

SGF

STUDIES IN GOTHIC FICTION

“A Pleasure of that Too Intense Kind”: Women’s Desires and Identity in Stella Gibbons’s Gothic London

by Rebecca Mills

Article DOI: <https://doi.org/10.18573/sgf.32>



Cardiff University Press
Gwasg Prifysgol Caerdydd

Copyright © Rebecca Mills 2020

ISSN: 2156-2407



This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International Licence. To view a copy of this licence, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>

“A Pleasure of that Too Intense Kind”: Women’s Desires and Identity in Stella Gibbons’s Gothic London

Article DOI: <https://doi.org/10.18573/sgf.32>

Rebecca Mills

ABSTRACT

Stella Gibbons (1902-1989) is best known for the rural novel *Cold Comfort Farm* (1932), which Avril Horner and Sue Zlosnik discuss as “comic Gothic.” In contrast, Gibbons’s little-studied Hampstead novels *Westwood* (1946) and *Here Be Dragons* (1956) map a melancholic Gothic fragmented city, marked by the Second World War, in which romantic attachment and marriage threaten young women’s comfort, self-sufficiency, and subjectivity. Excessive emotion and eroticism imperil women’s independence and identity, while the men they desire embody the temptation and corruption of the city. Gibbons employs Gothic language of spells, illusion, and entrapment to heighten anxieties around stifling domesticity and sacrificing the self for love. The London Gothic geographies, atmosphere, and doubling of characters and spaces reinforce cautionary tales of the ill-effects of submission to love, while dedication to a career and community are offered as a means to resist Gothic desires and control Gothic spaces. This reading of space and female identity in Gibbons’s London novels is intended to extend and add nuance to scholarship of her works beyond *Cold Comfort Farm*, and contribute to the emerging study of the “middlebrow Gothic.”

KEYWORDS:

Middlebrow Gothic; London; female identity; female desire; Stella Gibbons

Stella Gibbons is best known for the rural comedy *Cold Comfort Farm* (1932), in which confident modern Flora Poste tidies and bridles wild passions and natures and renovates a decaying farmhouse into a site of productivity and order. The novel ends in nature girl Elfine’s domestication and the disposal of the Starkadder family according to their best interests as determined by Flora, who is herself organized into marriage. Avril Horner and Sue Zlosnik discuss the “comic Gothic” of the novel, noting its “witty dialogue between the traditions of rural England and the city” (96). In contrast, Gibbons’s little-studied London novels *Westwood* (1946) and *Here Be Dragons* (1956) present romance and marriage as threats to young women’s comfort, self-sufficiency, and subjectivity. Excessive emotion and eroticism imperil these women’s independence and identity, while the men they desire embody the temptation and corruption of the city. Gibbons employs Gothic language of spells, illusion, and entrapment to heighten anxieties around stifling domesticity and around subjugating the self to desire. The London Gothic settings and atmosphere, and the trope of the double, reinforce cautionary tales of the ill-effects of submission to love.

In *Cold Comfort Farm*, London is satirised as a sophisticated, orderly civilization, in contrast to the titular gloomy and chaotic Sussex farm. London, however, is in a state of wartime ruin and blackout in *Westwood* and structural and moral decay in the early 1950s setting of *Here Be Dragons*. The shadowed, uncertain city of porous borders, uncanny atmosphere, and fragmented spaces reflects the fragile psychic boundaries and identities of schoolteacher Margaret (*Westwood*) and tearoom waitress Nell (*Here Be Dragons*). The destabilising effects of desire on Margaret and Nell, as well as significant encounters with their romantic interests, are mapped onto a Gothic cityscape: misty Hampstead Heath, overgrown Highgate Cemetery, and streets illuminated by unnatural light. In both novels, love reflects this sense of disorder, and offers only illusion and dissolution. Meanwhile, disillusionment becomes a restorative process of resistance, resulting in the emotional and financial independence that afford Margaret and Nell a satisfying and regular life, as well as stable selfhood and a secure place in the city.

This reading of two of Gibbons’s London novels is intended to extend and add nuance to scholarship of her works beyond *Cold Comfort Farm* and contribute to the emerging

Articles

study of the “middlebrow Gothic.” Nicola Humble includes *Cold Comfort Farm* within the “feminine middlebrow,” and *Westwood* and *Here Be Dragons* certainly fit into this “literature of the middle classes, paying a meticulous attention to their shifting desires and self-images, mapping their swings of fortune at this most volatile stage in their history [the 1920s-1950s]” (3). Neither protagonist has a contented home life; as Humble observes, “the home is...an emblem of difficult and disturbing change” (111). Christopher Yiannitsaros argues for the “middlebrow Gothic” by combining this domestic preoccupation with a reading of the Gothic novel as a “nightmare or inverted reflection of the family home”, noting the “detrimental legacy of a particularly Gothicised form of Victorian parenting” in *Cold Comfort Farm* (14, 104). The concerns of the “feminine middlebrow” authors, however, extend beyond the home into the city, as Yiannitsaros notes in his brief discussion of the middlebrow Gothic “urban labyrinth” in terms of the “triangulation between [homosexual] sex, urban space, and the state” in Agatha Christie’s interwar work (154, 158). Similarly, Deborah L. Parsons examines the *flâneuse* in the work of modernist Virginia Woolf, but also her contemporary middlebrow authors Elizabeth Bowen and Rosamond Lehmann (among others). Although Parsons does not mention the Gothic, she remarks that after the Second World War, “the ordered London of neat squares and panoramic vistas falls into dreamlike ruins, rubble-strewn wastelands, and geographic fragmentation” (188). In Gibbons’s novels, this fragmented city acquires a distinctly Gothic shadow, which infuses the romantic, familial, and professional dilemmas of women, delineating an urban space for the feminine “middlebrow Gothic.”

The feminine middlebrow is often perceived as a “body of work in which domesticity is repeatedly an arena for feminine disappointment” (Hinds 294). The significance of the Gothic city in *Westwood* and *Here Be Dragons* complicates this domesticity-centric critical narrative, as the unstable city reflects the pressure and claustrophobia of the Gothic romance, while also affording the resolutions of the women’s narratives in careers and community, rather than unhappy homes or attachments. Both Margaret and Nell are disappointed in romantic terms, and by their families, but this disappointment is compensated by clarity and purpose. Margaret’s excessive emotion and unbridled imagination leave her in a precarious position both socially and psychologically; this uncertainty is reinforced by her fascination with the dangerous city and the uncanny houses she visits. Nell’s attraction to her seventeen-year old cousin John Gaunt threatens her innocence, common sense, and agency; he functions as “Virgil who was guiding her through London”—a Dantean London of dark desires (202).

Indeed, the title *Here Be Dragons* suggests unknown dangers and uncharted territory.

Gibbons’s unstable metropolis shares more with Bram Stoker’s *Dracula* (1897) and the modern war uncanny of T.S. Eliot than with the rural Gothic of D.H. Lawrence and Emily Brontë that she parodies in *Cold Comfort Farm*. This is not to say that *Westwood* and *Here Be Dragons* are not humorous. Indeed, the theatrical milieu of the former and the Bohemian rebels who enforce their own codes and rules in the latter are skilfully skewered. As Horner and Zlosnik argue, “Gothic’s tendency to [serious and comic] hybridity makes possible a mixed response to the loss of transcendence that characterizes the modern condition”; Gibbons’s satire here is inflected with mourning for lost innocence (3). Between 1939 and 1944, Gibbons published “A Woman’s Diary of the War” in the London parish magazine, *St Martin’s Review*. In 1942, she wrote, “My visit [to North London suburb] was an eerie and moving experience. I have never been to Pompeii but I’m sure I have now experienced something of the feeling that a dead city gives” (98). This elegiac eeriness and dislocation unsettles both *Westwood* and *Here Be Dragons* and informs Margaret’s and Nell’s parallel trajectories from innocence to experience to resilience.

Sara Wasson describes Gothic Second World War London as “a hallucinatory, claustrophobic and labyrinthine realm,” where searchlights and blackouts made the “redemptive light [of progress and civilization] vanish,” and encouraged reversion to “crime, transgression, and peril” (*Urban Gothic* 2, 12). *Westwood*’s night skies are sliced open by “searchlights sweeping and probing” above an “enormous labyrinth of dark streets” (116). In *Here Be Dragons*, London’s lights are back, but they are morbid rather than reassuring. John Gaunt takes Nell through the metropole at night: “[G]reen lamps sprayed out their poisonous soft light into the night—or the lilac ones cast their corpse-colour on the faces of the dark anonymous shapes waiting patiently below” (76). This juxtaposition of the funereal “lilac” and “corpse” recalls Eliot’s *The Waste Land*, as well as emphasising Gaunt’s own macabre qualities. Indeed, Gibbons shrouds Gaunt’s nocturnal habits and sadistic and controlling nature in vampiric associations, heightening the threat he poses to Nell. These are not settings where romance can thrive; there are few happy couples and homes in the novels. The darkness and unhomey lights of the city are dissipated, however, when Margaret and Nell have their epiphanies of purposeful spinsterhood; the conquering of the Gothic city is implicated in the rejection of dangerous Gothic modes of love.

These novels are exceptions in Gibbons’s *oeuvre* of this period, which tends towards romantic comedy, or in Aristotelian terms the restoration of familial, communal, and romantic order

Articles

after misunderstanding. Lynne Truss describes *Westwood* as “an interesting companion to *Cold Comfort Farm*, being concerned just as much with the eternal struggle between romantic illusion and common sense” (x). This tension is central to the Gothic, although not limited to that mode. In *Westwood* and *Here Be Dragons*, romantic illusion is uncanny and unwholesome, associated with ensnaring spells and delusive charm. Margaret obsesses over playwright Gerard Challis (and his home, the mansion of Westwood in Highgate): “The spell of his personal beauty so enchanted her that she found it difficult to keep from watching him,” while Westwood’s “charm was so strong that she felt any sacrifice was worthwhile to keep her right to visit” (340-341, 292). When Challis condescends to Margaret, she feels “a pleasure of that too intense kind,” which is sometimes countered by sensation of “eating sickly sweets” (209, 203). In *Here Be Dragons*, the narrator notes, “Love must be a powerful agent indeed; [Gaunt] wondered for an instant what it must be like to lie helpless under that spell” (256). John Gaunt resists emotional attachment himself but uses his charm to change and challenge Nell’s identity and lifestyle. When he leads Nell down a dark corridor in a decaying building, she realizes “there was not going to be much ordinary happiness between herself and her cousin John” (64). Intense hero worship and desire, then, resonate with the excessive sensibility of the Gothic. This excess, as well as the decadence and disorder suggested by “sickly sweets” and dark corridors, suggests Eugenia Delamotte’s observation of a “concern about the boundaries of the self” in Gothic romances (13). The unwholesome and disorienting nature of Margaret’s and Nell’s desires indicates this concern about boundaries. For Margaret and Nell to create stable selves, they must reject the enchantments woven by their objects of desire and their own tendencies towards masochistic self-sacrifice and, thereby, resist subsuming their own lives and needs to those of the men they love.

Desiring these specific men threatens Margaret’s and Nell’s agency and subjectivity, but the emotions of unrequited love and yearning in themselves are also coded as seductive but dangerous. In *Here Be Dragons*, the addiction of desire is a cautionary tale. Benedict, an English poet, is helplessly addicted to Gardis, a troubled young American woman. When he tries to leave her for a wholesome English girl, he is unsuccessful:

And he knew that if he were unwise enough to turn round now, and see her face, there would instantly rise up to hover between them the false cruel ghost, crueller than any torture inspired by true love, who haunts lovers when love is dying: the ghost born of memory and regret and the longing

to be once more enslaved. (210)

Loveless desire is a tortuous enslavement, while unhappy love is equally painfully and negatively charged and haunted. Middle-aged domesticated marriages are as painful and haunted as youthful romantic affairs. Margaret’s mother had been an “ordinary pleasant girl,” but after decades of marriage to Margaret’s unfaithful father, “the ghost of that girl, puzzled and bitterly unhappy, sometimes looked out from her face” (25). These Gothic spells and ghosts transform romance into bondage, but they also link love and desire to the shadows and melancholic spectrality of the cityscape.

Desire breaches spatial as well as emotional boundaries. Margaret penetrates the wrought-iron fence of Westwood mansion and onto the fringes of a “charmed circle” of aristocratic artists, but venturing beyond her own class and milieu endangers her independent identity—the title *Westwood* invokes the archetypal danger of the forest. Nell’s passage through dark doorways and corridors in *Here Be Dragons* is a symbolic crossing of boundaries: “Nell looked past [Gaunt] down the passage. It was black and it smelt. ‘I suppose if you’ve been living here it can’t be too bad,’ and she stepped over the threshold” (64). The threshold is inherently a liminal space; here, it represents Nell’s position between innocence and experience. The uninhibited sexuality Nell witnesses between Benedict and Gardis at the end of the passage is a shock to her middleclass morality, as is the “[m]ould, and damp dust, and decay and worse” that suggests death (68). This smell suggests that experience may become moral and mortal corruption.

FOG AND DESIRE

The London fog is “floating in visible wreaths” in *Westwood* and “an invasion of ghosts” in *Here Be Dragons* (87). In both novels, mists and fog are spatially and emotionally destabilising; they lend an uncanny atmosphere to the city, and the suggestion of funeral wreaths and spectrality to the men and relationships that Margaret and Nell desire. Mists and fogs also isolate Hampstead and Highgate from central London at key points. This distancing reflects Faye Hammill’s description of Gibbons’s position on the “fringes of metropolitan literary culture,” which she connects to “her life in the North London suburbs” (*Women, Celebrity and Literary Culture* 177). According to biographer Mark Gerson, Gibbons lived on Oakeshott Avenue, between Highgate Cemetery and Hampstead Heath (featured in both novels). Elsewhere, discussing Gibbons as an “intermodernist,”¹ Hammill argues that “the suburb offered an ideal vantage point for exploring both urban modernity and countryside traditionalism, and for observing both literary

Articles

modernism and the vestigial Romanticism of popular rural fiction” (“Ex-Centricity” 76). The tensions between the rural and the urban suggested by Hammill do appear in these novels, which foreground wild spaces within the city, but it is questionable whether Gibbons considered Highgate and Hampstead to be suburbs. In *Westwood* and *Here Be Dragons*, she calls them villages, stressing their “romantic and charming” streetscapes, as opposed to the “dull, neat suburbs” and dark labyrinthine city (*Westwood* 47, 301). Gibbons’s cartography is fluid and inconsistent; this categorisation challenges organising principles of centre/periphery. Indeed, Margaret gazes from Highgate “across London, that beloved city, that wounded, unmartial group of villages,” further disrupting an orderly understanding of the metropolis, while emphasising vulnerability rather than steadfastness in the face of the Blitz (424).

The fog, then, emphasises the liminal and precarious position of these villages within the city—they are sites of security and community under threat from both nature and modern civilisation. This layered spatiality is key to the middlebrow Gothic mode suggested here, as the romantic and domestic concerns of the middlebrow are mapped onto the villages of Hampstead and Highgate, which are surrounded both by the wild nature of the Heath and the decay and decadence of London. Margaret finds Gerard Challis’s dropped ration-book on a misty autumnal Hampstead Heath, and John Gaunt stalks Nell through the “choking mist” of Fitzjohn’s Avenue as she walks towards Hampstead (25). The history and the intertextual association of these sites are as important as their cartography. Margaret’s excessive Romantic sensibility is enhanced by Hampstead’s John Keats and Highgate’s Samuel Taylor Coleridge. Indeed, Gibbons’s precise “Then autumn came, with mists” (2) faintly echoes Keats’s opening line, “Season of mists and mellow fruitfulness” in “To Autumn” (1819). Margaret’s “feeling for nature” is ecstatic; “she found spring flowers and autumnal woods too beautiful to be borne,” suggesting the Romantic response to the sublime (49). Nell’s fog is not sublime; it is uncannily “writhing yellow mist” (24). While Keats is the patron saint of Margaret’s raptures, Nell’s journey carries hints of *Dracula*’s fog-shrouded London. The links between *Dracula* and Hampstead support the reading of John Gaunt as a (psychologically) vampiric and sinister

figure. The fact that both Margaret and Nell first encounter the objects of their desire in the fog means that it not only signifies the blindness and obscurity of this desire, but also embeds these men within the Gothic city—they embody its threat and treachery. Challis represents a poisoned chalice; Margaret drinks in his attention, only to find her excessive emotion “sickly” and her independence threatened, while Gaunt preys on Nell’s innocence and devotion at the cost of her secure subjectivity and agency. As a remedial measure, to counter the fog, both men eventually appear in bright light, which dispels the illusions they cast and enables psychic wounds to heal and borders to be repaired.

Margaret’s enraptured response to the Romantic fog on the autumnal Heath is emblematic of her passionate character. This capacity for passion, however, undermines Margaret’s happiness and self-sufficiency. Fred Botting observes that “Negative aesthetics [in the Gothic mode] is double: deficiency, the absence, exclusion or negation of knowledge, facts or things; and excess, an overflow of words, feelings, ideas, imagining” (6-7). Botting refers to horror as well as passion here, but the basic structure of the double “negative aesthetics” can be applied to Margaret. She is composed of negations and excesses, with little solid ground between them: “She had not a vocation for teaching”; she is “charmless,” and in her friendships there is the “sense of something wanting” (27, 21,123). What Margaret has in excess is feeling: “she had no poise; she cared too much about Art, about Love, about the World and the War, and *everything*,” as well as the tendency to lose herself (82; emphasis in original). The practical effect of Margaret’s lack of understanding of the metropolitan world and upper-class social circles, when coupled with her excess desire and emotion, is that she is left vulnerable both to exploitation by those she admires and to interior conflict that threatens to negate her own agency and subjectivity. Challis, as the married but philandering lord of Westwood manor, ought to embody a traditional Gothic threat to our heroine’s virtue, but instead he is a threat to her identity.

Challis is attracted by beautiful young naïve women he can influence, and Margaret is too plain for him. Although he enjoys Margaret’s unquestioning hero-worship, he pursues her beautiful friend Hilda under a false name, neglecting to inform her that he is a married grandfather. The threat to Margaret that Challis poses therefore comes insidiously from within Margaret’s own excessive imagination and emotion; she “had at first dreamt of letting her ideal love for Gerard Challis so fill her life with selfless beauty that it should transform all her ways of feeling and thinking” (330-331). Botting writes that a

1 Nick Hubble considers “intermodernist narrative free from the association of high or low (or middlebrow) culture” (167). For more on the intermodernist approach and framework, see Kristin Bluemel’s introduction to *Intermodernism: Literary Culture in Mid-Twentieth-Century Britain* (2009).

Articles

consequence of “negative aesthetics” is that “One might lose reason and the clearly demarcated sense of self and world it sustains, but the loss might also entail the excitement of shedding the restraints of reason and being invigorated by passion” (7). Gibbons figures that excitement and passion undermine reason and the clearly bordered self. It is therefore Margaret’s desire to be “selfless” and transformed by Challis that Gibbons marks as hazardous. His influence is attributed to “glamour,” meaning “a delusive or alluring charm,” and his appearance is eerie (*OED*). “His face was in shadow by contrast with the brilliant day outside, and his eyes seemed bluer than usual and were shining with a strange reflected radiance” (205-206). Challis’s erotic effect is also threatening: “[H]e turned to her once more with his grave searching look, and she experienced a delicious tremor” that leaves her in “exquisite confusion” (137). This orgasmic tremor undermines Margaret’s psychic stability.

Being under another’s influence physically, spiritually, and intellectually, is, for Gibbons, a negation of subjectivity and agency. Challis’s influence is particularly pernicious because, while his speeches (and plays) are nonsense—“Suffering is the anvil upon which the crystal sword of integrity is hammered”—their masochism and melodrama threaten the impulse towards simple happiness and sanity that Gibbons encourages (223)². Ultimately, Margaret rejects Challis’s pronouncements and the demands of his family, for whom she has become an unpaid babysitter, and asserts her agency and self-reliance with the help of his mother Lady Challis. She thereby switches her allegiance from a delusive figure of masculine authority to steady matriarchal feminine wisdom. This epiphany takes place not in the hazy wilderness-within-the-city of Hampstead Heath, or in the “labyrinth of dark streets” of Blitz London, but in bright daylight in an orchard in Bedfordshire, where the season of mists can be translated into mellow fruitfulness (116).

Nell finds the London fog “pleasantly exciting” rather than glorious; Nell can be read as sense to Margaret’s sensibility (24). She has an “excellent sense of direction,” and she is pragmatic and bourgeois rather than artistic (24). Unlike Margaret, Nell is sexually and romantically inexperienced. Her meeting with Gaunt in the fog inspires a “shock of helpless delight,” a seismic quake rather than a tremor (27). Anxiety about this helplessness, as well as the figure who inspires it, is figured via the Gothic tradition of the vampire, with echoes of Bram Stoker’s *Dracula* (1897) in particular. Like *Dracula*’s

ship emerging from an unseasonable August sea-mist on the coast of Whitby, Gaunt emerges onto Fitzjohn’s Avenue from “a freak March fog” (291). Nell’s first glimpse of him is shrouded in uncertainty: “She glanced across into the yellow dimness. Could she see someone there? a tall black someone? She thought that she could just make out a white face. And then, as she looked, it was no longer there” (24). This dark figure with the white face parallels Mina’s vision of “a livid white face” emerging “out of the mist,” and, as Van Helsing explains, *Dracula* “can at times vanish and come unknown” (Stoker 241, 221). Gaunt and the fog that hides his approach, then, are both threatening; Nell’s entrapment in desire is foreshadowed by the “yellow haze which shut her in like a writhing impalpable wall on all sides” (25).

Charitably considered, Challis does not intentionally exploit Margaret’s hero-worship, and his spell succeeds due to Margaret’s own weaknesses. Gaunt’s vampiric associations, however, make him an actively malicious, if not malevolent, figure. Gaunt’s very name reinforces his vampiric threat; the etymology of “gaunt” includes “A yawn, a gape”—both openings, or frames for nothingness (recalling the fog), as well as an open mouth (suggesting the bite). Commonly-understood meanings include “haggard,” as in Shakespeare’s thin and ill John of Gaunt in *Richard II*, but archaic usage also included “Hungry, greedy, ravenous” (*OED*). This nomenclature, then, reflects Gaunt’s hunger to dominate Nell and to control his milieu: “This moving about of human beings and influencing, if only in small ways, the pattern of their lives, was what he liked doing best next to wandering, in a dream, yet observing and hearing all that was going on about him, through London’s streets” (172). Gaunt’s waking dream here recalls the vampire’s trance, while his often sadistic manipulations of Nell’s lifestyle and appearance, and his friends’ romances, are a psychological form of the vampire’s mesmeric powers.

Gaunt, then, is part *flâneur*, part *Dracula*; London is his domain, and the villages-within-the-city of Highgate and Hampstead lie particularly within his sphere of influence. As Jamieson Ridenhour summarizes, *Dracula*’s purpose is [T]he bringing of Gothic Other, the fringe-dwelling degenerate, into the realm of the progressive Britisher. Whereas Lucy as vampire confines herself to true Gothic sites on the outlying districts of London—Hampstead Heath with its wild landscapes and history of highwaymen and crime, and Highgate Cemetery’s lushly overgrown and wooded lanes—*Dracula* seems intent on

² Truss remarks that a comic element in *Westwood* is that Margaret cannot help disagreeing with Challis and then being horrified at her own presumption (xi).

Articles

penetrating into the center of the city. (72-73) As an unemployed and artistic Bohemian with no fixed address, between school and National Service (a legacy of the Second World War), Gaunt is a “fringe-dweller”; as a novelist creating a “map of London, carved in pouring molten crystal words,” he captures the city (152). Gaunt’s interlude with Nell in Highgate Cemetery reinforces the Gothic overtones of Gibbons’s spatiality as well as his morbid nature; Gaunt prefers darkness and often complains about “bestly strong light” (31). We are told that, as a boy, he was found “gloating over a squashed frog in the road,” which suggests sadistic tendencies (11). Indeed, he views Nell as a predator views a helpless creature: “[Your bones are] awfully small, aren’t they, Nell, like some delicate bleached baby rabbit...” (27). The greatest threat to Nell’s peace of mind is the helplessness caused by her intense awareness of John’s masculinity: “She had taken such unconscious pleasure in the sight of John’s white skin, ..., and sleepy-looking eyes whose colour she could not distinguish, by this light, that the image was still floating before her mind’s eye...” (26). “Floating” further embeds Gaunt within the mist and the vampire tradition, as Gibbons emphasizes the connection between eroticism and disorientation. Nell’s “excellent sense of direction” has been thrown off course by the Gothic atmosphere and John’s charm.

The fog invites a Romantic haze for Margaret, and a gaslit Victorian London for Nell. In both cases, the fog and the men it conceals pose a threat to temporal and spatial situatedness. The cityscape reflects this threat; ungovernable nature undermines London’s civilization and modernity. In *Westwood*, as a result of the Blitz, “Weeds gr[o]w in the City itself; a hawk [i]s seen hovering over the ruins of the Temple, and foxes [raid] the chicken roosts in the gardens of houses near Hampstead Heath” (1). The rural, here, is threatening rather than idyllic and signals a breakdown in order.³ Similarly, *Here Be Dragons* links pastoral nature to death rather than idyll, alluding to Matthew Arnold’s elegy “Thyrsis” (1865) in the chapter title, “And with the bloom go I!” This refers to Gaunt’s foreshadowed early death about fifteen years later, as well as the end of Nell’s innocence via Gaunt’s final betrayal. Set in Highgate Cemetery, this chapter contains Nell’s and Gaunt’s final amicable conversation. In Highgate Cemetery, nature challenges monument, paralleling the proliferating weeds from *Westwood*: “The tombstones were almost buried in green plumelike weeds sweeping across them, dark rich moss obliterating once-beloved names glowed in the mild air” (279). This erasure undermines the immortality

promised to John and his place in Nell’s memory. Nature, then, is as devouring, disorienting, and uncanny as desire.

REFLECTIONS AND SHADOWS

In both novels, Gibbons develops the threats and vulnerabilities revealed by the fog via the Gothic trope of the double. Mirrors, shadows, and temporal dislocation destabilize identity, spaces, and history. Paralleled and fragmented characters and sites embody and map “all the possibilities, which, had they been realized, might have shaped our [protagonist’s] destiny, and to which [their] imagination still clings” (Freud, 11). Along with *Dracula*, then, the Victorian women’s Gothic haunts these novels, specifically “the split between the docile Victorian heroine and her mad double” (Gilbert and Gubar xxxviii). But the double also reinforces the fragility of modern identity. As Catherine Spooner observes, “Initially, the rise of the double is clearly due to the emergent notion of the individual in modernity. It is only when value is invested in a unique, coherent subjecthood that fear can be generated through its duplication or disintegration” (293). In *Westwood*, doubled spaces threaten to trap Margaret into stifling domesticity, even as their mirrored surfaces undermine her “unique, coherent subjecthood.” In *Here Be Dragons*, American girl Gardis embodies both incoherent subjecthood and active sexuality. This combination of negatively-coded attributes reinforces the cautionary link between desire and “disintegration” in this novel. Gibbons’s employment of Gothic images and spaces to illustrate the breaching and reparation of the “boundaries of the self,” then, is informed by a modern preoccupation with unstable subjectivity (Delamotte 13). As Julian Wolfreys writes, “the comprehension of the Gothic is expanded through an understanding of the role Gothic effects have to play in the constitution of a modern, fragmented subjectivity” (13). This layering of the traditional and modern Gothic to examine women’s identity and emplacement within the home is crucial to the “Gothic middlebrow.” Yiannitsaros argues that Christie’s Gothic engagement with nineteenth-century literary culture suggests “a contradictory interplay of simultaneous desire and distance characteristic of the ‘middlebrow’ fiction produced by women writers of this time”; a similar dynamic is evident here (6). Gibbons emphasises the awkward position of Margaret and Nell and their generation; they are poised between the old world and the new, inheriting the anxieties of both—the sensitive conscience and class-consciousness of the Victorian novel and the hollow and splintered subjectivities of modernism.

Westwood-at-Highgate is mirrored by “*Westwood-at-Brockdale*.” The former is an elegant historic mansion; the

3 For more on uncanny nature during World War II, see Sara Wasson’s *Urban Gothic of the Second World War: Dark London* (2010).

Articles

latter is a pretty cottage in the fictional suburb of Brockdale—“the coincidence struck [Margaret] as uncanny” (257). Margaret visits the cottage to look after Linda, the daughter of Dick Fletcher, her father’s journalist colleague. He is a potential husband until he marries his housekeeper; his home represents the “unrealized destiny” of caring for somebody else’s children, an opportunity and destiny also offered by the Challis household. Both Westwoods and futures threaten entrapment and a surrender of agency and employ uncanny imagery to reinforce this threat. The surface glamour of the mansion conceals its interior decay—public rooms gleam with marble and mirrors, but back corridors are traditionally Gothic: “cells and caverns [...], with the concavities of worm-eaten wooden staircases above them” (108, 131). A “faint odour of cold marble and wood smoke” further suggests an unhomey combination of hotel and mausoleum (131). Westwood-at-Brockdale is equally unhomey: “That miniature fairy palace of eternal childhood that was no true childhood just because it was eternal!” (265). This uncanniness is problematically linked to Linda, described via early-twentieth-century terms for cognitive disability and Down syndrome. She seems to exist only to develop Margaret’s character: “[T]he vacancy in Linda’s eyes and her vague, unfinished movements made [Margaret’s] flesh faintly creep. The child was [...] very different from a normal child, and the fairy prettiness of this house that was both her world and her prison did not make Margaret feel any less uncomfortable” (257). Margaret’s physical reaction here is the inverse of the “delicious tremor” of Westwood. Overcoming her “pity and revulsion” towards Linda in favor of unselfish kindness becomes a praiseworthy sign of evolving empathy and self-mastery (256). Margaret’s closeness to Dick Fletcher is inflected more ambiguously, however: “[S]he was doing what she had never done in her life before; controlling her own feelings in order to make the occasion pleasant for a tired man” (264). Later Margaret feels that the “sugary prettiness” of the house would “stifle” her, a metaphor for the subservience and claustrophobia that the emotional labour of marriage would entail (382). This metaphor also invokes the sensation of too many “sickly sweets” that disrupts her hero-worship of Challis.

One of the ironies of the novel, and these parallels, is that the frozen time of the suburban cottage is echoed in the Highgate mansion, which Margaret does not realize—Challis’s plays repeat plots, and his extra-marital affairs repeat the same patterns. At Westwood-at-Brockdale, Linda’s wind-chimes emit a “silvery tinkling”; at Westwood-at-Highgate, “the clock silverily struck one” (254, 184). Mansion and cottage, then, share a stasis and disconnection from the everyday world—although

at Westwood-at-Highgate this is framed as tradition rather than claustrophobic stagnation. Indeed, Challis’s daughter Hebe presents herself as a “little girl dressed up,” despite her three children, as if mimicking her father’s inability to mature and parodying Gibbons’s description of Linda’s arrested state (420). Margaret, then, ricochets between Westwoods, trapped in a hall of mirrors, her value in both houses primarily utilitarian.

But amid these dazzling silvery surfaces, a shadow links Margaret to the Victorian “docile heroine.” In the sewing-room at Westwood, a women’s space between the public glitter and the worm-eaten back corridors, Margaret finds that “It was pleasant to think of women sewing here in the sunlight throughout the last two hundred years; the shadow which the seated, peaceful figure threw upon the wall changing in the course of time” (191). Here the continuity of sewing women represents privilege and peace, a pleasant rather than stifling domestic destiny. Nevertheless, Gibbons balances her recommendation of domesticity and its productive pleasures with a warning against excessive subservience to the demands of others; an elderly maid at Westwood collapses and dies, exhausted by her lifetime of service. “If you go to Hebe [as a live-in nanny] you will be swamped,” says Lady Challis (444). The challenge for Margaret, then, which foreshadows the challenge Nell faces in *Here Be Dragons*, is learning the anti-Gothic values of “ordinary happiness” and peace, while embracing life outside the home, beyond the shadow of the angel in the house.

Margaret is trapped between households that offer a borrowed and potentially stifling domesticity, while Nell is threatened with a destiny of destructive passion and dissolution, even death. Gaunt explicitly signifies submission: “She was quite sure that, if she did [admit her feelings for him], she would go into slavery” (289). The unhappy and vindictive Gardis embodies the harmful consequences of submitting to desire, making her Nell’s double. Nell’s English country-bred wholesomeness contrasts with Gardis’s corruption and fragmentation: “[Gardis] was hopelessly—yes...the analyst had informed her parents that nothing could be done—immature, unintegrated, inharmonious, schizo—helplessly, in short, split. She had grinned, and said that she did not care if she were; you got more fun that way” (101, emphasis and ellipses in original). Gardis is split between drifting “bad little girl” and elegant and emplaced “Miss Randolph of Widemeadows, Long Island” (230-231). These two selves coexist uneasily, fused only by desire and (self-)destructive impulses. Gardis’s sophisticated, overt sexuality is a foil for Nell’s innocence and virginity; Gardis’s “small feverish hands” contrast with Nell’s “cool freshness” (67). Gardis’s modernity mocks

Articles

Nell's morality and regard for convention, and while Nell develops from a lovesick teenager to a worldly entrepreneur, Gardis remains in stasis as a heavily made-up, tousle-haired, dirty-trousered "deliberately straying child" (101).

Gibbons repeatedly reinforces Gardis's foreignness and position as an outsider, to the point of racist othering—she is a "baby girl-goblin" and a "baby golliwog-witch" (217, 18). Gaunt compares Gardis to Poe's Ligeia, emphasising her uncanniness and Gothic disruptive power. Nevertheless, Ligeia suggests victimhood as well as vampirism: Ligeia is "most violently a prey to the tumultuous vultures of stern passion" (Poe 96). This rending reflects Gardis's "split" condition. Gardis's feelings for Benedict shift between adult desire and infantile—or indeed vampiric—need. When he is about to leave her, she feels not "love or the other thing, it [i]s like being terribly hungry" (229). This makes Benedict dominant. His primary feeling towards Gardis is "an unbearable pang of pity" for her vulnerable little-girl-self, which leads him to dedicate his life to her, and their mutual misery, ensuring that Gardis remains "helplessly split" (232).

The "shock" experienced by Nell when she first meets John in the fog is a possible first step towards Gardis's fragmentation; she embodies Nell's potential to become corrupted and "split"—were Nell to choose sex and the modern disordered existence that Gaunt, Benedict, and Gardis lead. A decaying mirror augments the positioning of Nell and Gardis as doubles and highlights this danger:

There was a mirror on the wall, so old that its last traces of beauty had been broken down into the strange repulsiveness attaching to domestic objects of great age; [...] Yet its degradation was not quite complete: the few patches of silver left on the blotched surface returned the fragmented images of the two girls with touching purity and faithfulness. (68)

Like the wall of the sewing-room at Westwood with its feminine silhouettes, this mirror contains traces of the past. The emphasis here, however, is on fragmentation rather than preservation. It is unclear whether the remaining silver suggests a surviving truth in Gardis or whether Nell is the silver surrounded by corruption. Either way, Nell must resist the fate of her double.

The city of London reflects the potential dislocating and corrupting effects of Gaunt's lifestyle. Jerry White remarks that: London... embodies in its purest form modern international capitalism in all its superficial brilliance and lure. This is a world where decent people are sucked in, used up and spat out. There is a

kinder London, and there are ways of coping with its speed and steel and shine. But for the innocent it is a dangerous soul-stealing place. (5)

White notes that this "sense of danger never left the coming-of-age novel [such as *Here Be Dragons*]" (5). Indeed, Nell's encounters with metropolitan decadence tarnish her innocence, while her nocturnal wanderings in Gaunt's wake dislocate her sense of identity. In a dimly-lit espresso bar, choking on cigarette smoke and surrounded by dirt, drunkenness, and drug users, Nell sees a girl: "She was just wondering if the girl felt as out of things as she looked, when she saw that the far wall was a mirror" (79). This delayed recognition is a further "shock," another step towards disintegrated subjecthood. Nell in her tweed is out of place in this transgressive night side of the city. The "dark, grimy and indescribably melancholy street" of the espresso bar where unemployed and unproductive youths linger over a single cup of coffee forms a counterculture to the glamour of the streets "starry with the winking and glittering of advertising slogans," symbols of commerce, productivity, and modernity (80, 77). This split between gleam and dirt, then, suggests the urban Gothic by challenging the notion of modern London as a cohesive and stable entity. Ultimately, however, Nell attains a position of control—of herself, her emotions, and her environment, as she looks forward to the "relief" of "peacefully sharing her life and work with [her old school-friend] Elizabeth" in an espresso bar they manage together (261). Their café is an upscale version of Gaunt's grimy haunts; it implies a shift from the ladylike tearoom where Nell first works to an anonymous urban service culture and a "coping with [London's] speed and steel and shine" (White 5). Perhaps it also suggests the loss of individuality to capitalism rather than desire.

Margaret and Nell may be surrounded by cautionary mirrors of passionate relationships, but marriages and domesticity are equally flawed. Margaret observes the "worry and sordidness and pettiness of being married" in her parents (13). Nell watches "the body of someone who had given way unrestrainedly to Love being lowered into the grave" after Miss Berringer, her boss at the tearoom, commits suicide after an affair with a married man (280). In both novels, then, pervasive uneasiness about love and marriage is translated into Gothic imagery that reinforces themes of breached spatial and psychological boundaries.

SPACES FOR RESISTANCE

If love is uncanny and unhappy, particularly for women, remaining unattached becomes the *Heimlich* alternative. Clare Kahane writes,

[T]he female Gothic depends as much on longing and desire as on fear and antagonism. Yet if it frequently indulges some of the more masochistic components of female fantasy, representing the pleasure of submission, it also encourages an active exploration of the limits of identity. Ultimately, however, in this essentially conservative genre—and for me this is the real Gothic horror—the heroine is compelled to resume a quiescent, socially acceptable role or to be destroyed. (342)

Both novels conclude with a rejection of Gothic desires and domesticity. Margaret's and Nell's concluding focus on their careers offers an alternative to the conservative conclusion proffered by Kahane, as well as to the stifling and trivial domestic sphere that worries middlebrow writers. For Margaret and Nell, resistance results in financial independence as well as a restoration and integration of identity, emotion, and intellect.

This progress from rupture to stability is reflected in the spatialities of the novels. The disruptive dynamics of female desire and male (self-)possession parallel the porous boundaries between nature and the metropolis, and Gothic tradition and uncanny modernity. The illusion and decadence of the male protagonists are reflected in hollow and chilling luxurious interiors in *Westwood* and decaying streets and lodgings in *Here Be Dragons*. The novels end in illuminated spaces; their protagonists assert control over their environments and destinies, finding stable pieces of ground where Gothic desires and threats can be resisted. Margaret finds enlightenment and peace in the middle of fecund nature, in an “unfamiliar world of mossy branches and rustling clusters of dark-green leaves through which bl[ows] faint scents of bark and sunned fruit” (440). It takes John's final pointless lie to change Nell, not that he realises this. He seeks a favourable image of himself in her, but he does not realise “how greatly Nell [i]s in fact altered” (314). It is implied that she has become less “faithful and forgiving,” but at least she is whole (315).

Margaret is dazed by the glow of the leaves and the fog of Hampstead Heath, dazzled by the glitter of Westwood-at-Highgate, and bemused by the silvery prettiness of Westwood-at-Brockdale. At night, London is a “silent, darkened city with its endless maze of houses,” punctuated by air raid sirens and searchlights (116). Nature in daylight, then, offers sanctuary from deceptive and dangerous spaces. Margaret resists Challis's charms when she admires wildflowers in the country, while he finds her ridiculous. She finally asserts her taste: “You *couldn't* have anything lovelier than that field of buttercups,

she thought rebelliously; what does he want?” (321). Margaret's growing ability to find beauty in the ordinary rather than the sublime or intense is underscored here. The disenchantment and rebellion triggered here is amplified when Margaret finds him picnicking with Hilda in Kew Gardens, and learns he has been lying to Hilda: “It was as if she had been reverencing someone who did not exist” (406). Disillusionment turns to contempt: “I suppose it wasn't until this afternoon that he came *out into the open*. As if he were tracking something! Ugh!” (412). Challis is no longer a beautiful visionary hidden in the shadows; the light reveals him to be an ordinary, sordid predator. After the melodrama of this meeting, Margaret “began to take more pleasure in her teaching” (417). The shattering of her illusions leaves Margaret with a wound, however, until her conversation with Lady Challis in an orchard in Bedfordshire inspires her to accept her life as a single woman, develop her interests in art and history, and turn her energies towards her community rather than an individual: “So Margaret left the shade of the tree and went out to meet the procession [carrying fruit], and joined it, and helped” (448). Margaret's journey towards clarity is supported by her love for nature; her passion for the shadowy Challis fades in the light of day.

Nell's disillusionment is a journey from the smoke and mirrors of seedy cafés and crumbling lodgings to a “closed door whose shape was outlined with a thread of gold light” (312). The process from blindness to illumination begins in a café in Highgate where “they could hardly see, through the smoke” (285):

The charm of his voice was on her, as it had so often been during the past six months. But now it was September ... and Benedict, ... and Miss Berringer? The ones who had yielded completely? How was it with all of them? She did not look at him, but only listened; she wanted to look, but something inside herself was stirring faintly and rebelliously, under the spell. (285)

The influence of these cautionary examples of unhappy and destructive love is key to Nell's rebellion. Nevertheless, she colludes with John to escape National Service and rushes to Paris where he claims to be hiding. When she arrives, she finds no sign of him—he lied to her. She returns home, exhausted: “The room, now, was dreamlike too. Only her anger burned and burned and was real...Well, now she did not love him any more” (310). This burning anger is cleansing; it destroys the floating image of vampiric Gaunt—and Nell herself becomes a space for resistance. Gaunt resurfaces in a neighbouring cottage. Nell stands in the doorway, the final threshold of her rite of passage, observing him stroking a cat, oblivious to her troubles and

Articles

exhaustion. In the final chapter, Gaunt gazes at Nell through the window of her espresso bar, a shift in focalization that shows her on the inside, taking ownership of a space in the city, and him on the periphery. This is no longer Dante's London: it is hers.

Jenny Hartley observes that women's war writing can often be read as a "fiction of affirmation," "resistance writing," with women writers "conscious of writing history," and willing to "join the collective enterprise" (9, 10, 9). Nevertheless, Hartley notes, there were reservations about this communal project:

While women writers felt part of wartime Britain, their co-option into the war-machine had two inescapable qualifications. War, although potentially emancipatory for women, could never be their congenial habitat. It brought separation, suffering, and death; and its values and codes of behaviour were inimical to many women. (11)

Westwood ends with its heroine Margaret renouncing hope of personal and romantic happiness in favour of communal service; throughout the novel, the routines of air raid sirens, rationing, and blackout evoke a resigned if not resilient communal spirit. In *Here Be Dragons*, social hierarchies are less certain, communal spirit has dissipated, and ideals of duty, bravery, and morality have lost significance for the young generation. National Service is an inconvenience to be dodged rather than an assurance of peace and military strength. Monuments to the past, such as Highgate Cemetery, are unkempt and threatened by sprawling nature; the London of the early 1950s suggests regression and disorder rather than progress. These novels, then, show cracks in the formulae of community, heritage, and reconstruction, and from these cracks the Gothic city emerges. It is these cracks, however, that offer Nell and Margaret their chance for a self-determined and productive life.

References

- Arnold, Matthew. *Dover Beach and Other Poems*. Dover Thrift Editions, 2000.
- Bluemel, Kristin. "Introduction: What is Intermodernism?" *Intermodernism: Literary Culture in Mid-Twentieth-Century Britain*, edited by Kristin Bluemel, Edinburgh UP, 2009, pp. 1-18.
- Botting, Fred. *Gothic*. 2nd ed., Routledge, 2014.
- DeLamotte, Eugenia C. *Perils of the Night: A Feminist Study of Nineteenth-Century Gothic*. Oxford UP, 1990.
- Freud, Sigmund. *The Uncanny*, edited by Hugh Haughton and translated by David McLintock. 1919. Penguin Modern Classics, 2003.
- Gerson, Mark. "Gibbons, Stella Dorothea (1902–1989)." *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, 2004, www.oxforddnb.com/view/10.1093/ref:odnb/9780198614128.001.0001/odnb-9780198614128-e-1005822. Accessed 11 Sep. 2019.
- Gibbons, Stella. "A Woman's Diary of the War." *St. Martin's Review*, St. Martin-in-the-Fields 1942/1943.
- . *Cold Comfort Farm*. 1932. Penguin Classics, 2008.
- . *Here Be Dragons*. 1956. White Lion Publishers Ltd., 1971.
- . *Westwood*, edited by Lynne Truss. 1946. Vintage, 2011.
- Gilbert, Sandra, and Susan Gubar. *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination*. Yale UP, 2000.
- Hammill, Faye. "Stella Gibbons, Ex-Centricity and the Suburb." *Intermodernism: Literary Culture in Mid-Twentieth-Century Britain*, edited by Kristin Bluemel, Edinburgh UP, 2009, pp. 75-92.
- . *Women, Celebrity, and Literary Culture Between the Wars*. U of Texas P, 2007.
- Hartley, Jenny. *Millions Like Us: British Women's Fiction of the Second World War*. Virago, 1997.
- Hinds, Hilary. "Ordinary Disappointments: Femininity, Domesticity, and Nation in British Middlebrow Fiction, 1920–1944," *MFS Modern Fiction Studies*, vol. 55, no. 2, 2009, pp. 293-320. DOI:10.1353/mfs.0.1619
- Hubble, Nick. "Intermodern Pastoral: William Empson and George Orwell." *New Versions of Pastoral: Post-Romantic, Modern, and Contemporary Responses to the Tradition*, edited by David James and Philip Tew, Fairleigh Dickinson UP, 2009, pp. 125–35.
- Humble, Nicola. *The Feminine Middlebrow Novel 1920s to 1950s: Class, Domesticity and Bohemianism*. Oxford UP, 2001.
- Horner, Avril and Sue Zlosnik. *Gothic and the Comic Turn*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2005.
- Kahane, Clare. "The Gothic Mirror." *The (M)other Tongue: Essays in Feminist Psychoanalytic Interpretation*, edited by Shirley Nelson Garner, Claire Kahane, and Madelon Sprengnether, Cornell UP, 1985, pp. 334-51.
- Keats, John. *Major Works*. Edited by Elizabeth Cook, Oxford UP, 1990.
- Parsons, Deborah L. *Streetwalking the Metropolis: Women, the City, and Modernity*. Oxford UP, 2000.
- Poe, Edgar Allan. "Ligeia." *The Collected Tales and Poems of Edgar Allan Poe*. Wordsworth, 2004, pp. 94-105.
- Ridenhour, Jamieson. *In Darkest London: The Gothic Cityscape in Victorian Literature*. Scarecrow Press, 2013.

Articles

- Spooner, Catherine. "Cosmo-Gothic: The Double and the Single Woman," *Women: A Cultural Review*, vol. 12, no. 3, 2001, pp. 292-305. DOI:10.1080/09574040110097292.
- Stoker, Bram. *Dracula*. Edited by Roger Luckhurst, Oxford UP, 2011.
- Truss, Lynne. Introduction. *Westwood*, by Stella Gibbons, Vintage, 2011, pp. ix-xv.
- Wasson, Sara. *Urban Gothic and the Second World War: Dark London*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2010.
- White, Jerry. "Unreal City: Reflections on London and the Novel in the Twentieth Century," *History Workshop Journal*, vol. 56, no.1, 2003, pp. 1-32. DOI: 10.1093/hwj/56.1.1.
- Wolfreys, Julian. *Victorian Hauntings: Spectrality, Gothic, the Uncanny and Literature*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2002.
- Yiannitsaros, Christopher. *Deadly Domesticity: Agatha Christie's 'Middlebrow' Gothic, 1930-1970*. 2016. Warwick University. PhD Thesis. webcat.warwick.ac.uk/record=b3067279-S15.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

REBECCA MILLS
rmills@bournemouth.ac.uk

Rebecca Mills is a Lecturer in Communication and English at Bournemouth University, teaching crime fiction, celebrity culture, and other literary and media modules. She recently co-edited *Agatha Christie Goes to War* (Routledge 2019) with J.C. Bernthal, and contributed the chapter "Detecting the Blitz: Trauma and Memory in Christie's Post-War Writings."