


«BEAUTIFUL THINGS ARE FRAGILE»: INTERTEXTUAL
CONNECTIONS AND IDENTITY (RE)CONSTRUCTION
IN GUILLERMO DEL TORO'S *CRIMSON PEAK* (2015)

«LAS COSAS BELLAS SON FRÁGILES»: CONEXIONES
INTERTEXTUALES Y (RE)CONSTRUCCIÓN DE LA IDENTIDAD
EN LA CUMBRE ESCARLATA (2015) DE GUILLERMO DEL TORO

José-María MESA-VILLAR 
jmvillar@ucam.edu
UCAM-Universidad Católica de Murcia, España

Francisco-Javier SÁNCHEZ-VERDEJO-PÉREZ 
fjsanchezverdejo@valdepenas.uned.es
Universidad Nacional de Educación a Distancia, España

ABSTRACT: This chapter argues that the consciously intertextual nature of the 2015 film *Crimson Peak* did not only enable Guillermo del Toro to render a heartfelt homage to time-honoured classics in the gothic tradition; it also operates at a strategic level in the enactment of a multi-layered rite of passage operating at three levels. On the one hand, with regard to its leading characters, it explores the physical and psychological traumas embedded in the transition between innocence and adulthood: the sharp contrast between the pervasive, apparently threatening, presence of ghosts and the predatory urge of other human beings around gradually transforms the former into allies in one's quest for self-assertion. On the other, in relation to viewer experience, the film replicates the function developed by these supernatural beings from beyond by uttering a well-measured warning against the danger of appearances and the blind pursuit of one's dreams. Likewise, within the dynamics of identification and differentiation between Edith Cushing and Thomas Sharpe's ill-fated wives, we may perceive a clear reflection of the film's eclectic construction and

negotiation of meaning with the tradition anticipating it. Therefore, our study pinpoints and analyses the integration of literary and film referents –firmly rooted in the gothic tradition– into Guillermo del Toro’s proposal, which is seen as a lively exercise of appropriation and resignification clearly withdrawn from soulless repetition. The film succeeds in the attempt of redefining the identity of the leading protagonist, the role of the audience with regard to the film, and its own construction: it ultimately brings forward a fruitful dialogue between fiction, reality, tradition and modernity.

KEYWORDS: Guillermo del Toro; gothic literature; intertextuality; identity; woman; film.

RESUMEN: El presente capítulo argumenta que la naturaleza conscientemente intertextual de *La Cumbre Escarlata* (2015) no solo permite a Guillermo del Toro desarrollar un sentido ejercicio de homenaje a hitos de la tradición gótica, sino que opera como elemento estratégico en el planteamiento de un rito de paso que opera a tres niveles bien diferenciados: de una parte, en lo que respecta a sus personajes, explora los traumas físicos y psicológicos en la transición de la inocencia a la adultez. El contraste entre los fantasmas y la amenaza predatoria de los vivos transforma a los primeros en aliados en la búsqueda de la autoafirmación. De otra, en relación a la experiencia del espectador, el filme replica la función de las aparecidas al plantear una medida advertencia ante el peligro de las apariencias y la búsqueda ciega de nuestros anhelos. Asimismo, en el contexto de la dinámica de identificación-diferenciación entre Edith Cushing y las malogradas esposas de Thomas Sharpe, se advierte un claro reflejo respecto a la construcción ecléctica del filme y la negociación de su propio significado respecto de la tradición. Nuestra propuesta recoge la integración intencionada de estos referentes literarios (Poe, Perrault, Stoker, Radcliffe) y cinematográficos (Kubrick, Wise, Clayton) en la propuesta de Guillermo del Toro como un ágil ejercicio de apropiación y resignificación que le alejan de una mera repetición y que acierta ante el desafío de plantear la redefinición de la identidad de la protagonista, el espectador y la propia creación fílmica, conformando un fructífero diálogo entre ficción, realidad, tradición y modernidad.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Guillermo del Toro; literatura gótica; intertextualidad; identidad; mujer; cine.

1. Introduction: A Multi-Layered Portrayal of Developmental Crisis

As the camera peers into a raging blizzard, the first seconds in the film *Crimson Peak* (2015) offer a medium close-up of its leading protagonist (Edith M. Cushing) that stresses a sharp chromatic contrast between the white hues of her pale skin, her gown or the surrounding snow, and the stark red on the neck of her garment, her right hand, and the open gash in one of her cheeks. Starting *in extrema res*, little to nothing is revealed about how or why she is found in such state: «Ghosts are real, that much I know», she says in off-voice. As if trying to break the fourth wall, while also luring viewers in with greater intensity of feeling, the camera softly, but increasingly, continues approaching her face as tears well up in her eyes —the windows to her soul. Viewers are thus informed that the ensuing story accounts for her traumatic journey from innocence to experience. At this point, it is essential to highlight two key aspects cunningly introduced here and developed in other stages of the film: on the one hand, the non-monolithic meaning of ghosts and, on the other, how its narrative structure is tightly knitted with its artificial nature so as to weave a self-conscious piece that serves a well-deserved homage to revered texts in the gothic tradition —both in literature and cinema.

As the plot unfolds, the function and significance of ghosts evolve in parallel to Edith's psychological development into maturity. First, her mother's ghost does not only epitomize a painful conflation of bereavement, absence and fear of death persisting into adolescence, but also introduces the function of subsequent spectres in the plot through her initially cryptic warning: «Beware of Crimson Peak». Later, once the Sharpe siblings succeed in isolating her from her significant ones while keeping an impression of supportiveness, Edith marries Lord Thomas Sharpe and leaves the US for England to discover that Allerdale Hall, his decaying gothic mansion in Cumberland (filled with infamous secrets and slowly sinking into the red clay soil on which it was built) is popularly known by the nickname uttered in the aforementioned ghostly encounter¹. Although the role of spectres as harbingers of warning continues

1 It is popularly known as «Crimson Peak» because of the hot red clay that seeps into the bowels of the earth, oozing through the snow during winters and dyeing it. This particularity creates the half-white, half-red mantle of snow. The clay also drips from the mansion faucets, sweats from its walls and comes out as a viscous paste from the floor, creating a disturbing sight, which, as the film progresses, relates as well to the bloody crimes committed within the walls of the mansion.

through most of the film², Edith's attitude veers towards determination, in the attempt to find out why these presences cannot rest in peace. This process, in return, provides her with a valuable lesson about who she is and the role that she is expected to fall into once within those walls, as a new victim in a gruesome sequence of murders. Such ideas are first explored through her fears of being anticipated by a set of unnamed others, in the sense that she has a feeling that Thomas has been married before.

Guillermo del Toro's ghosts are scary enough to keep the viewer attentive and unquiet. *Crimson Peak's* ghosts are red (like blood), thanks to the red clay that the characters' house stands on. Spectres are translucent, confronting the vividly crimson colour. Guillermo del Toro's *Crimson Peak* provides viewers with an example of tactile contact between humans and ghosts, when, at the beginning of the film, the black hands of a female spectre touch the heroine's shoulder. Borderline horror lies in the idea that to bridge the gap between the human and the supernatural it is needed to endow the dead with properties of living beings (Hearn 237). Each spine-chilling encounter with these ghosts provides a new hint «unearthing» the names of three women first seduced and then poisoned by the Sharpe siblings to snatch their money: Pamela Upton, Margaret McDermott and Enola Sciatti. The by-no-means-random similarity between the latter's initials and Edith's own intensifies a sense of impending doom and mutual identification trespassing the boundaries between the worlds of the dead and the living. Adding to the spirit of perversity and unnaturalness in *Allerdale Hall*, we should also add the ghost of Lady Beatrice Sharpe, butchered in the bathtub by her own children: this secret is finally unveiled thanks to Alan McMichael a close friend (and former suitor) of Edith's who —very much like her brutally murdered father— does not trust the Sharpes' apparently good intentions and risks his own life in the attempt of rescuing her.

Remorse, plus the sincere love professed by his latest wife, end up withdrawing Thomas from his unnatural feelings for his sister Lucille, but also lead him towards death at her hands when he belatedly attempts to preserve Edith's life and fortune. It is precisely his ghost that plays a crucial role in

2 Ghosts appear as reflections of the past that come to the present to warn the protagonists about certain events. Lovecraft said that the unknown, being likewise the unpredictable, clearly belongs to spheres of existence whereof we know nothing and wherein we have no part (cited in Bloom 56).

Lucille's final downfall, even if Edith is the one delivering the final blow. Marred by her covetousness, possessive obsession and distorted conception of love—which, in her own words, «makes monsters of us all»—Lady Lucille Sharpe is held as the main, but not the sole, responsible for this whole spiral of death and suffering. Her skilful use of appearances and emotional manipulation routines, together with her lack of empathy and predatory course of action hint at her psychopathic personality. While Thomas' belated reaction against her partly «exonerates» him, since he dares defy the one who initiated him into incest and murder, this proves not enough to justify his survival. His death, after being repeatedly stabbed by Lady Lucille, frees Edith from his noxious charm—hence clearing the way for Allan—and marks a transition between the images of tormented ghosts in previous stages of the film towards a more peaceful portrayal³. Even in death, both siblings will relate to their mansion differently: while Thomas soon vanishes in thin air, meaning that he has left his past behind after paying the highest price, his sister's ghost reappears at the end of the film, clad in black (echoing the description of predatory moths that she utters at a burial scene) and playing the piano, meaning that she will remain forever trapped in the walls of the mansion. Spectres in the film are clear markers of intense experiences, and they imbue the spaces through which other characters pass. Still, the fact that each sibling faces a different path in the afterlife carries distinctive developmental overtones which run parallel to Edith's own traumatic emergence into maturity and reality through this bloodstained rite of passage. Allan and Edith leave Allerdale Hall hand in hand, marking a turning point towards a—presumably—brilliant future together; experience has nonetheless taught them that threats lurk among the living, in the least expected places, in the obsessions that may transform human beings into monsters.

Another way of confirming how the female protagonist has come to terms with this whole sequence of events and has finally fulfilled her dream of becoming a writer and finding true love—albeit at a high cost—is the cover of the book (*Crimson Peak*, by Edith M. Cushing) shown at the end of the closing titles, right after the fight on the mansion premises brings the plot to conclusion in a circular way. Those same credits reintroduce some of the key

3 In line with what has come to be known as *female gothic*, a term coined by Moers (90-110), Edith and Lucille are far more prominent than their male counterparts.

objects and settings in the film together with a myriad of butterflies, which are associated with Edith and Thomas Sharpe's victimized wives through their symbolic meaning as emblems of the soul (Cirlot 35) or as the latter's «liberation» from the flesh (Chevalier and Gheerbrant 140). They are used as well as markers of the sense of metamorphosis and transience pervading this work, and stand opposite to black moths which, associated with Lady Lucille, are seen both as a death omen or as a reference to those who let themselves be carried away by their passions (Fontana 84), at the expense of their own lives—or, in the case of the Sharpe siblings, those of others as well.

The developmental process, plus the pitfalls and obstacles along the way, that these insects refer to—not only in the final credits but also in key scenes such as Edith's father burial or her entrance into Thomas' workshop and the attic of the mansion—takes place simultaneously at three distinguishable, but intertwined, levels: first, the evolution, regression or stagnation of characters within the fictional reality constructed in the film; second, the experience of viewers and how the film fulfils a role parallel to that of ghosts with regard to them, as a haunting reminder of the dangers that may lurk in the most unexpected places—often under pleasant or seemingly trustworthy appearances; third, the creative process of the filmmakers who, very much like Edith, need to come to terms with the fear of being anticipated by tradition: to stand the test, the resulting film needs to develop a positive bond with regard to the classic referents or tropes that it appropriates and re-signifies, while also constructing a convincing product for a modern audience. It is precisely on account of this that, having substantiated the first two layers in the first section of this chapter, the next one will be devoted not only to trace and pinpoint the numerous referents echoed or reused in the film, but to explain how these are functionally inserted in the core scaffold or inner gearbox of the film, whose consciously intertextual character enables us to perceive the presence of other texts in it and gauge how this interaction fosters an enriching dialogue with tradition—plus its updating.

2. *Crimson Peak* and Its Intersections with Classics in the Gothic Genre

Upon a first viewing, *Crimson Peak* (2015) may give the impression of a pastiche with the sole aim of capitalizing on already tried and tested

formulae. Its highly aestheticized form may even reinforce the effect, as if hiding some sort of «soullessness». Such feelings soon vanish on subsequent occasions: the film grows on viewers thanks to its richly layered nuances, self-conscious narrative, and skilful appropriation of gothic tropes. It goes beyond plain imitation to serve a minutely studied homage to classics in literature or film, while also providing a modern twist with its greater dynamism, more direct style, and ability to uncover its intertextual bonds in a gradual manner. It emerges as a heartfelt eclectic exercise on Del Toro's part to update the «ghost story» pattern in film without distorting its roots⁴. It echoes a similar attempt on part of Henry James to bring the spooky stories that mid and late Victorians enjoyed so much into a more modern format with *The Turn of the Screw* (1898). Nowadays, at a time of renewed interest in superhero movies and space adventures brimming with over-the-top special effects, it was indeed risky to brew a horror film featuring beautified visuals, tons of atmosphere, a love story, ghosts and a late-nineteenth century setting.

The film stands true to the mixture of realism and fantasy in *The Devil's Backbone* (2001) or *Pan's Labyrinth* (2006) while also offering a privileged vantage point for exploring its bonds with the works that it pays tribute to. It is worth highlighting that these intersections —from and with— other texts do not merely provide a legitimizing scaffold or underlying structure but are an intrinsic part of its narrative pulse. While establishing a dialogue with tradition, mainly on the basis of comparison and contrast, the film also offers enough distinctive features as to stand on its own and, most importantly, dwells in the minds of viewers so as to foster a subsequent return which brings forth new instances of interaction with the classics at a less straightforward level.

4 As stated by Aldana Reyes (2018), *Crimson Peak* does actively engage with the Gothic tradition and its key texts. Guillermo del Toro proves to know Gothic classics. Interestingly enough, he curated the 2013 Penguin Horror book series, which included works by H. P. Lovecraft and Edgar Allan Poe. *Crimson Peak* is labelled by critics such as Debruge (2015), Kohn (2015), Jolin (2015) or Nicholson (2015) as «Gothic romance», «horror» and «Victorian Gothic». It is also called a «ghost story» or «Gothic horror» (Schaefer 2012; Shaw-Williams 2013). Bilge Ebiri (2015) states upon this complex generic referencing by noting that «*Crimson Peak*... doesn't always seem to know what it wants to be». Del Toro wanted to make a movie that is a mixture of all these things that he loves, and it clearly shows.

Although Edith M. Cushing's⁵ sustained flashback⁶ may start in her native Buffalo, for most of the film she is dragged into the vast, yet claustrophobic mansion of Allerdale Hall, which clearly reminds viewers of the Victorianaesque gothic style in Shirley Jackson's *The Haunting of Hill House* (1959) and Robert Wise's *The Haunting* (1963). The tarnished grandeur of the setting provides a mixture of amazement and awe, in line with the traditional concept of the sublime. The feeling blends in neatly with the progression of characters due to two main reasons: on the one hand, it echoes the initiatory moral values in A. Radcliffe's novels, in which usually an innocent young woman learns about the secrets and sufferings in life —a trace that Moers (126) identifies as one of the bases in Gothic heroinism. On the other, Del Toro renders this evolution as a gradual liberation from the obstacles, fears or transgressions either manacled human beings or leading them into regression: Thomas Sharpe puts an end to his easily manipulated train of thought and sacrifices himself for Edith, as a way of putting an end to his old ways. Allan vanquishes his incapacitating indecision towards her, while she leaves behind a naïve view of existence to find the way to her new self —both in the professional and interpersonal spheres.

Edith's aspirations as a gothic writer are met with condescending pats from a male-led editorial sector, and polite aversion on part of fellow women who, far from a sense of sorority, mock her attempts by comparing them to Jane Austen's own, so as to remind her of how far her wishful thinking is from the status of an established author⁷. Although Edith may claim that her model actually is the less conventional Mary Shelley, she nonetheless resembles Austen's Emma in the sense that both characters represent personified virtue and create their fictional universe(s) with the intention of controlling the world. Both feel

5 Her surname reminds of Peter Cushing, giving life to the legendary actor of the producer Hammer, famous for his role as Van Helsing, a professional vampire hunter, and Victor Frankenstein; not in vain he will be revealed as the best Van Helsing in the cinema history. The confrontation between Cushing-Dracula and Cushing-Sharpe runs parallel in both productions.

6 The early minutes in the film implicitly follow the sort of first-person narration that emphasizes the extraordinary, but credible, nature of the story while also paying tribute to a variety of nineteenth century gothic tales focused on intoxicating, life-threatening infatuation, such as T. Gautier's «La Morte Amoureuse» (1836), E.A. Poe's «The Fall of the House of Usher» (1839) or S. Le Fanu's *Carmilla* (1872), among others.

7 Edith pursues the sublime late-nineteenth century example of the *new woman*, as a courageous, self-confident and independent person who, while following the path of virtue, is meant to act within marriage «as companion and counsellor» not as «the encumbrance and toy of man» (Willard 325).

independent, putting into operation their cunning, ingenuity and, not less importantly, their self-confidence. Echoing Cueto's remarks about Austen's work (15-16), we may claim that Del Toro's film also describes «the path by which a young woman comes to control her most dangerous and hidden passions [to finally attain] self-knowledge and integration in a value system». Another intertextual link leads to Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847), whose leading character (also questing for self-sufficiency) discovers on her wedding day that her fiancé holds a secret in the attic of Thornfield Hall. This turning point, already based on the gothic fiction that Brontë enjoyed during her adolescence, is reused and given a darker hue in *Crimson Peak*. By replacing Mr. Rochester's mad Creole wife with Thomas Sharpe's murdered ones, Del Toro brings forward another connection with Perrault's spooky fairy tale *La Barbe Bleue* (1695), as we shall see later. While Mr. Rochester's guilt is washed away through temporary blindness, after trying to save Bertha from the flames engulfing their mansion, Thomas Sharpe, in a rather Macbethian twist, cannot do it, and is irremediably bound to perish while trying to save Edith. Like *Jane Eyre*, Edith learns to observe the reality around with greater accuracy, to avoid its delusions and manages to leave behind her naïve fantasies while fostering a more rational outlook on life.

It is precisely that «world of dreams» —a factor that Botting (12, 44) also perceives in Austen's heroines— which the Sharpe siblings consistently thwart following Carter Cushing's brutal murder: Edith's feelings of isolation and incomprehension are regularly soothed by her protective yet respectful and caring father. Once he is left out of the equation, his daughter proves an even most fitting victim than before in the eyes of the Sharpe siblings. The tarnished beauty of their mansion strengthens Edith's lack of communication and increasing feelings of isolation —in an aristocratic environment that proves radically different from her own background. Echoing Polidori's *The Vampyre* (1819) and Stoker's *Dracula* (1896), the Sharpes deploy a carefully devised pattern of seduction, manipulation and effacement⁸ also projected

8 The pernicious effects caused by something as apparently harmless as tea-drinking (disguised here under the apparent formality of Lucille's welcome ritual) echoes the kind of toxicity that *Dracula* had for his victims, who experienced symptoms similar to those suffered by Edith and the Sharpe siblings' previous victims. Edith weakens and begins to cough blood (reminding us of a convalescent Lucy Westenra). The paraphernalia connected to the crimson colour is undeniably related to the symbolic value of blood, the fluid that vampires long so much for; and going further,

onto the conflict between civilized society and foreigners as carriers of evil⁹—an idea also explored in Matthew Lewis' *The Monk* (1796) and Sheridan Le Fanu's *Carmilla* (1872). Although Del Toro's film is set in the 1890s (with the British Empire at its peak¹⁰) the contrast is marked between self-made US citizens and «vampire-like» European aristocrats preying on others' lifetime efforts, luring others into death through a fantasy of self-fulfilment, and—borrowing from Poe's «The Fall of the House of Usher» (1839)—rattling in the last throes of their doomed lineage.

In consonance with the mixture of attraction and repulsion with which aristocrats are viewed in gothic tradition, the spaces where they live are equally imbued with a contrast between their grandeur and ominous decay. The conception and design of the main setting in the film partakes of Burke's definition of the sublime in *A Philosophical Inquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas on the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757): Burke identified beauty with harmony and the sublime with immensity plus a capacity to inspire terror; and he maintained that everything that in any way contributes to excite the ideas of pain, that is, everything that is terrible in some way, is the source of the sublime. Everything sublime is beautiful, but not everything beautiful is sublime. For Burke, horror arises from the sublime. He defined it on the basis that beautiful objects are characterized by their smallness, softness, delicacy, evoking love and tenderness, as opposed to the sublime, huge and disproportionate, which causes awe and terror (58). Guillermo del Toro manages to capture

here the blood is not absorbed, but quite the opposite, expelled by the earth, in a transposition and alteration of the most elemental gothic vampire tradition. The red-white chromatic opposition enhances the wonderful metaphor proposed by Del Toro.

9 Ken Gelder (34) suggests that society itself is vampiric, as long as aristocrats feed on the people. This data is far neither from *Crimson Peak* (2015) nor *Dracula* (1896). *Dracula* represents the agonizing rural aristocracy in rebellion against the new order. The count is the feudal lord who accompanies a cohort of vampires with whom he creates vassalage relationships through blood rites.

10 The nineteenth is a century of scientific-technical progress, political democracy, colonialism and nationalist struggles. It is the century of the bourgeoisie, of commerce, the railroad and steamboats. It is a century in which humanity seems to live in a state of unquestionable confidence in itself. And yet, when the century approaches its end, years in which authors like Stoker or Le Fanu will live their maturity, serious cracks arise, sporadically but continuously, to slowly, but unstopably, crumble that blind and naive confidence. The proletariat questions the power, values and, what is more important, the benefits of the bourgeoisie. Economic crises erode faith in economic development; pessimism as refuge and aesthetics is launched in a compulsive journey to the bottom of the human mind. In Fiedler's words, «gothic romance is fundamentally antibourgeois and can only with difficulty be adapted to the needs of the sentimental middle classes» (127).

and relaunch this same feeling, both captivating and impacting the eye of the spectator and translating this association into a kind of visual fear. The nervous tension felt in certain scenes prevails in the presence of solemnity and fear.

The once-proud Allerdale Hall, still towering over the surrounding moors but slowly sinking into clay soil also epitomizes the contrast between the siblings' mask of respectability and their rotten course of action. It is a closed, inbred, vitiated universe feeding back on itself and inexorably bound to extinction. The exploitation and barbarities of the past are intimately connected to their lacklustre present and moral corruption. The references to the baby ghost reinforce the description of the Sharpe family as a «cursed seed»: its deformity at birth is shown as the mark of his parents' sin. While Poe's story does not reveal whether or not Roderick's unhealthy infatuation for his sister had been consummated (Helvie, 45) we may still believe that fear of rejection—as Montes Doncel (570) puts it—prevented him from fulfilling his urge.

Although *Crimson Peak* viewers are not made aware of incest until the middle and late stages of the film, Lucille's changeable moods and controlling behaviour already hint at something weird going on between both siblings. Once Edith becomes aware of this secret (plus the collaborative murder of their mother and Thomas' previous wives) no room is left for suggestion or subtlety: the way to the room where it all started is cleared, and the siblings are shown indulging in the throes of carnal rapture. For a substantial part of the film, Lucille plays the role of an introverted, exquisitely refined woman who likes to collect butterflies and moths—possibly hinting at John Fowles' *The Collector* (1963)—indulges in piano playing and, not less importantly, is extremely afraid of being left alone once her brother finds a suitable wife. Behind such a mask, she resembles the Goethean «monster-woman» type, producing significant actions to the detriment of the contemplative purity of other females—and, in this case, also the passive Baronet. In terms similar to Lady Macbeth, she is the one who «gets her hands dirty» while securing her brother's cooperation in the series of gruesome murders—their baby, their own mother¹¹ and his wives, Pamela, Margaret, and Enola—which provide the backbone of their immoral relationship.

11 The manner in which Edith—and so viewers—get to know about the murder of Lady Beatrice Alexandra Sharpe is clearly reminiscent of the sight of Lorraine Massey's decaying body

Like the twins in «The Fall of the House of Usher», the Sharpe siblings are suspended over the —both literal and figurative— abyss of their corrupted and sinking family state. Every attempt at restoring its former glory is but in vain, not only because there is no idealized past to return to (their family history is one of violence and abuse) but also because they have been progressively swallowed by the emptiness lying within them. Whoever is lured into their microcosm feels very much like the insects seen along the film —trapped and about to die of suffocation. Just like the widening fissure in the Usher mansion —symbolically mirroring Roderick’s split personality and proleptically hinting at the extinction of his family— the huge hole in the ceiling of the Sharpe’s residence is both a symbol of their degradation and a reminder of Lady Beatrice’s smashed head, as a turning point in the siblings’ inexorable decline into self-destruction.

The damaging effects of merciless nature upon this (once exuberant, now dampened and decaying) setting are clearly visible since Edith sets foot in it: the whole image is meant to stress the contrast between its inhabitants’ appearances and inner reality. The wrathful gales of wind across the chimneys resemble the agonized cries of their victims and point towards their immediate past, also predating their present and denying them any possibility of a future. Edith’s steady progression, deeper and deeper into the rotting heart of the mansion —the wax ponds function in a way analogous to the crypt in «The Fall of the House of Usher»— provides additional intertextual hints that Del Toro clearly did not choose at random. Along her journey, echoing the persistent beating in Edgar Allan Poe’s «The Tell-Tale Heart» (1843), his heroine is often accompanied by the resounding blare of Thomas’ machine, thus drawing a parallel between both «extraction» processes: one is marked by his slavish obedience to a damned, exploitative legacy, while another is aimed at uprooting and purging the evil that haunts the mansion.

Allerdale Hall also stands out as a battlefield for female characters, who struggle to control this only possible space of power, under the new circumstances brought by Edith and Thomas’ wedding: the potentially lethal tension brewing up is additionally marked through Lucille’s refusal to hand Edith a copy of the keys, under the excuse that some of the rooms are unsafe. Her

in Stanley Kubrick’s *The Shining* (1980). It is worth noting, nonetheless, that the latter character actually committed suicide —as shown in the source novel by Stephen King, written in 1977.

seemingly protective attitude draws an intersection with Perrault's «La Barbe Bleue» (c. 1695), which also emphasizes prohibition and transgression (Hermansson, 3) through the key motif. As in the classic tale, it is curiosity (plus a mixture of unease and unrest) which spurs Edith to venture into unexplored areas of the mansion, with the sole help of lit candelabra¹². In clearly symbolic terms, she is the only source of light penetrating the gloomy darkened corridors of the battered building. Her loosened blonde tresses and ample white nightgown stand in stark opposition to her sister in law's usually bound hair —tellingly untied near the final climax of the film— and dark, corseted, outfits. Lucille is the one that manages to blend sublime with architecture (an idea already highlighted by Groom, 92-93), furniture and decoration through her movements and her wardrobe (to the point that she seems to camouflage herself with the house). At the beginning of the film, her dress is loaded with symbolism: thus, the great tail of pleated layers concentrated on her feet recalls a large pool of blood or red clay emanating from the mines on the property of the Sharpe siblings. Later on, Lucille stands out for the dark colour of her sculptural costume, alluding to her image as a moth and her perverse purposes. In the nineteenth century, the time in which the film is set, black was reserved to dress the mourning (opposed to the colour dresses throughout the film, Edith's mother is the exception, since she appears wearing black, probably her funeral dress), so presumably, in Lucille, that tonality attends the duel of losing her brother, now in love with Edith. A red flower, on the side of the heart, stands out like a bloodstain.

Interestingly enough, Edith's dresses are often decorated with flowers, as opposed to the dry leaves found outside and inside the mansion: she carries the promise of a new beginning, while Lucille is bound not only to the

12 This routine of exploration which, in Aldana Reyes' view, «continues to be the most powerful staple metonymic signifier of the Gothic» (171), clearly borrows from previous examples white-gown wearing or candelabra-wielding heroines in literature —Samuel Taylor Coleridge's *Christabel* (1800) or Wilkie Collins's *The Woman in White* (1859)— and subsequent gothic incarnations in films such as Jack Clayton's *The Innocents* (1963), Alejandro Amenabar's *The Others* (2001) or, Roy Ward baker's *Vampire Lovers* (1970) —starring Deborah Kerr, Nicole Kidman or Ingrid Pitt, respectively. A similar pattern of exploration —prior to Jonathan Harker's baleful encounter with the vampire brides— is also seen in Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1896). Furthermore, the elongated corridors of the mansion, plus the gift of seeing and communicating with ghosts are clear reminders of Danny Torrance's own experience in Stephen King's *The Shining* (1974) and Kubrick's subsequent film rendition.

destruction of others, but also that of their own lineage. It is this clear contrast which finally leads Thomas to betray his sister, despite his initial intentions. In Perrault's tale, the aforementioned key motif is merely a bait: the sadistic husband knows that, sooner or later, his wife will enter the forbidden chamber, and he will be allowed to justify his atrocious behaviour towards her on the basis of disobedience —just like the Sharpe siblings justify their own actions on the basis of financial need and their twisted view of love. This intense bond is made even more unnatural through the murder «not just» of their mother, but also of Thomas' wives: through the usurpation of the space(s) and function(s) that should be reserved for them, Lucille becomes a horrendous, self-contradictory conflation of the three roles —mother, sister, and wife.

Furthermore, both in Perrault's tale and Del Toro's film, the key motif is another indicator of «transgression»: in the former, the unremovable blood stain —another point in common with the concept of guilt in Shakespeare's *Macbeth* (1606)— seals the wife's destiny upon close inspection. In the latter, such scrutiny is replaced by a duel of appearances between Edith and Lucille upon discovering that Enola's key has been (temporarily) stolen. Just like the victimized wife in the 1695 tale, Edith gains power through knowledge (Osborne, 57-59) and suffers from an unawareness of the Sharpes' predatory plans. In the classic tale, the potential victim is saved by interfering males, in «The Bloody Chamber» —Angela Carter's 1979 feminist rewriting— it is the unfortunate wife's mother who bursts into the room on horse and drives a bullet through the psychopath's head. On its part, *Crimson Peak* (2015) intensifies Edith's isolation from her significant ones, so that the tension held within Allerdale Hall turns into a struggle to control her own destiny. Despite external aid, it is Edith who ultimately saves herself. While starting out at a disadvantage, she completes a critical rite of passage by uncovering the secrets beyond the walls of the mansion —a traumatic experience that also functions as a powerful purification ritual.

3. Conclusion

In parallel to its leading protagonist's process of self-growth and discovery of herself and others, Del Toro's film succeeds in following another trajectory of self-knowledge and self-position. Both dimensions are cleverly intertwined,

on the one hand, through the skilful handling of factors and components from diverse sources. On the other, by providing this eclectic whole with a character of its own, the film manages to stand its ground while also rendering due homage to Gothic tradition. Far from the initial appearance of fragility of its heavily aestheticized proposal, insofar as it appears to be based on a purely commercial move, *Crimson Peak* comes full circle having peered into the construction and development of its predecessors and performed a skilful exercise of appropriation and variation. The latter does not derive in a succession of sterile commonplaces, but in a minutely structured and fully-fledged whole firmly rooted in the classics and echoing the developmental crisis suffered by the leading female role: this conflict and the equally eloquent parallelism between the representation of monstrosity and beauty are two of the most recurrent Gothic themes, and are cleverly fused here to provide an updated product conscious of its indebtedness to others. This objective is also attained thanks to the juxtaposition between the real and fantastic dimensions in the film.

The intensely atmospheric settings and well-wrought characters in the film go hand in hand with Del Toro's reappropriation of classic Gothic formulae and heartfelt intellectual debt to the Victorian period. *Crimson Peak* steps down the ladder of time to resolve its own *raison d'être* and to look into the future. Through the negotiation of meaning inscribed in this uncanny process (Armitt, 46), Del Toro also updates the conception of ghosts to remind viewers that humans often are more terrible creatures than restless spirits. Likewise, it is through the cleverly-constructed contrasts of colour and Edith's empowerment that he keeps rewriting Gothic femininity and heroinism. Accordingly, Allerdale Hall's decaying walls and vaulted corridors, deeply imbued in the traditional Gothic romance style, also point beyond themselves, proving more than a mere backdrop. *Crimson Peak* builds on recurrent tropes in Gothic fiction—such as trauma, dysfunctional families and the irruption of the supernatural—to complete, in visual and narrative terms, a *tour de force* in terms of identity (re)construction, one which affects the film itself, its leading character, and even its audience, whose members—this time comfortably ensconced in their seats—round off a similar process of exploration and discovery through the viewing of what we may eventually call a rich mosaic of Gothic cognates.

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