

What is gothic television? Discuss using television texts and academic literature to support your argument.

Recently, the concept of ‘Gothic’ has spread to a wide area. A few of these are Literature, architecture, film industry and finally television works. The purpose of Gothic television is to provide audiences with an experience focused on horror and suspense. Gothic television is in a vital position for audience studies as it allows audiences to break away from ordinary reality and step into a more mysterious and psychological world, reminding that the fear felt can arise not only from physical threats but also from psychological concerns. This genre basically presents the familiar and the unfamiliar to the audience by bringing together common elements with unexpected and sudden ones.

This foundation is based on Sigmund Freud's essay ‘The Uncanny’ (1919) and Freud explains this as follows: [the] “uncanny is in reality nothing new or alien, but something which is familiar and old-established in the mind and which has become alienated from it only through the process of repression” (Rivkin and Ryan, 2017, p. 604). Based on this quote, this essay argues that Gothic television offers a new but familiar experience to the audience by blending the deep-rooted and common elements in the minds of the viewer with supernatural and unusual elements.

The history of Gothic narratives dates back to 18th-century literature and texts that shaped Gothic television. The first examples of this type appeared in the 1960s. One of the television series that was defined as Gothic rather than Horror in those years was *Dark Shadows* (ABC, 1966–1971). Moreover, while the *Dark Shadows* series brought the concept of gothic to television, subsequent productions gradually developed and added new elements.

One of the most distinctive features of Gothic television that distinguishes it from other genres is aesthetic structure. It has a dark, pale environment in terms of visual elements and

colour palette. The locations predominantly used in the TV series contain supernatural elements such as closed-in spaces, haunted or cursed houses. Helen Wheatley's book explains the aesthetic framework of Gothic television from different aspects, she states, 'Representations of the supernatural which are either overt (created through the use of special effects) or implied (suggested rather than fully revealed)' (Wheatley, 2006, p. 3). She also points out that such programs adopt a subjective perspective in the use of camera angle and sound effects like 'The 'spirit's-eye-view' of ghosts and supernatural beings, to the point of view of the victimised heroine in adaptations of the female Gothic novel' (Wheatley, 2006, p. 3). This perspective often emphasizes the emotional and psychological states of victimized characters.

For example, the series *The Haunting of Hill House* (Netflix, 2018) uses many elements that support Wheatley's 'spirit's-eye-view'. To give an example, in the 6th episode of the series, 'Two Storms,' (2018) the various camera angles used throughout the episode to allow the audience to understand the moods of the characters and be drawn into the moment with powerful camera shots. Moreover, in the scenes watched after minute 33:00, the audience follows the characters with a rotating camera angle as they argue in the funeral setting. In this scene, where the audience feels the psychological tension, it is noticed that both physical and psychological threats are intertwined. In this context, *Haunting of Hill House* uses the concept of 'spirit's-eye-view' effectively.

Another important aspect of Gothic television is that it shapes viewer identity. Audiences tend to identify with the familiar but somewhat disturbing environment created by Gothic television, the complex characters it presents, and the psychological conflicts they experience. For example *American Horror Story* (FX, 2011), one of the popular TV series of recent times, offers a different theme, character and introduction-development-conclusion stories each season, helping the audience to get into the created world, embrace it and connect more with their own memories and fears by linking variety of characters easily because, the different topics covered

in each season and the eventual conclusion of the stories make it easier for the audience to follow the plot.

As a result, Gothic television is not just about aesthetic structure (Supernatural elements, special effects and use of sound). Moreover, it aims to affect the mental state of the audience by using the themes of fear and tension in an effective and diverse way, while also leaving a deep impact on the individual identity of the society.

Gothic television offers the audiences a new but familiar experience in a context by combining familiar elements (House, family concept-structure, etc.) with unusual ones (Haunted-Cursed house, etc.). Moreover, this refers to Freud's essays 'The Uncanny' (1919). Helen Wheatley claims that the uncanny is central to characterising the 'structures' of gothic television, she states, 'The uncanny is therefore located in the moments in Gothic television in which the familiar traditions and conventions of television are made strange, when television's predominant genres and styles are both referred to and inverted' (Wheatley, 2006, p.7-8). Gothic television creates this situation that Wheatley advocates in several different ways. By placing supernatural elements (Automatons, waxworks, dolls, corpses, ghosts and the supernatural, masks and disguises etc.) into everyday concepts such as family structures - relationships and familiar spaces such as home, school, and small town.

One of the examples that will best support this argument is; *The Addams Family* (ABC, 1964-1966) which is a leading approach that Gothic family sitcoms. This is a genre that puts the concept of family at the centre of case and examines its formation and traumas in general. Henry James says: 'American Gothic literature was connected at a hundred points with the common objects of life' (Wheatley, 2006, p.123). However, *The Addams Family* made this familiar tradition is made strange in the 1960s through gothic tropes and aesthetics. To give an example, the family members in the series are supernatural beings such as vampire, witch and Frankenstein's monster. On the other hand, the family structure and environment in the series

coincide with known social norms, furthermore, these characters are treated as if they were normal people. Concepts such as 'Family ties', which are emphasized in many episodes and carefully incorporated into the series, push the audience to establish bonds with the characters by seeing examples of their own family dynamics.

For instance, there are episodes focusing on local celebrations and holidays. One of these is Season 2, Episode 15, 'Christmas with the Addams Family' (1965). In this episode, the Addams family celebrates New Year's Eve in a 'warm' environment within the framework of their own gothic style (Unusual gifts, etc.) In addition to this, the subject of young children believing in Santa Claus which is one of the classical and familiar attitudes, is discussed. Wednesday and Pugsley are told by their neighbours that Santa Claus is not real. Morticia and Gomez, who do not want to harm their children's beliefs, begin their efforts to protect the family's Santa Claus figure. As a result, Uncle Fester voluntarily takes on the role of Santa Claus. Audiences who watch this, can relate to the themes covered in the episode because celebrating New Year's Eve is always a tradition.

In addition, trying to protect family structures and beliefs as a parent is a deep-rooted behavioural style that is one of the foundations of the nuclear family structure in societies. On the other hand, the members of the family are supernatural beings, not humans, have unusual gothic style clothes, make-up, and lastly, because they own a gothic style house, people who watch this episode feel like they are in a half-familiar and unfamiliar-disturbing environment, even if they watch it at their own home.

Another example of Gothic television offering a different experience to the audience by combining familiar and extraordinary elements is the *Penny Dreadful* (Showtime, 2014) series, which is set in Victorian London and brings together horror and supernatural events. The series brings together extraordinary characters (such as Doctor. Frankenstein, Dorian Gray, Dracula) and their own dark stories. The pale-gothic colour palette used throughout the series, cramped

architectural structures, lighting, and music that aims to evoke feelings of tension and insecurity in the audience, puts the audience in a two-sided atmosphere (familiar and unfamiliar). With these elements, *Penny Dreadful* blends the familiar Victorian London with fearful and metaphysical elements, presenting the audience with a historical reality from a fantastic and gothic framework. .

Elisabete Lopes article gives some insights about gothic theme, she states, ‘Indeed, capturing the sensational thrills provided by the penny dreadful cheaply sold in the streets at that period, the show is also enriched by the superb quality inherent in the characters’ dialogues and sublimely tainted with blood, gore and supernatural horrors’ (Lopes, 2020, p.1). Especially the character of Vanessa Ives has a significant position in terms of gothic television and character structure. Lopes says the following about this character: ‘Miss Ives incarnates an adventurous, bold, refined and inquiring woman, qualities that contribute to define her as an active Gothic heroine’ (Lopes, 2020, p.2). The psychological and supernatural experiences, experienced by the character Vanessa Ives reflect Freud's feeling of the ‘uncanny’, which is a part of Gothic television.

For example, in Season 1, Episode 5, ‘Closer than Sisters,’ (2014) a journey is made into Vanessa's past. While the character's internal conflicts are shown, the traumas she has experienced, her repressed fears, interactions with supernatural beings are revealed. The psychological and internal conflicts she experiences include familiar concepts that viewers can relate to their own emotional states or emotions prevalent in society (fear, anxiety, past traumas, etc.). However, underlining Vanessa's connection with demonic entities, like, Lucifer, makes the audience feel insecure in a familiar area. Therefore, the series *Penny Dreadful* brings together the familiar and the unfamiliar, reminding the audiences that the fears people feel can arise not only from physical threats but also from psychological concerns furthermore, this has made this a strong example in this respect.

Moreover, 'The Nightcomers' (2015), the 3. episode of the 2. season of the *Penny Dreadful* series, offers an in-depth perspective on the supernatural abilities of the Vanessa Ives character from the 'Uncanny' perspective. In this episode, Vanessa meets Cut-Wife, a sorceress. The relationship between these two characters shows the audience the 'mentor-student' relationship they are accustomed to from their own world and the natural flow of life. Throughout the episode, Cut-Wife trains Vanessa by giving her important information such as how to use her powers and how to protect herself.

Although this relationship begins as an educational process that may seem familiar to the audience, over time, as information is presented about supernatural beings and magic practice, the familiar gives way to an unknown environment. Aesthetic structure used in this episode: For example, spaces, dark colour palette, etc. While it draws the viewers into a gothic atmosphere, it draws the audiences into the intersection of the familiar (education, mentoring, personal development) and the unknown (black magic, demonic beings, witches), allowing the viewers to confront their own fears in a familiar framework. To sum up, *Penny Dreadful* series strongly addresses Freud's essays 'The Uncanny' and effectively uses various elements that form the building blocks of Gothic television.

In conclusion, Gothic television emerges as a genre that pushes the boundary between familiar, deep-rooted concepts and unfamiliar and unexpected ones, based on Freud's essay 'The Uncanny' (1919). The Gothic television genre allows viewers to find a piece of themselves in worlds intertwined with both psychological and supernatural elements. As seen in examples that develop and change from *Dark Shadows* to *Penny Dreadful*, it attracts attention not only with its aesthetic structure but also with deeply developed character it creates. This genre creates questions about personal and social identity in the minds of the audience, paving the way for them to discover themselves in a familiar but disturbing world. I strongly believe that thanks to developing technologies, the Gothic television has the potential to influence viewers more

effectively by delving into their emotional and psychological experiences more deeply in the future. For example, an unforgettable experience can be provided by adding interactive story choices (such as whether the main character will encounter a supernatural threat) with augmented reality (AR) technologies. These experiences can become more authentic and unforgettable by dynamically reflecting the psychological states of characters and allowing viewers to influence their decisions.

## Bibliography

*American Horror Story* (2011) FX, Wednesday 5 October, 10:00 PM

"Christmas with the Addams Family" (1965) *The Addams Family*, Series 2, Episode 15. ABC. Friday 17 December, 8:30 PM EST

"Closer Than Sisters" (2014) *Penny Dreadful*, Series 1, Episode 5. Showtime. Sunday 8 June, 10:00 PM.

*Dark Shadows* (1966-1971) ABC, Monday 27 June, 4.00 PM.

Freud, S. (2017) 'The Uncanny', in J. Rivkin and M. Ryan (eds) *Literary theory an anthology*. Third edition. Chichester, West Sussex: Wiley Blackwell, pp. 592-614.

Lopes, E., 2020. *The Curious Case of Vanessa Ives: The Portrait of a Witch in Penny Dreadful*. ULICES (University of Lisbon Centre for English Studies) / IPS (Polytechnic Institute of Setúbal). p.1.

Lopes, E., 2020. *The Curious Case of Vanessa Ives: The Portrait of a Witch in Penny Dreadful*. ULICES (University of Lisbon Centre for English Studies) / IPS (Polytechnic Institute of Setúbal). p.2.

*Penny Dreadful* (2014) Showtime, Sunday 11 May, 10:00 PM.

*The Haunting of Hill House* (2018) Netflix, Friday 12 October, 12:00 AM PST.

*The Addams Family* (1964–1966) ABC, Friday 18 September, 8:30 PM EST.

"The Nightcomers" (2015) *Penny Dreadful*, Series 2, Episode 3. Showtime. Sunday 17 May, 10:00 PM.

"Two Storms" (2018) *The Haunting of Hill House*, Series 1, Episode 6. Netflix. Friday 12 October, 12:00 AM PST.

Wheatley, H. (2006) *Gothic television*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.