, however, occupies a quieter but equally revealing register. Her horror is not one of

excess, but of endurance. As Sheldon notes, “Olivia is arguably most abject to Shirley, who seeks to be stable, secure and rational—everything Olivia was not” (53). Her adherence to moral and emotional order is not an absence of monstrosity but another mode of it. She becomes the maternal container of the series, for she is the one tasked with holding everything together emotionally, domestically, and symbolically so that others can fall apart. Where Olivia, Nell, and Theo dramatize the Gothic’s collapse of boundaries, Shirley dramatizes the labor of maintaining them. Her role as mortician literalizes this ethic of control, as she reconstructs the dead into presentable form, converting decay into aesthetic order. In this act, the work of mourning becomes indistinguishable from the work of containment. Like the mothers described by Rich and Hays, Shirley takes on the invisible work of keeping things together. She turns grief into composure and disorder into routine. Her calm hides the toll of constant self-control. What others see as coldness or moral superiority is really exhaustion, and it is the result of living under the pressure to stay stable no matter what.

Shirley’s quiet monstrosity shows how the modern Gothic reimagines the maternal figure. Spectacle gives way to restraint, and violence becomes labor. She reflects Botting’s point that transgression often ends up reinforcing limits. Her control both protects and confines her, keeping the family stable while erasing her own interior life. In Flanagan’s version, which softens Jackson’s chaos into sentimentality, Shirley becomes the center of what the story leaves unsaid, in which the real horror of *Hill House* lies not in what escapes, but in what must be constantly contained. This makes her a key figure for understanding the postfeminist Gothic, where repression replaces rage and emotional labor replaces spectacle. Her composure, like the embalmed bodies she tends, maintains the illusion of peace. If Olivia, Nell, and Theo show what happens when boundaries collapse, Shirley shows what it costs to preserve them. Her restraint is

not freedom from horror, but its modern form, in which containment is turned pathological, order revealed as the Gothic's newest excess.

Shirley Crain's story begins where the Gothic body confronts its most impossible task: the illusion of containment. From the dead kittens she tends as a child to the corpses she restores as a mortician, she performs the same ritual of holding disorder within the bounds of propriety. Through her, *The Haunting of Hill House* reworks the Gothic fascination with the leaking, uncontrollable body into a moralized form of care. The genre's earlier depictions of feminine excess are reimagined through composure and order, the cultural work of keeping things clean, calm, and still. Shirley becomes a modern, maternal figure of the monstrous-feminine, not through violent transgression, but through the quiet labor of never letting the boundaries of the home or the body break.

Monstrosity as Care: Gothic Labor and Maternal Containment

Shirley's pattern, here, originates in her childhood trauma in "Open Casket." After finding a litter of kittens, Shirley insists on caring for them, imagining herself as a tiny mother capable of keeping them alive. The kittens begin dying one by one, and when her mother gives the sole surviving one away, Shirley breaks down, shouting, "Why would you give away the last one, the only one left? It's not fair!" This moment turns care into anger and love into disgust. She is not crying for the kitten's death alone, but also for the loss of control over something she believed her care could preserve. Olivia later tells Hugh, her husband and Shirley's father, that Shirley is "gonna have a pretty messed-up view of death coming out of this," acknowledging how deeply this moment will shape her daughter's emotional logic. What disturbs Shirley does

not seem like death itself, but more of the realization that care cannot stop it. From then on, love becomes something to control instead of something to feel.

As Downey and Crummy explain, children exposed to trauma often adopt “passive coping” mechanisms, taking “minimal or no effective action... as adversities are deemed inevitable” (2). Shirley’s obsession with order reflects that pattern. Her perfectionism hides a quiet belief that some things can never truly be fixed. Her later career as a mortician turns this helplessness into routine, replacing mourning with technical control. When she comforts a frightened boy who is reluctant to see his grandmother’s body before the funeral, she gently explains, “The thing about an open casket... is that it’s a great chance to take all of those pictures in your head of Grandma... cover it all up with a better picture... I’m gonna fix her. That’s what I do.” This line captures Shirley’s entire worldview, in which pain can’t be erased, but it can be made presentable. If it looks contained, it feels manageable.

Allison Scott Pruitt’s research on women in the funeral industry sheds light on the gendered dimension of this logic. Before the medicalization of death, “women generally cared for the dying and dead, enacting their essentialist roles as ‘natural’ caregivers” (7). Modern women in death care must “manage their emotions in a detached fashion to be successful” (16). Shirley embodies this paradox. For instance, when Nell dies, Shirley insists on preparing the body herself, telling Kevin, her husband, and the others, “She’s my sister. I’m hosting her funeral. That’s that.” When Kevin objects, calling the idea “insane” and worrying that “this is too much for anyone,” Shirley replies, “In the time it will take me to explain to you what to do with her, I could just do it myself, so I’m doing her myself. I owe her this.” Her insistence sounds like strength, but it is really denial, a refusal to let anyone else handle her grief. Later, on the phone with Steven, she defends her need to keep working, arguing, “Don’t talk to me that way. Steve,

do you know what I'm doing right now? I'm elbow-deep in our sister's chest cavity, pulling out a bag of her internal organs." Her tone is both clinical and defensive. Her professional language becomes a barrier that keeps emotion out. To hold the family together, she keeps herself inside the wound. Later, when her children peek into the embalming room, she tries to normalize what they see, which allows audiences to see even further that is attempting to restrain any emotion. "Any questions you have are completely normal," she tells them. When Allie asks where Nell is now, Shirley answers, "I don't know, Allie. Nobody knows. Mostly, I'm just sad." Her calm tone teaches restraint as virtue. Even though she admits she is sad, she models emotional control as compassion. The mortuary becomes a lesson in self-control, where emotional restraint is treated as the right way to grieve.

If the mortuary represents the literal house of containment, the funeral home in "Two Storms" becomes its Gothic double, extending Shirley's death work into the domestic realm. The night before Nell's funeral, the Crain family gathers in the viewing room, along with the open casket that Shirley has prepared. The episode's continuous camera movements trap the family in one long, unbroken moment, forcing them to inhabit the same space and time as their grief. Within this setting, Shirley acts not only as caretaker but as gatekeeper, managing how emotion is displayed. Theo stands beside Nell's body and tells Shirley, "In movies, they always say that they, uh, look like they're sleeping. She doesn't look like she's sleeping. She looks dead." Shirley immediately corrects her, clarifying, "I don't know why people say that. Most of what people say at a funeral is a wish. They're in a better place, they're at peace, they're smiling down. People just wishing out loud." This exchange turns comfort into denial. For Shirley, grief must be

factual and contained. Her insistence on accuracy becomes its own form of avoidance. The words she refuses to use—peace, rest, release—are the very ones she most needs to believe.

This self-imposed discipline reaches its breaking point when she has a deep conversation with her father later that night. Sitting near the casket, she tells him, “There were seven of us, and now there’s five because two of us decided to die.” Her choice of the word “decided” exposes her need to frame tragedy as a choice she can morally assess, not an event she cannot control. She adds, “Some religions won’t let you be buried in their cemeteries if you kill yourself? It’s monstrous... When really it was just that you’re in so much pain... and Nellie... knew the price the rest of us pay when someone does that, and she did it anyway.” Her words reveal a tension between empathy and resentment. She recognizes pain, yet frames it as betrayal. Chaplin notes that women are socialized to “internalize negative emotions such as sadness, guilt, and fear” because those feelings “facilitate rather than threaten relationships” (5). Shirley performs this internalization perfectly, speaking compassion while condemning the act. Her anger becomes responsibility, and her heartbreak becomes moral order. Even in grief, she holds herself to the same rules she enforces on others.

As the pressure mounts, the illusion of control shatters in “Witness Marks” when she discovers Theo and Kevin having a suspicious encounter, which is a rare instance of Theo having a moment of vulnerability. Later on, the confrontation begins with confusion and spirals into accusation. Shirley’s rage is not about the act itself, but about what it symbolizes, which is the shattering of her moral authority. Theo finally breaks the silence, yelling, “All of us are just always helping you keep up this idea in your head that you’re perfect Shirley, and we’re just a bunch of fuck-ups fucking up. Perfect Shirley’s perfect fucking life.” Theo’s outburst reframes Shirley’s morality as pathology. The funeral home, once a place of composure, becomes a

haunted domestic space where control turns violent. The argument is not only about betrayal but about the strain of keeping order. Theo's words expose how much anger and exhaustion lie beneath Shirley's calm exterior.

This conflict reflects a broader pattern of female regulation. M nderlein argues that in Gothic parody, "women are enticed to alter their behavior" through social correction rather than direct punishment (7). Shirley's relationships with her sisters mirror this structure. She polices them not out of cruelty, but because the family's stability depends on it. The weight of maintaining control falls on women themselves, passed down across generations as a duty disguised as virtue. Even online audiences reproduce this dynamic. As noted earlier, some viewers read Shirley as cold or hypocritical, misinterpreting her repression as arrogance. The discomfort she provokes mirrors the show's own tension between realism and restraint. The Gothic excess that once appeared as blood or screams now appears as silence. Hill House no longer bleeds because Shirley refuses to let it.

This cycle of repression and endurance culminates in the Red Room sequence in "Silence Lay Steadily," which completes Shirley's transformation from caretaker to what might be called a monster of order. Inside the Red Room at Hill House, a shapeshifting room that serves as a manifestation of the Crains' personal fears and desires, she relives the night of her affair with Ryan Quale, a fellow mortician she met six years earlier at a conference. At first, she remembers rejecting his invitation, saying, "It was nice to meet you, and I enjoyed the conversation, but I'm gonna say goodnight." But, the haunting corrects her memory, stating that she did go upstairs. Ryan's spectral voice narrates the encounter in detail, forcing her to face what she has repressed. "You're so righteous," he sneers. "You did this thing, and you liked it, and you just decided not to look at it. That's you all over. Shirley never wants to look." The dialogue literalizes her

lifelong avoidance of self-knowledge. She desperately responds, “I’m a good wife. I’m a good mother. I’m a good person,” revealing that her moral identity has become its own haunting. The room acts as both confession and punishment, confronting her with the corpse of her ideal self.

This realization deepens when the memory shifts to the funeral home. In a hallucination that fuses her childhood and adult selves, the mortician who once “fixed” Olivia’s body stands beside Shirley’s own open casket. He says, “I fixed her. I ripped out her organs and eyeballs, and wired her jaw so she couldn’t scream. But she is pretty. Isn’t she?” The grotesque imagery transforms Shirley’s profession into a metaphor for self-erasure. Every act of preservation has been an act of mutilation. She has not conquered death; she has imitated it. Later at the end of the episode, Shirley goes to Kevin and confesses, almost pleading, “I need you to remember... that I love you, my best friend. I’m asking you to love me hard for the next few minutes, and it might be the hardest that you’ve ever had to love me. But I know it’ll be okay, because it’s us.” She ends this by saying, “So... I’m gonna jump, and I’m asking you to hold my hand while I’m falling.” The language of death merges with the language of intimacy, evoking the series’ recurring imagery of falling, as Olivia’s suicide was framed as a literal and symbolic descent. Therefore, the only way for her to escape the trap of containment is through surrender, through falling. Flanagan frames this confession as redemption, but the resolution is uneasy. Shirley’s vulnerability restores peace within the family, yet that peace depends on the same self-denial that has defined her. What appears to be healing is simply control reborn as forgiveness. The Gothic wound becomes therapy, and emotional repression is mistaken for recovery. This reading aligns with how critics describe the show’s conclusion, which is not seen as liberation, but as the reassertion of the same moral order that caused the family’s collapse. Shirley’s supposed progress only reaffirms the system that demanded her composure in the first place. The horror is

not the confession itself, but that she must keep living inside the world that made confession necessary.

Pruitt's notion of the "refeminization of death care" clarifies why this resolution remains ambivalent. One funeral worker she interviewed described her role as "a feminine orientation," a return to the tradition of "shrouding women" who once tended the dead (19–20). In Shirley's case, that return becomes confinement. Her skill grants authority only within a feminized space. Even when she seems to "undo" gender by mastering a male-coded profession, she does so by performing idealized feminine composure (Pruitt 5). The very traits that empower her also entrap her. Her control, empathy, and restraint absorb every failure the family cannot face. She becomes the mechanism through which the narrative achieves closure, carrying the emotional labor of everyone else's redemption. This burden extends to the audience's response as well. Shirley's restraint, often mistaken for moral superiority, becomes the lens through which the series enforces its vision of healing. She is punished for her imperfections but redeemed for her endurance. Her stillness is read as virtue; her exhaustion as grace. This contradiction lies at the center of Flanagan's moral universe, where excess hides inside order and monstrosity becomes indistinguishable from care. Shirley's silence shows how she keeps the family together by holding everything in.

In the final moments of *Hill House*, the siblings gather around a birthday cake in soft light. It appears to be peace, but it looks more like preservation. The family has been made whole again, but only because every wound has been carefully dressed. The title "Silence Lay Steadily" captures this tension. Silence is not serenity; it is labor. Flanagan's ghosts may rest, but the cost of that rest is the invisible work of women like Shirley, whose emotional containment holds the world together. The Gothic has not disappeared but been domesticated into propriety. In Shirley,

the series reveals that the true monster of Hill House is not the ghostly mother or the haunted mansion, but the ideal of the good woman who keeps everything intact. Her story turns care into the site of horror, showing that the most terrifying ghosts are the virtues that refuse to die.

Containment, Catharsis, and the Gothic's Return to Order

Placed in conversation with the critical and audience responses surrounding *The Haunting of Hill House*, Shirley's arc reveals that the series' supposed sentimentality is not a betrayal of the Gothic, but its modern form. Critics who accused Flanagan of replacing Jackson's perversity with "goop-y self-help truisms" understood that the series reconfigures horror as moral management, but they stopped short of recognizing that this transformation is precisely what this analysis of Shirley exposes. Her mortuary rituals, her refusal to relinquish control, and her need to "fix" Nell's body do not dilute the Gothic, but rather they embody its latest iteration. The illusion that care can contain disorder replays the genre's foundational cycle of transgression and recoil. In the kitten sequence, Shirley's cry that "it's not fair" that her parents gave away the last kitten already stages this paradox, as love becomes control the moment it confronts decay. What the critic calls the "draining" of the Gothic's feminine perversity is, in Shirley's hands, the transformation of that perversity into composure, where the horror lies not in eruption but in endurance.

Kelly's observation that Flanagan refuses "cruelty" and replaces the novel's instability with sentimentality finds its visual corollary in "Two Storms." The continuous camera movement that traps the Crains in an unbroken shot mirrors the emotional economy that traps Shirley in perpetual responsibility. Her correction that mourners' words are "wishes" instead of truth shows how emotion is contained and cleaned up. Flanagan's ending may look sentimental, but scenes

like this show that it operates more like ritual, turning grief into something controlled and proper. The Gothic spectacle no longer relies on women screaming, but on women who hold everything in.

Graham's claim that *Hill House* "believes deeply in the sanctity of the family unit" is borne out most clearly in "Witness Marks," when Shirley's rage at Theo exposes her as both enforcer and victim of domestic order. The scene literalizes the critic's concern that the show's horror is not dissolution but disobedience. Theo's accusation of "perfect Shirley's perfect fucking life" articulates the same dynamic that viewers later reproduce in forums, castigating her as "a liar, a hypocrite, a control freak." The audience, like the series, cannot tolerate the sight of containment unraveling.

The Red Room sequence completes this dialogue between the critics' frustration and the show's formal logic. Where Nussbaum saw the series as "draining the Gothic of its raw feminine perversity," the hallucination of the mortician mutilating Shirley's corpse exposes that perversity still operating beneath Flanagan's empathy. Each time Shirley tries to fix or help, she ends up repeating the same kind of control she's trapped in. What seems caring is really another way to avoid chaos. Flanagan's story treats this as healing, but it only shows how much pain is hidden behind her self-control, reproducing the very containment critics accuse him of endorsing essential to ideological constructions of motherhood.

Overall, Flanagan's broader goal of telling a story about grief and reconciliation becomes more complicated through Shirley's arc. Her emotional labor shows that reconciliation and repression often look the same. The version of healing the series offers depends on keeping pain contained, rather than confronting it. The final birthday scene captures this perfectly, as what seems like peace is really the return of order. Still, this return is a transformation of the Gothic

itself. By turning monstrosity into care and fear into endurance, this reveals how the genre now locates horror in endurance itself—the quiet, ongoing work of holding everything together.

In this way, Flanagan's series marks a turning point in this project's larger argument. *Hill House* transforms the Gothic wound into domestic labor, showing that horror no longer explodes through the body but circulates through the moral economy of care. Yet, if Shirley's containment makes monstrosity invisible, the next chapter shows what happens when that containment breaks. In the MCU, figures like Wanda Maximoff and Agatha Harkness unleash the Gothic's repressed energy on a cosmic scale, turning the quiet labor of *Hill House* into world-shattering grief and shame. Where Shirley holds the home together, Wanda and Agatha destroy it, and through them, the Gothic's buried excess finally erupts again. Together, these figures trace the Gothic's shifting center of gravity from the mortuary to the multiverse, from the horror of holding everything together to the terror of letting it go.

Chapter 3

Wanda and Agatha: The Monstrous Maternal in the Marvel Gothic

This chapter examines how *WandaVision*, *Doctor Strange in the Multiverse of Madness*, and *Agatha All Along* reimagine the Gothic witch through the maternal body, transforming grief, shame, and endurance into forms of containment. Through Wanda Maximoff and Agatha Harkness, these texts explore how feminine emotion becomes both the source of power and the object of punishment, revealing that maternal love and rage are bound by the same cultural demand for control. I argue that Schaeffer's authorship positions these women as figures of Gothic persistence, rather than villainy, exposing the labor of emotional regulation that sustains the MCU's moral order. Across these narratives, containment collapses into suppression, suppression into haunting, and haunting into refusal. The result is a maternal Gothic defined not by transgression or catharsis, but by the quiet endurance of women who refuse to disappear.

Witchcraft, Feminism, and Motherhood

In contemporary culture, motherhood is bound to expectations that are both unrealistic and isolating. Georgia Constantinou et al. describe how “maternal guilt was most commonly related to high expectations of good mothering” and how such expectations are shaped by what Anna Rotkirch and Kristiina Janhunen call the “motherhood myth,” which “holds women solely accountable for the development, health, and wellbeing of their children, irrespective of the role the father may play in the child's life” (2). These myths reinforce the idea that a mother's responsibility is both limitless and invisible. Constantinou and colleagues explain that these demands drive mothers toward “intensive mothering,” defined as when “a mother tries to fulfill the societal ideals of motherhood by adhering to intensive mothering practices, often an

impossible feat, resulting in maternal guilt when those ideals are not met” (3). The emotional fallout is often more severe than guilt. When mothers cannot meet these ideals, they internalize this failure as personal deficiency, for they feel that they are “not living up to their ideals of parenting” and are therefore experiencing “a shame experience rather than a guilt experience” (4). Helen Block Lewis further clarifies that “shame was experienced when the global self was negatively evaluated as being bad, unworthy, small, and inferior” (qtd. in 4). These contradictions between the idealized image of the “good mother” and the lived experience of exhaustion and failure form the psychological groundwork for Gothic motherhood. In figures like Wanda and Agatha, guilt collapses into shame, and shame into monstrosity. Their stories literalize the psychic and social damage that follow when the cultural fantasy of maternal perfection becomes unsustainable.

This emotional tension intensifies when mothers refuse or fail to conform to normative models of care. Jennifer Purvis, drawing on Kristeva and Mary Douglas, writes that “the materials associated with the abject as well as the social positions associated with abjection are sources of shame in subjective and social orders and therefore face expulsion or sometimes elicit disgust” (51). The maternal body, tied to reproduction and emotion, becomes the central site of this expulsion, as it represents “that against which we define ourselves, the engulfing maternal body in the phase of psychic development where the infant rejects maternal oneness or dependence” (50). For Purvis, the consequence of this logic is that maternal figures are punished for feeling or expressing too much. She adds that “abjection tied to pregnable bodies, or those assumed pregnable, may generate outcomes of pain, or even death” (52). Shame thus functions as both regulation and rupture, as it is “volatile, unpredictable, [and] precarious,” for it “entails not simply rejection and humiliation but the desire for re-attachment, which can lead to violence

or love” (63). This ambivalence makes shame a central affect for the Gothic mother, who moves between care and cruelty, repression and revelation. Shame is the emotional residue that remains when a woman can no longer uphold the myth of composure.

The figure of the witch amplifies these contradictions by linking female emotion to cultural transgression. Zachary Hutchins notes that “heteronormative expectations, and particularly those related to motherhood, unnaturally suppress the economic, artistic, and civic potential of women” (75). To “deviate from those expectations” is to “self-identify as a witch... or a dragon: dangerous magical beings that threaten the social order” (75). His invocation of Patricia Hart’s “magical feminism” emphasizes how supernatural imagery can “defamiliarize maternity and the suffocating expectation that a mother’s life is subsumed in that of her child” (76). In this light, witchcraft becomes the symbolic vocabulary for resistance against institutional motherhood. Historically, as Hutchins observes, “witch hunts were collective efforts to punish women who challenged social expectations about motherhood” (76), and even in modern culture, “motherhood itself has become identified as a deviant state; to be a mother is to be socially suspect” (82). The witch’s transgression thus lies not in her evil but in her autonomy. She “represents the promise of a different and better world than the one in which we live” (78), one in which maternal identity could exist outside the constraints of propriety and sacrifice. This potential for redefinition is precisely what makes the witch so threatening, as she exposes the artifice of naturalized motherhood and the fragility of the systems built around it.

Media representations carry this lineage forward. G. Dhara observes that “the witches in the Disney films are always associated with having the freedom and voice for themselves, which the princesses lack,” while the princesses are burdened with “unattainable and impractical beauty standards” (2). The witch’s distorted appearance serves as a visual code for deviance, turning

emotional and political independence into a sign of monstrosity. Dhara writes that “Disney films use this idea to build on their creation of female villains who are more than horrifying but also disgusting,” echoing Creed’s argument that women are feared not for literal violence, but for what their bodies symbolize, which is the threat of uncontained sexuality and agency (2).

Kristeva’s concept of abjection clarifies this dynamic, for horror arises not from ugliness itself but from “things that have lost the distinction between the subject and the object” (2). The witch disrupts that distinction. She blurs the line between body and self, natural and unnatural, good mother and bad woman. Her grotesque visibility unmask the ideological labor required to sustain the illusion of purity. As Dhara concludes, “witches are often wise women who break the binaries,” and for this reason “their independence, agency and boldness” are “equated with the visual representation of witches as unappealing or monstrous” (4, 17). Through this lens, popular media reproduce the same logic that Rich and Hays describe, in which women who resist containment, mother differently, or refuse the maternal ideal are disciplined through disgust.

The association between maternal power, emotion, and danger is further supported by psychological research. Guyonne Rogier et al. distinguish between two key emotion regulation strategies: cognitive reappraisal and emotional suppression. Cognitive reappraisal “describes the process of connecting a particular meaning to a situation in order to regulate the imminent emotional experience,” while emotional suppression is a “response-focused strategy that refers to deliberate attempts to limit one’s emotionally expressive behavior when aroused” (411). These strategies are gendered, as “women usually report a greater use of reappraisal than men, whereas men use suppression more often than women” (412). When women do engage in suppression to meet cultural expectations of calm and care, the psychological cost is steep. “Only among women,” Rogier and colleagues note, “psychopathological distress was negatively related to

reappraisal and positively related to suppression... Women who were more hostile made a greater use of suppression and a lower use of reappraisal” (417). This suggests that the very emotional control valorized by patriarchal culture produces distress, hostility, and self-alienation. In the Gothic mode, suppression structures the emotional core of horror, where what is repressed eventually resurfaces. The witch-mother’s instability and collapse result not from inherent flaw, but from the pressure to remain controlled.

What emerges from these cultural, historical, and psychological frameworks is a complex image of the witch-mother as a figure of contradiction and containment. Janine Engelbrecht observes that “the source of these witches’ power is their display of motherhood, which is an issue that many feminists... have been grappling with for some time, as motherhood and feminism seem to be on two opposite ends of the spectrum” (2). In this paradox, the witch is both punished and empowered by her excess. Her refusal to separate emotion from power, care from autonomy, transforms her into a Gothic emblem of the institution’s failure. Wanda and Agatha embody this collapse. Their stories dramatize what happens when emotional labor becomes impossible, when a mother’s efforts to manage grief and desire turn monstrous not because they are unnatural, but because they are human.

The Maternal Gothic in *WandaVision*, *Multiverse of Madness*, and *Agatha All Along*

While *WandaVision* may not appear Gothic on the surface, its emotional structure is steeped in Gothic excess. The series translates grief and repression into architecture, staging Wanda’s trauma within the suburban ideal of Westview, a town she reshapes into a 1950s sitcom called “the Hex.” The Hex functions as a domestic space designed to preserve order and suppress contradiction. Within it, Wanda creates a family that conforms perfectly to cultural ideals. Her

sons, Billy and Tommy, are not born through biological means, but willed into existence through magic, transforming motherhood into an act of denial. The children exist to stabilize Wanda's sense of self, fulfilling the maternal role that culture demands while exposing its artificiality. When the Hex collapses and Wanda must say goodbye, the fantasy of natural, redemptive motherhood dissolves with it. What once appeared as composure reveals itself as repression. The final images of Wanda standing alone in the ruins of her home visualize the return of what her control tried to hide, which is grief, loss, and shame that cannot be contained.

Wanda's story continues in *Multiverse of Madness*, where the emotional contradictions of *WandaVision* erupt into overt horror. After dismantling the Hex and losing Billy and Tommy, Wanda turns to the Darkhold, an ancient book of dark magic, to search alternate realities for versions of her children she can keep. Her maternal desire becomes catastrophic, driven by the need to reclaim what was never meant to last. The film amplifies the cost of containment, for the more Wanda tries to restore the illusion of domestic wholeness, the more violent and fractured she becomes. Her body bears the marks of exhaustion and decay, recalling the Gothic motif of the self-consuming mother whose labor cannot end. Ultimately, her apparent self-sacrifice serves to restore the boundaries she has broken, reasserting the cultural need to contain her excess.

In contrast, *Agatha All Along* picks up after Wanda's chaos subsides, shifting from outward grief to quiet emotional stagnation. Agatha, introduced in *WandaVision* as the nosy neighbor Agnes, is revealed to be a centuries-old witch haunted by the death of her son, Nicholas Scratch. The series reframes her not as a villain, but as a figure trapped by maternal shame. When Agatha manipulates Billy Maximoff, whose soul now resides in the body of teenager William Kaplan, it is not simply for power but for re-enactment. Billy reminds her of the child she lost, and the Witches' Road they travel becomes a journey through her own arrested

mourning. Each trial confronts her with versions of care distorted by guilt and fear. The series depicts this collapse by externalizing emotion, shaping grief into the physical world around Agatha.

Across these works, the Gothic logic of containment unites witchcraft, motherhood, and emotion. Wanda and Agatha are undone not by evil but by affect—by attachments that exceed what culture deems acceptable. Their worlds are not destroyed from without but implode from within, mirroring the dialectic of excess and recoil that defines the Gothic tradition. Across these works, witchcraft, motherhood, and emotion converge within a shared Gothic logic of containment. Wanda and Agatha are undone not by evil, but by feeling, by attachments that exceed what culture deems acceptable. Their worlds break apart internally, showing how emotional repression converts care into conflict and harm. Together, they show how contemporary Gothic narratives use the witch and mother to expose the instability of cultural boundaries, revealing how love, loss, and control are continually negotiated within systems that demand order, yet depend on excess.

Critical and Cultural Reception

Critical and popular responses to *WandaVision*, *Multiverse of Madness*, and *Agatha All Along* reveal how contemporary audiences continue to struggle with representations of feminine emotion, power, and grief. Across these works, critics praise emotional authenticity, but remain unsettled when maternal love becomes excessive or destructive. The tension between empathy and fear, between the desire to see women as fully dimensional and the instinct to contain them, runs through both critical and fan responses. This discussion shows how the Gothic turns

emotion into a site of boundary tension, where women's feelings are treated as excess that must be controlled to protect social order.

When *WandaVision* debuted, Schaeffer positioned the series as a corrective to Marvel's history of marginalizing female perspectives. She told *The New York Times* that she wanted to portray "authentic women onscreen" and depict "nuanced portrayals of their exterior and interior lives," insisting that representation should not be reduced to a slogan, but "one of the many foundations of the story" (Itzkoff). Despite her intentions, critical responses to the show reveal how cultural expectations of femininity shape even progressive storytelling. A *New York Times* review by Maya Phillips notes that "for all of the enormity of the Marvel Cinematic Universe, the franchise has been remiss in its portrayal of female heroes and their power," framing Wanda's arc as both a breakthrough and a limitation. Phillips identifies the show's "central conceit" as a "classic dichotomy: Can Wanda do her job as a hero, or can she have a quiet life as a wife and mother?" It further observes that Wanda's emotional power replays "a gendered cliché ... the idea that female strength is always grounded in emotion," while "too much female emotion—hysteria—is also a threat." This response captures the contradiction at the heart of *WandaVision*, in which its feminist aim collides with its Gothic structure. The show was praised for turning the superhero narrative into an intimate story of mourning, yet it also repeated the trope that connects women's emotions with danger. Schaeffer's comment about not wanting to make "feminism palatable" reflects her awareness of this bind, as the series presents emotion as both power and punishment (Itzkoff). For many viewers, including Phillips, this tension was what made the series "a delightful surprise" at times, but Phillips also confessed that it "doesn't leave [her] fully sated" and she wished for "messy women, strong women ... independent from the society of men." In short, *WandaVision* succeeded in humanizing Wanda's

grief, but remained restricted by the genre's impulse to domesticate her, literally confining her power within the suburban home of the Hex.

WandaVision dramatizes the emotional labor of containment, and *Multiverse of Madness* transforms that containment into spectacle. Critics and audiences were sharply divided on Wanda's shift from grieving mother to destructive witch. Nicole Drum of *ComicBook.com* accuses the film of "reducing her to the old trope of emotional women are crazy." To elaborate, Drum argues that instead of "building on a character who has broken away from a lifetime of trauma and victimization," the movie "jump[s] right back into victimizing Wanda again." This reaction reflects a broader frustration with Wanda's regression from agency to pathology, particularly after *WandaVision* had presented her as emotionally autonomous.

Behind the scenes, the film's creative team expressed varying interpretations of this shift. In an interview with *The Playlist*, screenwriter Michael Waldron addressed the backlash, saying, "Watching a character you love do bad things sucks. That elicits a strong feeling, which is what we're trying to do in the movies. We never would have done it if it didn't feel like the next step in her character journey" (DeAngelo). Waldron explained that, in his view, *WandaVision* showed Wanda "confronting her grief ... but not conquering it," suggesting that *Multiverse of Madness* continued that emotional arc through the anger "that the Darkhold preys upon." He described her actions as "a very justifiable, noble journey. She just wants her kids." In a separate *Reddit Ask Me Anything* (AMA), Waldron expanded on this idea, writing that he wanted to "continue to explore Strange's need for control," which he saw as a mirror to "Wanda's own struggle with control following *WandaVision*." He emphasized that he had been "reading and watching [*WandaVision*] all the way through," framing the film as a deliberate parallel between Wanda's

loss and Strange's struggle with control and isolation after *Avengers: Endgame*, suggesting that both characters respond to grief through attempts to master what cannot be contained.

Other production voices revealed the complications of maintaining narrative continuity across the MCU. In a *Vanity Fair* interview, Elizabeth Olsen recalled asking the writers if they had seen *WandaVision* and learning that "they had not seen it because it wasn't finished yet" ("Elizabeth Olsen Rewatches"). She explained, "I had to try and play [Wanda] differently. I had to attack the same themes in order for it to be interesting for me, I think, and potentially for the audience." Director Sam Raimi's comments in *Rolling Stone India* confirmed this fragmented process, stating, "I never even saw all of *WandaVision*; I've just seen key moments of some episodes that I was told directly impact our storyline" (Hiatt). *WandaVision*'s unfinished state during production created a partial understanding of Wanda's evolution, leading to creative inconsistencies that critics later highlighted. Schaeffer herself, speaking with *RadioTimes.com*, reflected that MCU writers "borrow characters and storylines for a time" before handing them off, describing this as both a strength and limitation of the franchise's shared authorship (Craig). Together, these accounts show how creative goals and studio demands often conflict, breaking continuity and weakening emotional focus in stories about women.

Taken together, these perspectives reveal the central tension between intention and reception. Waldron envisioned Wanda's descent as a continuation of her grief, Olsen struggled to maintain coherence without the benefit of a finished predecessor, and Raimi worked within a fragmented framework of references. The resulting film shows how collaboration and audience expectation limit how women are portrayed. In this way, *Multiverse of Madness* reveals how ongoing production can divide female characters between emotion, agency, and control. This disjunction is further complicated by the shift in authorship, as it jumps from Schaeffer's female-

led creative vision in *WandaVision* to Raimi and Waldron's male-directed and -written sequel, which is an industry transition that may help explain the film's regression into more conventional portrayals of female emotion and moral instability.

Multiverse of Madness fractures Wanda's emotional continuity; meanwhile *Agatha All Along* seeks to restore the introspective tone that had defined *WandaVision*. Returning as showrunner, Schaeffer described the series as both a successor and an inversion. In an interview with *Script Magazine*, she explained that while *WandaVision* explored "grief as love persisting," *Agatha* examines "grief of a different kind," rooted not in love but in loss, guilt, and self-deception (Young). She described *Agatha* as "a liar" whose persona is "just masks," saying, "This show is about pulling that mask all the way off. And what do we see? What is under the mask?" Schaeffer contrasted *Agatha*'s inner conflict with Wanda's domestic longing, stating that "Wanda wanted to be safe and cozy with her family," whereas "for *Agatha*, she's in the way of her own thing." Beneath *Agatha*'s quest for power, Schaeffer saw "a covenless witch who, deep down, wants a coven," positioning isolation as both her wound and her defense.

Schaeffer elaborated on these ideas in *Creative Screenwriting Magazine* interview, where she described *Agatha All Along* as an exploration of "otherness and persecution through the lens of witchcraft, blending horror elements with comedy while maintaining dramatic stakes" (Swinson). She characterized the project as "a very queer show," explaining that she deliberately hired "queer folks for that, for the conversation and the voice of that," as well as "horror fans and witchcraft enthusiasts." Schaeffer emphasized that her approach to representation was "not about fixing misconceptions," but about "authenticity and dimension," saying she wanted to see "the women and the people that I know in my life for all of their complexity reflected on the screen."

These statements show that Schaeffer aimed to connect the history of witchcraft and persecution to current ideas about identity and belonging.

Fan and critical responses, however, mirrored the ambivalence that greeted *WandaVision* and *Multiverse of Madness*. While many reviewers praised *Agatha All Along* for its tonal confidence and emotional sincerity, others viewed the series finale as a retreat from its earlier subversion. The *Twindly* blog post “Marvel, Feminism and the Erasure of Women” argues that the show “turned patriarchal nightmare Agatha on her head and presented her in her new, palatable, society-approved role: that of a mother.” The writer criticizes the narrative’s turn toward Billy’s self-discovery, claiming that Agatha’s complexity had been reduced to maternal support. “There’s nothing of maiden or crone left,” the piece concluded, “there is only mother.” This view shows ongoing doubt about Marvel’s ability to keep feminist ideas intact within its larger connected story.

Together, these examples from *WandaVision*, *Multiverse of Madness*, and *Agatha All Along* show how Marvel’s stories continue to struggle with women’s emotion and power. Each work tries to show female characters as complex, but still ends up containing them. Schaeffer’s focus on honesty and inclusion meets the limits of franchise storytelling, while viewers still expect closure and control. These patterns show how modern Gothic stories use women’s emotion to question who gets to feel, who must stay composed, and what happens when those limits break.

Maternal Abjection and the Collapse of Containment

In Gothic narratives, the maternal body rarely represents safety or peace. Instead, it becomes the site where love, care, and intimacy coexist with fear, shame, and collapse. In

WandaVision and *Agatha All Along*, motherhood functions as both magic and abjection, a form of containment that eventually breaks apart. These stories trace the point where maternal endurance fails, when care turns into control and control turns into fear. Their protagonists are not monstrous because they lack love, but because their emotional intensity exceeds the limits of what culture allows. Both Wanda and Agatha carry out the same exhausting work expected of mothers, holding families, emotions, and order together until that effort turns harmful. Each tries to maintain a version of motherhood built on control and stability, but grief and shame make it impossible to sustain. When their control breaks, the care they provide no longer looks like nurture, but like excess, as emotion that cannot be contained.

In *WandaVision*, Wanda's motherhood is built on fantasy. She wills her children, Billy and Tommy, into existence through magic, bypassing the biological and institutional processes that define "natural" motherhood. Her creation of the twins is less about growth but more about erasing loss. The twins are created to soothe her trauma, not to live independently of it. Within this logic, Wanda's motherhood functions as a containment structure, an attempt to stabilize her fractured identity by producing the image of a perfect family. Yet, because this fantasy rests on denial, it cannot last. The cracks begin to show when Wanda's control over her children falters. For instance, in "On a Very Special Episode..." Wanda and Vision agree that Billy and Tommy cannot have a dog, Sparky, until they are at least ten years old. In response, the boys instantly age themselves up. This scene removes any sense of natural development, turning the boys into symbols of Wanda's desire, rather than individuals. Later, when Sparky dies, the boys again try to age up to escape the pain, but Wanda stops them: "I am trying to tell you that there are rules in life, okay? We can't rush aging just because it's convenient." The irony of this statement exposes her repression. She is lecturing her sons not to do what she has done herself: bend reality to

avoid grief. Each transformation shows that control is temporary and that emotional repression cannot contain loss.

This tension becomes clearer when Wanda confronts Monica Rambeau, an outsider who enters the Hex and tries to reach her. Threatening Monica, Wanda warns, “I have what I want, and no one will ever take it from me again.” Her tone is not protective but possessive, showing that her love has turned into ownership. She is protecting not her children, but the fantasy that motherhood can undo trauma. The line between mother and child disappears; they become proof that loss can be reversed. As Christine Bousfield observes, “It is the child who feels threatened by the abject; she abjects the maternal body in order to separate” (331). In *WandaVision*, that separation shifts to the mother. Wanda becomes unable to release what she created. Her monstrosity comes from attachment so complete that individuality disappears. She repeats the role of the selfless mother until it destroys her.

Agatha’s story presents a quieter version of the same breakdown. Where Wanda’s collapse is explosive, Agatha’s is inward and slow. In a flashback from “Maiden Mother Crone,” she tells her newborn son, Nicholas Scratch, “I spoke no spell. I said no incantation. You were made from scratch.” Her words show the tension between magic and reality. Nicholas’s birth is physical and painful, exposing the limits of the maternal body. This moment challenges the cultural idea of “natural” motherhood, which presents care as effortless and instinctive. Agatha’s childbirth makes visible the exhaustion and vulnerability that this myth hides. Her body becomes the point where that illusion breaks down. The abjection of this scene deepens when Death, personified as Rio Vidal, arrives to claim Nicholas. Agatha begs for more time, but the child dies in her arms. His death is calm and ordinary, which makes it even more painful. Life continues around her, but Agatha cannot move forward. Her effort to keep going turns into stillness,

showing how endurance can become another form of loss. She becomes a figure of care without purpose, unable to let go of what is gone. Even after regaining her memories, she remains withdrawn and silent, unable to say her son's name. Her silence enacts the contradiction described by Purvis, as "the workings of horror, disgust, and shame... both regulative and disruptive of subjective and social order" (52). Agatha's restraint becomes both punishment and survival. She cannot grieve publicly, but she also cannot move on.

This detachment reaches its most striking expression in her scenes with Billy. In "Follow Me My Friend / To Glory at the End," she helps him search for his twin, Tommy, guiding him through memories until he realizes his power may be harming another boy. Terrified, Billy asks, "Agatha, am I killing this boy so my brother can live?" After he vanishes, Agatha replies softly, "No, Billy. Sometimes... boys die." Her response rejects comfort and faces death directly. Her grief no longer shows itself through control, but through acceptance. This moment reflects what Sally R. Munt calls shame that brings "abasement, abjection, and soulless despair," but can also be "a restorative, creative force... in cycles of disattachment and reconnection" (216). Agatha moves between these extremes. Her shame isolates her, but she still helps others, as she guides Billy, completes trials, and sacrifices herself on the Witches' Road. These actions show she still cares, but they do not heal her. They are not acts of redemption; they are pieces of a broken maternal self.

By the end of the series, Agatha embodies what Bousfield calls "maternal monstrosity," characterized by "moral and bodily revulsion directed at the maternal body or the Feminine Real" (331). Agatha's form of monstrosity is different from Wanda's. Even though she has murdered countless witches, she is not frightening because of anger or destruction, but because she keeps going when nothing is left to save. Her power is tied to decay and the awareness that

motherhood cannot return to what it once was. She becomes a reminder of the maternal role after it has collapsed, as she is still enduring, still trying to hold things together, but without purpose or faith in its meaning. Her magic weakens because she has reached the end of what containment can do. What remains is a mother caught between memory and grief, alive but unable to live.

Wanda and Agatha show two forms of Gothic motherhood: one marked by excess, the other by emptiness. Wanda's emotions break outward, while Agatha's collapse inward, but both reveal the same problem. The ideal of maternal love depends on control, and when control fails, emotion becomes something feared and labeled as disorder. Their stories show this breakdown as recognition of what the Gothic exposes, which are the limits of endurance. As Wanda's Hex dissolves and Agatha's journey ends, both spaces show how systems meant to contain pain eventually collapse under their own pressure. When the mother can no longer hold what she carries, the result is rupture rather than healing, and from that rupture, the Gothic begins.

Suppression, Haunting, and the Gothic Refusal

With this maternal collapse of containment established, this analysis turns toward what happens when grief and shame are not performed openly but are instead pushed inward, and how that suppression inevitably transforms into haunting. Both Wanda and Agatha suffer not only because of the loss of their children, but also because of what they believe that loss says about them as mothers. Their repression follows the same emotional pattern seen throughout Gothic storytelling, where efforts to control feeling eventually give way to collapse. Here, the maternal figure once again becomes the boundary's breaking point, as they are the one meant to contain excess, yet undone by it. When they suppress grief, they become vessels for the very excess they

are supposed to manage. Suppression is therefore the beginning of haunting, and haunting is the Gothic form that suppressed emotion takes.

Wanda's grief becomes more volatile when she begins to suppress it rather than contain it through fantasy. In *WandaVision*, she creates a magical world where her sons exist and her pain is hidden. But by the time of *Multiverse of Madness*, she is no longer trying to hold onto her children through illusion. She is attempting to undo their loss through force. Her actions are not framed as redemptive, but as catastrophic. This shift is most visible in her confrontation with her alternate self, where she finally abandons her pursuit of Billy and Tommy. After choking America Chavez, a young girl capable of traveling between universes, and attacking her alternate self, the twin boys are terrified of her. Billy yells, "Get away from our mom! You're not our real mom!" Then, the alternate Wanda reassures her with the words, "Know that they'll be loved," and with this, Wanda falls silent. There is no verbal acknowledgment, no sobbing, and no apology. Her grief becomes internalized. At this moment, Wanda does not heal. She disappears.

While Wanda's decision to destroy Mount Wundagore, the source of the Darkhold, could be seen as a way of learning from her mistakes and righting her wrongs, this is not an act of liberation. It is an attempt at erasure. She collapses the structure on top of herself, hoping, it seems, that the pain, the power, and the maternal failure might be buried with her. This moment reflects how Gothic narratives often replace freedom with a return to control once boundaries are crossed. The collapse of Mount Wundagore seems to reassert order, but instead reveals how impossible that order truly is. Her death does not redeem her, because the excess cannot be buried. The "natural" maternal role she clings to, already exposed in the broader framework as a cultural fiction, reveals how deeply she internalizes the demand to contain and erase her own suffering. Her silence is a learned behavior, a form of restraint that hides the social expectation

for women to endure quietly. With this, Purvis writes that “examining shame as an expression of power reveals insight into how it operates and how best to respond to its negative and potentially devastating effects” (48). From this perspective, Wanda tries to erase her shame rather than confront it. Despite her efforts, her grief continues to linger, turning her collapse into the beginning of haunting. The silence after Wanda’s disappearance leaves a trace of her presence that continues to haunt the multiverse. Wanda’s grief shows how some emotions cannot be expelled or resolved; they remain and reshape everything around them. The grief Wanda tries to suppress continues to move through every place that once promised closure, such as Westview, Mount Wundagore, and the multiverse. Each of these spaces of containment mirrors her body as both protective and unstable. When they fall apart, they release the pain they were built to contain. Wanda’s suppression therefore turns into haunting, as her unspoken grief becomes the force that keeps her story alive.

Agatha’s form of suppression is quieter, but no less destructive. Unlike Wanda, she does not externalize her grief through overt violence. Yet, her history of manipulating and killing witches for power reframes this distinction. Agatha’s violence is distant and shaped by survival. Her need to stay alive repeats the same cycle of consuming and losing that defines her guilt and grief. She never speaks about Nicholas after his death. Her maternal shame remains unspoken, buried beneath sarcasm, detachment, and silence. She enacts the same ideological containment outlined earlier, as she is the mother who endures, conceals, and stabilizes, even when it destroys her. However, this endurance turns into paralysis. It does not preserve her or allow her to move forward. It locks her in place. She refuses to face Rio. She avoids talking about Nicholas. She detaches from Billy, or at least tries to, even while helping him. In this way, Agatha’s shame becomes a suppression so complete that she seems more ghost than person, even before she dies.

Agatha's suppression is perhaps most clearly revealed in her final conversation with Billy, after her death. When her ghost appears in "Maiden Mother Crone," she tells him, "The song doesn't mean anything. It never did. The Road wasn't real until you made it real." This admission reveals how deeply she has buried the truth. As revealed in the same episode, the song was originally composed by Nicholas during their travels, but after his death, Agatha repurposed it as a myth to lure and kill witches. Even before that, she had used Nicholas to draw witches in, convincing herself and him that it was necessary for survival. Her continued use of the Road myth became a way to mask her guilt. By letting Billy walk the same path without acknowledging the truth, she repeats this pattern. Her maternal guidance is compromised by her refusal to confront the past and her guilt becomes something that haunts Billy just as it haunts her. The abject, as Bousfield explains, is the "(pre)-object which fills me with horror, disgust, sickness, revulsion" and is connected to the moment before the subject separates from the mother (331). Agatha's failure to acknowledge Nicholas's death keeps her trapped in this pre-separation space. She cannot move forward or release her identity as a mother, and this emotional paralysis becomes the reason she lingers as a ghost.

In both stories, suppression leads to repetition instead of resolution. The pressure to appear controlled and perfect causes each woman's eventual breakdown, exposing how emotional labor itself can become a source of horror. As Rogier et al. observe, "women could have been educated to pay deliberate attention to their emotions while male gender socialization would lead men to inhibit emotional expression" (412). In the case of Wanda and Agatha, neither is given the space to process grief meaningfully. Wanda explodes. Agatha withers. Neither path leads to healing because both responses reflect a refusal, whether self-imposed or culturally reinforced, to openly mourn or speak. This form of maternal horror does not come from a lack of

love, but from the inability to express loss without feeling shame. This emotional restraint is reinforced by larger social systems that teach women to remain silent. Wanda is punished when she clings to her children, but she is also punished when she attempts to erase the evidence of her grief. Agatha is punished for grieving too little, just as Wanda is punished for grieving too much. Every possible response to maternal loss becomes subject to judgment. When women are forced to suppress emotion, that pressure turns them into figures of horror, cut off from others and from themselves. Suppression becomes haunting, the return of feeling that cannot stay hidden.

Haunting eventually becomes refusal. Suppression hides emotion, but refusal allows it to remain visible without resolution. Both forms keep grief alive. Wanda and Agatha do not follow the usual path of maternal loss. They refuse to let go, to heal, or to restore order. Their persistence turns them into figures of refusal, shaped by attachment that continues even when it should end. They remain bound to motherhood, existing within its aftermath rather than beyond it. Wanda's refusal becomes clearest in her final confrontation with her alternate self. When the twins reject her, she falls silent and accepts their fear without defending herself. Destroying Mount Wundagore is another withdrawal from what is expected of her. She offers no apology and no redemption. Her silence becomes an act of defiance, and her lasting attachment to her children, even in their absence, remains excessive, abject, and unresolved, as if it is a form of emotion that cannot be absorbed or explained away.

Agatha's refusal takes a different shape. In *Agatha All Along*, she dies saving Billy, but her return as a ghost is not redemptive. Her ghostliness, as discussed previously, is not the result of vengeance or unfinished business, but rather, it is shame. For example, in "Maiden Mother Crone," she admits that she "can't face him," likely referring to Nicholas on the other side. This is not because she doubts his presence, but because she doubts his forgiveness. As Schaeffer

explains in an interview with *The Wrap*, Agatha is “ashamed of everything she’s done... ashamed that she couldn’t save him and she couldn’t fix him,” and “she thinks he wouldn’t recognize her now, because she’s killed so much since then” (Ortiz). Agatha’s refusal is not driven by pride or fear of death, but by maternal shame and its subsequent avoidance tactics. She does not resist Death itself. She resists reunion.

This level of shame defines Agatha’s ghosthood. While she admits to Billy that the Witches’ Road was never real until he made it so, this admission comes only after damage has been done. Where her silence once marked suppression, it now manifests as haunting. She remains in the world not to atone, but because she cannot bear to see the one person who might truly condemn her. This, too, is a maternal refusal, not of love, but of separation. She cannot bear to see the consequences of what she has become. Agatha’s continued presence shows how her identity as a caregiver consumes her from within. She keeps trying to nurture, even when there is nothing left to save. Like Wanda, she shows that devotion can turn destructive when it demands endless endurance.

Although Agatha and Wanda go about this differently, they ultimately enact the same transformation of suppression into haunting. One returns from death, and the other disappears into it, but neither lets go. Their monstrosity lies not in what they have done, but in what they refuse to undo. They do not step aside to make room for new maternal figures. They do not offer final words or lessons. They simply persist. In doing so, they violate a cultural script that demands maternal containment and symbolic release. The Gothic does not require blood to create horror; it requires unresolved affect. These women are monstrous because they love without end. They are too much, too present, and too unwilling to sever the final bond. Their refusal to relinquish their maternal roles transforms them into figures who cannot be placed

within acceptable categories of mother, martyr, or villain. Instead, they become something else. They become witch-mothers who remain on the edges, beyond the ending, embodying the Gothic's fascination with excess and the failure of the "natural" to contain it.

Authorial Intention, Audience Reception, and the Limits of Containment

When viewed alongside the creators' own comments and the critical conversation around them, the stories of Wanda and Agatha show how Marvel's witches follow the same pattern found throughout Gothic narratives. Emotion is first expressed openly, then brought back under control. The creators claim to explore grief and shame honestly, but their competing goals turn that effort into a struggle between sincerity and spectacle, empathy and control.

The emotional collapse traced across this chapter, from containment breaking into suppression and then into refusal, reappears at the level of authorship. In *WandaVision*, Schaeffer constructs a world built to contain Wanda's grief. The sitcom structure and the Hex's visible limits represent the broader cultural demand to keep emotion controlled. The show's empathy toward Wanda, as well as its portrayal of care as magical, makes its return to order at the end even more striking. Schaeffer's stated goal of representing "authentic women" results in a heroine who must dismantle her own world to be deemed sane. Critics praised the show for its emotional honesty, but also criticized it for returning to a safe, domestic ending. This response reflects a tension in Schaeffer's authorship that the story never resolves. What begins as authenticity turns into another form of containment, where empathy is used to monitor and control emotion rather than release it.

When Waldron and Raimi take over Wanda's story, her breakdown becomes a large-scale spectacle. What was once a quiet, personal collapse becomes an action-driven purge designed for

the big screen. The film's production gaps, such as its scripting before *WandaVision*'s completion and Raimi's partial familiarity with the series, cause gaps in emotional continuity. The grief that once shaped the Hex becomes large-scale violence, turning Wanda's desperation into spectacle. Waldron's claim that she "just wants her kids" and Raimi's focus on her brutal power repeat the same cultural mistake the story depicts, which is that of treating emotion as threat once it escapes control. Wanda's destruction of Mount Wundagore mirrors the film's effort to restore order after chaos, reflecting Marvel's usual pattern of punishment and restraint. The change in authorship itself symbolizes containment, as a woman's story retold by men who frame her power as danger and her silence as resolution.

Schaeffer's return with *Agatha All Along* shows how incomplete that earlier resolution was. Critics were divided, some praising the show's focus on emotion, while others saw it as too restrained. The series turns containment into haunting, showing how exhaustion and guilt persist even after violence ends. Agatha's quiet moments, such as holding Nicholas's body and later admitting to Billy that "the song never meant anything," reveal the pain left behind after the spectacle fades. Schaeffer's idea that the story is "about masks" also reflects her own position within Marvel's system. She exposes the surface of horror only to find another kind of disguise, which is a softer, more acceptable version of femininity. With this, Agatha's ghost, who refuses both death and forgiveness, cracks that surface, revealing how maternal duty and endurance remain the real source of horror.

Audience reactions repeat the same divide seen in the stories themselves. Some viewers treated Wanda's death as repentance or Agatha's ghosthood as redemption, reproducing the same logic that drives the characters' suffering. Others were disturbed by the lack of closure, recognizing that something unresolved remains. This uncertainty, whether these women are

healed, lost, or simply exhausted, is what gives the stories their power. Their silence and endurance challenge Marvel's usual need for neat endings. Like the women themselves, the franchise cannot fully close the story it tries to contain.

Together, these stories show that Schaeffer comes closer than Fargeat or Flanagan to imagining a version of the Gothic that questions its own limits. Her witches approach freedom without falling into spectacle or sentimentality, long enough to expose where containment begins. *WandaVision*'s tenderness toward grief and *Agatha All Along*'s refusal of moral purification mark a genuine movement toward representing women's emotional lives as complex, offering a more honest picture of women's emotions. Yet, as critics observed, those gestures still settle back into familiar rhythms of composure and care. Wanda's silence at Mount Wundagore and Agatha's endurance reinforce the same ideology they seem to challenge, where suffering is bearable only once it is domesticated. The hesitation that keeps Schaeffer's work from fully realizing its radical potential, like the softening of transgression and the impulse toward empathy, reveals how thoroughly even feminist sincerity is bound to cultural expectation. However, this tension matters. By showing the persistence of emotional restraint beneath apparent understanding, Schaeffer exposes how containment survives by disguising itself as empathy.

Schaeffer's approach fits between the extremes traced through Fargeat and Flanagan. In *The Substance*, Fargeat ties horror to the body, turning self-improvement into self-destruction and showing how control over appearance becomes violence turned inward. In *The Haunting of Hill House*, Flanagan moves that same logic into the home, where emotional labor replaces physical transformation, and containment becomes the quiet duty of keeping order. Schaeffer's *WandaVision* and *Agatha All Along* fall between them, as they are aware of containment's appeal,

but unable to escape it. Working within a system built to control emotion and gender, Schaeffer exposes the persistent idea that women's pain can be made meaningful through endurance. Her insight is that endurance itself is the horror. Where *The Substance* ties containment to the body and *Hill House* to the home, the MCU exposes it at the level of authorship via *Multiverse of Madness*, in which the production system turns women's excess into structure. Schaeffer's witches remain within that machinery, still enduring in the spaces between care and spectacle. Their survival, neither triumphant nor destroyed, becomes the most honest form of the modern Gothic, as it is a refusal to disappear, even when nothing is left to restore.

Conclusion

Across *The Substance*, *The Haunting of Hill House*, and the Marvel narratives of Wanda Maximoff and Agatha Harkness, this thesis has traced how the Gothic reconfigures the monstrous-maternal for the twenty-first century. What unites these works is not the spectacle of female transgression, but the quiet persistence of containment, the demand that women hold the self, the family, and the world together at any cost. Whether expressed through the body, the home, or the systems that frame women's emotions, containment emerges as both a social ideal and a site of horror. In Fargeat's *The Substance*, this labor becomes grotesquely literal as Elisabeth Sparkle's body and mind disintegrate under the pressure to perfect itself. In Flanagan's *Hill House*, that same labor takes domestic form, as Shirley Crain polishes, embalms, and disciplines grief until it appears manageable. Finally, in Schaeffer's *WandaVision* and *Agatha All Along*, as well as Raimi's *Doctor Strange in the Multiverse of Madness*, emotion is contained on a larger scale, showing how caring too much can still mean being controlled. Across these texts, endurance replaces eruption as the defining gesture of the Gothic mother: she does not destroy boundaries but sustains them until she breaks.

By following containment from flesh to feeling, this project has argued that the Gothic's enduring fascination with boundaries is inseparable from the institution of motherhood. What once appeared as excess now manifests as exhaustion. Even as these narratives claim to challenge patriarchal ideals, or at least attempt to give their women narrative justice, they often reaffirm the structures they critique, aestheticizing women's suffering as moral virtue. However, within that repetition lies the genre's power. The Gothic's double movement, its simultaneous exposure and reassertion of order, reveals not failure, but function. It shows how cultural systems

depend on the very women they discipline, turning endurance into ideology, and care into containment.

At the same time, this analysis is shaped by its own limits. Its focus on Western, white, cisgender maternal figures reflects the narrow representational defaults of the media it examines, leaving room for further work on racialized, queer, disabled, and non-Western maternal horrors. Because scholarship on *The Substance* is still emerging and Marvel's industrial and collaborative authorship structures are often opaque, this project necessarily draws on early criticism and partial interviews. And while the Gothic lens illuminates how containment operates symbolically and affectively, it cannot fully account for the material, structural conditions—economic, racial, institutional—that shape maternal labor in lived contexts. The Gothic clarifies the emotional logic of containment, but other frameworks are needed to map its distribution, enforcement, and refusal.

Even with these limits, the Gothic remains valuable because it reveals cultural fantasies in heightened form. Yet, one of the most generative next steps for this work lies in following containment beyond the Gothic altogether, toward the broader systems that script maternal endurance today. The conclusion hints at this shift, as containment is not just a narrative device, but part of the emotional architecture of neoliberal life. Future research might explore versions of the monstrous-maternal in self-help discourses that rebrand sacrifice as empowerment, in influencer and digital-motherhood cultures where composure becomes performance, or in wellness industries that aestheticize exhaustion and emotional suppression. Likewise, algorithmic pressures that shape maternal visibility online offer a contemporary counterpart to the narrative containment traced here.

Broadening the representational scope is equally important. Black feminist horror, Indigenous Gothic, queer and trans kinship narratives, and working-class maternal stories all challenge the forms of containment central to this thesis by foregrounding structural oppression rather than emotional self-regulation. These traditions show how maternal horror changes when survival itself, not composure, is at stake. Thus, the next phase of this work moves both across genres and across identities, examining containment outside the Gothic entirely, and interrogating how race, class, gender, disability, and queerness reshape or resist the very scripts that make containment seem natural.

Ultimately, if this project has shown anything, it is that the horror of motherhood does not end when the credits roll. It endures in every structure that demands composure as proof of value, and in every woman who refuses, or is unable, to disappear beneath that demand. The Gothic makes this labor visible, but contemporary culture ensures it persists.

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