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The Escape of Effluvia: The Release and Recapture of the Madwoman in the Attic in the  
Postwar Films *Gaslight* and *Les Diaboliques*

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This thesis explores the evolution of the Gothic genre during its transference from literature to film, particularly stories of the Madwoman in the Attic. This paper focuses on *Gaslight* and *Les Diaboliques* and how these films reflected postwar America in 1944 and postwar France in 1955.

In particular, this thesis examines definitions of madness and sanity in these two cultures and why these films exemplify their era, while continuing the Gothic genre.

## About The Gothic Heroine, The Madwoman in the Attic and Its Continuing Resonance

Stretching back to the late 1700s, the Gothic is far-reaching and has enjoyed many iterations, but there are some defining elements common to the various stories. For this paper, I will focus on the setting and the Gothic heroine. The tropes begin with aspects of the Romantic movement:

In the most abstract terms, Romanticism may be regarded as the triumph of the values of imaginative spontaneity, visionary originality, wonder, and emotional self-expression over the classical standards of balance, order, restraint, proportion, and objectivity. Its name derives from romance, the literary form in which desires and dreams prevail over everyday realities. ... Nourished by Protestant conceptions of intellectual liberty, the Romantic writers tended to cast themselves as prophetic voices crying in the wilderness, dislocated from the social hierarchy.<sup>1</sup>

It was on this foundation that the Victorian era Gothic heroine and setting was built. And with this Romantic philosophy as a basis, a reader will recognize aspects of the heroine's personality in this description, as well as the notion that trees give way to entropy and Nature reclaims the efforts of humans.

The all-important setting is a home, estate or castle that was once grand, but has now fallen into disrepair. Castles crumble, rooms are boarded up and gardens are impassable. This manor house, key in the Gothic, is described by Chris Baldick in his introduction to the *Oxford Book of Gothic Tales* as "a house of degeneration, even decomposition, its living space darkening and contracting into the dying space of the mortuary and tomb."<sup>2</sup> With hallmarks set forth by Ann Radcliffe in the 1790s, the Gothic novel "established the genre's central figure: that of the apprehensive heroine exploring a sinister building in which she is trapped by the aristocratic villain."<sup>3</sup> These dank, abandoned spaces are often hiding clues to a central secret, being hidden by the protagonist and his domestic staff, a secret which bars the way to the heroine's happiness. And speaking of the staff, they are decidedly grim, having seen more than their fair share of defeat in a futile attempt to maintain the glorious past. They are rarely welcoming to the

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<sup>1</sup> Margaret Drabble, ed., *The Oxford Companion to English Literature*. 6th ed., (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2000), s.v. "Romanticism."

<sup>2</sup> Chris Baldick, *The Oxford Book of Gothic Tales*. (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1992), xx.

<sup>3</sup> *The Oxford Companion to English Literature*. 6th ed., s.v. "Gothic Fiction."

newcomer (and soon-to-be heroine) and add another layer of discomfort to the already mysterious setting. Despite their warnings and demands, the heroine explores the recesses of the decaying structures.

This gothic heroine is a complex character type. She teeters on the edge of adventure and safety. At once curious and downtrodden, defiant and submissive, intelligent and stubborn, she attempts to navigate an unconventional situation and causes a ripple in standard social statuses in both the microcosm of the manor and of societal norms. For this she is admired by her audience but derided by fellow characters. She must defend herself against outside forces, while maintaining her virtue and standing in society. Her efforts are constantly thwarted by those who wish the secret to remain hidden. But this heroine also sets herself apart by being stubborn in her quest for the truth. This heroine emerged in Victorian Gothic literature, but she is just as visible in the films of the 1940s and 50s.

In the early Victorian era, there were few options for women, yet she is more determined than her fellow characters and will discover the secret, even at the expense of her own contentment. In this self-sacrifice, she rises above those who have settled for society's convention. She is often punished for her choices (or for the fact that she dared to even make one) but there is still a sense of bravery and heroism around her. Although any of the other characters would have suggested to just leave well enough alone, her determination has swept away the figurative cobwebs, and literally cleared out the attic. As I will show, the same settings and the same heroine exists in mid-20th century films, though they have taken on the vestiges of each era in order to reach the contemporary audience.

This paper will map the jump of the Gothic from literature to film, specifically the use of the Madwoman in the Attic. Using the novel *Jane Eyre* as a touchstone for the genre, I will explore how and why the Gothic story, and in particular the trope of the "Madwoman in the Attic", appeared in films during and after World War II, on both sides of the Atlantic. Specifically, I will support my ideas with research on sanity and madness, and by analysis of genre adaptation, specifically from page to screen. My two source films will be *Gaslight* (US, 1944) and *Les Diaboliques* (France, 1954). Through this analysis, I intend to trace the genre evolution of

Madwoman in the Attic into a woman who is not mad, but is driven to madness (or at least the brink of it) and into an attic (both real and figurative) by male anxieties and social constraints specific to the time of each film, and why these changes took place. Additionally, I will trace this evolution as reflected in the use of elemental themes (flame and water) and how they are reflections of modernity, displayed for Gothic reference.

## PART I

### Jane Eyre and the Birth of the Madwoman in the Attic

In 1979, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar published a game-changing series of essays entitled *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth Century Literary Imagination*. These articles explore the idea that the figure of the Madwoman in literature at the time was a double for the female authors who struggled against societal repression. Professor Harriet Kramer Linkin at New Mexico State University wrote, “For British nineteenth-century studies, work on literary canons has a particularly rich history given the once radical, now standard arguments by such critics as Ellen Moers, Elaine Showalter, or Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, whose examination of women writers redefined our conceptions of significant nineteenth-century narratives.” Their academic analyses of these Gothic stories from a modern perspective went hand in hand with a wave of feminist revolution in America. However, these essays do not explore the transference of this idea to the 20th century and film. Most notable for my paper is application of Gilbert & Gubar’s theory to *Jane Eyre* and its literal madwoman in the attic (Bertha Mason Rochester). I contend that as the Gothic genre advances to film, this woman becomes symbolic, rather than literal — or at least literal in a different sense.

In a number of classic Gothic novels, the secret that threatens the heroine is, or is centered around, a “Madwoman in the Attic.” Most notably, in *Jane Eyre*, published in 1847, this woman is Bertha Mason Rochester, who terrorizes the household of Thornfield Hall. Never seen by daylight, and never even truthfully acknowledged by Mr. Rochester until he is standing at the

altar with Jane, she quite literally haunts Jane's new home and represents a truth Jane is determined to seek out.

Jane, the narrator, is a resourceful, if naive, young woman thrust into the mysterious world of Thornfield Hall. The story contains all the conventions of a gothic novel: remote location, crumbling structures, gruff personages, a dark secret and whispered rumors. Charlotte Brontë adds to this a strong, though struggling heroine, as well as a concrete, rather than spectral, demon. There is more than the rumor of madness run amok — Bertha Mason Rochester really is mad, and she does exist. Gilbert and Gubar note that such characters are “mad anti-heroines who complicate the lives of sane heroines.”<sup>4</sup> Bertha's existence is the personified reason why Jane and Rochester can never be happy.

Daphne du Maurier brings this Madwoman to the 20th century. In her novel *Rebecca*, published in 1938, the title character is dead before the story begins. Yet Rebecca's presence is still so overpowering that the new Mrs. deWinter is terrified of a dead woman and the author never even gives this heroine her own name. She is so identified as “the new wife,” the mistress of the house and as the teller of this story, that she needs (or perhaps has earned) no other identity. This adaptation of the the Madwoman and the Gothic brings the tropes forward to a modern audience and tailors them with modern themes. *Rebecca* is accessible to a modern reader, and is instrumental in bringing the Madwoman to the screen.

### A Vintage Tale For A Modern Audience

By the 1920s, women had already held down the homefront in one war and earned the right to vote. At the onset of the Second World War, they did more than keep house while the soldiers were away. Some enlisted as members of WAC, the Women's Army Corps. Some applied to be nurses overseas. Those who remained at home took on jobs at munitions or airplane factories. They welded steel, installed electronics and assembled engines. As Greenwald notes in his review of Susan Hartmann's *The Home Front and Beyond: American Women in the 1940s*:

Hartmann observes that the war opened many doors to women.

<sup>4</sup> Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth Century Literary Imagination*. (New Haven and London: Yale Univ. Press, 1979), 80.

Women's participation in the labor force dramatically increased during the wartime labor shortage as women from all walks of life gained admittance to jobs from which they had been previously excluded. Educational institutions beckoned women into the traditionally male fields of science and technology. The war opened hospitals to female interns and nursing schools to black women. Women's visibility in civil and political affairs increased as women entered jury service in several states for the first time, replaced political party workers and leaders at the local level, and won elections to state offices. The war era echoed with public rhetoric in favor of women's new roles.

But women's wartime opportunities in non-traditional jobs in the civilian labor force and in the military, their new-found positions in science and technology, and their various political gains were all short-lived.<sup>5</sup>

When the men returned from war, they found a changed female role. However anxious they may have been to return to the usual order of things, the man now knew, at least subconsciously, he was not *necessary* for her survival. A paranoia about his place in society crept into suburban paradises across the country. And a paranoia about being confined to pre-war roles became relevant for women. It is on this foundation that Madwoman films begin to take shape.

No longer able to deny the capability of a female counterpart by simply (figuratively) shutting her up in the attic and ignoring her presence, the male figure had to create a new way to gain his dominance. During, and following, W.W.II, the Gothic genre shifted toward a more subversive and more frightening plot device. The male now slowly and systematically unraveled the sanity of this empowered woman in order to achieve his dominance in this redux of the Madwoman in the Attic.

### The Gothic in Films and The Sanctity of Sanity

This Gothic genre makes its appearance in a number of films. At first the stories were told simply as adaptations of existing novels. *The Oxford Companion to English Literature* notes, "The Hollywood cinema did even more to grant Gothic narrative a favored place in the popular imagination through its various adaptations of *Dracula*, *Frankenstein* and other literary works."<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Maurine Weiner Greenwald, review of "The Home Front and Beyond: American Women in the 1940s", by Susan M. Hartmann, *The Journal of American History*, (Dec., 1983): 720

<sup>6</sup> *The Oxford Companion to English Literature*, s.v. "Gothic Fiction."

David O. Selznick and Alfred Hitchcock teamed up to make *Rebecca* (adapted from the novel) in 1940 (with significant plot changes due to the Hays Code). Orson Welles and Joan Fontaine (who also played the heroine in *Rebecca*) starred in a popular version of *Jane Eyre* in 1943. That same year, Val Lewton produced a B film for RKO Studios called *I Walked With A Zombie*, a present-day retelling of the Eyre story, set in the Caribbean, a post-colonial paradise lost setting.

Perhaps it is no accident that the genre evolution of the Gothic, Madwoman in the Attic films began with low-budget pictures, just as many of these Gothic tales began as cheap or pulpy novels. While studios focused on acquiring star names and manufacturing broad appeal for large-budget pictures, B films were able to tailor to more marginal audiences. Amidst the rise of the “Woman’s Film”, was a growing subgenre of these updated Gothic tales, which I refer to as New Madwoman films. They reflected a changing world for women. Though an audience could appreciate a Victorian-set story, the New Madwoman in the Attic had more immediacy. In a day when it would be far less likely for a husband to be able to lock his wife away in a turret without some sort of public outcry, it would still have been believable that he could suppress a strong or dominant female through the subtle means in these films. Because literal physical restraints would be questioned, he began a slow, systematic attack on her sanity, thus making the restraints of an asylum necessary.

In the Nineteenth-century, the origin of many Gothic stories, there was a very fine line between acceptable, even encouraged, frailty and outright insanity. As Gilbert and Gubar write:

Nineteenth-century culture seems to have actually admonished women to *be* ill. In other words, the “female diseases” from which Victorian women suffered were not always byproducts of their training in femininity; they were the goals of such training. ... As Dr. Mary Putnam Jacoby wrote in 1895, ‘considered natural and almost laudable to break down under all conceivable varieties of strain — a winter dissipation, a houseful of servants, a quarrel with a female friend, not to speak of more legitimate reasons.... Constantly considering their nerves, urged to consider them by well-intentioned by short-sighted advisors, [women] pretty soon become nothing but a bundle of nerves.’<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Gilbert and Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic*, 54–5.



In this way, mild “insanity” was considered common for women, making it all the easier to dismiss any real mental or emotional issues. Difficult to prove but easy to suggest, insanity was an oft-used excuse for a husband looking to get rid of his wife. This could be for many reasons: a wish to marry another, a desire to be free from marriage altogether or an aim to inherit or control her property. And since a woman had very few acceptable roles, using this societal pressure and expectation to his advantage, insanity became one of his strongest weapons. Certainly plenty of loving husbands sent their wives to asylums for treatment and, hopefully, a cure. But, for an already downtrodden woman, a loss of sanity represents the loss of the last personal freedom one can have. In an already controlling society, to be told that even your own thoughts and emotions were not under your control, or were invalid, would have been taking the last safehouse away from her. Whether insanity was rampant during the Victorian era due to suffocating and unrealistic social strictures or whether those same judgments assumed a diagnosis of insanity is debated even now. The male counterpart was less likely to become “insane” since he was allowed more freedom of movement and personality. What is clear is that being declared insane was both a very real fear and rather common. And fearing insanity, and its punishments, could easily create even more anxiety for the female and thus cause a display of “insanity.”

Showalter writes:

In presenting textbook cases of female insanity, doctors usually described women who were disobedient, rebellious, or in open protest against the female role. Tilt writes that female adolescence is a state of "miniature insanity," when girls previously well-behaved become "snappish, fretful . . . full of deceit and mischief." In his important lecture series on hysteria, F. C. Skey warned his audience that the typical hysteric was not a person of weak mind but "a female member of a family exhibiting more than usual force and decision of character, of strong resolution, fearless of danger, bold riders, having plenty of what is termed nerve."<sup>8</sup>

This description certainly could describe many of the female heroines of the Victorian Gothic novel as well as these proto-Gothic films. And it is this basis that the ill-meaning husbands of the

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<sup>8</sup> Elaine Showalter. "Victorian Women and Insanity," *Victorian Studies*, (Winter, 1980): 178.

New Madwoman films use for their slow torture. However, since times and expectations have changed, the films must present a more realistic scenario that reflects the audience's own fears and a more modern understanding of sanity.

Showalter proffers:

We learn from the study of Victorian women and insanity, I think, that definitions of both insanity and femininity are culturally constructed, and that the relationship between them must be considered within the cultural frame. Insanity is intricately connected with a host of social and economic factors: with the availability of custodial care, with the rates of unemployment and migration, with urbanization and loneliness, and with changes in family size and cohesiveness.<sup>9</sup>

It is with this history in mind, then that we turn to the films which ushered in the New Madwoman in the Attic. Following *Jane Eyre*, *Rebecca* and *I Walked With A Zombie*, MGM Studios released *Gaslight*, starring Ingrid Bergman and Charles Boyer in 1944. Set in the Victorian era, it brings together some of the more common elements of the Gothic and the modern female of the W.W.II era.

## PART II

### Gaslight

In literature, "gaslight crime" refers to a type of story involving stolen diamonds, mistaken identity, perhaps a murder, during the gaslit era of London. As editor Michael Sims puts it:

One writer may employ 'gaslight era' to represent the heyday of Arthur Conan Doyle and the next writer may use it to approximate Queen Victoria's entire reign from 1837 to 1901. Technically, the real-life period of gaslighting began in 1807 when London's Pall Mall lit up like a fairy-tale kingdom. ... The term implies an urban setting, minus the honking stench of our modern highways; sophisticated characters, but not twenty-first-century cynics. The moment I envision a gas lamp, the special effects department in my brain surrounds it with London fog. Then it cues the rattle of a

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<sup>9</sup> Showalter, "Victorian Women and Insanity," 180.

handsom cab across cobblestones and the whinny of a horse...”<sup>10</sup>

In these stories, it is the modern element in an old story. It’s no accident that the film *Gaslight* carries the title. Nor is it happenstance that the tale is set in the very era Sims describes. Yet *Gaslight* does not appear in the silent era, as a Griffith epic or a cautionary tale of the Hays Code. It takes the upheaval and paranoia of a worldwide war to inspire such a story. This sub genre of the Gothic story thrives in the post W.W. II film canon; so much so that “gaslight” becomes a verb — a term meaning to drive someone mad through underhanded means. It is so pervasive that it was used on an episode of “House” (2011), season seven, as a verb, without reference to the film.

*Gaslight* employs many traits of a Gothic romance. The main protagonist, Paula, (Ingrid Bergman) witnesses the murder of her aunt and guardian while very young, but has grown into a lovely woman, despite her suffering and her truncated childhood. She is swept off her feet by a man she knows very little about and returns, married, to the home of the childhood trauma. The house is not a rambling, decrepit estate but a neat townhome facing a square in a fashionable London neighborhood. It has, however, been boarded and closed up for several years and represents the once-sparkling, glamorous life of the Alquist. In a shift towards the modern, we learn that the house is owned by Paula, not Gregory. It is he who is reliant upon her for a home and income.

Very soon, Paula begins to suffer episodes of dizziness, confusion and absent-mindedness. Her husband, Gregory (Charles Boyer), insists she remain indoors, lay down, and see no one until she feels well again. She becomes a prisoner in her own home. The more she fights these spells, the worse she becomes until she is convinced that she really is losing her mind and is completely at the mercy of an increasingly abusive husband. As the film progresses, it becomes clear that it is a dastardly case of Munchausen’s. Gregory suggests and fosters insanity in Paula and encourages Paula’s belief that her health and sanity are mirrored by the gaslighting system in the house. And, ironically, it is the gaslighting that allows her to discover the root of her “insanity.”

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<sup>10</sup> Michael Sims, introduction to *The Penguin Book of Gaslight Crime*. Ed. Michael Sims, (NY: Penguin, 2009), x-xi

The gas fixtures are a sign of the modern in the Victorian home. Predating electricity, the use of gas lighting was predominant in Victorian and early Edwardian society. It provided a constant source of light that was not possible with candles and it was cheaper too. In addition to lighting homes, it was used to illuminate streets and (hopefully) minimize crime. But the bright lights cast equally dark shadows — and the light itself was a filmy, sickly and murky. The spent oil and gas products created a residue that clung to every surface. Yet this was the height of modern convenience and much was done to improve upon its ill side effects. A household guide from the era describes the importance of proper installation:

A word here on the subject of ventilation will not be out of place. To burn gas constantly in any living-room without providing for the escape of the effluvia, is to ensure the breathing of a most hurtful and pernicious atmosphere, and such a practice cannot be too strongly condemned. A grating should be concealed in the central flower, and a pipe, not less than two inches in bore, carried from it to an air-brick in the wall, or into a chimney. This pipe will convey away not only the air destroyed by the gas, but a current will be created which will carry off all the foul air produced by the breathing of the inmates of the room.<sup>11</sup>

The implication here, then, is that gaslit environments, while modern in some capacities, can be made harmful. Read in the context of the New Madwoman films, this seemingly innocuous household hint, takes on new meaning.

It is in these gaslit conditions that the ill-meaning Gregory attempts to cause insanity in his wife. Building upon the Gothic and adapting it for film, the use of gaslight as a visual cue employs, I suggest, the motif of absence / presence through out the film. This motif recalls Gothic stories by harkening back to ghostly figures and mysterious locked rooms — pitting what is there against what isn't. And in the confines of the screen, each mention or shot of a gaslight carries with it filmic significance — one that is not possible when reading a book. Using absence/presence in this way is purely filmic, and one that is highly congruous with the Gothic genre. What isn't talked about or acknowledged is the very thing that becomes overwhelming.

In *Gaslight*, when Gregory is *absent*, the dimmed gaslight and disembodied footsteps are *present*, as is her wavering sanity. And the *absence* of light creates a *presence* of fear and dread for Paula,

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<sup>11</sup> Cassells Household Guide, New and Revised Edition (4 Vol.) c.1880s [no date] THE HOUSEHOLD MECHANIC.—XV. GAS <http://www.victorianlondon.org/cassells/cassells-8.htm>

and the audience. The purposeful *absence* of certain narrative details allows for a *presence* of the questioning of sanity — and a possible *absence* of sanity. It is through this use of the absence / presence dichotomy that another filmic theory comes into play: suture. Literally meaning “to stitch”, this is the phenomenon of a viewer identifying with the film on screen. Susan Hayward defines suture as “to stitch the spectator into the filmic text.”<sup>12</sup> This is particularly relevant for the Gothic and New MadWoman in the Attic film. *Gaslight* adapts the fears of the American woman — social expectations, return of domesticity, lack of acceptance from male counterparts — and dramatized them for the screen. By aligning the audience with Paula, not just in the film but on a greater social plane, the viewer sutures themselves into the film and its theme. And in dealing with their own fears, they recognize both the tropes of the Gothic genre as well as their similarities with the new Gothic heroine.

### Gaslit Attics

After the opening titles of *Gaslight*, which are a static shot of a flickering gaslamp, the first shot shows dim London neighborhood streets, lit only by gaslamps. This is the London not only of Queen Victoria but of Jack the Ripper. As the camera zooms in on an open front door, a man reaches up to turn out the gas fixture above the entryway. The house is dark except for this one light, which he extinguishes. It is being closed up for an extended amount of time. And no modern touch will disturb its walls for more than ten years.

The next time gas appears is when Paula and Gregory open the house, not unlike the opening of King Tut’s tomb. No light penetrates the heavy drapes and the furniture is covered by dropcloths, making nonsensical, amorphous shapes. It still clings to the past, like any Gothic setting should. This picture is hardly the joyful homecoming of two newlyweds. Hesitant to look upon the scene she has tried to forget for so many years, she asks Gregory to cross the room and “light the gas.” [Fig. 2.1]

It illuminates a portrait and Alice’s spirit is awoken - she is at once absent and present. The house, and Paula’s memories, are alive once again. But Alice’s absence is very present to her

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<sup>12</sup> Susan Hayward, *Cinema Studies: The Key Concepts*, 3rd ed., (London: Routledge, 2006), 404.

niece.

It is significant that the house on Thornton Square is already fitted with gas and fixtures. This means that it had been installed during Alice Alquist's tenancy. It gives the audience another clue into Alice's story. She was wealthy and concerned with being modern and independent. The fact that she already had the most modern conveniences underscores her forward-thinking nature. It is this very nature that will torment, and ultimately free Paula, just as the gaslight does, and Paula will fulfill the role of the new Gothic heroine.



Fig 2.1. *Opening the house*

It is significant that gaslight serves as a motif for the story, appearing as a clue, a warning and a theme throughout. It is a modern representation of fire that exists in *Jane Eyre* and *Rebecca*. Bertha Mason Rochester attempts, on numerous occasions, to burn the house down. She runs about the halls, with a candle, shrieking and setting things alight. She eventually succeeds, and Mr. Rochester is blinded while trying to save her from the burning building. In *Rebecca*, when it becomes clear that Mrs. Danvers is not going to succeed in driving the new Mrs. DeWinter away, she sets her mistress's Manderley on fire. In the book, Maxim deWinter is severely injured while trying to rescue his housekeeper from the fire (just as Mr. Rochester is blinded

<sup>13</sup> [Fig. 2.1] *Gaslight*. 18:35

while trying to rescue Bertha from the fire). In the film, the couple watches while Mrs. Danvers settles into Rebecca's room and is engulfed by the flames. [Fig. 2.2]

Fire destroys their Thornfield Hall and Manderley but it also ensures that they can never go back to that same space. There is a chance for a new start, a rising from the ashes, so to speak.



Fig. 2.2. Mrs. Danvers returns to her beloved Rebecca in death.

In *Gaslight*, the flame mirrors not only Paula's sanity and self-assuredness, it also represents the key to her freedom. Once she can decipher what the dimming of the gas means, she will be able to escape its clutches and succeed as the new Gothic heroine.

Although Paula wants to venture out into the community and the fresh air, her insecurities and fear of embarrassing herself and incurring Gregory's anger prevent her from leaving her passive, gaslit, house arrest. While her body may be kept in the house, her spirit still wishes to escape and join the living (the sane). This threatens Gregory, for he risks losing one of his main tools of control if she leaves the house. To render her afraid of both the outside world and its society to a more severe extent, Gregory brings the outside *inside*, into their world, and does so in the form of a new maid. He brings on Nancy (Angela Lansbury), a cheeky, irreverent housekeeper and ladies maid. Nancy is the Mrs. Danvers of *Gaslight*. She is not nearly so diabolical, but she is a frightening presence nonetheless. Her disposition is entirely opposite of Paula's. She seems to be unaware of societal norms, or at least unaware that she is breaking

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<sup>14</sup> [Fig. 2.2] *Rebecca*. 1940.

them. Gregory chastens her for the clothing she wears and is constantly correcting her manner of address. Yet he also teases her in a forgiving way. It is the sort (nearly) of interaction one should have with his wife. [Fig. 2.3] They joke, flirt and comment on the household as if they were the owners of it. They play on the same team, and Paula is their main opponent.



*Fig. 2.3. They conspire against her.*

While Nancy's motives are far less deadly than Gregory, she does her part to torture her mistress. She delights in taking Gregory's side in any incident where Paula's sanity is called into question. She even ad-libs on occasion. After Paula admits that she is "beginning to not trust her memory at all," Nancy is helping her get into bed. Paula reminds her to put some extra coal on the fire and, with a hint of mischief, says, "You already told me that, mum." With a smirk she retreats while Paula tries to remember. It is this scene too when Paula first notices the gaslight get dim – which Nancy also denies noticing. She is like Mrs. Danvers, always undermining her mistress for her own selfish gain.

Nancy's character sits outside the proper and prim housekeeper type. While maintaining a thin veneer of politeness, there is always an undercurrent of insubordination. Thus it makes it doubly difficult for Paula to deal with her. She knows how to be a fair mistress to a usual servant. She understands how the partnership works. When Nancy supplants that comfortable relationship, she has a difficult time dealing with it. Paula must determine how to maintain her sanity, her position in the home and her life, despite Nancy's influence. As a Gothic heroine her

<sup>15</sup> [Fig. 2.3.] *Gaslight*. 57:27



challenge is to find her way through the maze to the truth.

She is made to sit by while Nancy and her husband have a conversation inappropriate for a master and employee, and abnormal based on their social situations. She can say nothing in front of Nancy, and when she tries to confront Gregory about it, he merely twists her words — as usual. [Fig. 2.4]



Fig. 2.4. Domination reversal

Gas, and lighting of it, becomes a central figure in the tension between Gregory, Paula and Nancy. Nancy is a maid hired by Gregory without Paula's input whatsoever. He has upended the usual societal role by running the household, rather than allowing his wife to. Their triangle is displayed most effectively in a scene that is the first time Gregory embarrasses Paula in front

<sup>16</sup> [Fig. 2.4.] Top, *Rebecca*, 1940. Bottom, *Gaslight* 38.28

of anyone. She is already on edge, literally tiptoeing around the parlor while Gregory dozes on the sofa. It is daytime but all of the drapes are pulled. The room is decidedly Victorian, cluttered with knickknacks, furniture, and busy patterns. It is stifling and cramped. Yet Paula is chilled. She starts toward the fireplace to put on some more coal, but he wakes up and insists she call the maid to do it. By treating her like a helpless child, he is enforcing her self-doubt. When Nancy enters to stoke the fire, she and Gregory engage in a flirtatious exchange, literally behind Paula's back — during which he asks Nancy to light the gas as well. Gregory even suggests that Nancy share her beauty tips with Paula.

Mortified, she sits there while the two of them banter, pretending to ignore the inappropriate and hurtful comments. They treat her presence as absence. The use of the deep focus allows the viewer to clearly see each character's emotion and their position in terms of the household hierarchy. It also makes the viewer feel like an uncomfortable spectator — as if they were invited to a dinner party but the hosts were fighting. It enhances the tension and it marks a turning point in Gregory's tactics. He is now including others on his slow torture of Paula. [Fig. 2.5]



*Fig 2.5. Cross-class humiliation*

After a scene in which the extreme tension is released, or as Cassell's would call it, "the escape of effluvia,"<sup>18</sup> (Gregory promises to take Paula out, he sits at the piano and she dances around the room), he once again destroys her. He has brought her up as high as possible so that the fall will

<sup>17</sup> [Fig. 2.5] *Gaslight*. 48:23

<sup>18</sup> Cassells Household Guide, New and Revised Edition, <http://www.victorianlondon.org/cassells/cassells-8.htm>

be even more painful. Following this episode of the missing picture, Gregory insists that Paula is not well enough to go out now and brings her to her room. He calls to her as if she were a petulant child. They ascend the staircase to the landing, which is dark. Gregory enters a dark room and Paula looks on, wild-eyed. She finally yells that she is afraid of this house. Then Gregory lights the gas in her room and she yells to his shadow. His figure has become all the more menacing in this shot. He is not visible, or audible, but the shadow he casts, via the gaslight, is powerful, frightening and inescapable. [Fig. 2.6]

She fears so many things here. She is afraid of being left alone with her thoughts, her imagination, which seems to be heading out of control. She is afraid of disappointing or incurring the wrath of Gregory. She fears that she really is going mad and will soon be relegated to live in her room, upstairs, where she won't bother anyone.



Fig 2.6. Controlled by shadows

In this way, she fears becoming Bertha Mason Rochester — a mad and useless figure, locked in the attic, who is feared and hated by husband and household, and causes wild destruction when

<sup>19</sup> [Fig. 2.6.] *Gaslight*. From top left, 1:00:02, 1:00:06, 1:00:20, 1:00:24

she manages to escape her confinement. Going up to her room doesn't make her well; it makes her worse. When this gaslit room dims, so does her sanity; for that is when the steps begin treading above her, and the claustrophobia sets in.

In one overhead shot, the gas chandelier wraps its tentacles around her helpless figure, while a candle, new and unlit, sits on her bedside table. She is caught. This demon hovers above her, affecting how she "sees" things. The gaslight makes things murky for her, not clearer, despite its status as a modern convenience. As its light wavers and fades, so too does her sanity — and her confidence. [Fig. 2.7] Modernity, and sanity, are left in the dark.



Fig. 2.7. *The gaslight dims*

Her fear of social embarrassment is so strong that she is willing to sequester herself, to give up basic pleasures of life, in order to maintain her reputation as an upstanding female in the Victorian era. She is also tormented by the ghosts of her past. Her mother died when she was a baby, so she was raised by a maiden aunt. Her aunt, Alice Alquist, was a famed opera singer, worthy of great respect. However, it was a tenuous societal acceptance. As Fletcher writes in his article *Primal Scenes and the female gothic*, "...the house [inherited by Paula] is a site of social, sexual and domestic economy unregulated by patriarchal law in any obvious sense."<sup>21</sup> Alice was a woman who defied convention, never married, traveled the world and made her own fortune. She sang for tsars and owned property. She was wealthy and independent — nearly unheard of in the Victorian era. Besmirching the family name, one that is already whispered in the neighborhood

<sup>20</sup> [Fig. 2.7.] *Gaslight*. 1:03:11

<sup>21</sup> John Fletcher, "Primal Scenes and the Female Gothic," *Screen* 35:4 (Winter 1995): 355.

because of the tragedy, would only serve to further embarrass Paula's station. The fine home in a fashionable part of town would be sneered upon, rather than mourned. Instead, she decides to believe in Gregory and the possibility of a happy homelife here. Her determination to do so makes her all the more vulnerable to Gregory's scheme.

Gregory also plants seeds of uncertainty in Paula's mind about her inherited insanity. Though she was too young to remember, she has been told that Paula's aunt was mad. Not only does this serve the purpose of belittling Paula, it also gives her an excuse, as was the Victorian standard for madness. It allows her to assign a reason to her bizarre feelings, and thus makes it easier to fall into the trap he has set. It also acts as a foothold for the audience of 1944 US. It reflects female anxiety about returning to a household role and the man's desire to have a societal purpose.

The slow dissolution of sanity is represented filmically through the use of suture. The film's editing uses this technique to "sew" the audience into the story and thus make it more real. While it is told in the third person, we are closely aligned with Paula. As her incidents increase, and we are given little introductory information, we begin to wonder if she really is mad. The narrative also skips over incidents that are only referred to later. Did we, the audience, miss something? Are we, the audience, going insane? The use of both absence/presence and suture are filmic devices that create suspense and sympathy — key elements for a strong Gothic tale. They are also specific to film, and thus allow the Gothic genre to further evolve through another medium.

### Upending Social Constraints

As Paula's husband, Gregory, uses subtle and incremental techniques in order to gaslight her, he also uses her proper upbringing against her. She fears impropriety as much as she does becoming insane. Like Jane Eyre, she is constantly vacillating between her own independence and her need for societal normalcy. Her lack of a consistent, "normal" childhood is no doubt the culprit of that. Yet it is also what granted her an adventurous spirit and a strong mind. In order

to disassemble this, Gregory must apply to her need for affection and her desire to placate. Like a woman in the postwar era, she is stuck between tradition and the modern. She is caught between her own tendencies and what is expected of her, much like an American woman from the homefront and a postwar suburbia. And Gregory's desperate play for control reflects the postwar social anxieties, as I will show in my analysis of *Gaslight*.

At the outset their courtship is already a bit risqué for the Victorians. Merely weeks after meeting, they have married. He has allowed her to feel legitimized in her affections, but he has also gained complete control over the assets she brings to the table. His first step to undo her sanity is to convince her to return to what she calls "that house of horror." He suggests, Iago-like, that someday he would love to live in London, "on a lovely little square." He pretends to know nothing about her past or the property. She resists for a moment, then insists that he shall have his house on a square. To confirm his nonchalance about the situation he even tries to talk her out of the idea, which only makes her more confident, and even serves to make her feel as though this were her decision. She is willing to subdue her own fears in order to please him and encouraged by her own desire to be strong. As he hugs her, the camera sees both facial expressions. Paula's pleased expression is content and hopeful; Gregory's chameleonic face is twisted in a conniving sneer. [Fig. 2.8] This camera angle gives the audience more information than Paula and thus pulls us, the audience into the story. This suture increases the tension and sets up a Gothic antagonist.



Fig 2.8. *Differing dreams*

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<sup>22</sup> [Fig. 2.8.] *Gaslight*. 15:09

A short time after they have settled into their new place, the two decide to go to the Tower of London to see the Crown Jewels. While there, Gregory notices a man (played by Joseph Cotten, but unknown to the audience at this point) and steers Paula away as best he can — but not before they make eye contact. The man tips his hat politely and she gives a slight head nod in acknowledgment. The audience knows that it was Gregory the man was looking at, but Paula is unaware. Gregory then turns her simple gesture into an underhanded plot against him. He accuses her of either knowing him, or being in the habit of nodding to strange men. Neither is acceptable to him — she can't win. He has again used her desire to be proper in society against her.

Another scene of Gregory's dreadful dealings mirrors *Rebecca*. The second Mrs. DeWinter is desperate to please her husband Max and dons a dress Mrs. Danvers has suggested. She makes a grand entrance on the stairs, only to be exiled from the room in great embarrassment. She never enjoys the party.

Paula does something similar to attempt to regain her identity, and just as in *Rebecca*, we the audience are behind Paula, willing her to succeed against male tyranny. The audience has once again been sutured into the story.

As Paula descends the stairs in a beautiful dress she matter-of-factly informs Gregory she is going out and that she “must get out of this house.” It is the night of Lady Dalroy's party and is reputed to be quite an occasion. Gregory assumes his explanation that he can't go with her will be enough to keep her at home, but to his surprise, she calls his bluff. Angry, he goes upstairs to change and determines to use this public appearance as an opportunity to further his plan. She gets out of the house but her freedom is short-lived.

The setting for this concert is quite modern and lovely. A light, airy conservatory-style room, with high ceilings of painted wrought iron and shining glass. Everything is white. Society sparkles. Ladies flaunt wonderful dresses and breathtaking jewels. Men wear tailored jackets and smart gloves. It is great contrast to the heavy, damask, upholstered home on Thornton Square. For once, Paula actually looks pleased, contented. She is enraptured by the lithe music,



while Gregory's mind wanders, full of frustration and jealousy.



*Fig. 2.9. Gregory looks on in jealousy at her happiness.*

He plots to undermine her. [Fig. 2.9] He sees Cameron, the man from the Tower of London, (Joseph Cotten) and knows he has to make his move. Once again playing on her doubts in her own kleptomania and forgetfulness, he feigns losing his watch, only to find it in her bag. Paula desperately tries to maintain her composure in the formal setting, but because of all of Gregory's groundwork, she is already in a fragile state. She cries out, disturbs the concert and he insists on taking Paula home. Her outburst is the pinnacle of disruptive and unacceptable behavior for this setting. He has accomplished a few things towards his end. He has succeeding in undermining her confidence yet again, but he has also managed to show her weakness in public. Now he has other witnesses to her madness, and she is more mortified than ever. She will be too embarrassed to seek out help from anyone who was present for the concert and her interruption of it.

In these slow, progressive ways, Gregory picks away at her sanity. He questions her ability to remember. He calls into questions her rationality, and eventually her honesty. These things that she has held dear are being called into question by someone she loves and who loves her (she thinks). Her nature is so good that she would rather doubt herself than someone else, even if it comes at the cost of losing herself.

The climax of the film takes place, of course, in the attic of the home on Thornton Square.

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<sup>23</sup> [Fig. 2.9.] *Gaslight*. 1.12.24



Determined to discover the source of the sounds that terrorize her, she confronts the disturbances of her sanity. She becomes the New Madwoman in the Attic, surrounded by vestiges of her past -- literally. [Fig. 2.10]



*Fig 2.10. Madness in the attic*

Gregory is discovered by Paula and Cameron, going through Alice's things, throwing pieces aside with no regard for their rightful owner or the memories they hold. Once caught, Gregory is tied to a chair by Cameron, and Paula begins to give him a bit of his own back. She plays his game and feigns madness. For a brief moment the audience fears that she is once again under his spell and we will her to escape. This suture is vitally important for a tense, dramatic scene. The audience has been drawn in and is desperate for Paula to prevail, due to the suture that has occurred throughout the film.



*Fig. 2.11. She wields her power*

<sup>24</sup> [Fig. 2.10.] *Gaslight*. 1.47.45

<sup>25</sup> [Fig. 2.11.] *Gaslight*. 1.50.05

Gregory is no longer a physical threat but he is convinced he can still manipulate her, and he attempts to get her to cut open his ropes. She wields a knife over him, then starts speaking nonsense about there being no knife. [Fig. 2.11] She brings Gregory to the brink of fear, then reveals she isn't mad, and she isn't under his spell anymore. She is strong, forceful and sure of herself. Through her own efforts, she has managed to free herself from his clutches.



Fig. 2.12. *Is there a knife?*

She has emasculated him. Free of his torture and control, the film ends with her on the roof of her home, having broken through the dust of the attic. She is the master of her domain. [Fig. 2.12]

### *Gaslight* in Postwar America

In the days toward the end of World War II, when *Gaslight* was released, the returning soldiers would have been greeted by women who had made it on their own. They had gained a sense of independence, not out of spite, but of necessity. For the country to support the efforts of the front, women had to assume new roles both economically and psychologically. Even for the most understanding of men, this would have been a jarring shift. Diane Waldman notes in “At Last I Can Tell It to Someone”:

This conflict was to be exacerbated in the rest of the decade, as women joined or gained access to higher-paying positions within the labor market during the war and then were re-routed back to

<sup>26</sup> [Fig. 2.12.] *Gaslight*. 1.50.14

the home after the Armistice. It is this situation — the role redefinition, frustration and confusion — which forms the background set for the Gothic romance films of the 40s. Add to this the rash of hasty pre-war marriages (and the subsequent all-time high divorce rate of 1946), the increase in early marriages in the 40s, and the process of wartime separation and reunion, factors which gave the “marrying a stranger” motif of the Gothics a specific historical resonance.<sup>27</sup>

The film *Gaslight* reflects these postwar uncertainties even within its Victorian setting. Survival, happiness, sanity, duty and self-possession were all at odds. Decades later, this upheaval of gender roles is seen as empowering and laudable, but it was not a long-lived or permanent change for many women. Kimble and Olsen write about the imagery of Rosie the Riveter and note:

D’Ann Campbell summarized a revisionist view of this legend when she confirmed that “the general consensus” among historians “is that on the home front women temporarily assumed new roles but that no permanent or radical transformation took place.” “This revisionist critique” and others like it, wrote Deborah Montgomerie, “has enriched our understanding of women’s contribution to war and corrected misconceptions about the extent of the wartime challenge to the sexual division of labour.” Such critiques, she concluded, “suggest considerable continuity between women’s pre- and postwar employment, and between pre- and postwar definitions of femininity.”<sup>28</sup>

For the women, some of whom were now expected to return to their prewar roles, it would have been at the very least confusing and at the worst impossible. Even for those willing or eager to return to housewifery, it would signify a stark transition. This national psychological shift is mirrored in *Gaslight*. Paula is transformed from a free-spirited, capable woman into a dependent, weakened woman with crumbling facade of sanity. Gregory, with the help of Victorian society, represents the overarching expectations of a postwar society. He attempts to gain control over Paula - a microcosm for postwar America. Even if the female viewer didn’t have her own dastardly husband, she could certainly sympathize with the feeling of having personal will and

<sup>27</sup> Diane Waldman, “At last I can tell it to someone!: Feminine Point of View and Subjectivity in the Gothic Romance Film of the 1940s”, *Cinema Journal* 23:2 (Winter 1983): 30-31

<sup>28</sup> James J. Kimble and Lester C. Olson, “Visual Rhetoric Representing Rosie the Riveter: Myth and Misconception in J. Howard Miller’s “We Can Do it!” Poster,” *Rhetoric & Public Affairs*, (Winter 2006): 535

spirit taken away from her. Gregory is not content with just robbing her. In fact, he could just break into the attic, steal Alice's hidden jewels and leave. Instead, his arrogance determines he must supplant himself as her master as well. He could not control Alice Alquist, so he killed her. Now he must find a way to control Paula. But as the modern American woman on the homefront must, Paula finds a way to defend her sanity, her home and her freedom, even if it is against the man she should be able to trust. Those on the homefront in France will not be so fortunate.

### PART III

#### *Les Diaboliques* and the French Modern Gothic

By 1955, the war had been over for ten years. But France, one of the main battlegrounds, struggled to recovery its identity, its economics and its psychological footing. Whatever difficulties Americans on the homefront, and returning GIs faced, they were even more traumatic for the French. As a nation, they reeled from the embarrassment of their Vichy government's lack of leadership. Personally, they faced down the destruction of their homes, fear of battles, and an occupation. France's economy, infrastructure and morale suffered - not to mention that France had barely begun to heal from the previous war fought on their soil. Though these things were slowly being restored, the scars of war were still visible.

In fact, psychological scarring started as Nazi encroachment began and war became inevitable, according to Robin Bates:

As the turbulent 1930s highlighted male weakness, male-female relations felt the strain. Since men's strength has traditionally been defined by their ability to take decisive action and to protect women, and since women's strength has traditionally been defined by their ability to inspire and support men, men and women alike felt the weight of failure.<sup>29</sup>

The male leadership could not protect France or its citizens from a Nazi takeover. This failure, the surrender of France to fascist occupiers, without so much as a whisper of a fight, was a psychological wound that still ached in 1955. Culture, in particular, cinema reflected this

<sup>29</sup> Robin Bates. "Audiences on the Verge of a Fascist Breakdown: Male Anxieties and Late 1930s French Film," *Cinema Journal*, (Spring, 1997): 27.

insecurity and this embarrassment.

During the war, films were not imported from other countries. This led to a tidal wave of previously unseen Hollywood films coming into the country, despite France's efforts to maintain a national film identity and canon. As Jarvie notes, "In France, the rapid reopening of movie theaters was seen by the Americans as a return to normality, a way of pacifying the newly liberated populations and forestalling French government plans."<sup>30</sup> French audiences were enamored with what they saw. Films like *Jane Eyre*, *Rebecca*, the films of Val Lewton, as well as *Gaslight*, flooded French cinemas and inspired them to tell their own version of the New Madwoman in the Attic.

It was not only the films that captured the imagination of a ravaged postwar Europe. The sleek modern style emerging in America by the mid-1950s was enviable, yet still out of reach for many middle class French. There was a desire to reset, begin with a clean slate. Just like Jane Eyre who seeks a new life, free of her past and Paula who fulfills modern ideals and wishes to start again in her old home, France looked to a culture who succeeded in protecting itself and its identity. Ross writes, "[The French woman's] distant horizon of excellence, was the American woman who washed her hair every day. Modernity was measured against American standards; materials imported from America-stainless steel, Formica, and plastic-were valued both for their connotation of modernity and because they were easy to clean."<sup>31</sup> The juxtaposition of this ideal with the reality of postwar France -- dilapidated buildings, remote settings, scarce contentment - - made for fertile Gothic storytelling. *Les Diaboliques* fulfills all of the Gothic requirements, what would no doubt be considered "to achieve comparable effects of apprehension and claustrophobia ... with more modern settings,"<sup>32</sup> and pushes the genre even further to meet the psychological needs of its audience.

The setting, always important in a Gothic story, certainly fits the bill. The school building appears to be a converted French villa or manor. It has clearly seen better days. Not only does it not seem to evoke its former glory, it also has become a something far less glamorous than it

<sup>30</sup> Ian Jarvie, "The Postwar Economic Foreign Policy of the American Film Industry: Europe 1945-1950," *Film History*, (1990): 279.

<sup>31</sup> Kristin Ross, "Starting Afresh: Hygiene and Modernization in Postwar France," *October*, (Winter, 1994): 36.

<sup>32</sup> *The Oxford Companion to English Literature*. 6th ed., s.v. "Gothic Fiction."

was intended. A place that once housed wealthy, politically important families in luxury is now a holding pen for children that no one wants to deal with and is run by disgruntled, selfish adults. Fine parlors and dining halls are now chalk-dusted classrooms and slop houses.

The war has left its mark as well. The facade's plaster is crumbling and mottled. The shutters need repainting and straightening. There are no grounds to speak of — certainly not the well-tended, formal gardens of the previous tenants. And a pool, which will figure greatly in the plot, sits stagnant and algae-covered. With an unused, rickety slide, it mocks the present with memories of a carefree and luxurious past. All of these small details point to a slowly crumbling once glorious past and are a microcosm for France's own struggles. When survival itself was unsure, the pleasures of life were set aside for more practical needs. Supplies supported the war effort or basic needs for life, not for superficial upkeep. And while these efforts are commendable, they make an already depressing existence feel even more like a prison.

After classes, everyone is still trapped in this boarding school compound. A side wing, in an upper floor upstairs houses the discontent. Christina's bedroom, the only main room upstairs ever seen in the film, has prison-bar-like slats separating it from the hallway — signifying her figurative imprisonment both by her failing health and her bullying husband. Interestingly, her bedroom is rather nicely furnished. She has spent a bit of her money to make herself comfortable in the figurative attic. It is in this setting that a modern Jane Eyre *partners* with her rival to escape Mr. Rochester's violent spells and disdainful treatment.

Based on a novel by Pierre Coileau, published in 1952, Henri Clouzot brought the thriller to the screen in 1955. It presents itself with a veneer of lowbrow trashiness, but upon closer inspection, it has many levels. It centers on a boarding school owned and run by Christina (Vera Clouzot), a fragile heiress, and her despicable husband Michel (Paul Meurisse). Christina is tormented by her husband, who belittles her at every turn. She is meek, kind and almost childlike in her innocence. She wears her hair in pigtails and dresses in simple, domestic frocks. Her demeanor is in stark contrast to her husband's mistress and fellow teacher, Nicole (Simone Signoret). She has cropped hair, a tight black skirt, Hepburn sunglasses and a cigarette. She is a modern woman. Yet for all her modernness, she is still at the mercy of her lover. With Michel

already established as a tyrannical figure, it is hardly surprising to see her with a bruise under her eye. She has allowed herself to be victimized by a stronger personality. She has allowed her fear and paranoia of Michel to contribute to her (in)sanity. Ross writes:

To be interested in paranoia was to bring another kind of patient and another kind of woman to the forefront women who suffered from what Lacan called “social tensions, women for whom a role in society was a question, women who had lived at the same time as the early twentieth-century feminist and anarchist movements, women turned, as much as they were able, toward the future. Paranoia retained the figure of the woman as emblem of modernity but changed her characteristic gestures: from catatonia to crime, from paralysis to act.<sup>33</sup>

These two women represent two versions of a French postwar woman stuck in a seemingly impossible position. It is this desperation that leads them to their actions.

Also striking is the women’s nonchalance about each other. In fact, defying social convention, they are friends. They commiserate as victims of the same torturer. For Michel it is all about control. He wields a strict outlook over the school, its employees, the students and his women. He has Christina, his wife, accepting her miserable lot in life because he is so controlling. He has her convinced that she can amount to nothing without him and it is only through his benevolence that she survives, when in fact the opposite is true.

Setting up the absence / presence in this film, the audience sees *evidence* of his control over Nicole when she shows her black eye to Christina. It is important that the audience never sees his dominance over Nicole *in action*, as will become clear.

Early in the film, in a scene at the dinner table Michel sits with his wife, mistress and other teachers at the school. In it, the audience sees his unfair, mean and controlling behavior. It also exemplifies some of the social contexts of France in 1955. He meters out the wine with an iron fist, much like a Victorian Scrooge paying his humble accountants. He suspiciously eyes the teacher who says he has only had one glass of wine so far. And it is Michel who pours it from the bottle so as to prevent an extra dram. His strict management of a bottle of wine seems excessive, but Michel has survived war shortages. More importantly, he is the interlocutor for enjoyment,

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<sup>33</sup> Kristin Ross, “Schoolteachers, Maids and Other Paranoid Histories,” *Tale French Studies*, No 91, Genet: In the Language of the Enemy (1997): 20.

pleasure. In order for anyone to enjoy anything, they must first go through him. Michel's assertion of power is an (over)reaction to French male embarrassment.

Christina is reluctant to eat the ill-making meal in front of her. The audience has seen the cook and the cafeteria worker both turn up their noses at the stinking food. Not only does he force her to remain at the table, he insists upon her eating the fish on her plate. She explains, "I am not hungry," but Michel responds by throwing two large dollops on her plate. At the same time, Michel makes an excuse for himself and eats from another plate entirely. The rules do not apply to him, even his own rules. She attempts one bite, but spits it out, once again insisting that she is not hungry. He becomes irate, watching her like a parent watching a child, telling her to "Swallow!". Nicole looks on and shakes her head. The students stop their carousing and watch also — to see who will win the battle of the stinking fish. Everything has stopped. Christina's face is full of fear, embarrassment. To add to this insult, Michel blames *her* for the awkward situation in the room. Nicole is the only one to make a comment about his behavior - "Some things are hard to swallow. I'm not talking about the fish."<sup>34</sup> Nicole manages to lay outside of social constraint. As for Michel, he is a quintessential abuser. He strips down Christina's self-worth and begins to believe that she is indeed worthless — and thus begins the slow descent into madness.

### Social Class Reversal

After the students are kicked out of the dining hall, Christina begins to show some backbone. It seems it is the mistreatment of the students that angers her most. It is also here that we learn that it is Christina's money that pays the staff and keeps the school afloat. Reminding him of this only encourages Michel to admit he would just as soon have her dead, just as Gregory would Paula.

The revelations in this scene clearly point to the early makings of a modern Gothic adaptation. It fulfills the "characteristic theme [of] the stranglehold of the 'dark' ages of oppression upon the 'enlightened' modern era"<sup>35</sup>, of the remnants of Vichy France clinging to a new France. Michel

<sup>34</sup> *Diaboliques*. Dir. H.G Clouzot. 1954. Criterion.

<sup>35</sup> *The Oxford Companion to English Literature*. 6th ed., s.v. "Gothic Fiction."



is a domineering, crass male figure — like Mr. Rochester or Gregory. He finds self-assurance in belittling others. Christina is a physically and psychologically weakened female. She is bullied constantly by Michel and barely has the strength to maintain her own self, let alone fight back against his attacks. Her focus is survival — one day at a time — something that has not changed since the war. Additionally, Michel uses social embarrassment to keep Christina in check, just as Gregory does with Paula. By mocking her in public, in front of her peers, Michel asserts his dominance even further. He shows her, and her peers, that he can make things even worse by exposing her weaknesses. This social anxiety serves to further undermine her weakened state. As Michel does this, he usurps her social standing as well. Like Gregory, he reverses his role in the relationship in order to dominate Paula and Christina even further. Paula is the true owner of the lovely house on Thornton Square, and all of Alice Alquist's treasures. Christina is the owner of the school and the beneficiary of a sizable inheritance. Michel has no respect for this situation, which should make *him* subordinate to *her*. Instead, he scoffs at her when she reminds him of it. In both films, the object is some sort of monetary gain for the male at the expense of the female. In this way, these modern Gothics differ from their predecessors. Rochester does not seek to destroy Jane or Bertha. His indecision and lack of courage do cost Jane and Bertha contentment and safety, but the intent is not malicious. Vichy France's indecision cost the French citizenry more than just comfort and safety. And in *Les Diaboliques*, there is no romance to be saved. A postwar France is a much colder place.

### Modern Convenience Versus Entropy As A Barometer of Sanity

As *Jane Eyre* uses live flame and *Gaslight* uses gas flame, *Les Diaboliques* also employs an elemental symbol. However, in this step of the Gothic genre evolution on film it becomes water. As the gaslight comes to represent Paula's (in)sanity, water stands in for Christina's. Just like the gaslamp in the opening of *Gaslight*, *Les Diaboliques* opens on a close-up shot of water. [Fig. 3.1] Although the audience does not yet know the significance, this is a shot of the surface of the stagnant pool. William Blake, one of the fathers of Romantic poetics (and by extension the

Gothic), wrote: “Expect poison from standing water.”<sup>36</sup> This idea of stillness being detrimental is very important to the Romantic and Gothic writers. Stagnancy begets no new ideas, and worse, allows rot and degradation to take hold. In this vein, *Jane Eyre* would never have achieved her quest and Paula would have remained a victim had they not pushed the boundaries of convention.

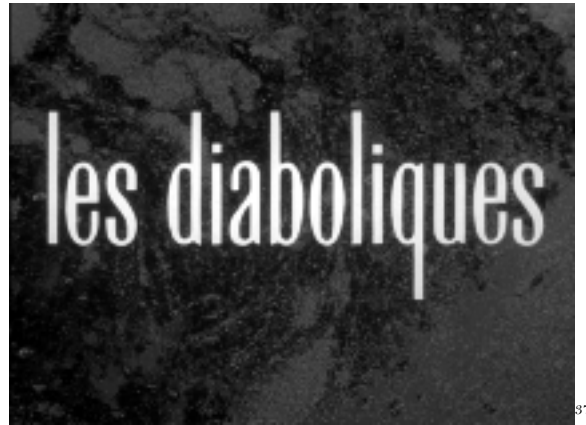


Fig. 3.1. Opening Titles

They broke free of the idle, unchanging standards and expectations of their society. And though dangerous, they were better for it.

Entropy is one thing; self-inflicted wasting away is quite another. In these Gothic stories, the female heroine simply must ask questions, doubt the answers and seek the truth. Stagnancy is not better than action in these stories. A movement towards the modern, rather than grasping at the failing past, is the goal and is to be commended. The Gothic highlights the difficulties when these two mentalities clash. While the gaslight *should* illuminate Paula’s life, it only serves to create darker shadows. An abundance of water *should* indicate life and freshness, but in *Les Diaboliques* it is quite the opposite. Water is sinister, poisonous and deadly. An attempt to control entropy fails yet again, only enhancing the Gothic aspects of the story.

### A Ritual Cleansing

Water, rather than fire, becomes the elemental symbol in *Les Diaboliques*, further evolving the genre. For the French following the war, there was a desire to cleanse themselves (literally and

<sup>36</sup> William Blake, “Marriage of Heaven and Hell,” *English Romantic Writers*, 2nd Edition, ed. David Perkins (Fort Worth: Harcourt Brace, 1995), 106.

<sup>37</sup> [Fig 3.1.] Opening shot of *Les Diaboliques*.

figuratively) from those trying times. As Kristin Ross notes in her article *Starting Afresh: Hygiene and Modernization in Postwar France*, “France was being regenerated, it was being washed of all the stains left behind by four years of Occupation.’ Certainly the immediate postwar purges (called *epurations* or “purifications”) and attempts to rid the nation of the traces of German occupation and Petainiste compromise and complicity set the tone for a new emphasis on French national purity.”<sup>38</sup> And yet despite this desire to slough off the old ways and embrace the new, there was a resistance to “cleaning house.” If nothing else, the war had taught a people how to reuse, save and make do. Desperation, fear and necessity trained them. To throw that aside, in a still struggling economy, was difficult, if not impossible. In *Les Diaboliques* one sees constant evidence of this ambivalence.

In all of this, it is important to remember that in 1955 France, modern plumbing and clean water were appreciated, but at a premium. Women’s magazines of the time encouraged cleanliness.

Ross writes:

One can gain access to the future without loss; nothing is left behind, nothing is wasted. The brief newsreel narration does much to allay the anxieties of modernization. A wonderful example of Lefebvre's discourse of the "domesticated sublime" ("where one speaks familiarly of the sublime and of the familiar with the tone of the sublime"), the narration brings God into the household, and equates dreams and ideals with bathrooms and appliances.<sup>39</sup>

These women of postwar France were being urged to embrace a new way of thinking, yet within the confines of domesticity. Throughout the film, this idea of water, cleanliness, and modern plumbing is explored. It is used to signify its opposites - stagnancy, death, and obfuscation. In this way, absence / presence is used again as a mode of tension in the Gothic storytelling. Additionally, as the attic in *Jane Eyre* is the place where the past is sent to be forgotten or hidden, the attic in *Les Diaboliques* is the storehouse of items that are useful. The frugality of postwar France requires it. And yet, it still manages to make these household items instruments of subjugation and even murder.

The washroom, and the bath in particular, are instrumental in the film, as well as for the film’s

<sup>38</sup> Ross, “Starting Afresh,”: 24

<sup>39</sup> Ross, “Starting Afresh,”: 34

audience. Here Ross writes about the feelings and ideas around bathing in postwar France as cited in a novel of the time, *The Age of Nylon* by Triolet:

The chapter that recounts her first bath is entitled "The Baptismal Font of Modern Comfort," and, as an evocation of the domesticated sublime, is worth quoting at some length: 'When Martine saw the bathtub for the first time and Cecile told her to soak herself in all that water, she was overcome by an emotion that had something sacred about it, as though she were about to be baptized.... Modern comfort happened to her all in one fell swoop, with running water, gas heating, electricity... . She never became completely used to it when Mama Donzert said to her: "Go take your bath" . . . she felt a delicious little thrill. ... The tile of the bathtub was smooth, smooth, the water was gentle, gentle, the bar of soap, all new, produced pearly suds... a pink and sky-blue sponge. ...The milky light-bulb lit up every innermost recess of the bathroom, and Martine scrubbed every innermost recess of her body with soap, pumice-stone, brushes, sponges, scissors.'<sup>40</sup>

This popular, contemporary novel elucidates the desire for modernity. Yet in *Les Diaboliques*, the women will commit their crime with the assistance of a bathtub and running water, a symbol of modern life, and what should be used to cleanse, not to commit a sin.

### Water and *Les Diaboliques*

In the opening moments, a rude man (who turns out to be Michel) brings a delivery truck through the imposing front gates. As he does, he crosses a small stream of flowing water but it is outside of the gates. Once inside, he drives through a puddle and carelessly smashes a child's paper boat. [Fig. 3.2] Some small innocence tried to stir the muddy stagnancy with a simple joy. Michel quickly stamps it out. Even something as harmless as a paper boat has to be quashed by the iron-fisted Michel. It also symbolizes the inability of life to thrive in stagnancy. The puddle cannot sustain the life of the boat or the life of a child's happiness. More is required for life to thrive. The war, and the mentality it fostered, suffocate this simple pleasure as well.

The presence of this simple toy in a disgusting puddle, and in the absence of a playing child is only the first of many absence/presence appearances that create a sense of abandonment, ambiguity and mystery. Then, as the truck approaches the building, the algae-laden pool is

<sup>40</sup> Ross, 39-40.

clearly seen. The whole place reeks of decay and poverty. It quickly becomes clear that everyone is fulfilling multiple jobs in order to keep the place running, and it still isn't enough. The pool figures shortly thereafter. It sits, waiting, in the background as the children run outside after school lets out.



*Fig. 3.2. Childhood innocence under attack*

Then, in a fade, the pool becomes central and in the foreground, while the two women sit on the steps of the unused slide. Ironically, Nicole sits knitting while Christina tosses pebbles into the pool, causing the surface to ripple. [Fig. 3.3] Water stagnates in front of them and they seek to change it. It's striking that Nicole should be engaged in some sort of mundane, household task but Christina is the one, literally, making waves. It is in this place that they determine to carry out their plot.



*Fig. 3.3. They conspire against Michel*

<sup>41</sup> [Fig. 3.2.] *Les Diaboliques*. 3:07

<sup>42</sup> [Fig. 3.3.] *Les Diaboliques*. 10:06

Christina, the innocent and Nicole, the modern carefree woman, conspire to kill Michel and water is the culprit - and the clue.

During the scene of the actual crime, water plays a prominent part. In her nervousness, Christina spills the drugged concoction on Michel and has to retrieve a wet cloth to try and clean his suit. But instead of seeing Christina over the faucet, instead we only see her *shadow* obey Michel's orders. She is absent and present, all at once. [Fig. 3.4] It marks a shift in her demeanor. Her real self, at this point, is determined to go through with the murder — her intentions made clear by clean, running water.



Fig. 3.4. *His attempt to control a shadow*

Michel's bath is nothing like the one Martine so enjoys in Triolet's *The Age of Nylon*, but it points to the French obsession with baths, tile and plumbing. The sound of loud rushing of water running through the pipes and filling the tub annoys the neighbors above. These neighbors are older and seem content with the prewar lifestyle. The husband tries to listen to his quiz show on the radio but cannot hear it. The sound of the pipes is a reminder to the audience of horrible deed being done below. The water that fills them is absent from their apartment but just knowing it is present upsets the husband.

The two women struggle to carry Michel's limp body to the now-filled bathtub. As they heft him over the lip and set him in the water, he rouses but is powerless to fight back. [Fig. 3.5] The deed is done. Water is used as an instrument of death rather than life. He is left to start rotting

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<sup>43</sup> [Fig. 3.4.] *Les Diaboliques*. 38:52

in a still tub of water. Without realizing it, the nosy neighbors too recognize this lack of life. As the couple gets ready for bed, he complains that she hasn't drained the tub yet. He comments that he won't be able to sleep knowing the noise will wake him.



*Fig. 3.5. Baptism by murder*

He says, “I can’t sleep under Niagara Falls,” (a comment that speaks of presence of American popular culture in postwar France) and determines to stay up until midnight at least. A drain that does not drain, absence / presence — yet another watery reversal from Clouzot. The tub has become another stagnant body of water with its own filmy covering - a cheap tablecloth. This use of water in conjunction with Christina’s resolve, and by extension her sanity, is about to be even more frightening.

Nicole fetches a plastic-coated tablecloth and stretches it over the bathtub. As the faucet drips during the night, it is a constant sonic reminder of the moral wrong committed, a self-inflicted Chinese water torture. Michel is now absent from their lives, but the guilt of the deed looms large. With each drip, Christina loses a piece of her already wavering sanity and sits up in bed awake all night.

Having not slept the night before, the neighbor/husband announces to his content wife that he is going to take a nap. Just as he heads for the bed, the drain plug is pulled. “Here comes the flood,” he complains, but there is not post-Diluvian forgiveness washing away of sins for the women. They still have much to accomplish in order to achieve some sort of salvation from

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<sup>44</sup> [Fig. 3.5.] *Les Diaboliques*. 45:19

Michel. The camera focuses on the last of the water draining from the tub, between Michel's waterlogged feet. [Fig. 3.6] The water is gone and Christina and Nicole must attempt to return to their lives.



*Fig. 3.6. Circling the drain*

They arrive back at the school in the dead of night and pull up alongside the algae-infested pool. Getting the basket out of the back of the truck proves an arduous task — one that is interrupted by someone who gets up to go to the bathroom in the night. It is once again the use of water and modern plumbing that threatens their plan. Finally, the sound of a flush is heard, and they exhale and continue. As Christina and Nicole turn over the basket and Michel's body tumbles into the pool, it make very little noise. The water itself looks inky black in the darkness and simply envelopes the body. They sins are once again covered by water.

Night turns into day and a shot of the pool pans up to Christina and Nicole standing in a window overlooking their crime. The same shot then pans to the right to reveal the boys at their sinks. [Fig. 3.7] Sinks and showers with clean, flowing water that erase the human grime accumulated overnight. At the same time, the boys are discussing the odd relationship of the two women and why Michel might not be back yet. The running water, clear and cold, accompanies clear and cold reasoning on their part. The content of this single shot highlights a great deal about the essence of water and how its uses can be diametrically opposed. It also serves to underscore the use of water as an eroder of sanity. The stagnant pool sits there festering, just as Christine's

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<sup>45</sup> [Fig. 3.7] *Les Diaboliques*. 47:59



conscience stews. The longer it sits, the worse the fetid out-gassing becomes and the sicker Christine becomes – just as the longer Paula lives in the house on Thornton Square she is systematically affected by the gaslight - or so she thinks.



*Fig. 3.7. A ritual cleansing*

However, once she realizes the significance of the gaslight dimming, it will become the clue that sets her free. Not so with Christina. She has become too weakened. She has a serious heart condition and it is this inherent physical weakness that makes her undoing all the easier.

The stagnant pool now becomes the focus for the the women and for the audience. The viewer has been “stitched” into women’s story so completely that their every gasp makes the audience cringe. Christina teaches English verb conjugation to her students, all the while watching the slimy water. As a groundsman approaches the pool and reaches in with a rake, Christina has the children conjugate “to find” - then falters. The man’s disturbance of the water also disturbs her. Her sanity wavers. He then pulls out only a water-soaked piece of paper and walks on. She has been given quite the scare and it seems her constitution may not be able to handle much more. As for the audience, they breathe a momentary sigh of relief.

The following scene opens on the two women and the algae-covered pool. Children are playing in the courtyard and they walk the dishelved, crumbling grounds of the Gothic setting. Insistent that Michel’s body be discovered today, Christine urges Nicole to do something definitive. Capitalizing on the boys’ desire to get their ball back, she tosses the keys to one of them to get

<sup>46</sup> [Fig. 3.7] *Les Diaboliques*. 58:14

the pole from the garage. But she purposefully misses so that the keys sink to the bottom of the pool. It will have to be drained now. The realization that her sanity will be once again assaulted puts her in a sort of trance.

As Christina waits for the groundskeeper to arrive she stares at the surface of the pool. It glints and glitters in the sunlight, yet it hides so much from view. In her short conversation with him, her determination seems sure. She knows that a new chapter in her ordeal with Michel is about to begin. She will undoubtedly face suspicion and difficult questions. But she also realizes that once his body is discovered she can begin to extricate herself from his grip. Her new life can begin. The emptying of the filthy, smelly water represents a new beginning for Christina. The presence of the dark, dingy water covers Christina's evil deeds, but the absence of it (and the presence of Michel's body) is what will set her free.

Instead, there is an unexpected turn, one that further destroys Christina's wavering sanity. The pool is empty. The absence of Michel has created a presence of madness. In the same spot on the edge of the pool, where just an hour before she declared herself to be head of the school and once again in charge of her own life, she instead sways and faints. [Fig. 3.8] The cleaned pool has not set her free; it has ensnared her further.



*Fig. 3.8. Teetering on the brink of sanity*

A doctor gives a rather unfavorable prognosis to a frightened and angry Christina. She accuses Nicole of “playing one of your word games with leaking taps and tanks that empty ... bathtubs that we fill up, swimming pools that we empty.” The water motif continues with her speech,

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<sup>47</sup> [Fig. 3.8.] *Les Diaboliques*.1:07:48

though she has yet to realize the attack being made by others on her sanity. But in another moment, the real push to destroy her begins.

A disembodied figure walks in to the bedroom where they are arguing. It is carrying a dry cleaned suit. The fact that this suit was cleaned without the use of water acts as an underscore to how the suit was last used. Wide-eyed they accept the delivery from the man who has no information about its origin other than it seems someone is posing as Michel. All the while, this entire scene has played in a room that overlooks the now empty pool. The skeletal slide is just perched and waiting for Christina's swift descent into madness.

As in the Gothic novels, Christina's determination despite these roadblocks is what exposes her to trouble. Christina has no plans to stop following this mystery, even against doctor's orders. The following two scenes also open with references to water. Christina and Nicole are flustered by what they have discovered in Paris and are about to argue about who is more responsible for the murder, but before they do, Christina is sitting at her desk paying bills. She complains, "80,000 francs to fix the shower, and it's only two years old." Later, Nicole intercepts the milk man for the newspaper who warns her to "Be careful not to get dirty. The ink is still wet." The lead story too is about water. A dead man has been found in Le Seine and the women are sure it is Michel. Flowing water may yet set them free. But frustratingly for Christina, it is not Michel. An old bloodhound of the police, Fichet (Charles Vanel) invites himself up to the school, asks questions and creates yet another layer of tension for the story - and for the women. When Fichet notices the empty pool he comments, "You dream too much about water in this house." Within minutes he too has noted the dark persistence of water.

Just as flame and gaslight are integral to the Gothic stories of *Jane Eyre*, *Rebecca*, and *Gaslight*, water becomes so in *Les Diaboliques*. As a symbol of modernity and cleansing in postwar France is it the perfect thread for the audience of the time. As displayed by Ross's article *Starting Afresh*, modernity and cleanliness were cultural obsessions in postwar France.

### Further Gothic Elements in *Les Diaboliques*

Fichet is one of the elements that brings this Gothic story into the modern era. He is a quintessential detective character but he is not of the Victorian. He has a subtle sense of humor and a nose for clues. He is more reflective of the American noir detective than a European one. The modern influence on this Gothic setting brings the story into the time in which it was set - a postwar France.

*Les Diaboliques* further resembles the Gothic in the slow unraveling of mysterious clues, and the audience's sympathy for the main female protagonist. The missing body, the dry cleaned suit, the empty pool, the student Moinet's slingshot, and the strange stories that circulate about Moinet seeing Michel are all clues to the ultimate solution of disappearance of Michel's body. As the film progresses, the audience becomes more attached to Christina, as it becomes clear that she may not survive long enough to enjoy a Michel-free life. These aspects can all be tied to the Gothic tradition. And each one serves to create the New Madwoman in the Attic in Christina. Though she is certain Michel is dead, she is continually confronted with signs that he is still alive. Her certainty is at odds with itself and affects her sanity. It also affects her weak heart until she becomes confined to her bedroom, just like Bertha Mason Rochester and Paula Alquist Anton. The final push to madness will take place in the "attic" as well.

Christina, on her death bed, is having a nightmare when she is awakened by Fichet. He is a dim hand in the darkness holding a candle and evokes the character of Bertha Mason Rochester who frightens Jane with a candle. [Fig. 3.9] But for Christina, it is fire that sets her free. She absolves herself, trying to confess what really happened but he doesn't seem to believe her. Still, it seems to allow her to sleep. That is until lights in the other wing wake her up.



Fig. 3.9. *A disembodied hand reaches for the candle*

Like Mrs. deWinter in *Rebecca* and Jane in *Jane Eyre*, she defies the orders of the male superior and seeks truth for herself, even if it is detrimental to her happiness or her very life. As in the classic Gothic, she walks a darkened hallway with numerous doors clad only in a nightgown. It is quiet. As she creeps toward a sliver of light coming from the room at the end of the hall, the camera cuts away to disembodied feet and hands opening doors and turning corners. [Fig. 3.10]

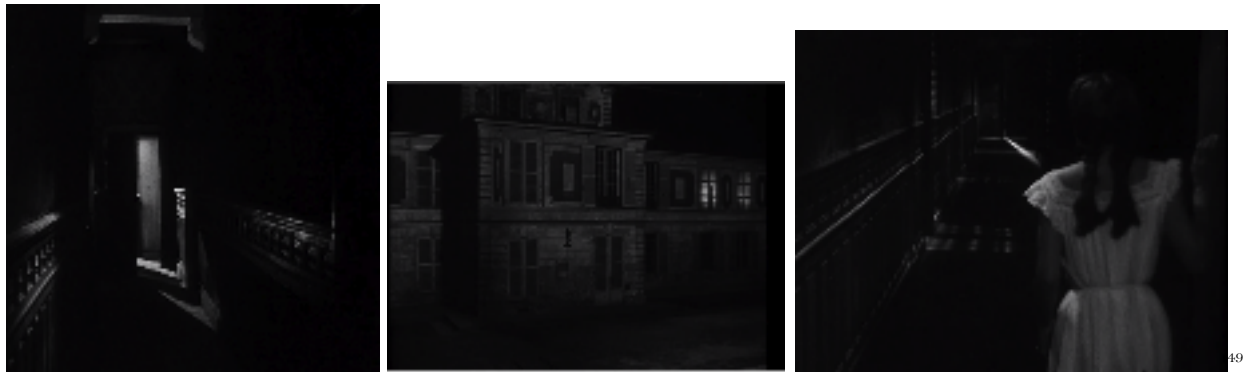


Fig. 3.10. *A Gothic hallway*

Who is tormenting her? With these close-ups and detail shots, the upper hallway starts to feel claustrophobic and discombobulated. The textures and fixtures highlight the age and crumbling nature of the school. The scene is incredibly suspenseful and all the details are heightened. The audience can feel the frantic confusion the Christina is dealing with and is sutured into the scene, making the tension ever more palpable. [Fig. 3.11]

<sup>48</sup> [Fig. 3.9] *Les Diaboliques*. 1:43:21

<sup>49</sup> [Fig. 3.10.] *Les Diaboliques*. From left to right. 1:47:59; 1:48:44; 1:50:10



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*Fig. 3.11. A Gothic realization*

On the table at the end of the hall sits Michel's typewriter, the keys of which she heard just moments before, but the room is empty. The presence of a typewriter is at odds with the absence of a human typist. The paper shows the repetitive typing of "MICHEL DELASALLE". Christina lets out a dreadful scream and runs, stumbling, back to her room.

For the last time, water will figure into the narrative. She reaches for the sink tap and splashes a little water on her face while she attempts to compose herself. But the fresh, cool water is no match for what she sees next: a filled bathtub with Michel in it. Michel slowly rises out of the tub, Christina clutches at her chest, collapses and dies. His presence kills her, just as the last vestiges of sanity leave her. [Fig. 3.12] Her last vision is of a dripping, zombie-like Michel. The droplets are not blood but to Christina they were just as mortal.



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*Fig. 3.12. The dead has come back to life.*

<sup>50</sup> [Fig. 3.11.] *Les Diaboliques*.1:51:09

<sup>51</sup> [Fig. 3.12.] *Les Diaboliques*.1:53:07

She was driven mad, slowly and systematically by Michel and Nicole. They played upon her trusting nature, her poor health, her moral compunction and desire to be free. They took away her freedom until she was confined to her own attic dwelling. Bit by bit, they undermined Christina's sanity until she was driven mad — a madness that killed her.

The final scene reinforces the Gothic nature of the story. As everyone carries their belongings out of the building (the school must now close that Christina is dead and Nicole and Michel are in jail), Moinet swears he spoke to the ghost of Christina. She gave him back his slingshot and said, "Have fun." He insists that she isn't dead - or at least that she came back. The film ends with Moinet's insistence. It seems there is now one more ruined building with a ghostly inhabitant. The Gothic canon has gained another tale.

## PART IV

### Female Roles in the New Madwoman in the Attic

Jane Eyre had Bertha Mason Rochester. Though she didn't know it they were pitted against one another from the outset, they were rivals for the heart of Mr. Rochester. As the genre is updated in *Gaslight*, Paula must defeat her own inner demons as well as Gregory. But for Christina in *Les Diaboliques*, she has to defeat two enemies. It is as if both Mr. and Mrs. Rochester were aiming for her destruction. This reflects the hard scrabble reality of postwar France. In Victorian literature, characters are often at the mercy of strict social rules and other circumstances beyond their control. Jane is born to relative poverty and has few options. Not so with Paula or Christina. Paula is wealthy and owns property. This sets her apart from her literary predecessors as a character, but also as a victim. Gregory only intends to steal her jewels. It is sheer greed. Michel and Nicole are trying to destroy Christina for a number of reasons. She owns the school, one that she opened because she truly wants to help and teach children. In this way, she is like Jane Eyre, who, after enduring dismal educational experiences, came to Thornfield to be a governess and tutor to Adele. The children adore her. But Michel and Nicole see more value in selling the school. They wish to be free of it and of Christina. They

kill for greed, lust and spite. And it seems they rather relish the chance to torture their victim. So much is done to drive Christina to madness and misery. *Les Diaboliques* follows in the unnerving footsteps of its predecessors but brings at an extra layer of deceit and despicable behavior. The American product, *Gaslight*, concludes to the contentment of its audiences. The European cousin, *Les Diaboliques*, finds darker, less satisfying results. Depending on her home's location, The New Madwoman in the Attic has differing challenges.

### Conclusion

The Victorian era Gothic genre, beginning with *Jane Eyre*, finds itself in films more than one-hundred years later. Crucial elements of the Gothic remain, making the story a familiar type to audiences. For those same audiences, though, certain details were updated to reflect the time and place in which they were made. *Gaslight* tells a Gothic story but for an American audience in 1944. It touches upon the fears and insecurities of both the newly-independent female and the returning GI. It explores the ideas of autonomy, control, sanity and society in a country that joined and fought a war overseas. By pitting a spirited female against a suspicious husband, *Gaslight* represented and resonated with women on the homefront. It also represented the latent anxieties of the male figure in Gregory. He fears he can not satisfy himself so he seeks to destroy another's sanity.

By using a modern adaptation of candlelight in the gaslight, it simultaneously solidifies the connection with the Gothic and brings story forward. Flame and the use of it hearkens back to candlelit passages and recalls the burning of Thornfield Hall. The element of fire is still present but in a new, modern convenience. This signals that there has been an evolution in the genre and shows the audience that Paula is a modern woman, just like they are.

*Jane Eyre* and her ilk began in England and continental Europe, but it resurfaces in American films such as the adaptations of *Jane Eyre* and *Rebecca* as well as B-films like *I Walked with a Zombie*. These and *Gaslight*, made during WW2, wouldn't have been seen by Europe until after the war ended.



Like the genre of film noir, the French would have seen this New Madwoman in the Attic as an artifact of a culture and attempted to imitate it — in their own style, of course. In order to resonate with its audience *Les Diaboliques* adapts the Gothic genre for 1955 France. Broken, rundown and shamed, the populous dangled between the promise of a clean slate of modernity and the shadows of a failed, inept government and weakened national mentality. It adds a layer of grittiness and sleaziness that was missing in *Gaslight* — a veneer that can never be washed away despite the ever-present water. Here the candle and the gaslight evolves again to water and modern plumbing. Modernity once again highlights the friction between the old and the new. Despite the women's desperate attempt to be free of Michel, they are only more ensnared by him. Christina takes action to cleanse herself of him, and to maintain autonomy and sanity. Instead, she is manipulated to the point of insanity. For postwar France, there is no happy ending. *Gaslight* and *Les Diaboliques* employ the Gothic tropes and include the New Madwoman, but do so in their own manner. The production value in *Les Diaboliques* is less slick, less polished than its American counterpart. This more realistic setting and style would have resonated with a war-weary French population, while being a completely entertaining Gothic fantasy. And in *Gaslight*, the heroine manages to free herself from the attack on her sanity, echoing the independent spirit of the American woman. Clearly, this narrative type has resonance across country, culture and time. Beginning with the pen of Charlotte Bronte and her *Jane Eyre*, the Madwoman in the Attic can be traced to the screen in *Gaslight* and then across an ocean to France with *Les Diaboliques*. Though she adapts to the modern audiences, she is always there, waiting to tell her story.

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