

Anna Kérchy & Rita Antoni

University of Szeged

Rejuvenation and Immortality in/of the Female Gothic Genre. The Feminist Potentials of Contemporary Children’s- and Teenage Gothic Fiction

In Memoriam

The field of literary studies we discuss in this paper is inseparable for many of us from Professor Marinovich-Resch’s person. We remember very clearly the amazement we felt at our very first elective seminar at the university when Professor Marinovich-Resch taught us that Gothic is more than just a Medievally inspired architectural style or a post-punk subcultural movement: it is also a literary mode of writing. Our fascination increased further when we learnt that the type of literature we have been reading ‘just for fun’ about monsters, mad scientists, wizards, ghosts and faeries constitutes indeed a relevant field of academic research. We immediately decided we wanted to work with Professor Marinovich-Resch, and so we did – although it was difficult to get among her disciples since she was such a nice person and excellent scholar that many awaited to join her crew. Our cooperation was quite a journey! Professor Marinovich-Resch taught us that instead of pseudo-objective value judgments, besides meticulous analysis and scholarly scrutiny one should remain endlessly curious about a text, try to understand its flaws, the significance of the unsaid, and feel free to love it along with its imperfections, and relate it to other texts one is fond of. And her approach to texts was valid to people too: as an outstandingly open-minded personality, she was always open to subversive people, ideas, and unusual research topics. We still cherish the little notes she attached to articles on feminism she photocopied for us, adding kind lines like: “Read this! I am curious to know your opinion!” It is a sad loss that we will not be able to hear her opinion on the topics we are discussing in this paper, we dedicate to her memory. We chose to focus on current manifestations of the Gothic, because, unlike authors like Fred Botting who envision the end of Gothic, Professor Marinovich-Resch constantly emphasized the continuity of the genre. She argued that it is also a mode of writing that can appear in any

period of literary history due to its constant capacity to rejuvenate itself, to resurrect just like its fantastic, undying characters. Regarding the tons of children's, teen and young adult popular Gothic novels seen in bookstores these days, we can be sure she was absolutely right.

The Feminist Potentials of Contemporary Children's Gothic Fiction (by Anna Kérchy)

In her 2002 essay "Interrogating the Iconography of the Female Gothic" Professor Marinovich-Resch distinguished between classic *Gothic* novels penned by male authors with "masculine plots of transgression of social taboos by an excessive male will" and a *female Gothic* counter-tradition. In the latter one, the formerly heroic male transgressor turns into the villain, a patriarch, abbot or despot with an authoritarian reach who "usurps the great house and threatens with death, rape" or entrapment the heroine who often reflects ironically upon her situation within the confines of her gender and genre. (258) Professor Marinovich-Resch emphasized on numerous occasions that the feminist project of *female neo-Gothic* writings is to reveal that the happy ending of marriage, the accomplishment of the family romance plot as a reward at the end of the gothic heroine's quest is indeed a male fantasy interiorized by earlier protagonists but rejected by their increasingly independent successors.

I have particularly vivid memories of Professor Marinovich-Resch's exciting lecturing on a popular subgenre of female neo-gothic fiction, the so-called *homely Gothic* in which, instead of haunted castles in faraway lands, the scene of mysterious events is relocated to one's own home, normally a primary comfort zone that suddenly appears defamiliarized as radically alien, and potentially threatening to the inhabitant's safety or sanity. A primary technique of provoking the pleasurable discomfort characteristic of this genre is the *uncanny* (*unheimlich*) or the 'homely unhomely' described by Freud in 1919 as a cognitive dissonance, an emotional ambiguity, and a perceptual flaw resulting from confusing feelings of foreignness and familiarity, a questioning of "our sense of ontological certainty about the world through the seeming appearance of phenomena that we know cannot exist, or the disappearance of phenomena that we *know* must" (Zolkover 70). Professor Marinovich-Resch's example for the *uncanny* we could all relate to was the childhood experience when at night the well-known furniture of the kid's bedroom is suddenly seen transformed into predatory monsters. The child *knows* it is an armchair she is peeping at from underneath her blanket but she *imagines*, and even occasionally and temporarily *believes* it to be a monster. Moreover, as Freud suggests, children's sense of the uncanny is particularly

complex because of the incomplete process of their socialization's psychic repressive mechanisms, and their partial embracement of the animistic system of beliefs, organizing most fairy tales. This makes them joyously personify throughout daytime play the same toys they dread in nocturnal fantasies about the inanimate coming to life. It is the deeply disturbing, infantile, night-time experience that becomes a titillating literary adventure and a dominant mode of enjoyment fictionally framed in the form of safe or pretended fear in today's *children's Gothic novels*.

As Townshend claims, children's literature initially emerged in largely didactic forms in the eighteenth-century as a counter-reaction to the horrifying and immoral 'adult' genre of Gothic fiction. Yet, as Jackson, Coats and McGillis argue, the first piece of children's literature children today still recognize as a children's book, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, mocked precisely the "morals and manners" of children's instructive tales designed to take Gothic fiction's place, without becoming itself a Gothic text per se. As the authors put it in the introduction of their 2008 collection of essays entitled *The Gothic in Children's Literature. Haunting the Borders*:

When the genre of didactic narrative is turned back on itself, and indeed turned upside down and inside out, the result is not a return to the Gothic stories children used to read before children's literature was invented, but the beginning of a new children's literature tradition, the tradition to which all subsequent children's literature belongs. (3)

Accordingly, the Gothic genre is rejuvenated by means of its multiple subversions.

Among several other reasons, children's Gothic is thought-provoking on accounts of challenging the nuclear heterosexual family romance plot normatively prescribed and idealized by the patriarchal ideology and canon. This narrative subversion, Du Plessis calls "writing beyond the ending" (1985) and Roof deems essential for an alternative, non-hegemonic reconstruction of narratively constituted identities (1996), is performed here from the perspective of children, who constitute protagonists and target reading-audiences in one. I wish to argue here, that children's rebellious revisionings tend to be interestingly invested with feminist ethical and political potentials. Conventional, phallogocentric modes of cohabitation are travestied in several children's Gothic oeuvres where the Gothic house appointed Home ceases to be or is not meant to last as a realm domineered by the patriarch. Examples include the extended clan-like the Addams Family whose credo "We gladly feast on those who would subdue us" (1991) ironically comments on the aggression lurking under the apparent gentility of family ties; Harry Potter, a Dickensian

orphan tormented by a disenchanting “muggle” adoptive family who gains support from friendship instead of kinship bonds; Tim Burton’s *Corpse Bride* literalizing the marital vows “till death do us apart” while spookily confounding marital and familial relations between the living and the (un)dead (Kérchy-Povidisa 2011, 117); and Neil Gaiman’s *Coraline* where the evil doubles of parents have to be fought by the title character who by the end of the story completely reevaluates her and our ideas of an ideal family.

Gaiman’s *Coraline* (2002) has been adapted into animated motion picture by Henry Selick (2009) and a graphic novel by Russel P. Craig (2008), yet in the followings I wish to concentrate on Gaiman’s novelistic original, a par excellence children’s Gothic text, written for a recommended readership of over eight-years-olds about an adventurous little girl, who abandons her parents because they are too preoccupied with their own work to entertain her, and explores through a secret door of their house, an *Other* house inhabited by an apparently much more attentive and alluring *Other* mother (and father). The *Other* mother eventually turns out to be a witch-like figure who wants to replace Coraline’s eyes with buttons, “eat her up”, and “steal her soul,” and threatens with fully engulfing her by an eternal childhood that keeps her forever blind, undifferentiated, and passive under the Beldam’s suffocating guardianship. Coraline courageously fights her and gains back her real, imperfect but loving parents and most importantly, with them, her freedom.

Parsons, Sawers, and McNally criticized Gaiman’s novel for debilitating women’s empowerment by allowing “material feminism slip seamlessly into [inefficient] postfeminism” (372). As they point out, Coraline’s real mother, a fictional embodiment of material feminism, pursues a career unsubdued to childrearing, frantically works on a gardening catalogue, refuses to cook daily meals or to sacrifice all her attention to her needy daughter, and shares household duties with a rather maternal/mothering father-figure. Yet, it is also the real mother’s relative empowerment that calls to life the fantasy of her dark double, the Other Mother whose strength is portrayed as tyrannic and sadistic. Female-to-female bonds are represented as either fatally dangerous, like the Other Mother-to-daughter bond (Parsons et al. 373) or as horribly repulsive, regressive and mutant, like Misses Spink and Forcible, the crone-like siblings’ cocooning into one single, horribly unformed creature during one of Coraline’s night-time visits. Moreover, it is a memory of male heroism, of the real father bravely protecting Coraline against an attack of wild wasps, that provides her a positive identificatory model, that becomes a token of her coming of age and survival, and helps her fight the monstrous mother’s female villainy. Thus, in Parsons, Sawers and McNally’s reading, Coraline’s

maturation takes place at the cost of consolidating conventional gender hierarchies: conforming to the Oedipal scenario she must learn to identify with masculine bravery and fight feminine power (including her own desires for power) to succeed at her quest. However, Parsons et al's excellent paper is weakened by the classic psychoanalytical terms – phallic mother, castrated woman, penile imagery – it relies on to interpret Coraline's journey through a Lacanian landscape while disregarding the specificity of a *girl's* adventure story which cannot be so easily modeled conforming to the schemata of the masculinised subject's psychosexual maturation.

Unlike Parsons et al, I think that the annihilation of the Other Mother figure does not mean a rejection but a reevaluation of empowered maternity. There is a feminist critical potential lurking beneath the Gaimanian fantasy's inseparable conjoining of idealized and demonized motherhood via the Gothic doubling of Coraline's apparently-inefficient 'good enough' Real Mother and the seemingly-perfect monstrous Other Mother. This character-confusion seems to be an ironic, fictional recapitulation of Mary Russo's argumentation on the inevitably paradoxical social positioning of the female subjects due to the cultural enfreakment she has to undergo as a side-effect of her engendering by patriarchal ideology. Accordingly, if a woman fully submits to the social requirements of her gender role (like sacrificial motherhood or feminine subservience), she is deprived of autonomy and her subjectivity becomes primarily identified as objectified, over-embodied and fundamentally grotesque, whereas if she rebels against the passive scenario prescribed for her, she is considered mad or monstrous. The real mother's grotesque negligence and the Other Mother's monstrous over-protectiveness as mirror-images to each other shed light on the difficulties feminized subjects have to face in a masculine hegemony where femininity (or motherhood) and subjectivity (or autonomous agency) are radically incompatible terms.

Gaiman's negative portrayal and Coraline's eventual rejection of the Other Mother's ideal caretaking as a false and flawed parental relation demythologizes the patriarchal fantasy of submissive mothering as a cornerstone of harmonious family relations. The animation adaptation's tagline "Be careful what you wish for" suggests that Coraline, in the end, recognizes that the kind of maternal care encapsulated in the other maternal promise "We're here to love you and feed you and play with you and make your life interesting" (58) "for ever and always" (42) "you and I shall understand each other perfectly and we shall love each other perfectly as well" (88) is not what she wants after all because it would debilitate and deform mother and daughter alike. The Other Mother caters for but also strictly delimits all Coraline's needs; she gives her miraculous toys, delicious

nourishment, and abundant care but would like to trap her infantilized in a maternal space deprived of dreams and desires of the daughter's own making. As Gooding suggests, the novel illustrates that the prolongation of the psychoanalytical myth of the "infantile desire for a permanent (re)union with the mother" necessarily leads to "a parasitic substitute of love that destroys difference" (397). Unlike in the first spooky tales invented by eighteenth-century nursemaids to discipline and teach children to obey to adult guidance, Gaiman's contemporary children's gothic offers for children a lesson on the advantages of autonomy – for children and mothers alike. I fully agree with Gooding who argues that 'moral' of the text resides in Coraline's recognition that the increasing independence her real parents demand of her are not synonymous with rejection and abandonment, but signify a love that encourages the prosperation of her individual otherness and its engagement with the colourful outside world, a kind of love that does not wish to sew uniform buttons in place of her eyes, but lets her see and explore everything for herself, to shape a worldview of her own. In a wonderful passage on the last trial of Coraline's quest towards autonomous selfhood, it is the voice of her "real, wonderful, maddening, infuriating, glorious mother" simply saying "Well done, Coraline!" (155) that enables the little girl "to close the door on" the fake lure of the ideal-monstrous Other Mother's Other World. Gooding stresses that the Real Maternal praise comes before Coraline's actual accomplishment of her act (of triumphing over the Other Mother) (399) – this indeed suggests that parental encouragement and advice are worth more than instruction and moralizing. Both Coraline and her real Mother seem to agree on that as neither makes any attempt at improving her imperfect mothering ways after the daughter's return. A new family dynamics for the twenty-first century is circumscribed here where affection may coexist with independence. Thus, Coraline's earlier claim, "I think I've become a single child family" (48) is perhaps more triumphant than fearful.

The very concept of childhood is reevaluated: neither idealized nor demonized, far from the innocent immaculacy Victorians or the polymorphous perversion Freudians identified with, it is not meant to be a period of prolonged dependency or of precocious self-sufficiency but of street-smart exploration and wayward imagination, activities that truly contribute to infantile identity's development. The new underage gothic heroine instead of fleeing the despotic patriarch in a bridal gown fights it in her pyjamas. As Balay opines, she is a tomboy who is at ease with traditionally masculine tasks of "saving souls, capturing talismans, and defeating demons" (Balay 10) but she also knows how to perform cleverly girly activities – like playing with dolls – that she uses by means of "a

protective coloration” (151) that help her trap the unsuspecting disembodied hand of the other mother willing to seize her. In Balay’s words “gender [serves] as a system of camouflage here, used to hide from danger, from our own uncertainty, and self-doubt” (8). The creepiness of the ghost-children emphasized by Balay is counterbalanced by Coraline’s empowering skill to enact and manipulate gender roles in subversive ways, described above, pointing towards gender trouble of the Butlerian kind. According to this logic, even Coraline’s miming of her father’s masculine heroism, criticized by Parsons et al., may qualify as a type of gender-bending “female masculinity” (see Halberstam). Through expanding gender roles the novel “gives girls an expanded sense of imaginary options: not only to choose masculinity instead of femininity, but also to persistently, deliberately choose both, and to refuse to choose entirely” (Balay 13).

Interestingly, in *Coraline* the expansion of gender roles coincides with an expansion of the protagonist’s imaginative faculties – which belong to a specifically feminine fantasy in so far as they are maternally inspired and position the little girl as an implied author of her own story. Balay quotes an important passage – Coraline “could only think of two things to do. Either she could scream and try to run away, and chased around a badly lit cellar by a huge grub thing, be chased until it caught her. Or she could do something else. So she did something else” (110) – to convincingly demonstrate that Coraline avoids binary logic and does not make a choice between two alternatives, but rather “between choosing and refusing,” to opt for “that which exists outside the realm of meaning and the possible” (9). However, I think the emphasis here is neither on *not* enacting the expected feminine responses to a potential threat, nor on the *refusal* to make a choice at all, but rather on “*doing* something *else*”, the capacity to imaginatively make-up new options, to reinvent *her* story. Balay’s assertion that Coraline “chooses candles and pyjamas over flashlight and jeans because she knows she is in a fantasy novel and wants to do it right” (11) should be complemented by the remark that, besides conjoining horror with humour, this gesture turns her into a highly self-reflexive author (and reader) of the events which not simply happen to her but are incited by her imaginative agency. Numerous details relate the horrific quest-narrative to instances of infantile creativity – the adventures are initiated as an antidote against boredom, the fight against the monstrous mother is regarded a game of hide-and-seek, the other house disintegrates flattened into a child-drawn sketch – suggesting that Coraline plays it safe as she is toying with a pretended fear called to life and resolved by her own imagination.

According to Coates, the Gothic theme focusing on the most common childhood fear of losing one’s Home along with the caring family,

static comfort and protection from responsibility it affords refers to a rationally based anxiety all children must face when growing up. Pretending this fear serves “to work out possible plans of response” to it (Coats 83). Significantly, the Freudian uncanny, the strangely familiar, familiarly strange Other Home that “ought to have remained secret and hidden” is called to life by Coraline’s dark fantasies. It is comforting to know that the horror and the horrific are products of Coraline’s imaginative, interpretive consciousness, since this means that, complicit in their creation, she can also control or terminate them. This is neatly spelt out in the passage:

She crept back into the silent house, past the closed bedroom door inside which the other mother and the other father – what? She wondered. Slept? Waited? And then it came to her that, should she open the bedroom door she would find it empty, or more precisely that it was an empty room and it would remain empty until the exact moment that she opened the door.

Somehow that made it easier. (64)

Although Coats stresses here as primal source of anxiety the suspicion about parental sexuality Coraline both is curious and reluctant to witness as a would-be primal scene of her psychosexual maturation, I believe that the most telling bit about the empowering nature of Coraline’s imaginative agency is the last phrase on “the room remaining empty until the exact moment that she opened the door” that guarantees mastery over the alternate universe by suggesting that its very existence depends on Coraline’s perception of it or pretence of perceiving it. Coraline is not a victim but a provocateur of weird circumstances. Her curiosity – conventionally a fault that needs to be corrected in the original scary tales with a disciplinary intent – becomes a primary token of her girl power. On exploring the Other House she is exploring her own imaginative capacities. Via an exciting *mise-en-abyme*, the reading experience of the child reading the children’s Gothic novel mimes the safe play with fear enacted by the protagonist she is reading about.

It is also noteworthy that Coraline’s imagination is inspired by her Real mother who shows her the locked door and the hidden key, encourages her daughter to explore the house, and hints at the possibility of adventures lurking beyond the apparent boredom of the Real House. It is significant that the Real Mother does not entertain Coraline but rather stimulates her to find (out for herself) amusements of her own. In Coats’s psychoanalytical terms, the Real Mother does not fulfil all Coraline’s desires but shows her how desire may be pursued as a project, how boredom’s sense of loneliness may be exploited as an imaginative space for dreaming and desiring, for

testing who one is (86). Thus, the maternal lesson teaches imaginative agency, courage to discover one's own desires.

Coraline's quest ends with a happy return to an imperfect home where she can live, desire, and fantasize free beyond the frames of the conventional heterosexual nuclear family romance. From then on her ordinary *being* home will constitute the greatest adventure. This is nicely encapsulated in Coraline's words she utters on her return home, "the sky had never seemed so *sky*, the world had never seemed so *world*...Nothing, she thought, had ever been so *interesting*" (135), and, at last, "as the first stars came out Coraline finally allowed herself to drift into sleep" (160).

The Continuity of the Gothic in Recent Teen and Young Adult Fiction (by Rita Antoni)

*"Have you ever read Udolpho, Mr. Thorpe?"
"Udolpho? Oh Lord! Not I; I never read
novels, I have something else to do."
(Austen, 32)*

Professor Marinovich-Resch chose the above quotation from Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey* (1818) as a motto of her study on the parody of the female Gothic (2002). Through the examples of the quoted text and Eaton Stannard Barret's *The Heroine, or the Adventures of a Fair Romance Reader* (1813) she presented the manifold ways in which the contested genre of the female Gothic, along with its writers and readers, became stereotyped and ridiculed. I would like to argue that the same degradation of women's texts and reading habits is repeated now, two hundred years later, through the reception and evaluation of the recent revival of the Gothic, that takes the primary form of the new vampire craze. Thus, my aim here is to provide a relatively new example for a phenomenon consistently emphasized by Professor Marinovich-Resch: for the continuity of the Gothic as a mode of writing distinguished by feminine manifestations, which are apt to create space for (seemingly) contradictory interpretations.

From the beginnings of the genre's coming to literary discourse, Gothic novels – quotes Marinovich-Resch from an 1802 *Scots Magazine* – were seen by anxious men as "literary abortions", causing the "imbecility of mind", particularly amongst females (W.W., quoted by Howard 149, and Marinovich-Resch 263). Today, fans of *Twilight* (and other, contemporary vampire narratives) are ridiculed, infantilized, and sometimes even

caricatured as mindless zombies.¹ This judgment seems to be oblivious about forms of popular entertainment associated with masculine readership, and the fact that teenage boys are equally unlikely to be voracious readers of Hegel, Proust or Dostoyevsky. On the contrary, in line with Susan Faludi's arguments on antifeminist backlash (1996), Leonard Sax (2008) blames the ideological tenet (widespread both in the US/UK and in Hungary) and popular misconception about feminism's successful completion, hence unnecessary – which concludes that there is no use speaking of gender – for the reproduction of inequality in and through free time activities, too:

For more than three decades, political correctness has required that educators and parents pretend that gender doesn't really matter. The results of that policy are upon us: a growing cohort of young men who spend many hours each week playing video games and looking at pornography online, while their sisters and friends dream of gentle werewolves who are content to cuddle with them and dazzling vampires who will protect them from danger. In other words, ignoring gender differences is contributing to a growing gender divide. (Sax 2008)

Young boys, however, are rarely ridiculed and caricatured for playing computer games or watching pornography (neither were seemingly refined Victorian gentlemen who stealthily visited brothels, or got maids pregnant), although, in terms of the potential effects on the mind and treating others, these leisure-time activities might be more dangerous than *Twilight*. Of course, if we refuse to regard people as mindless consumers of popular media, we must admit that these activities do not necessarily result in a misogynic attitude – as reading *Twilight* does not necessarily make young women readers antifeminist either (Tweezers 2008). In terms of the current popularity of vampire romance I would like to argue that the possibility of a critical, even resistant reading must be taken into consideration; besides, instead of simply dismissing young women's reading choices and labeling these texts low-level and/or, anti-feminist, we should ask *what social, cultural factors* provoke the need for and popularity of this kind of romantic fiction.

The Gothic, in its early form, is basically transgressive, with “issues of gender deeply inscribed within” the genre (Marinovich-Resch 259). Early Gothic novels included brave heroines, who, in certain cases, when their safety or the self-identity was at stake, failed to conform to contemporary feminine norms like passivity and obedience (Jancovich 20, 24). Many women writers chose the genre because its weird world reflected the alienated way they felt among confining patriarchal norms (van Leeuwen

¹ See e. g. <http://totallylooklike.icanhascheezburger.com/2009/12/23/zombie-horde-totally-looks-like-twilight-fangirl-horde/>

37), not to mention the fact that, beside promoting a more active and confident version of femininity, Gothic fiction criticized ambitious, oppressive power relations (Davenport-Hines 9) as well as hegemonic, misogynic types of masculinity (Hendershot 3-4). Through the character of the hero, who was always respectful of the heroine, an alternative, non-oppressive model of masculinity was introduced as well. Regarding all these, it is not surprising that, in a patriarchal cultural environment where women's reading activity in itself has been met with suspicion (Heidenreich 15), the popularity of this specific, rebellious genre created an even greater male anxiety.

The attempts at rejecting and ridiculing contemporary vampire romance, in my opinion, originate mostly in the fact that these texts continue to promote an alternative kind of masculinity. As Auerbach claims, the vampire figure represents – besides, we may add, eternal human fears and desires concerning, for example, death and immortality – the cultural climate, fears and desires in which it appears (1). In the nineteenth and early twentieth-century, the heyday of restrained, ‘continent’ masculinity (when men tried to preserve their wealth, blood and semen from the supposed threat of the hungry, ‘vampiric’ women (see Dijkstra 43-4), women fell for the overtly sexualized demon-lover, the male vampire who awakened their desires instead of repressing and demonizing them. (Finding themselves in a new kind of repressed situation this way is another problem.) By now the tables have turned: our over-sexualized, porn-driven culture, instead of the former repressing of female sexual activity, urges a compulsory eroticization/sexualization of women (which is, furthermore, conformed to certain patterns), and rejecting the former continence imperative finds pseudo-scientific justification for what Jeffreys calls “male sex right”, i. e. encouraging men to let their libido loose even in an oppressive way (calling it, ironically, sexual ‘liberation’!). Small wonder, heterosexual women readers will come to fancy a non-oppressive, ‘non-macho’ hero who embodies a refined, sensible, romantic type of masculinity.

The difference between the British-American and the Hungarian reception of the Edward-phenomenon, i.e. girls’ and young women’s enthusiasm about the new, chivalric, protective, gentle type of vampire introduced by Stephenie Meyer’s *Twilight* saga, reflect, in my opinion, the difference between levels of feminist consciousness in the two given cultural climates. In Hungary, there hasn’t been a strong women’s movement yet (Arpad & Marinovich), and Gender Studies is still only sparsely taught by a few pioneers at elective courses. This is reflected by a recent (non-academic) essay collection on the popularity of *Twilight* (Mörk ed., 2011), in which many contributors, mostly psychologists explain young girl’s attraction to

the gentle vampire as an either acknowledged (Bagdy 82-5) or unconscious (Jakabffy 33) desire for a pre-emancipatory state. So, instead of seeing the new masculine ideal as a critique of hegemonic masculinity, they interpret the *Twilight*-phenomenon as the (rightful) critique of emancipated femininity. This approach doesn't presuppose that young women don't want the oppressive male, it presupposes that they don't want equality.

English and American theorists, professional and amateur critics have a multiwave, strong, well-established feminist history, and an educational background with Gender Studies as a more or less generally accepted discipline and viewpoint. As a result, they tend to hail the achievements of feminism, and demand this perspective of the text, often accusing it of promoting antifeminist ideology (Gassley, Sax, Tweezers). Meyer's claim that she writes feminist fiction, because her novels are about women's choices, makes the situation even more complicated (Gassley). The problem is, as Tweezers wittily points out, that somehow all women in her work happen to 'choose' the role of the stay-at-home mom – I agree that this rather seems to be the promotion of one (conservative) alternative than the freedom of feminine choice.

Since *Twilight* seems to be an ambivalent work, both of these contradictory statements can be justified on the basis of the text, and – just like in case of the early female Gothic – both conservatives/essentialists and progressives can draw their own conclusions. Situating myself between these two viewpoints – i.e. as a feminist, being critical of the novels' projected value system concerning feminine roles, but being more 'indulgent' than the American critics – I would like to argue that there still are some feminist potentials in contemporary vampire fiction (to some extent, even in *Twilight*). Seemingly problematic textual elements should be – just like in the predecessor, early female Gothic! – interpreted in terms of *ambiguity*, which, driven by the contradictory motives of conforming to the norms of society as well as realizing one's desires and potentials as an autonomous person, describe female existence. Furthermore, in my opinion, critics pointing out the anti-feminist elements in the novel do not seem to take the difference between a teenage girl's perspective and that of a well-educated, fully conscious, adult feminist into consideration. This extension of scope, of course, does not lead to the justification of *Twilight* as a feminist accomplishment, but helps us understand the related female choices and preferences in other possible ways than female antifeminism and an open or repressed desire for subordination. (So, I'm attempting to defend *Twilight* and its fans for feminist purposes, after all!)

The formerly mentioned ambiguity of feminine existence evolves in the teenage years, through the quest for identity, which is, for the young girl,

equivalent with experiencing the limiting norms of femininity and feminine roles (de Beauvoir 282, Halberstam 6). This was the conflict the traditional Gothic heroine had to face: she was imprisoned, objectified by a male villain or sometimes the female proponent of a patriarchal institution (like the church), and basic knowledge about her identity (e.g. who her parents are) was often denied to her. In recent fiction, the heroine is in a different kind of predicament, but still has to face internal conflicts and external threats. The ruling ideology and its value system seems to favor only those few who meet the actual beauty norms: Bella hardly has any self-confidence, because she does not look like the ideal American high school girl, the athletic, tanned, blonde and popular cheerleader. Since the beauty industry renders women and young girls to hate their appearance and see themselves as freaks (Bartky 139), it makes easy for the average teen reader to sympathize or identify with the clumsy, shy, inhibited protagonist, and her astonishment at the fact that she was *chosen* and is desired by the beautiful vampire, the most handsome guy at school (who usually chooses the popular prom queen). In this light we may be a bit more sympathetic at Bella's constant, annoying and banal admiration for Edward's beauty, and understand the young fans' enthusiasm as well. Some plot elements that feminist critics see as misogynic (e.g. sneaking into Bella's room at night, and watching her sleep) emphasize the handsome Edward's *interest* in the plain Bella. This does not fail to impress neither the characters nor the readers, both of low self-esteem and an ideological background suggesting that a woman's worth is determined by men's attention. (Or, more specifically, the prestige level of men interested in her! and being a powerful supernatural being with gorgeous looks is quite a prestige, though). Bella even has two fine suitors, the vampire Edward and the werewolf Jacob – teenage girls *won't* read the love triangle plot as teaching them that a woman cannot exist without men (like, for example, Gassley does), but in terms of Bella's supposed luck that she, despite her plain looks, is so 'popular'.

So – remembering the fact that Professor Marinovich-Resch saw classic fairy tales as Gothic narratives – we can say that *Twilight* is a modern *Cinderella* story²; in which Bella meets her vampiric 'Prince Charming' at a surprising place: the high school. The often ridiculed fact that Meyer's vampires spend an eternity repeating secondary education over and over again (e.g. Rice, quoted by Flood)³ also serves the aim to get closer to teenage readers, enabling them to see their boring, confining, often frustrating surrounding in

² See also Robinson's 2011 analysis of *Twilight* as a fairy tale.

³ Louis and Lestat "would never hurt immortals who choose to spend eternity going to high school over and over again in a small town – any more than they would hurt the physically disabled or the mentally challenged."

a new, more exciting light. (Even a science lesson is much more motivating if a vampire can be your lab partner, after all.) Furthermore, today's popular, in a sense, 'de-gothicized' vampires do not have to experience such a terrible torment as, for example, Rice's Claudia, whose adult mind was confined to a five-year-old's body. Even their concerns and conflicts are adjusted to the level an average teenage reader can supposedly 'digest'. Edward is not a one-hundred-year-old wise being forced into the disguise of a seventeen-year-old teenager, he is an eternal seventeen-year-old teenager. Today's popular vampire characters, in mentality, seem to remain at the age when they were transformed (referring to both the number of their years as well as the cultural-historical eral), thus get stuck in a "never-coming-of-age" plot.⁴ They are eternally imprisoned in an identity crisis just like the one the teenage protagonist is experiencing, only in different terms: whilst the teenager struggles with the ordinary difficulties accompanying the stage of adolescence, e. g. wanting simultaneously to become an autonomous person and a member of a community, or the feeling of being out-of-place due to her inarticulate otherness (e.g. Bella feels somehow different, but she cannot really specify what her 'otherness' exactly lies in, see Meyer 9-10), the vampire figure hesitates between his human and vampire side, i.e. his philanthropic vs. monstrous nature. The vampire's presence triggers the heroine's conviction of her being different from other humans, in *Twilight* saga even to the extent that Bella tries to justify her decision to marry Edward at 18, a decision otherwise she is very uncomfortable with.

The human-vampire relationship built on this pattern in contemporary fantastic fiction is usually disturbed by a (human, or, more typically, werewolf) rival (who is destined to lose), and, more importantly, fellow vampires who do not share the hero-protagonist's reserved attitude (and who are more difficult to conquer). At this point a further parallel can be drawn with the antecedent of today's Gothic romance: early texts had a lot in common with crime fiction (i.e. murder, detection, a mysterious death case to be solved), which is at the core of current plotlines, as well. According to a frequently applied narrative element, a series of murders takes place, of which the vampire-hero may be suspected, so the protagonists have to find and punish the real perpetrator(s). During this process, the human heroine gets more and more involved with the supernatural world, and – just like in early Gothic – finds herself in dangerous situations, from which she, either alone, or, more typically, with the help of the hero, finally escapes. (As the classical Gothic heroine was also helped by beneficial supernatural occurrences and creatures!) These

⁴ The expression is taken from the title of a 2010 novel by Adam Rex (*Fat Vampire: A Never Coming of Age Story*, Balzer & Bray, HarperTeen).

horrifying events do not divert her from the intention to stay with her vampiric partner, or – although not as frequently as in the 1970s fiction reflecting second wave feminism, when transformation was equal with escape from patriarchal humanity, thus, empowerment – to become like him. Whether this is courage or a self-effacing, destructive kind of love is, again, the question of interpretation.

The ending also shares its ambiguous character with early Gothic, and, the debate whether the genre is reactionary or progressive can be (and, sometimes, is) extended to current versions that follow this tradition. The ambiguity can be, to a certain extent, dissolved, if we take Jancovich's critique into consideration: merely asking whether a narrative reproduces or rejects dominant ideology is a reductive approach (11); furthermore, one single text, as I also referred above, can be "consumed differently within different cultural contexts" (15). For example: the fact that Bella had to look after her scatter-brained mother and later, cooks for her reserved father should not, in my opinion, be examined from the adult, emancipated woman's perspective as strenuous, monotonous drudgery. From a teenage girl's viewpoint, it may rather be seen as the lack of parental authority, since the parent-child relationship, emphasizing the girl's cleverness and maturity, is practically turned upside down; thus the young protagonist has an opportunity to experience (even be proud of) her self-reliance. Bella says in the first volume that she was born 35 years old, and gets older day by day – it is definitely an ironic twist that she finally gives up the possibility of the actual adult human womanhood. But this choice ironically serves the aim that she never gets disappointed in the stay-at-home-mom ideal: firstly, the narrative comes to an end before the point when, years, or decades later, Bella may get tired of the eagerly chosen and romanticized "feminine" serving role and self-effacement; furthermore, considering my view that the vampire's *Bildung* gets stuck at the point of transformation, we may as well claim that she luckily escapes this unfortunate personal crisis, since she, after all, is petrified, together with her naïvely romantic concepts, as an eighteen-year-old girl.

In Place of Conclusion

Since within their fictional frames the realistic context is either neglected or predominated by a speculative play with "what if" and a non-mimetic representation of our reality, Gothic novels are often refused to be read seriously and are claimed to be deprived of all political, ideology-critical potential. One of the most important lesson Professor Marinovich-Resch has taught us was that this is not so. Not only do these oeuvres offer

symptomatic manifestations of collective cultural traumas, anxieties, and desires (both of milieus re/producing and interpreting them), but they also outline alternative plot-lines, social structures, systems of thought and identificatory positions which are fictionally tested and may eventually affect real life choices. The potentially beneficial influence and consciousness-raising potential of these fantastic fictional texts should not be devalued simply on accounts the large number of people they can reach. What these works metaphorically argue for is that on being afraid of monsters, instead of destroying we should embrace them, and try to understand our fears, along with its potential reasons and remedies.

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Her former students: Anna Zsófia Tóth, Anna Kérchy and Rita Antoni.