

The Gothic Family
and the Male and Female Gothic
in Stephen King and Peter Straub's
The Talisman

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RANTALA, MERVI: The Gothic Family and the Male and Female Gothic in Stephen King and Peter Straub's *The Talisman*

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Pro gradussani tutkin Stephen Kingin ja Peter Straubin romaania *The Talisman*. Lähestyn sitä gotiikan, erityisesti goottilaisen perheen sekä mies- ja naisgotiikan näkökulmista. Tavoitteenani on selvittää kuinka nämä käsitteet ovat läsnä romaanin rakenteessa ja hahmoissa sekä millä tavoin ne ilmenevät romaanin tapahtumissa.

Työni alussa esittelen lyhyesti romaanin kaksi kirjoittajaa, Stephen Kingin ja Peter Straubin, joita voidaan pitää eräinä aikamme merkittävimmistä kauhukirjailijoista. Seuraavaksi esittelen gotiikkaa, sen historiaa ja tärkeimpiä edustajia sekä piirteitä, keskittyen erityisesti sen kahteen suurimpaan sisäiseen kahtiajakoon, eli brittiläiseen ja amerikkalaiseen gotiikkaan sekä erityisesti työni kannalta olennaisiin mies- ja naisgotiikkaan.

Työni analyysiluvuissa käsittelem erityisesti naisgotiikassa keskeistä poissaolevan äidin-käsitettä sekä romaanin päähenkilöä naisgotiikan sankarittaren roolissa. Seuraavaksi lähestyn romaanin roistohahmoa gotiikassa yleisen pahan isähahmon sekä miesgotiikan sankari/roistohahmon näkökulmista. Tarkastelen myös romaanin perhekäsitystä goottilaisen perheen näkökulmasta. Lopuksi analysoin romaania mies- ja naisgotiikan lähtökohdista, tavoitteenani selvittää kumpaan näistä romaani voidaan laskea kuuluvaksi.

Työni lopussa esitän johtopäätökseni, joissa totean romaanin perhekäsityksen muistuttavan gotiikan vastaavaa, mutta olevan kuitenkin Kingin ja Straubin moderni versio siitä. Myös romaanin poissaoleva äiti-teema ja päähenkilö goottilaisen sankarittaren roolissa sekä paha isä-hahmo ja goottilainen sankari/roisto-hahmo muistuttavat perinteisestä gotiikasta löytyviä, mutta sisältävät myös Kingin ja Straubin tyyliteltyjä muutoksia. Vastauksena mies- ja naisgotiikkaan liittyvään tutkimuskysymykseeni, totean romaanin muistuttavan pintarakenteeltaan enemmän perinteistä miesgotiikkaa, mutta pohjimmiltaan ja keskeisimpien teemojensa puolesta luen sen kuitenkin kuuluvaksi enemmän perinteisen naisgotiikan piiriin.

Avainsanat: King, Straub, goottilainen perhe, miesgotiikka, naisgotiikka

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1. Introduction

My thesis will deal with the Gothic and how it manifests itself in Stephen King and Peter Straub's novel *The Talisman* (first published in 1984). The choice of the novel that I wanted to examine in this thesis was not a difficult one. *The Talisman* was the first novel by either King or Straub that I ever read, and ever since that first encounter with it, I have been absolutely fascinated with it. This was also the beginning of my long-time love affair with especially Stephen King's, but also with Peter Straub's work.

The reason why I chose to look at the novel from the point of view of the Gothic literary tradition was that even though *The Talisman* is not a Gothic novel as such, but could rather be considered to belong to the horror or fantasy genre, it does, however, deal with some of the basic concepts and themes of the Gothic genre. I thought that it would be interesting to see how these are present in the structure, events and characters of the novel. Especially the similarities and dissimilarities in the manner in which family is depicted in both the novel and the Gothic were of particular interest to me, along with the representation of the male and female Gothic found in the novel. In addition, I felt that it would be interesting to analyze the collaboration of two of the leading horror novelists of our time, Stephen King and Peter Straub, from a little more unusual point of view of the Gothic, rather than from the more obvious ones of horror and fantasy, which is most often the case when discussing the work of either author, and, in particular, *The Talisman*.

I begin my thesis by first presenting some biographical background of both authors, with the emphasis slightly on Stephen King, followed by a brief discussion on why Stephen King is such a major writer in the horror genre while Peter Straub is still considerably less successful in terms of popularity and book sales. I will also offer a very brief summary of the novel. I will then proceed to discuss the Gothic and its themes and elements and give some general information of the genre and its representatives. I will then apply the Gothic to *The*

Talisman and analyze the novel in this light, concentrating on the Gothic family and on the notions of the male and female Gothic.

In the words of Stephen King "We are going into a number of dark places, but I think I know the way. Just don't let go of my arm."¹

1.1. Stephen King, Peter Straub and *The Talisman*

Stephen King was born in Portland, Maine in 1947. He attended the University of Maine on a scholarship and later taught English at the same institution. With the publication of his first novel, *Carrie*, in 1974 and the subsequent film adaptation of it in 1976, he became a well-known name around the world. He is considered the master of horror and suspense and has remained at the top of best selling lists all over the world for more than thirty years. Some of his most famous novels include *Salem's Lot* (1975), *The Shining* (1977), *The Stand* (1978), *Cujo* (1981), *Pet Sematary* (1983), *It* (1986), *Misery* (1987), *The Green Mile* (1996), *Bag of Bones* (1998), *Hearts in Atlantis* (1999), *From a Buick 8* (2002) and *The Dark Tower*-series (1982-2004). Even though he lives and works both in Bangor, Maine and Florida, it is in his native Maine that he really feels he belongs.

Stephen King's interest in the supernatural derives from an early age, he himself states that "[it] goes back as far as I can remember."² He was an enthusiastic consumer of horror and science fiction films of the 1950s and 1960s; his particular favorites were the films directed by Roger Corman which had taken their titles from Edgar Allan Poe's works, for example, *The Raven*, *The Masque of the Red Death* and *The Pit and the Pendulum*, even though they were not actually based on them.³ Other favourites included such films as *Creature from the Black Lagoon*, *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*, *It Came from Outer Space*, *The Haunting* and

¹ Stephen King, *Skeleton Crew* (London: Warner Books, 1985) 7.

² Eric Norden, "Playboy Interview: Stephen King," *Bare Bones: Conversations on Terror with Stephen King*, eds. Tim Underwood and Chuck Miller. (London: New English Library, 1988) 43.

³ Stephen King, *On Writing* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 2000) 41-42.

The Thing.⁴

Another major interest and influence in his childhood were in particular E.C. Comics, published in the 1950s, including titles such as *Weird Science*, *Vault of Horror* and *Tales from the Crypt*. These publications were horror comics with a moral in them, since "the guilty were always punished."⁵ The influence of these comics and their moral is clear in much of King's work: he also has a strong sense of morality and belief in justice, and this manifests itself in the fact that according to his own words "the bad guys get their comeuppance"⁶, that is, they are almost always punished for their actions. It usually does not pay to be the bad guy in the Stephen King universe. Some other non-literary influences that can be considered central to his fiction, were, as King himself mentions, the horror and suspense shows on both the radio in the 1950s and the TV in the 1950s and 1960s.⁷ The TV shows that were his particular favourites were *Thriller*, *The Outer Limits* and *The Twilight Zone*.⁸

Now we come to the most important influences of King's early life, and, indeed, his subsequent successful writing career. These are, of course, the literary influences, the writers and books that he became acquainted with and read growing up. King has talked extensively on the writers and works that he admires, especially in his book on the horror genre, *Danse Macabre* (1981). As especially central to the birth of the whole modern horror genre he regards these three novels: Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818), Robert Louis Stevenson's *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (1886) and Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897).⁹ These novels have also given the genre its best-known set of monsters, that is, the thing without a name, the werewolf and the vampire.¹⁰ These all can also be found in several of King's works, for example, the vampire in *Salem's Lot*, the werewolf in *The Cycle of the*

⁴ Stephen King, *Danse Macabre* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1991) 463-465.

⁵ George Beahm, *Stephen King from A to Z: An Encyclopedia of His Life and Work* (Kansas City: Andrews McMeel Publishing, 1998) 67.

⁶ Beahm 67.

⁷ King, *Danse Macabre*, 131, 255.

⁸ King, *Danse Macabre*, 255, 260.

⁹ King, *Danse Macabre*, 65.

¹⁰ King, *Danse Macabre*, 66.

Werewolf (1983) and *The Talisman* and the thing without a name in *It*, where Frankenstein's monster is one of the many shapes taken by Pennywise the clown.

Other writers who have exerted an influence on King were, among others, H.P. Lovecraft, whom he had discovered by accident among some of the belongings his father had left behind, and this was his first real encounter with serious horror fiction. And through Lovecraft he discovered other writers, too, for example, Robert Bloch and Ray Bradbury.¹¹ Yet other major literary influences mentioned were Richard Matheson, Raymond Chandler, Harlan Ellison and his co-author of *The Talisman* Peter Straub.¹² Heidi Strengell points out yet other writers whose influence can be seen in King's work, such as E.A. Poe, Shirley Jackson, Algernon Blackwood, Washington Irving and J. R. R. Tolkien.¹³

It can be said that the writers, styles and other forms of popular culture, such as the cinema, which have moulded the fiction of Stephen King are numerous and diverse in their appearance, but, nevertheless, all of them have their roots planted firmly in the soil of the Gothic genre, the origin of the modern horror genre. It is against this background that King identifies himself first and foremost as a horror novelist, but also as an American ghost story writer.¹⁴ But King is not only a horror writer, he is also a Gothic writer who "successfully follows in the literary tradition of . . . Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Edgar Allan Poe and H.P. Lovecraft"¹⁵ who all are representatives of the Gothic tradition of their times. King has also been called an heir to the Gothic conventions and ideas that Ann Radcliffe and Charles Robert Maturin, among others, developed and used in their novels.¹⁶ Although most of King's work falls neatly into the horror category of literature, he has also

¹¹ King, *Danse Macabre*, 117-118.

¹² King, *Danse Macabre*, 466-468.

¹³ Heidi Strengell, *Dissecting Stephen King: From the Gothic to Literary Naturalism* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press Popular Press, 2005) 103.

¹⁴ King, *Danse Macabre*, 26, 315.

¹⁵ James Robert Parrish, *Stephen King: Author* (New York: Ferguson, 2005) 3.

¹⁶ Tom Newhouse, "A Blind Date with Disaster: Adolescent Revolt in the Fiction of Stephen King," *The Gothic World of Stephen King: Landscape of Nightmares*, eds. Gary Hoppenstand and Ray B Browne. (Bowling Green: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1987) 49.

written novels and short stories that can be labelled as fantasy, namely *The Dark Tower*-saga, or even fairy tales, such as *The Eyes of the Dragon* (1987). As Strengell aptly points out, King's fiction is a mixture of genres. In his work he combines elements from such different traditions as the Gothic, realism, literary naturalism, myths, fairy tales, romanticism and the fantastic, using these to enrich his fiction, but challenging the traditional lines of these genres as well. Also aspects of science fiction and fantasy are relatively often found in King's fiction. Strengell continues to present the following formula to describe King's fiction: "[his] brand of horror is the end product of a kind of genre equation: the Gothic + myths and fairy tales + literary naturalism = King's brand of horror."¹⁷

But no matter what type of a writer Stephen King may be labelled as, the fact still remains that he is a very skilled and highly productive writer of contemporary American literature, be it horror, Gothic, science fiction, fantasy or even fairy tale. It is in this sense that King's work is akin to the Gothic itself; they are both difficult to label as definitely something or other, since both seem to evolve and change; furthermore, they share aspects from a variety of different genres.

The co-author of *The Talisman*, Peter Straub was born in 1943 in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. He attended the University of Wisconsin, Columbia University and University College in Dublin and has also taught English for a while.¹⁸ He lived for ten years in Britain and Ireland and now lives in New York.

Peter Straub began his literary career with the publication of two books of poetry, *Ishmael* and *Open Air* in 1972, and has later published more poetry. His first published novel was *Marriages* in 1973, but his literary career began to take off with the publication of *Julia* (1975) and *If You Could See Me Now* (1977). His other works include *Shadowland* (1980), *Floating Dragon* (1983), *Koko* (1988), *Mystery* (1989), *The Throat* (1993), *The Hellfire Club*

¹⁷ Strengell, 22.

¹⁸ Peter Straub, Website, "Biography", 27 Feb. 2008, <http://www.peterstraub.net/bio/bio_home.html>.

(1996), *Lost Boy Lost Girl* (2003) and his latest novel to date, *In the Night Room*, published in 2004. He has also written short stories published in anthologies such as *Prime Evil* (1988) and *American Gothic Tales* (1996). He has been nominated for, and also won, a number of awards for his work, including the 1984 British Fantasy Society Award for *Floating Dragon*.

Peter Straub is a child of the same generation as Stephen King and he, too, grew up with probably much the same radio and TV shows and films as King. Also Straub read E.C. Comics growing up, just as King did.¹⁹ As his literary influences Straub mentions, for example, the story "The Great God Pan" by Arthur Machen that really made an impression on him.²⁰ He also reacquainted himself with the works of Nathaniel Hawthorne, Henry James, H.P. Lovecraft, Ambrose Bierce and Edith Wharton before beginning to write *Ghost Story* (1979),²¹ all writers working with, or to some extent influenced by, the Gothic genre.

The style of the majority of Peter Straub's novels, but especially that of *Julia, If You Could See Me Now* and *Ghost Story*, can be said, according to Stephen King, to be more Gothic than horror, and to have very much in common with the classic Gothic of Horace Walpole, M.G. Lewis and Charles Maturin.²² King analyzes *Ghost Story* rather extensively in his non-fiction book on the horror genre, *Danse Macabre*, and comes to the conclusion that the novel and, indeed, much of Straub's writing, is a great example of the modern American Gothic, of which Straub himself also seems to be aware of in *Ghost Story*.²³

Why is it then that while Peter Straub is by no means an unsuccessful writer, he has not achieved the same level of success and fame that King has? What is the secret of King's huge success, the thing that makes the difference in the amount of books sold, between him and Straub? It surely is not the quality of the work of either of them being considerably superior

¹⁹ Stanley Wiater, Website, "Altered Earth Arts Portfolio #7: Stephen King and Peter Straub", 29. Sept. 2002, <<http://www.alteredearth.com/wiater/king.htm>>.

²⁰ Stanley Wiater, Website, "Altered Earth Arts Portfolio#7: Stephen King and Peter Straub", 29. Sept. 2002, <<http://www.alteredearth.com/wiater/king.htm>>.

²¹ King, *Danse Macabre*, 286.

²² King, *Danse Macabre*, 285-286.

²³ King, *Danse Macabre*, 315.

or inferior to the other. It could have something to do with productivity; even though Straub has written seventeen novels, poetry and numerous short stories, he is still nowhere near the statistics of King with over forty published novels, screenplays and hundreds of short stories. The answer to this question is quite possibly an impossible one to find, but as Heidi Strengell suggests, maybe it is because the readers of King's fiction find that the truths found in the magic of his novels also hold true in their own lives as well.²⁴

Peter Straub has commented, however, on the rise to success of the horror novel in the 1970s in which both he and King played an integral part by redefining the whole horror genre as something acceptable, even respectable, and this in turn gave financial success to its writers. They made horror fiction easily accessible and believable to the general reading public by first writing their novels as novels and only second as horror novels.²⁵ It could be argued that King and Straub, along with such writers as Ira Levin (*Rosemary's Baby*, 1967) and William Peter Blatty (*The Exorcist*, 1971) were the architects of the rise of the modern horror literature as we know it today and, indeed, the revival of the authentic Gothic, instead of the "late 60s and 70s . . . pseudo-gothic/historical soft-core erotica"²⁶ that abounded the market at the time, including "The Modern Gothic . . . [that is] novels written [by women] for women who cook . . . in short, for housewives."²⁷ By doing so, King and Straub opened up a path for many aspiring writers to come after them. In this sense both King and Straub can be truly considered as Gothic writers writing in the horror genre, for they too, just like writers of the early Gothic, were pioneers in their chosen fields and made their creations known and accepted by the general public of their times.

As was already stated earlier, *The Talisman* is the product of the collaboration of King and

²⁴ Strengell, 263.

²⁵ Stanley Wiater, Website, "Altered Earth Arts Portfolio#7: Stephen King and Peter Straub", 29 Sept. 2002, <<http://www.alterearth.com/wiater/king.htm>>.

²⁶ Gary Hoppenstand, and Ray R Browne, "The Horror of It All: Stephen King and the American Nightmare." *The Gothic World of Stephen King: Landscapes of Nightmares*, eds. Hoppenstand and Browne, 1.

²⁷ Joanna Russ, "Somebody's Trying to Kill Me and I Think It's My husband: The Modern Gothic." *Journal of Popular Culture* 6 (1973) 675.

Straub. The novel, first published in 1984, was the result of a friendship that began in 1977, when King and his family lived briefly in England, where Straub and his family were residing at the time.²⁸ The two authors talked about collaborating for years and finally began to write the novel, which took nearly two years, with its central idea based on a dream King had had and then adding the "Territories" to the plot.²⁹ The novel has a very distinct voice to it, but at the same time a neutral and mingled one that is not clearly the voice either writer, in the way that the reader really cannot tell who wrote what, something that even the authors themselves are sometimes unable to do.³⁰ The novel coincides around the ten-year mark of both their publishing careers, so when writing it, they were not writers in the absolute beginning of their literary careers, but not by no means the experienced authors they are today, each with over a thirty-year career in horror fiction. The two have since collaborated on a sequel to *The Talisman* called *Black House* in 2001.

The Talisman tells the story of a twelve-year-old boy named Jack Sawyer who is sent on a quest across the American continent and its parallel reality the Territories to find the Talisman which can save the lives of his cancer-ridden mother and that of her Twinner, the Queen of the Territories, and thus secure the safety of both worlds. Jack's task is not an easy one, or without grave dangers, but in the end he succeeds in his quest and saves his mother and the world as he knows it.

The Talisman is a very complex novel; it could even be called a hybrid one, since it combines aspects from various literary genres, including horror, fantasy, fairy tale, science fiction and the Gothic. It operates mainly on two levels, incorporating two different dimensions or realities in its structure: the United States of the early 1980s and the medieval world of the parallel reality the Territories. Together, these two realities form the setting of

²⁸ Stanley Wiater, Christopher Golden, and Hank Wagner, *The Stephen King Universe: A Guide to the Worlds of the King of Horror* (New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 2001) 452.

²⁹ Stanley Wiater, and Roger Anker, "Three Interviews with Stephen King and Peter Straub," eds. Underwood and Miller, 232, 234.

³⁰ Wiater and Anker, *Bare Bones*, eds. Underwood and Miller, 233.

the novel, and blend in the story seamlessly. They are, in a way, two slightly different versions of the same thing, since the basic geographical layout of the Territories corresponds roughly to that of the United States; it is only on a considerably smaller scale and also has a medieval society structure instead of a modern one.³¹ Some of the characters of the novel are aware of both of these realities and able to move, or “flip”, from one to the other, while others are not. Some of the characters of the novel have Twinners, while others do not; similarly, not all of those that do are aware of having one. A Twinner is a double of sorts that some of the novel’s “real world” characters have in the Territories.³² They can be said to be the same, but yet different, like two sides of the same coin; some features are shared while others are not. Altogether, the Twinner-concept, and all that it entails, is a rather complex one, including the concept of “possession”³³, but it, nevertheless, gives the novel depth. The ultimate goal of Jack’s quest, the Talisman is a magical object that has enormous powers, “an axle of all possible worlds”³⁴ that holds these worlds in place and can and does save the lives of Jack’s mother and her Twinner, the Queen of the Territories.³⁵ Similarly, the fate of all possible worlds, not only those of the “real world” and the Territories, depends on the success of Jack’s quest. If he fails, and the Talisman falls into wrong hands, all will be lost; his mother will die, his own life will be shattered and entire worlds destroyed:

‘Listen,’ Speedy said, and his voice took on a slow, chanting rhythm. ‘Talisman be [sic] given unto your hand, Travellin [sic] Jack. Not too big, not too small, she look [sic] just like a crystal ball. Travellin Jack, ole [sic] Travellin Jack, you be [sic] goin [sic] to California to bring her back. But here’s your burden, here’s your cross: drop her, Jack, and all be [sic] lost.’³⁶

The success of Jack’s quest is absolutely essential to the survival of not only his world but of all the others as well, and despite grave dangers and huge obstacles in his path, Jack conquers

³¹ Stephen King, and Peter Straub, *The Talisman* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1996), see, for example, 55-63; 93-94, 194 & 212.

³² For example, Morgan Sloat’s Twinner is Morgan of Orris, Lily Cavanaugh Sawyer’s is Queen Laura DeLoessian and “Sunlight” Gardener’s is Osmond. See also King and Straub, 50-51.

³³ King and Straub, see, for example 505-509.

³⁴ King and Straub, 613.

³⁵ King and Straub, see 761-767.

³⁶ King and Straub, 63.

in the end and succeeds in his task of saving his mother and the world as he knows it. Despite the fact that the Territories and the Twinners play an integral part in the novel; in this thesis I will be mainly concentrating on the “real world” dimension and characters of the novel and applying the Gothic point of view to these aspects instead of the more overtly fantasy ones of the parallel reality, however, these will be discussed to some extent during the course of the thesis.

1.2. The Gothic: British and American; Male and Female

”Gothic is used to describe stories in which strange, mysterious adventures happen in dark and lonely places such as the ruins of a castle.”³⁷ This is the definition a dictionary will give, but the Gothic genre is not that easily described. This is in particular because the Gothic genre and tradition have undergone significant changes with regards to its basic elements and themes in the past two hundred years since its birth in the late 1700s.³⁸

The Gothic genre was born in the latter half of the eighteenth century. The first Gothic novel is considered to be Horace Walpole’s *The Castle of Otranto* (1764). The period in which most of the central early Gothic texts were written, was between the publication of Walpole’s *The Castle of Otranto* and Charles Maturin’s novel *Melmoth the Wanderer* which was published in 1820.³⁹ One of the best known representatives of the first wave of the early Gothic was Ann Radcliffe. Her novel *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794), which inspired many later Gothic writers, is still the best-known example of the period even today.⁴⁰ Other well-known writers of this period were, among others, Clara Reeve, Sophia Lee, M. G. Lewis and Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley, who wrote *The Old English Baron* (1777), *The Recess* (1783-85), *The Monk* (1796) and *Frankenstein* (1818), respectively.

³⁷ ‘Gothic’ Collins Cobuild English Dictionary (HarperCollins Publishers, 1995) 729.

³⁸ Anne Williams, *Art of Darkness* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1995) 14.

³⁹ Fred Botting, *Gothic* (London: Routledge, 1996) 15.

⁴⁰ David Punter, and Glennis Byron, *The Gothic* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2004) 185.

According to David Punter and Glennis Byron, the origins of the term “Gothic” can be traced back to the Goths, a Germanic tribe, one of many that played a central part in the downfall of the Roman Empire in AD 410. The Goths then came to be considered as barbaric invaders and destroyers. It was because there was not much actual knowledge about the period that began with the fall of the Roman Empire and lasted all the way to the mid-seventeenth century, this medieval period, also known as the Dark Ages, became generally referred to as Gothic. The term “Gothic” actually came to mean anything and everything associated with the medieval period. The myths constructed around the Goths and the various ways in which these were later used, played a central part in the birth of the term “Gothic”. In the eighteenth century, however, the Gothic came to be considered from another, if mythical, point of view in political and aesthetic terms, that of a democratic and civilized nationalistic heritage, and the Goths were considered courageous believers in justice and freedom, as opposed to uncivilized barbarians. They were seen as the origins of English justice and political systems. The myth associated with the Goths can, therefore, be said to have been constructed to suit whichever purpose that was needed. In both of these myths of the Gothic, however, it was still associated with the primitive, in the first one as uncivilized against which the civilized present was compared, and in the second one as the original lost source of civilization.⁴¹

In the eighteenth century, according to Punter and Byron, the centre of attention began to move from the Goths themselves to the historical aspects of the period associated with them, the Middle Ages. With regard to the term “Gothic” in literature, both of the definitions mentioned above hold true. The Gothic genre originally concentrated on the medieval as uncivilized and barbaric and totally opposed to the order of the classical tradition, as something evil and avoidable. The focus then began to shift and the Gothic with its

⁴¹ Punter and Byron, 3-5.

fascination of the medieval became perceived as a positive thing that had old-fashioned values the contemporary society needed. Several writers began to emphasise this point and to bring forth the ignored English cultural tradition. Most of these writers produced their pieces in the 1760s and the central text of this decade is Bishop Hurd's *Letters on Chivalry and Romance* (1762).⁴² The four central aspects of past literature that were rediscovered during this period were the authentic, ancient British heritage, the ballads, English medieval poetry and Edmund Spenser's and the Elizabethans' work.⁴³ Developing in the 1740s, the graveyard poetry tradition also had a profound impact on the development of the Gothic genre. These poems, often concentrating on death and the limitations of the human understanding of the function of the universe, were central in the formation of the Gothic novel.⁴⁴

The term "Gothic" is, however, also closely linked to architecture. Originally used to refer to European architecture from the mid-twelfth to the sixteenth century, the term now also covers the buildings built in that style during the revival of the Gothic from the late eighteenth century to the mid-nineteenth century. The Gothic style was mainly used in churches and cathedrals, but during this revival period, also many domestic buildings in this style were built, the most famous of which was Horace Walpole's Strawberry Hill.⁴⁵ Typical features of the Gothic architecture were pointed arches and vaults, pinnacles, buttresses, piers, columns, towers and turrets, ornate decoration and stained glass windows. The Gothic architecture was also often seen as something fierce and strong but also as desolate, gloomy and ruinous⁴⁶ in its appearance, just as the Middle Ages that it harks back to. The Gothic in architecture and literature were closely linked, especially in the early Gothic revival, since Gothic buildings often played a central part in the novels written during that period.

The Gothic as a literary genre, and in particular as the Gothic novel, as it will be called

⁴² Punter and Byron, 7-8.

⁴³ Punter and Byron, 9.

⁴⁴ Punter and Byron, 10.

⁴⁵ Punter and Byron, 32, 34.

⁴⁶ Botting, 128, 165.

from now on, drew its influences and inspiration from a variety of sources. The most important of these was the immense fascination with all things medieval; with the romantics also having an influence on the development of the Gothic. According to Punter and Byron, the major romantic poets of the period, for example, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Lord Byron and Percy Bysshe Shelley, all had contributed to the development of the genre as well as being influenced by it.⁴⁷ Tales of magic, superstition, chivalry and adventure were depicted in romances⁴⁸ and these also played a central part in the formation of the Gothic genre. In fact, according to Fred Botting, the Gothic is actually situated between the novel and the romance, a highly ambivalent and elusive genre.⁴⁹ So the Gothic can be said to be a real cocktail of literary traditions and genres and this also holds true regarding its own features and characteristics, which truly are a motley crew. This is also one of the reasons why it is so difficult to thoroughly define the genre, since it is a hybrid that changes with the times and often shapes itself after the popular literary themes and types of those times, such as the previously mentioned romance or graveyard poetry.⁵⁰

The central themes, topics and characters of the first wave of the Gothic included, according to Botting, "fragmented narratives relating mysterious incidents, horrible images and life-threatening pursuits . . . spectres, monsters, demons, corpses, skeletons . . . monks and nuns. . ."⁵¹ Most of these novels were also set in the Middle Ages, since that time was considered to be distant enough from the time of the actual publication, to allow the fantastic events of the novels to take place in those wild times where everything was possible and no morality prevailed. The most important setting of the novels was the brooding castle, often set in an awe-inspiring mountainous terrain. The castle was in turn connected to old and ruinous

⁴⁷ Punter and Byron, 13.

⁴⁸ Botting, 23-24.

⁴⁹ Botting, 9.

⁵⁰ Botting, 14-15.

⁵¹ Botting, 2.

churches and graveyards that represented the feudal, barbaric and superstitious past.⁵² Other central elements of the early Gothic were, according to H.P. Lovecraft:

the tyrannical and malevolent nobleman as villain; the saintly, long-persecuted, and generally insipid heroine who undergoes the major terrors and serves as a point of view and focus for the reader's sympathies; the valorous and immaculate hero, always of high birth but often in humble disguise; . . . and the infinite array of stage properties which includes strange lights, damp trap doors, extinguished lamps, mouldy hidden manuscripts, creaking hinges, shaking arras, and the like. All this paraphernalia reappears with amusing sameness, yet sometimes with tremendous effect, throughout the history of the Gothic novel. . . .⁵³

When the Gothic began to surface as a major literary genre in the late eighteenth century, it was not accepted by the literary circles and scholars as a serious literature. It was considered as a "serious threat to literary and social values . . . [and a] waste of time."⁵⁴ However, such writers as Horace Walpole and Ann Radcliffe were both critically acclaimed and enjoyed popular success as well, but these two were the exception to the rule, and the Gothic was condemned by the critics, especially between 1790 and 1810.⁵⁵ Nevertheless, the 1790s can be called the decade of the Gothic, because it was the time when more Gothic texts than ever were being written and read. Despite being shunned by the literary circles, the Gothic, and especially the fiction of Ann Radcliffe, was, however, immensely popular among the reading public through the classes.⁵⁶ The Gothic also attracted a new public, which was the middle-class reader, and this, in turn, made the previously clear class distinction in the novels more problematic and less visible.⁵⁷ The power was shifting from the aristocracy to the middle-classes.⁵⁸

This was also the time when women began to take on a more visible role in society. "[A]

⁵² Botting, 2-3.

⁵³ Howard Phillips Lovecraft, *Supernatural Horror in Literature* (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1973) 25-26.

⁵⁴ Botting, 9.

⁵⁵ Botting, 21.

⁵⁶ Botting, 62.

⁵⁷ Botting, 73.

⁵⁸ Botting, 46.

feminization of reading practices and markets”⁵⁹ took place, in the sense that more and more women began to write fiction as well as consume it. Women became an important audience for whom the Gothic was written and they became equally important as the writers of the Gothic as well. The best-known female Gothic writer was Ann Radcliffe, a highly productive writer whose work included the aforementioned *The Mysteries of Udolpho* and also *A Sicilian Romance* (1790), *The Romance of the Forest* (1791) and *The Italian* (1797). Other prominent women writers included, among others, Sophia Lee whose novel *The Recess* was widely popular among women, giving them the much needed escape from their domestic sphere and mundane lives that would otherwise be impossible.⁶⁰

In the 1790s the locus of evil in the Gothic began to change. The Gothic started to become more internalized in the sense that it “[disturbed] conventional social limits and notions of interiority and individuality . . . [and this] represents the most significant change in the genre, the gloom and the darkness of sublime landscape becoming external markers of inner mental and emotional states.”⁶¹ In this period, the new Gothic hero/villain was also introduced. Contrary to the older Gothic, where the distinction between hero and villain was relatively clear, the new hero/villain is part victim and part villain, an outcast on the edges of society and not able to find his way back. The sympathy for this new character harked back to the Romantic tradition.⁶²

The heyday of the Gothic lasted to about the 1820s, when Charles Maturin’s novel *Melmoth the Wanderer* (1820) was published. This novel is generally considered as the last truly Gothic text, and it combines aspects of the earlier Gothic and of the newer, internalized Gothic.⁶³ The best-known piece of Gothic literature was written towards the end of this period. This is Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley’s *Frankenstein* (1818). It is this text that

⁵⁹ Botting, 4.

⁶⁰ Botting, 58.

⁶¹ Botting, 91-92.

⁶² Botting, 92.

⁶³ Botting, 106.

contemporary horror is mostly indebted to, since it gave the genre one of its favourite themes and monsters. In the period following the height of its success, the popularity of the Gothic began to dwindle and the number of Gothic texts being written also decreased significantly, even though the Gothic did not completely disappear in the following decades.

The mid-nineteenth century was a period when the Gothic was alive, but hibernating. During that time it made its appearance in other literary styles and not really as an individual genre. Examples of this include Charles Dickens's realistic novels, the Brontë sisters' novels and the popular sensation novels of the likes of Wilkie Collins and Mary Elizabeth Braddon. However, in the mid-nineteenth century, new staples were being added to the Gothic's canon. These included the ghost, the double and the mirror, and also "[the] terrors and horrors . . . [were] brought much closer to home [with] uncanny disruptions of the boundaries between inside and outside, reality and delusion, propriety and corruption, materialism and spirituality."⁶⁴ Other central elements being added to the Gothic included

[the] bourgeois family . . . [as] the scene of ghostly return, where guilty secrets of past transgression and uncertain class origins are the sources of anxiety. The modern city, industrial, gloomy and labyrinthine, is the [new] locus of horror, violence and corruption. Scientific discoveries provide the instruments of terror, and crime and the criminal mind present new threatening figures of social and individual disintegration.⁶⁵

It was in the late nineteenth century that the Gothic made a spectacular return to the literary scene enriched with all these new ingredients. This was the period in which such well-known novels as Robert Louis Stevenson's *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (1886) and Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897) were published. These two, along with Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley's *Frankenstein*, are also seminal to the later development of the horror genre, giving it two more of its central characters and themes, the double and the vampire. Both of these characters were also central in the earlier Gothic, but really made their mark in the 1890s.

⁶⁴ Botting, 113.

⁶⁵ Botting, 114.

Even though the Gothic underwent some significant changes in the hands of the writers of the nineteenth century, it still retained its basic style and devices to continually be recognized as Gothic. This was its strength, but also its weakness, since it made the Gothic vulnerable to ridicule and satirizing,⁶⁶ which it did receive quite extensively at the hands of many writers.

As was stated above, the late 1800s brought forward new themes and characters in the Gothic. The most central of these were science as the new supernatural and the source of dark powers,⁶⁷ and doubles and alter-egos. The double was “the new form of the Gothic ghost . . . [a] shadow of [the protagonist] himself. . . .”⁶⁸ The early twentieth century Gothic was very much the Gothic of the previous decade carried over to the new century. The basic plots remained the same, with dangerous science, obscure past and the haunted house being the primary sources of fear.⁶⁹ European writers of this period were, among others, M.R. James, Algernon Blackwood and Mervyn Peake.

The American Gothic tradition is slightly different from that of the European, or the British, which has been mainly discussed in this thesis. The definition of the American Gothic is even more problematic and difficult than that of the British. This difficulty stems especially from the fact that contrary to the British Gothic, the American Gothic had no clear founding period or a specific collection of founding writers or even a very consistent collection of conventions. As a result, according to Teresa A Goddu, the American Gothic cannot be defined so much on the specific collection of conventions, but more on the ones that it upsets. It can, nevertheless, be identified as American, since Gothic stories can be argued to be closely associated to the culture that created them.⁷⁰

According to Botting, in the literary tradition of the United States, the impact of the Gothic

⁶⁶ Botting, 45.

⁶⁷ Botting, 13.

⁶⁸ Botting, 93.

⁶⁹ Botting, 158-159.

⁷⁰ Teresa A. Goddu, *Gothic America: Narrative, History, and Nation* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997) 2-4.

and the romances is clearly visible, it is as though "literature [in general] . . . seems virtually an effect of a Gothic tradition."⁷¹ Botting continues that the major difference of the American Gothic to the British is the absence of heavy Gothic devices and elements, such as the castle, evil aristocracy and the terrors of the supernatural, partly because of the different historical and geographical aspects of the two continents. The traditional Gothic themes were replaced by an interest in the mysteries of the human mind and family histories, the social world taking the place of the horrors of the supernatural variety. But still the dichotomies of good and evil and light and dark played a part in the American Gothic, they just took on a different form. It can be said that the "grand gloom of European Gothic" was replaced with the "broad and simple daylight of American life", which by no means implies that the new continent did not have its share of secrets and shadows to draw from.⁷²

Goddu adds that the American Gothic turned inward, towards the psyche and the "blackness of the American soul" and away from society, and that in American Gothic "the social struggle of the European [was replaced] with a Manichean struggle between the moral forces of personal and communal order and the howling wilderness of chaos and moral depravity."⁷³ Goddu also brings forward the debate about the history of America and its literature or the lack of it, and its effects on the readings of the American Gothic. The Gothic, considered a historical mode, seems out of place in America. Therefore, most critics oppose any historical readings, while others see a clear connection to society and history, particularly to historical hauntings, such as slavery. Goddu herself adheres to the latter opinion and argues that the American Gothic is "a primary means of speaking the unspeakable [that is, especially slavery] in American literature" with which "the cultural contradictions of national myth" are uncovered and discussed.⁷⁴

⁷¹ Botting, 16.

⁷² Botting, 114-115.

⁷³ Goddu, 9.

⁷⁴ Goddu, 9-10.

Some of the best-known writers of the early American Gothic were Charles Brockden Browne, Nathaniel Hawthorne and Edgar Allan Poe. Brown, writing in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, had an important impact on the variations of the Gothic; both influencing and being influenced by, such writers as Percy Bysshe Shelley and William Godwin, and creating his novels on the basis of these influences while adding aspects of the American Gothic,⁷⁵ such as he himself regarded essential and central, for example “incidents of Indian hostility, and the perils of the western wilderness. . . .”⁷⁶ However, according to Lovecraft, Browne also wrote his texts in the tradition of Ann Radcliffe, calling him one of her

countless imitators . . . [who] stands the closest in spirit and method. Like her, [Browne] injured his creations by natural explanations; but also like her, he had an uncanny atmospheric power which gives his horrors a frightful vitality as long as they remain unexplained. He differed from her in contemptuously discarding the external Gothic paraphernalia and properties and choosing modern American scenes for his mysteries; but this repudiation did not extend to the Gothic spirit and type of incident.⁷⁷

In Lovecraft’s opinion, the elimination of the supernatural at the end of the novels lessens the effectiveness and impact of the novels and he himself prefers to leave the supernatural unexplained.

The period in which both Hawthorne and Poe wrote most of their texts was around the middle of the nineteenth century and they are often regarded as the major American Gothic writers of their time. Hawthorne’s best-known texts include *The Scarlet Letter* (1850), *The House of Seven Gables* (1851) and short story “Young Goodman Brown” (1846) of which the two latter are considered most Gothic. Poe wrote mainly short stories rather than novels, the best-known of which were “Ligeia” (1838), “The Fall of the House of Usher” (1839), “The Pit and the Pendulum” (1843) and “The Cask of Amontillado” (1846). Of these two writers, Poe is generally considered more central to the genre. His tales were often filled with

⁷⁵ Botting, 115.

⁷⁶ Goddu, 4.

⁷⁷ Lovecraft, 28-29.

claustrophobic anxieties, fears of being buried alive and the hallucinations of the protagonists. The traditional eighteenth century Gothic devices, such as decay, gloominess and extravagance were revolved inward “to present psychodramas of diseased imaginings and deluded visions that take grotesque to spectral extremes.”⁷⁸ His external settings represented the disturbed inner states of the protagonists. The vivid shades of the supernatural represented the individual’s neuroses and desires in such a compelling way that reality and nightmare were intertwined. The influence of Poe’s subjects, devices and style is undisputable since “the doubles, mirrors and the concern with modes of representation; the scientific transgressions of accepted limits; the play of internal and external narrations, of uncertain psychological states and uncanny events; and the location of mysteries in a criminal world to be penetrated by the incisive reason of a new hero, the detective” developed all into central and widely used motifs in later Gothic and horror writing.⁷⁹ Poe’s influence is particularly evident in the Southern Gothic tradition which concentrates on the decay of family and culture through the dissolution of normality and familiarity. The grotesque and its manifestations are the key elements in the Southern Gothic, some of the best-known writers of which include William Faulkner and Flannery O’Connor.⁸⁰

Examples of later American authors writing in the Gothic/ghost story/horror/fantasy tradition were, among others Henry James (*The Turn of the Screw*, 1889), Richard Matheson (*I Am Legend*, 1954) and Shirley Jackson (*The Haunting of Hill House*, 1959). The most prominent writer of twentieth century American Gothic was H. P. Lovecraft (1890-1937). He wrote mainly short stories in which he created the Cthulhu Mythos, a wide range of gods and demons totally indifferent to humans and their world and ready to destroy all.⁸¹ Lovecraft himself has defined the concept of the cosmic fear present in his stories as a “certain

⁷⁸ Botting, 119-120.

⁷⁹ Botting, 122-123.

⁸⁰ Botting, 160-161.

⁸¹ Punter and Byron, 143-144.

atmosphere of breathless and unexplainable dread that expresses a malign and particular suspension or defeat of those fixed laws of Nature that are our only safeguard against the assaults of chaos and the daemons of unplumbed space.”⁸² Lovecraft also often demonstrated “distrust in the progress of science”⁸³ in his tales. Along with Poe, Lovecraft has also had a profound influence on the Gothic/horror literature of the twentieth century. Poe and Lovecraft have both had a profound influence on the writings of Stephen King as well, as he himself has often stated, for example in his book on the horror genre *Danse Macabre*.

One of the most important dichotomies within the Gothic is that of the male and female Gothic. Initially referring to simply just the gender of the author, the concept of the male and female Gothic has broadened to encompass the differences of style and plot devices as well. According to Punter and Byron, the major difference between these two styles is in the relationship of the central character to the prevailing Gothic space in the texts. The female Gothic usually concentrates on the plight of the, most often, young heroine who is torn from her happy and sheltered life into imprisonment in a big labyrinth-like castle or house by a malevolent and dominant male figure. She is pursued by this menacing man who threatens her virtue and thus her very life. She then manages to escape and reclaims her place in the social world by either being reunited with her aristocratic family or most often through marriage. The emphasis of the female Gothic is clearly centered on the Gothic castle or house and the female protagonist, her experience being the centre of attention. The female Gothic also often highlights anxiety instead of overt horror by giving the reader no more information than the heroine herself has of the events that take place and keeping the focus on the heroine instead of violence and gore. Though the supernatural is frequently alluded to, it is nevertheless most often explained away thus creating a clear closure for the heroine and the story. The most prominent writer of the female Gothic was Ann Radcliffe; she can be said to be the founding

⁸² Strengell, 223.

⁸³ Strengell, 105.

mother of this type of Gothic in her novels such as *A Sicilian Romance* and *The Mysteries of Udolpho*.⁸⁴ Other representatives of the female Gothic were writers such as the aforementioned Sophia Lee and Clara Reeve.

The male Gothic, on the other hand, according to Punter and Byron, concentrates on the male central character and his “attempt to penetrate some encompassing interior,” centering on identity issues. The protagonist often transgresses collective taboos and defies social establishments such as the family, the church and the law. Women are often depicted as victims, as mere objects to the male’s desire and power, as opposed to the acting subjects of the female Gothic. Both the male Gothic and its hero are transgressive, in the sense that both violence and, in particular sexual violence, are depicted in candid detail. The male Gothic also often uses a multiple and fragmented point of view which denies the reader any concrete interpretation of the story. The story line is usually tragic and the hero is punished for his transgressions, but there seems to be a lack of any closure. For instance, all supernatural occurrences are usually not explained away, but left to cause anxiety and horror. One of the most characteristic examples of the male Gothic is M.G. Lewis’s *The Monk* (1796).⁸⁵

According to Botting, the apparent moral conclusion of the female Gothic made it more acceptable to the critics of the times, as opposed to the male Gothic which was often condemned as immoral, shocking and gruesome.⁸⁶ He continues that male Gothic writers were often members of the aristocracy who in their work concentrated on the supernatural and irrationality using the liberties and advantages of their gender and social status. Female Gothic writers, in turn, quite often belonged to the middle-classes and directed their attention to the limitations of eighteenth century morality and carefully investigated the peripheries of familial decorum which were much more decisively sustained due to their gender, instead of

⁸⁴ Punter and Byron, 278-279.

⁸⁵ Punter and Byron, 278-279.

⁸⁶ Botting, 66.

transgressing these boundaries.⁸⁷

Yet another important distinction that separates the male from the female Gothic is the difference between the terms “horror” and “terror”. Horror is generally associated with the male Gothic and terror with the female. Botting gives a definition to both horror and terror. He states that

[horror] freezes human faculties, rendering the mind passive and immobilizing the body. The cause is generally a direct encounter with physical mortality. . . . Death is presented as the absolute limit, a finitude which denies any possibility of imaginative transcendence into an awesome and infinite space. It is the moment of negative sublime, a moment of freezing, contraction and horror which signals a temporality that cannot be recuperated by the moral subject. Horror marks the response to an excess that cannot be transcended.⁸⁸

Terror is in turn explained as the opposite of horror, as something that instead of freezing or immobilizing, it

‘expands the soul and awakens the faculties to a high degree of life;’ . . . [and] activates the mind and the imagination, allowing it to overcome, transcend even, its fears and doubts, enabling the subject to move from a state of passivity to activity. . . . Terror enables escape; it allows one to delimit its effects, to distinguish and overcome the threat it manifests. . . . By elevating the mind, objects of terror not only give it a sense of its own power, but in the appreciation of awful sublimity, suggest the power of a divine order . . . [such] as Providence, . . . as the way out of vice and the guarantee of conventional boundaries.⁸⁹

These distinctions between horror and terror are clearly seen when comparing, for instance, the works of Radcliffe to those of Lewis. However, the division to male and female Gothic is not completely and absolutely clear. As is the case with the constantly changing hybrid that is the Gothic genre itself, this division is also under debate. As Punter and Byron point out, what is considered as male or female Gothic, cannot be taken as absolutes. Male writers did not always produce texts adhering to the male Gothic or female writers texts considered a part of the female. For example, Charlotte Dacre’s novel *Zofloya, or The Moor* (1806) and Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley’s *Frankenstein* can be argued to adhere more to the

⁸⁷ Botting, 60.

⁸⁸ Botting, 75.

⁸⁹ Botting, 74-75.

male than the female Gothic. Also such male writers as J. Sheridan Le Fanu (*Uncle Silas*, 1864) and Wilkie Collins (*The Woman in White*, 1860) seem to relate much more closely to the female rather than the male Gothic.⁹⁰

Ellen Moers, however, offers a slightly different view to the female Gothic. Moers was one of the first literary critics to address the female Gothic issue in her work. She defines the female Gothic somewhat more strictly: as the work of women writers writing in the Gothic mode from the eighteenth century to the present.⁹¹ For example, she considers Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley's *Frankenstein* a novel firmly adhering to the female, rather than the male, Gothic. It was written by a woman and, most importantly, by a mother and can be thus regarded as "a birth myth", a topic Moers regards as most feminine, since it is only women who give birth to children, but also to the female Gothic. She continues that this is because *Frankenstein* is about the "revulsion against newborn life, and the drama of guilt, dread, and flight surrounding birth and its consequences," a novel that is "distinctly a woman's mythmaking on the subject of birth precisely because its emphasis is not upon what precedes birth, not upon the birth itself, but upon what follows birth: the trauma of the afterbirth."⁹² Then which of these two dissimilar views of *Frankenstein*, that of Punter and Byron or that of Moers, is more correct is difficult to say, since both seem to have their strong points. Actually, this debate is a good example of the diversity of the analysis and discussion regarding the Gothic, no absolute right or wrong exists. And so as a conclusion it can be said that the concrete and finite definition of the Gothic and its subdivisions, the male and female Gothic or the American Gothic, is problematic and always changing.

Then where is the Gothic today? According to Botting "[the] Gothic is everywhere and nowhere."⁹³ The Gothic has taken on countless diverse forms and can be found in music,

⁹⁰ Punter and Byron, 279-280.

⁹¹ Ellen Moers, *Literary Women* (London: Women's Press, 1978) 90.

⁹² Moers, 92-93.

⁹³ Botting, 155.

fashion and style, in films, especially horror and science fiction ones that mercilessly exploit the Gothic in their story lines and themes. The Gothic makes its appearance in graphic novels and of course, in literature, where it is most evident in such popular fiction genres as horror, fantasy and, also to some extent, in science fiction and the romantic, in which “echoes of Gothic features abound.”⁹⁴ So the Gothic is kept alive in popular culture, rather than what is perceived as high culture, which is highly appropriate, since the Gothic in its own time was considered as a low form of culture for the masses, just like, for example, horror and fantasy fiction is today. And it is this tradition that writers such as Stephen King and Peter Straub find their place in.

1.3. The Aims of the Study

At first sight *The Talisman* is not really a novel that could be considered typically, or for that matter even slightly, Gothic. First of all, it was written in the 1980’s, hardly a period when the Gothic was the dominant or even a minor genre in literature. The novel was also written, as has been already stated earlier, by two authors, Stephen King and Peter Straub, who are generally considered as horror or fantasy writers, rather than Gothic ones. At surface level, *The Talisman* appears to be a fantasy novel, or a horror novel, or even a science fiction novel. In other words, it appears to be just about anything else than a Gothic novel. And that is actually just what it for the most part is, fantasy and horror, with its parallel worlds and Twinners. However, when looked at more closely and critically, it begins to take on some of the themes, elements and characteristics typical of the Gothic novel. It is actually rather surprising how seamlessly these features intertwine with the fantasy and horror aspects of the novel and thus merge into the unique blend that is *The Talisman*. This is also the reason why I chose to analyze the novel from the Gothic point of view instead of the horror or fantasy one,

⁹⁴ Botting, 161.

which would have been the most obvious choices when considering the novel and its contents and also its writers.

The aims of my study are, as was already stated in the beginning of this thesis, to apply the Gothic to *The Talisman* and analyze the novel and its themes, elements and characters from the point of view of the Gothic family. I will also examine the novel from the point of view of the male and female Gothic and how the novel draws from these two distinct traditions. I will try to see how the novel finds its place in relation to these two genres and to which one it can be said to belong to, if, indeed, to either one. I begin my examination of *The Talisman* with an analysis of the representation of family in the novel and how this fits into the definition of the Gothic family. I shall analyze the themes of the quest for the mother and Jack Sawyer as the Gothic hero(ine), the evil father figure and Morgan Sloat as the Gothic hero/villain, and also the aforementioned Gothic family present in the novel in this respect in section two. I will then move on to examining the novel from the point of view of the male and female Gothic and try to find out which one of these *The Talisman* seems to have more in common with, if in fact either one, in section three of this thesis. In section four I will then draw my conclusions on the subject and present them at the end of this thesis.

2. The Gothic Family in *The Talisman*

In this section of the thesis I shall begin my analysis of *The Talisman* from the point of view of the Gothic literary tradition, and in particular, from the point of view of the Gothic family. I will also apply the female and male Gothic and their respective differences to the novel's representation of the family relationships and the portrayal of the central and minor characters to see if either tradition prevails. In the first subsection, I will address the quest for the absent mother theme and, in connection with this, the protagonist of the novel in relation to the heroine of the female Gothic. The second subsection will focus on the presentation of the evil father figure in *The Talisman* and the Gothic hero/villain of the male Gothic presented in the novel. In the final subsection, I will discuss the representation of family in the novel in relation to the representation of family in the Gothic writings, with its several subthemes, for example past family secrets and the disintegration of the family.

2.1. The Quest for the Mother and Jack as the Gothic Hero(ine)

On September 15th, 1981, a boy named Jack Sawyer stood where the water and land come together, hands in the pockets of his jeans, looking out at the steady Atlantic. He was twelve years old and tall for his age. The sea-breeze swept back his brown hair, probably too long, from a fine, clear brow. He stood there, filled with the confused and painful emotions he had lived with for the last three months – since the time when his mother had closed their house on Rodeo Drive in Los Angeles and, in a flurry of furniture, checks, and real-estate agents, rented an apartment on Central Park West. From that apartment they had fled to this quiet resort on New Hampshire's tiny seacoast. Order and regularity had disappeared from Jack's world. His life seemed as shifting, as uncontrolled as, the heaving water before him. His mother was moving him through the world, twitching him from place to place; but what moved his mother? His mother was running, running.⁹⁵

The basic plot of the novel tells the story of a twelve-year-old boy, Jack, and his attempt to save his dying mother's life with the magical Talisman. This quest then takes Jack on a journey filled with dangers across the North American continent of the early 1980s. Although

⁹⁵ King and Straub, 3.

this scenario does not appear to be Gothic in any sense, it can however be argued that, nevertheless, is King and Straub's version of the quest for the absent mother of Gothic literature.

The quest for the absent mother is rather a common and central theme of the early female Gothic, especially in the works of Ann Radcliffe, and in particular her novel *A Sicilian Romance*. However, contrary to *The Talisman*, in the female Gothic, the seeker, who is also the central character, is always female: a young heroine trying to find her absent mother and to be reunited with her and, possibly, also with the rest of her family.⁹⁶ The mother in the female Gothic is also almost invariably totally absent from the heroine's life: she is simply not there, not emotionally, mentally or physically. Where the mother should be, there is just a void that needs to be filled by her rediscovery. It is through this rediscovery of her lost mother and possibly even the rest of her family, but also through her future marriage, that the heroine also, in a sense, finds her own identity and thus becomes whole again as an accepted and respectable member of society.⁹⁷

In *The Talisman*, however, there are several variations from the traditional quest for the absent mother, even though the basic concept remains the same. First of all, and most importantly, the central character is not a young and distressed female, but a young boy. Jack Sawyer is, nonetheless, a very distressed boy, since he is very concerned about his mother's rapidly declining health and her possible demise. It is this distress that ultimately leads him to his mission and keeps him going through extremely difficult circumstances, and in this sense Jack is very similar to the heroines of the female Gothic. The difference here is that with the Gothic heroine the loss of the mother has usually already taken place and her attempts to remedy the situation are all retroactive, she is in a way trying to get back something that used to belong to her but was taken away, whereas with Jack it is the threat of that looming loss

⁹⁶ Punter and Byron, 158-159.

⁹⁷ Punter and Byron, 279.

that is his motive. Jack is acting to prevent the imminent absence of his mother, not just reacting to the sense of loss caused by it, even though it needs to be said that the Gothic heroine's quest for the mother is usually prompted by, and also incorporated in, some other plight, for example her flight from a controlling and malevolent male. The heroine's quest for the mother is thus not necessarily at the centre of her attention, though still an important issue. However, for Jack his quest is the most important thing in the world, it is the very heart and core of the whole novel and it is not submissive to any other predicament even though he is in no shortage of these either. Since Jack is actively seeking out the solution to his problem, even though he too is being pursued by an extremely malevolent male, he is in this sense a more active figure than the Gothic heroine. The need to save his mother's life and thus get back his ordinary life as it formerly was can be compared to the objective of the Gothic heroine. It is Jack's attempt to make everything normal again, to make sense of everything that is happening to him and to be once more reintroduced to the society and the life that his mother's illness has taken him away from, that is, his normal life in California. It is also a way for him to rediscover himself and to be reunited with his mother.

Both Jack and the Gothic heroine are torn away from their idyllic and more or less sheltered lives and plunged into a world of distress and anxiety. They are both distraught and considered as helpless, Jack because of his age and the Gothic heroine because of her gender, and consequently as easy targets not able to defend themselves against the world. In the case of the Gothic heroine, this is usually done by a menacing male figure that imprisons her in some dark and gloomy castle or house and then continues to pursue her threatening her virtue and also often her life. The same basic concept holds true with Jack, since he too has been forced to leave his previous life behind and he also now lives with a constant sense of anxiety. Although, in his case it is his mother who has taken him away from his home and across the

American continent.⁹⁸ Even though Jack has been taken from his previous life by a female, that is, his own mother, and not some malevolent male figure, the reason for their flight is in most part just that. They are running from the business partner of Jack's late father, Morgan Sloat, who has dire plans in store for both Jack and his mother.⁹⁹ In this sense, even though the mother does the actual removal of Jack from his home and former life, it can be argued that it is actually Sloat who ultimately brings about his imprisonment in a new and unfamiliar setting. Just like with the Gothic heroine, the malevolent male is responsible for Jack's predicament. Sloat is pursuing both Jack and his mother, and in this sense they both resemble the Gothic heroine fleeing from a menacing man. However, there is also another reason why Lily Cavanaugh Sawyer has brought her son to New Hampshire: she has cancer and she has come there to die.¹⁰⁰ This situation represents the absent mother theme found in the novel and will be discussed more thoroughly later on in this section of the thesis.

Lily and Jack are now staying at a hotel, the Alhambra Inn and Gardens, that is described as being "a great Victorian pile" with "rambling wings" that "looked like castle in a Sir Walter Scott novel."¹⁰¹ There they too are in a way imprisoned, just like the Gothic heroine, cornered there by Sloat's persecution. However, Jack's prison is much bigger than just the Gothic-looking hotel; it is the whole town around it and also the anxiety caused by his mother's illness. Even his whole journey across the North American continent can be argued to be yet another representation of that prison: it is Jack's version of the labyrinth-like house or castle of the Gothic heroine. He, too, wanders through the many highways and back roads of the continent, like the corridors of the Gothic castle, searching for an escape which in his case is the discovery of the Talisman and the subsequent healing of his mother. His imprisonment is more of the mental and emotional kind than that of physical incarceration,

⁹⁸ King and Straub, 3.

⁹⁹ King and Straub, 3, 46.

¹⁰⁰ King and Straub, 47.

¹⁰¹ King and Straub, 3, 4, 25, 9.

and thus, also the release from it is brought about through emotional means.

In the female Gothic, the centre of the attention is, as was already stated earlier on in this thesis, focused on the Gothic castle or house and the female protagonist and her experience. The same holds true, at least in part, in *The Talisman* as well, since the centre of the novel's attention is on Jack and his perception of the world and the events around him. Although, as Strengell points out, in *The Talisman*, the narrator sometimes does give the reader information that Jack only becomes aware of later on, for example about the death of Uncle Tommy.¹⁰² In the female Gothic, however, as was already mentioned, the reader only knows as much as the female protagonist does, and this in turn highlights anxiety over overt horror, and this is also something that deviates from *The Talisman*, since it highlights the actual and graphic horror instead. This deviation will be discussed more thoroughly in chapter 3.1. Also the centrality of the Gothic building is echoed in the novel, though there the actual building has metamorphosed into the open network of the roads of North America and the Territories, the roads that are as dangerous and full of surprises as the Gothic building itself.

The gender of the main character of the novel has little importance in the end, for both Jack and the Gothic heroine are not considered as independent individuals who are allowed, or even able, to make their own decisions, but as someone who desperately need the guidance and supervision of others. As Tony Magistrale points out, "King's children, like the female protagonists in one of Mrs. Ann Radcliffe's eighteenth-century gothic [sic] novels, are perfect victims—their confrontations with evil initially appear overwhelming—and their plights elicit intensely sympathetic responses from the reader."¹⁰³ This is because the Gothic heroine is a female and Jack, even though male, is a child, both inferior to the adult male and thus must be controlled and supervised by them. In the Gothic heroine's case this is usually done by a

¹⁰² Strengell, 249.

¹⁰³ Tony Magistrale, *Landscape of Fear: Stephen King's American Gothic* (Bowling Green: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1988) 73.

dominant male figure, be it a father, a guardian or in some cases even a prospective husband. In Jack's case the adult figure in charge has been his mother Lily, although Sloat is also becoming increasingly interested in controlling Jack's life and thus gaining total control of the joint family business. In this sense, the gender roles in the beginning of *The Talisman* are reversed: the mother has been the guardian of her son, the adult in charge of his life. The female has control over the, albeit a juvenile, male. But this relationship is, however, a loving one and not one based on oppression and, to some extent, even exploitation as is often the case with Gothic heroines and their guardians. The relationship is, however, soon changed, since the mother has become ill and Jack needs to be taking on more and more responsibility of his own life and that of his mother's. The roles are reversed; the child becomes the mother in the sense that he now is responsible for his mother's well-being as she had formerly been of his. Through this change Jack becomes perceived as an individual who is able to make his own decisions and take responsibility for himself and for others and also as an active character, which differs from the Gothic heroine who is considered throughout the novels as in need of some sort of guidance and control, be it from her family, husband or guardian. As a female she does not go through this changing of roles, even though she does temporarily become a more active and independent agent through her quest and flight, but still after all the excitement is over she returns to her relatively submissive role as a wife and/or daughter.

One of the major differences between Jack and the Gothic heroine is the fact that the heroine's quest almost invariably ends in marriage as well as in a reunion with family/society. The heroine is also often subjected to sexual persecution by the malignant male that imprisoned her. Sexual themes, even if only alluded to, play an important part in the predicament of the Gothic heroine. It seems to be the way that the male tries to control the female and keep her in check. The opposite, however, is true with regard to *The Talisman*, since Jack's troubles do not have sexual implications. There is no marriage in store for Jack,

nor does his pursuer, Sloat, harbor any sexual desires toward him; the constant physical sexual threat is not present in the novel. However, Jack is temporarily thrown into the position of the sexually harassed Gothic heroine when, on the road, he encounters men who display a sexual interest in him.¹⁰⁴ But beyond that, sexuality is not really an overtly visible issue in the novel. However, themes relating to the very covert and embedded sexuality present in the novel will be discussed in the following section of this thesis.

The underlying theme of the whole novel has to do with the concept of responsibility: Jack suddenly becomes responsible for not only himself and his life but for the life of his mother as well. Through this responsibility for them both he is responsible for the survival of both of his worlds: the USA of the early 1980s and its parallel world the Territories, for if Lily and her Twinner, the Queen of the Territories die “[t]hen we got black horror in both worlds.”¹⁰⁵ To prevent the end of worlds is a huge responsibility for an adolescent boy, but Jack manages to rise to the occasion and accomplish his enormous task thus saving everyone and everything. The whole theme of parallel worlds is a far cry from the Gothic and adheres more to science fiction, fantasy and even fairy tale, and it is also here that Jack also differs from the Gothic heroine. She is not burdened with such a heavy task of being responsible for others, instead her main interest is merely to survive and to complete her quest for the mother and to escape the malevolent male hunting her. In other words, she is only to a certain extent responsible for her own well-being and happiness since she only achieves these through other people: her family and future husband, even though without her own active role she would not find them. However, it can be argued that also Jack’s happiness is dependent on other people, namely on the survival of his mother, since without her all is lost for Jack, and in this respect he does bear a resemblance to the Gothic heroine.

Jack’s quest is also more than just an attempt to salvage the lives of both himself and his

¹⁰⁴ King and Straub, 261-263.

¹⁰⁵ King and Straub, 644.

mother; it is also through this, as was already stated in the previous chapter, an endeavor to save the universe. As Magistrale points out, Jack's quest is a noble one that elevates beyond his personal motives, he is on a mission to obliterate evil.¹⁰⁶ Even though Jack is mainly acting for personal reasons, the result will still be for everyone else's benefit as well. The success of the Gothic heroine's quest, on the other hand, is first and foremost a personal victory and does not benefit others in the way that Jack's does. It can be therefore said that Jack's quest is a nobler one than that of the Gothic heroine, since she is not trying to save anyone but herself.

The quest of the Gothic heroine is an attempt to escape this male/parental control and to try to gain at least some say in her own life, while Jack's is motivated more by the desire to save his mother's life, although there is a similar motive present in Jack's quest as well. He too wants to escape/avoid the possible future of falling under his "Uncle Morgan's" custody and consequently to maintain his independence. With this regard, Jack can be considered to have more success than the Gothic heroine, since her quest usually ends with her being reunited with her mother/family, or most often, in marriage in which she once more becomes controlled by a male: her husband, and so the temporary absence of an overbearing male in her life is again brought to an end. Whereas with Jack, his quest ends with him healing his mother and being reunited with her, he, nonetheless, retains his independence as a result of his trials and experiences on the journey and their effects on him, and also due to his growing up and becoming a man. Even though once again reunited with the now healthy Lily who does once again resume the role of mother, their relationship seems to shift a little more into that of equals instead of just simply mother and son, or custodian and dependant. Whether this shift has anything to do with Jack's gender, is not an issue. Even if the protagonist were female, I still believe that the same sense of equality would be reached. It is Jack's growing up and his

¹⁰⁶ Magistrale, 117.

dire experiences on the road that shaped him that bring about the equality, not his gender.

The absent mother theme in *The Talisman* is portrayed somewhat differently than in traditional female Gothic, for in the beginning of the novel, Lily is not actually physically absent from Jack's life. Rather, her absence is of the psychological kind, brought on by her growing illness.

[Jack] had meant to tell his mother about the dream this morning, but Lily had been sour and uncommunicative, hiding in a cloud of cigarette smoke. It was only as he started out on of the hotel coffee shop on some trumped-up errand that she smiled at him a little. . . . 'Go out and play' [Lily said] *Go out and play*, Jack thought with a bitterness utterly unlike him. *Oh yeah, Mom, way to go. Too cool. Go out and play. With who [sic]? Mom, why are you here? Why are we here? How sick are you? How come you won't talk to me about Uncle Tommy? What's Uncle Morgan up to? What* – Questions, questions. And not one of them worth a darned thing, because there was no on to answer them.¹⁰⁷

Cancer has caused her to withdraw from Jack mentally and to some extent emotionally as well. She has become distant and unwilling to even discuss her condition with Jack, which leaves him totally in the dark and in great distress. The fear of losing his mother has become the dominant emotion of Jack's life and everything else revolves around it. But the cancer is not only making Lily absent psychologically, it is also causing havoc on her body, she is losing weight and is described as having "[a] face that looked bony and vulnerable"¹⁰⁸ and "[which] was very pale, and the smudges under her eyes looked almost like bruises."¹⁰⁹ In this respect, the cancer is making Lily more and more physically absent as well by eating her alive before finally bringing about the ultimate absence: her death. In *The Talisman*, the mother is being gradually made absent during the course of the novel, instead of being absent to begin with, as is the case in the Gothic. This in a way makes Jack's quest for the mother even more urgent, it is a race against time and his very life depends on it. In the case of the Gothic heroine, however, the success of her quest for the mother is not in such a direct connection to her survival. It is rather a question of whether she can escape the evil male figure pursuing her

¹⁰⁷ King and Straub, 12.

¹⁰⁸ King and Straub, 41.

¹⁰⁹ King and Straub, 69.

that determines her destiny, not so much the reunion with the mother.

The cancer and the changes it brought about in Lily represent the actual physical distance between the mother and child in the traditional female Gothic, and it is that distance Jack has to cross in order to rediscover his absent mother. In other words, he has to find a cure for his mother's cancer in order to be reunited with her. This also entails that Jack has to go away from Lily so as to find her again and, consequently, an actual physical distance is created between them. In other words, the already absent mother must temporarily be made even more absent in order to be rediscovered again and this makes his quest even harder on the both of them. Even Lily herself comments on this during a phone conversation with Jack when he is on the road, during which she says that "[this] absentee-mother business is hard on an old girl like me."¹¹⁰ Here there is a clear difference to the situation of the Gothic heroine, since she is not first required to leave her mother to find her again, because the mother in her case is not present to begin with. Her quest is in this respect more direct and linear, without an initial separation from the mother taking place within the course of the novel, whereas Jack's is more cyclic, since for him to be reunited with his mother, he has to come full circle back to the place he started from. Furthermore, the Gothic heroine is not also obliged to try and save her mother's life during the course of her quest, but just simply to find her.

Numerous Gothic heroines, especially those portrayed in the works of Ann Radcliffe, are orphans¹¹¹ who have lost either one or both of their parents. Jack has also lost one of his parents and is thus a semi-orphan. However, in his case the dead parent is the father, whereas with the Gothic heroine the deceased/absent parent tends more often be the mother. Here, there is a twist in the gender-roles compared to traditional female Gothic, as there is with the gender of the central character as well, since it is the father, and not the mother, who is absent from Jack's life to begin with. But his absence, though a source of vast sorrow for Jack and

¹¹⁰ King and Straub, 247.

¹¹¹ Botting, 64.

constantly on his mind, is not the most important issue in the novel. Perhaps this is because there is no chance for Jack to do anything about his father's absence as there is with his mother's impending one. However, the fact that he has already lost one parent, no doubt makes his determination to save the remaining one even more resolute; the threat of becoming a complete orphan hangs constantly over Jack's head and drives him on. Anyhow, the basic motive of both the Gothic heroine and Jack in this respect is the same: the reunion of mother and child, only the time-aspect is different, while the first is trying to right a past wrong, the latter is trying to prevent a future one. The Gothic heroine is striving to achieve something that is still unfamiliar to her, that is, to say maternal love, whereas Jack is striving not to lose it.

The end of the quests of both Jack and the Gothic heroine are similar in the sense that they both have a happy ending with a clear closure and reassurance of the future which is very typical of the female Gothic. All the loose ends are tied together as the Gothic heroine is reunited with her long-lost mother and family and married, and Jack, in turn, saves his mother's life and gets his former life back:

In a room on the fourth floor of a deserted resort hotel on the miniscule New Hampshire seacoast, a thirteen-year-old boy named Jack Sawyer leaned forward, closed his eyes, and hugged his mother tightly, smiling. His ordinary life of school and friends and games and music, a life where there were schools to go to and crisp sheets to slide between at night, the ordinary life of a thirteen-year-old boy (if the life of such a creature can ever, in its color [sic] and riot, be considered ordinary) had been returned to him, he realized. The Talisman had done that for him, too. When he remembered to turn around and look for it, the Talisman was gone.¹¹²

However, this clear closure is undermined in the case of *The Talisman*, since the happy ending is thwarted in Stephen King's later novel *The Tommyknockers* (1987) by suggesting that Jack has after all become an orphan after his mother has died in a car crash.¹¹³ This puts the happy ending of the novel in a rather peculiar and interesting light and leaves open the

¹¹² King and Straub, 766.

¹¹³ Wiater, Golden and Wagner, 258.

question of whether Jack's quest for the absent mother can be considered a successful one after all. Did Jack go through his road of trials in vain, only to lose his mother sometime later in an unfortunate accident? In the light of *The Tommyknockers* it would certainly seem so, but when considered solely from the point of view of *The Talisman*, it is a completely different matter: the mother and the world are saved and mission accomplished.

Is Jack then a kind of Gothic heroine or does he bear a closer resemblance to the hero portrayed in male Gothic? Even though there are several differences between Jack and the heroine, these are, nevertheless, mostly superficial in nature and as a result he has much more in common with her than he does with the typical hero of the male Gothic described earlier on in this thesis. It can be therefore argued that Jack in fact is the heroine of the female Gothic but with a twist.

2.2. The Evil Father Figure and Sloat as the Gothic Hero/Villain

In this section of my thesis I will analyze the villain of *The Talisman*, the character called Morgan Sloat. I will examine him from the point of view of the evil father figure found in Gothic literature and also from the point of view of the hero/villain presented especially in the male Gothic. I begin this section by taking a look at the evil father-figure aspect of the character.

“[Parental] wickedness and filial suffering”¹¹⁴ and “the terrible violence and irrationality of the father/villain [lie] at the heart of the Gothic genre.”¹¹⁵ The archetypes of the evil father figure can be found, for example, in Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* and Ann Radcliffe's *A Sicilian Romance*,¹¹⁶ that is to say, the evil father figure is a character found in both the male and the female Gothic. Alongside with the theme of the quest for the absent

¹¹⁴ Botting, 99.

¹¹⁵ Laura Mulvey, “The Pre-Oedipal Father: The Gothicism of Blue Velvet,” *Modern Gothic: A Reader*, eds. Victor Sage and Allan Lloyd Smith (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1996) 46.

¹¹⁶ Mulvey, *Modern Gothic*, eds. Sage and Lloyd Smith, 46.

mother, the evil father figure is also a significant concept and very central to the plot, since it is the constant threat of Sloat and his relentless pursuit of Jack that comprise the other major reason for Jack's quest and, in part, also the force that drives him on. By completing his quest for the Talisman and in doing so also saving his mother's life, Jack escapes the looming threat of falling under Sloat's reign and thus losing his freedom and quite possibly even his life.

The character of Sloat fits perfectly into the category of the evil father. He, too, haunts, harasses, pursues, persecutes and even, when given the opportunity, kills his intended victims just like his Gothic counterpart. However, in the case of the Gothic father figure, the victim and object of his pursuit is usually a young maiden and this, in turn, gives his hunt a sexual motive as well and thus also adds the threat of rape to the maiden's plight. The constant threat of sexual assault is yet another form of control that the male is able to impose on the female. As was already mentioned earlier on in this thesis in the subchapter 1.2., the threat of sexual violence and the loss of virtue were considered as synonymous to death. If her pursuer succeeded in raping or otherwise sexually violating the heroine, all was lost for her and death soon followed, since a woman's virtue was the most valuable asset she had and a violated female was a miserable creature that had no place in the respectable world.

In the relationship of Jack and Sloat, however, there is a lack of this overt sexual threat, since Sloat's is motivated purely by money and power. His main objective is to get rid of Jack and to get his hands on the Talisman and to become the undisputed sovereign of both the Sawyer & Sloat joint business in this world and the whole of the Territories kingdom in the parallel reality. He is driven on by his greed and the immense desire to become the all-powerful and controlling "father figure" of both the business and the territory, and not by the desire to actually physically rape Jack. Although, it can be argued that there is also an allusion of a sexual motive present in Sloat's actions towards Jack. Since rape is all about control and power over the victim, the motif of sexual threat seems to fit here. Sloat as the dominant male

figure is trying to gain total control over Jack, the distressed and defenseless “maiden” just like the evil father figure of the Gothic over the heroine, only his methods vary slightly. Even though he is not physically attempting to rape Jack, Sloat is, nevertheless, engaged in a mental and emotional rape of Jack that is intended to have the same effect on him as the actual physical rape of the Gothic heroine: to gain absolute power over them and to break their spirit and thus cause the subsequent demise of the violated victim. In Jack’s case this emotional and mental rape is carried out by the extreme emotional stress caused by his constant fear for both the lives of himself and his mother at the hands of Sloat and the stress of being relentlessly hounded by him. In other words, Sloat is trying to break Jack through the violation of his spirit, rather than his body, since he cannot actually get his hands on him.

An additional manifestation of the sexual threat imposed by a father figure of sorts is presented when Jack is sexually harassed by the “sugar daddies” that he meets while hitchhiking across USA. In a strange way, they all seem to want to be Jack’s “fathers”, first appearing to be helpful and protective by offering him a ride in their cars and then turning on him when he does not comply with their sexual desires.¹¹⁷ Jack is regarded as “a good boy” only as long as he remains the potential victim of their perverse sexual desires and obeys his “father”. Once he disobeys, he is cut off and thrown out to fend for himself. Even though this sexual threat is an actual physical one and one that Jack himself is in fact very much aware of, it nevertheless pales in comparison to the concealed mental one presented by Sloat, and in the long run it is also relatively meaningless to Jack’s quest. In the case of both these sexual threats, however, it is Jack that is triumphant in the end, since he is able to avoid violation completely at the hands of the “sugar daddies” and ultimately to overcome and survive the emotional rape imposed by Sloat by reaching his goal the Talisman. It can be therefore said that while there is a covert sexual threat present in *The Talisman*, the intended victim, Jack,

¹¹⁷ King and Straub, 262-263.

manages to avoid and triumph over it, thus retaining his “virtue” and successfully completing his quest. It is in this sense that Jack is also “stronger” than the Gothic heroine, since he survives the, albeit mental, rape while she, once violated, loses her life as a result of it.

The disobedience of the child/victim towards the father figure is also a central aspect of both *The Talisman* and the Gothic, since in both the plight of Jack and the heroine respectively, is caused not only by the malevolence, and quite often also greed, of the evil father figure, but also by the refusal of the victim to succumb to this oppression and their attempts to break free from it. This refusal is the victim’s way of rebellion, their way to undermine the paternal domination, and an attempt to gain some control of their own life, which, of course, is totally unacceptable and must be dealt with by the father figure, quite often through violence or the threat of it. The rebelling victim must be put back to their place and the father figure must maintain control over them at all costs, for if control is lost, all is lost for him. He is the abuser that tries to take advantage of the prey under his power and to use them to his personal gain, notwithstanding their views or even their possible deaths in the process. This personal advantage is usually something they cannot quite attain on their own without their victim, for example wealth, the domination of others, or social standing. The only value that the victim has to the evil father figure is that of profit: how much can he possibly profit from his victim and how much he stands to lose if he loses control over them. No love is lost in this relationship, and this holds true with regard to Jack and Sloat’s relationship as well: money and power, and the desire for them, lie at the heart of it. Sloat is trying to climb the social ladder through Jack, to use him in his own quest for the total control of the Sawyer & Sloat business and the sovereignty of the Territories. Jack is only worth having around as long as Sloat can control him as well as get what he wants from and also through him, once he has fulfilled this task, he becomes a liability and must be disposed of and that is exactly what Sloat is trying to do, to kill the disobedient child: “he would kill

[Jack]. There was such a thing as an unacceptable risk.”¹¹⁸

In *The Talisman*, as was already stated above, Morgan Sloat is the evil father figure. He is also literally a father, since he has a son, Richard, who is also Jack’s best friend. In the Gothic, the evil father figure did not necessarily have to be a father to anyone, in order to be regarded as such; all that was needed was that he had control over a submissive, quite often female, ward. Actual kinship played little part in the relationship, but in *The Talisman* it does and this makes Sloat seem somehow even more off-putting and sinister than the evil father figure found in the traditional Gothic. Sloat has been a good, even if somewhat absent father, in the physical sense, that is, for Richard. However, all this changes in the course of the novel when Richard joins Jack for the latter part of his quest for the Talisman, and in doing so, disobeys his father and thus abandons his submissive role as the always obedient son. Richard’s unexpected revolt upsets Sloat a great deal, since “as long as there was Richard politely coming along behind him, all was well and all was well and all manner of things was [sic] well.”¹¹⁹ When Richard rebels against his father and, eventually chooses Jack over him, their relationship changes from father and son to that of hunter and prey. As long as the son obeys his father’s wishes, he will be safe and loved, but once he starts to think for himself and goes against them, he is suddenly in danger and even becomes expendable. In Sloat’s world, fatherhood seems to be a matter of choice and rationality, almost a matter of business, rather than that of love and affection, since once the business deal, that is the father-son-relationship, ceases to be a profitable one for him, the contract might be terminated. In this sense, Sloat becomes the evil father figure even to his own son, since his disobedience cannot be tolerated. It is also in this sense that the relationship of Sloat and his son is very reminiscent of the relationship of the evil father figure and his ward in the traditional Gothic, since also that relationship is most often based purely on the potential profit, be it wealth or power, of the

¹¹⁸ King and Straub, 89.

¹¹⁹ King and Straub, 83.

guardian gained through his ward.

To Jack, however, Sloat has been more or less the evil father figure all along, even despite earlier attempts to pose as the jolly uncle:

When [Jack] looked into Uncle Morgan's face, he saw calculation sink into his skin, slide underneath his jolly-fat-man's cheeks like a snake beneath a rock. He looked like Richard Sloat's daddy again, like good old Uncle Morgan who always gave spectacular Christmas and birthday presents, like good old sweaty Uncle Morgan, so easy not to notice. But what had he looked like before? *like [sic] a human earthquake, like a man crumbling apart over the fault-line behind his eyes, like something all wound up and waiting to explode . . .*¹²⁰

Sloat's façade finally comes off completely and he shows his true face and character to both Jack and later on to Richard as well, which costs him his son and heir in the end. Sloat's own actions and his antagonism towards Jack become the downfall of his intended empire and also his own immortality, the first of which he had planned to leave to his son and the second to be reached through him, since "Richard was . . . his immortality."¹²¹ In this sense, in *The Talisman*, the evil father brings about, at least to a certain degree, his own downfall through the alienation of his own offspring. It can be argued that entwined in the sadness that Sloat briefly feels at the loss of his son there is also some sorrow for himself as well, since his plans of "immortality" through Richard have been thwarted and the continuity of his future empire denied.

Both Sloat and the evil father figure of the Gothic are ruthless and violent, they will stop at nothing to get what they want, even if it means they have to sacrifice anything and everything they might hold dear, even their own offspring, in the process. Their personal benefit is all that matters, everything else is expendable. In Sloat's case he is willing to sacrifice his own son and let him die in order to get his hands on Jack and the Talisman. To Sloat and the evil father, power, wealth, social status and control are the most important things in the world and in order to achieve these no expense is spared. In Sloat's universe,

¹²⁰ King and Straub, 199.

¹²¹ King and Straub, 81.

“[it] profits a man the *world* [to lose his own son], and by Jason, the world is enough!”¹²² The reward gained through extreme sacrifice is regarded well worth it. Here, yet again, evidence of Sloat’s violence and the unending desire for power are clearly present. He seems to be totally unable to feel anything for anyone in the end, even the love he once had for his son is gone, and as a result of this Richard becomes dead to him just as he does to Richard. In the end, the evil father and his diabolical plans are destroyed here as they are in the Gothic narratives as well. Evil is punished for its actions in both the world of the Gothic as well as in the world of *The Talisman*.

It can be also argued that Sloat is not only an evil father figure himself, but that he is also the product of one. His own father relationship was not particularly warm and the young Sloat spent his whole adolescence trying to escape his severe and fearsome father who abused him if not necessarily physically, then at least in the emotional and mental sense. He finally managed to escape him by going away to university where his father dared not come.¹²³ This emotionally deprived and even antagonistic relationship no doubt has had an effect of the attitude of Sloat to his own son and Jack. It is as though he is following in his father’s footsteps and repeating his mistakes, only exponentially, and alienating and abusing his own son just as his father did to him. From this point of view, Sloat is also a victim and not just the tormenter, and this gives his character more depth and manages to elicit even a little sympathy for him.

Besides Sloat, there are also two other characters in the novel that can be placed in the evil father figure category. These are the mean barkeeper Smokey Updike and the crazy Reverend Robert “Sunlight” Gardener. The first one, Updike, owns a bar in which Jack makes the grave mistake of getting a job at¹²⁴ and ends up being made to work extremely hard for almost nothing and forbidden to leave. The second one, Gardener, runs the “Sunlight Gardener

¹²² King and Straub, 656.

¹²³ King and Straub, 655.

¹²⁴ King and Straub, 167-168.

Scripture Home for Wayward Boys”¹²⁵ in which Jack and his friend Wolf are sent to in order to “get a little sunlight in [their souls]”¹²⁶ but are enslaved, abused, and in Wolf’s case even killed, instead. The similarities that these two characters bear to the evil father figure of the traditional Gothic are undeniable and evident, since both Updike and Gardener are ruthless and evil men who only care about their own best interests and profit, disregarding anything and everything, as well as everyone, else. Neither one of them has any difficulties when it comes to abusing and taking advantage of children, and in fact, they both almost seem to take pleasure in it. Both also imprison Jack and keep him against his will and force him to work his fingers to the bone. In both cases, however, Jack manages to escape from his captivity and proceed on his quest for the Talisman, just as in the traditional Gothic where the heroine escapes from her imprisonment and the evil father figure.

The evil father figure theme is visible also in another form in *The Talisman*, one which does not involve Gardener, Updike or even Sloat at all. It is echoed in the “Wicked Stepfather”-story that Jack tells to potential employers when he is on his journey.¹²⁷ Even though it is only a little made up story of an evil stepfather that used to beat up his stepson who then ran away from home, it is still another version of the same theme of the evil father figure. In this version too, the child is abused by the cruel adult and must flee his once more or less happy home. The only difference in this story is that the victim is not actually being pursued by his abuser. Albeit merely a miniscule part of the novel, it is still interesting that one of its central themes is in this way echoed even in its smallest details.

The character of Morgan Sloat can also be examined from the point of view of the hero/villain found in the male Gothic which I had dealt with in chapter 1.1. The hero/villain, or who Anne Williams, among others, calls “the Byronic hero”¹²⁸ is often depicted as a

¹²⁵ King and Straub, 348.

¹²⁶ King and Straub, 345.

¹²⁷ King and Straub, 166.

¹²⁸ Williams, 141.

transgressor, a dark and mysterious character, somewhat an outcast, an individual that defies collective taboos and social establishments. He breaks the boundaries of decency and morality and acts according to his own set of rules and not those posed by society and decency. In his world, women are demoted to mere victims, the passive objects of his sexual desire and power. However, in the end the hero/villain is almost invariably punished for his actions.

Morgan Sloat seems to fit this description to some extent, although he cannot be really considered the central character of the novel, as the hero/villain often is, but rather as an auxiliary character, though still very central to the plot. And as for the hero part in the hero/villain dichotomy, Sloat is naturally more villain than hero, but, nevertheless, he can be to some extent regarded as a dark hero, the counter-force to Jack's light one, a fallen hero that once perhaps was not the evil man he grew up to be. However, there are some similarities between Sloat and the hero/villain and these will be addressed next.

The first of these equivalences is the attitude towards women. However, there are relatively few women characters in *The Talisman*, and only one of real importance, that is, Lily. Due to this, Sloat's attitudes towards women are only reflected through this one, albeit distorted and antagonistic, relationship. This relationship has never been particularly warm, and it has only deteriorated even more during the years after the death of Lily's husband. Her cancer has finally turned her into the frail, vulnerable and passive female that cannot hold her own as she used to. Now she really has become the helpless victim of Sloat's harassment, just like he always wished her to be, trapped in the Alhambra with nowhere left to hide, and she is at last at his mercy to be dealt with in whichever way he best sees fit. Sloat has at long last gotten a hold on Lily and is able to wield his power on her, to make her suffer for all that she has done wrong in his opinion. The sexual aspect of Sloat's desire to have Lily under his control is also mentioned, even if only in passing, when he reminisces about the single

time he made a drunken pass at Lily who rejected his advances and slapped him.¹²⁹ This seemingly small and unimportant incident no doubt added friction to the already troublesome relationship of Sloat and Lily and quite likely made Sloat even more bitter and vindictive towards her. The rejection, although only alluded to at the very end of the novel, can be seen as an undercurrent in Sloat's attitude to Lily; it is as though her other "tricks" were not already enough, but she had to add insult to injury by refusing to comply even in this, that is, the sexual sense and deny Sloat even this chance to have her under his control.

The second of these similarities is that both Sloat and the hero/villain are transgressors of boundaries. They do not obey the rules and conventions of society on their path towards their goal, but rather do what they please and pay no attention to the consequences, which will eventually always catch up with them in the end. For example, Sloat has arranged several "accidents", has had people killed if they got in the way of his plans, has cheated and stolen, harassed and haunted, and not really cared about anything else than how these things worked in his own favour. As long as his personal profit was ensured, the potential damages and harm to others is entirely secondary and meaningless. In other words, he has crossed several boundaries of common decency and decorum and even broken the law. The absolute worst of his actions is the breach of the ultimate taboo of society and humanity, the killing of other people. Sloat has both killed and tried to kill people himself and also orchestrated and ordered their deaths at the hands of others. In this light, it is safe to say that Sloat is an egocentric creature with a total lack of morality and empathy for others and it is in this respect that he bears a resemblance to the hero/villain of the male Gothic.

The most important thing that Sloat, the evil father figure and the hero/villain all have in common is the fact that they all get punished for their actions in the end. No matter how successful they may or may not be in their undertakings, nevertheless, the ultimate victory is

¹²⁹ King and Straub, 736.

never theirs, since they all usually end up losing everything they treasure and eventually their lives as well as a result of their violations. Sloat, too, pays the ultimate price, when he is finally killed in a battle with Jack over the Talisman.

Then Morgan Sloat was driven backward and enveloped in a field of fire from his own key – fire that had been absorbed inside the Talisman as the flashes of light from Sunlight Gardener’s telescopic sight had been absorbed – and which was returned to him a thousandfold [sic]. A hole opened between the worlds – a hole the size of the tunnel leading into Oatley – and Jack saw Sloat, his handsome brown suit burning, one skeletal, tallow hand still clutching the key, driven through that hole. Sloat’s eyes were boiling in their sockets, but they were wide ... they were *aware*. And as he passed, Jack saw him change – saw the cloak appear like the wings of a bat that has swooped through the flame of a torch, saw his burning boots, his burning hair. Saw the key become a thing like a miniature lightning-rod.¹³⁰

There is a very clear moral in *The Talisman* as well as in the Gothic narratives that, in the end, evil deeds and evil people get what they deserve and a balance is once more restored to the world. This “notion of fate” as Strengell calls it, is very central to both King’s writings as well as the Gothic, where it “often implies evil destiny or even death, thus punishing the wrongdoings of such villains as Manfred of Otranto”¹³¹ as well as Morgan Sloat and his accomplices in *The Talisman*.

2.3. The Gothic Family

In this section of the thesis I will explore the way the family is portrayed in *The Talisman* and how the novel’s portrayal of family fits in with the way it is depicted in the Gothic texts. I will begin this section with a brief introduction of some of the central aspects associated to the Gothic family. One of the central themes associated with the family in the Gothic is the notion that “the sins of the fathers are visited on their children“ which first originated in Horace Walpole’s *The Castle of Otranto* and became a widely used subject in later Gothic writings as

¹³⁰ King and Straub, 737.

¹³¹ Strengell, 16.

well, for example in Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights*.¹³² In connection with this topic, the matters concerning inheritance and succession were also introduced in *The Castle of Otranto* and dealt with extensively by later Gothic writers.¹³³ Another common theme which I also discussed in relation to the absent mother theme, is that of the protagonist often being an orphan that has lost either one or both of their parents. The attack on traditional family values and the disintegration of the family is also often depicted in the Gothic. The abuse of both women and especially children was also a frequently used topic.¹³⁴ The families portrayed in the Gothic invariably belong to aristocracy or at least to the upper classes, the family lives of the lower classes are rarely depicted. Family secrets of the past and the consequences they have are also a common theme, for instance in the novels of Ann Radcliffe¹³⁵ as well as in later Gothic sensation novels of, for example, Wilkie Collins.¹³⁶ The patriarchal family structure, with the father as the ultimate form of authority and power, lies also at the heart of the Gothic.¹³⁷ These themes will now be discussed in relation to *The Talisman* in the following chapters.

The sins of the fathers that are then revisited on their children is also a theme found in what Strengell refers to as "Stephen King's Gothic melodramas . . . [such as] *Bag of Bones* and *The Shining*."¹³⁸ This theme can, however, be argued to prevail in the world of *The Talisman* as well, even though the novel cannot really be said to adhere to the genre of melodrama. It is also one of the novel's major underlying themes that forms its backbone together with the motifs of absent mother and evil father discussed earlier. One of the main reasons why Sloat is harassing Jack and his mother has to do with just this concept. He feels that Jack's father and his deceased business partner, Phil, committed "sins" against him while

¹³² Botting, 49, 129.

¹³³ Punter and Byron, 179.

¹³⁴ Punter and Byron, 289.

¹³⁵ Botting, 64.

¹³⁶ Punter and Byron, 29.

¹³⁷ Williams, 22-23.

¹³⁸ Strengell, 87.

he was still alive and seeks retribution through Jack, since someone must pay for them. He feels that Phil wronged him by always being superior and somehow better than him, making him feel inferior and inadequate, and underestimating him ever since they were in university together.¹³⁹ Which, of course, he never did, except for maybe the underestimation part, but Sloat nevertheless is convinced of this and bases his whole vengeance on this false notion. He feels that because of this and the fact that, in his own opinion, he always did more for it, the Sawyer & Sloat business should become exclusively that of Sloat. That all of it should be his because he is more worthy of it than Jack who never did anything else for it except inherit it from his father. In this sense, the sins of the father can be paid by giving Sloat total control of the business and of the Territories as well, something that was denied from him before and that he truly deserves. The imagined and exaggerated sins of Phil Sawyer act for Sloat as the justification of his actions and his quest to rule everything and to hurt Jack, Lily and also his own son in the process.

In *The Talisman*, the sins of the father are not very grave, or for the most part nothing more than the products of a twisted and envious mind, but in the Gothic tradition they usually tended to be just that, grave and horrific, and the retribution thus somehow more warranted. However, in the novel, the retribution of them on the child is all the more severe. Jack is being made to pay the ultimate price for his father's trivial sins, that of his future and his life. The price seems very unreasonable, but Sloat is not willing to settle for anything less than a complete retribution and compensation of his troubles. It is only through this that he will feel totally vindicated, only after the sins of the father have been atoned by his son. As in the Gothic literature, the child in question does not have a choice in the matter, the sins of the father are simply forced on them and expected to be atoned. This is also the case with Jack, even though he himself is not aware that his troubles are caused by this, since he is ignorant

¹³⁹ King and Straub, 85.

of this underlying motive in Sloat's antagonism towards him.

There is also another dimension to the sins of the father theme that centers on the characters of Sloat and his son Richard. First of all, it can be argued that also Sloat, is in a way paying for his own father's sins. As was already stated earlier, he is repeating his father's mistakes with his own son, and in this sense he is paying for his father's sin, that of the lack of compassion and love by being doomed to repeat them. The ultimate price for his father's sins is the loss of his son through alienation. This ultimate price is echoed even in his own death through his false pride. These sins have in part made him what he is and he has tried to compensate them by involuntarily turning into his father. Even though the sins of Sloat's father pale in comparison with his own, they do, nevertheless, play a part in the formation of his character. Second, also Richard is paying for his father's sins, and the price he pays is almost as severe as the one his father has to endure. Richard not only loses his father, but also comes very close to losing his life as well. He falls gravely ill at the end of his and Jack's journey and almost dies. His illness is brought on him by his father¹⁴⁰ who would rather see him dead than with Jack. It is for his father's sin of complete lack of empathy and consideration for anyone that Richard is made to pay. However, in the end Richard manages to survive the debt imposed on him, while his father perishes under his. It can be therefore stated that in the Sloat lineage there is a succession of sons paying for their fathers' sins, and ironically the son whose father's sins were fewer and less dire than those of his own, pays with his life, while his son in turn "settles his debt" and survives.

In connection to the sins of the father, the topic of inheritance and succession also runs deep in *The Talisman*, forming yet another part of the novel's backbone. The topic was already discussed to some extent in connection with the evil father figure in the previous chapter. The novel is all about inheritance and succession, who is entitled to what, what

¹⁴⁰ King and Straub, 643.

parents leave to their children and whether or not everyone gets what they deserve. The first and the last of these questions lie at the heart of the relationship of Jack and Sloat and will be discussed next.

There are two kinds of inheritance and succession in the novel: the justified and the unwarranted kind. Jack represents the first one, since he is the rightful heir to his father's half of the business as well as to the throne of the Territories, where his mother's Twinner is the Queen.¹⁴¹ Sloat is the pretender to both the other half of the business as well as to the throne of the Territories. The question of who is the rightful heir can be approached from two opposite angles, that of the traditional view and that of the more unorthodox one represented by Sloat. The traditional view is that of blood lineage and family and that children should invariably inherit their parents, the other that inheritance and succession need not have anything to do with family or blood lines, but rather with merit, that those who are "worthy" should benefit regardless of kinship. In *The Talisman*, Sloat attempts to deny Jack's birthright to his inheritance based on this belief and in doing so disrupts the traditional order of things. However, just like in the Gothic tradition, also here the rightful heir prevails over the pretender in the end and proper order is restored to the world in the sense that children do inherit their parents.

Another instance of the inheritance and succession topic has to do with the relationship of Sloat and Phil, which at first glance seems a rather unlikely place for it. However, it is still there, having a huge effect on the way things eventually turn out for Sloat, Phil, and their families. Sloat and Phil built up their company together, but Sloat still feels that he did far more for it and thus is also entitled to the whole company after the death of Phil which he had in fact orchestrated¹⁴² to gain just that. Sloat had always felt inferior to Phil, that Phil was always "the golden boy" and in this sense their relationship can be said to have resembled that

¹⁴¹ King and Straub, 531.

¹⁴² King and Straub, 602.

of two brothers, with the younger always feeling envious and in the shadow of the elder, the first born with his natural first born rights to everything. However, when the elder brother dies, the younger feels entitled also to his half of the business, and to the rights of the first born, in order to become the undisputed ruler of the company; an inheritance that he has truly earned, and as a result, feels betrayed, swindled out of his inheritance, when this does not happen. Sloat always envied Phil and, in a way, also wanted to be like him: successful, respected and liked; all things which he tries to accomplish through power and control of the company. He wants to become “the new king” and to rise to the throne after “the old king” has perished, as his rightful successor. Due to this firm belief in his succession right, Sloat seeks revenge, and in the process not only destroys his own life, but very nearly manages to destroy those of his own son as well as Jack and his mother.

The theme of inheritance and succession is also visible in the relationship of Sloat and his son, and was already discussed to some extent earlier, so it is sufficient to only mention here that Richard was intended to be the heir to Sloat’s empire comprising of both the business and the throne of the Territories. However, he chooses not to accept them, thus breaking the traditional line of inheritance and succession from father to son. Since, as was mentioned in the previous chapter, Sloat is the pretender to both of these positions; this makes Richard one, too, and their line of succession as a consequence based on dishonesty and betrayal. In this sense, Richard’s refusal to comply with his father’s plans and his allegiance to Jack are the right and noble thing to do. By refusing his father and being loyal to the true future sovereign he redeems himself from a grave destiny that would surely follow should he accept them, since both in the world of the Gothic and the world of *The Talisman*, bad deeds are always avenged in the end and righteousness prevails over injustice, those with a clear conscience and a pure heart survive and prosper.

Another central family-related theme of both the Gothic and *The Talisman* has not only to

do with the absent mother, which was discussed to a great extent in chapter 2.1., but also with the protagonists often being either complete or semi-orphans. In the Gothic, the family and its values are often under attack and the same holds true with *The Talisman* as well. The dysfunctional family and the subsequent disintegration of the (nuclear) family is a common topic in the Gothic fiction and also very central in the works of especially Stephen King, for example in *The Shining* and *Pet Sematary*.

The absent mother and the orphan protagonist topics were already addressed in connection with the relationship of Jack and Lily, but there is also another take on these subjects in the novel. These have to do with Richard and his mother-relationship, or rather, the lack of it. Richard's mother is the ultimate absent mother and is not mentioned even once in the novel. Neither are we told how long she has been absent, what has happened to her and whether her absence is voluntary or her rediscovery possible. In the light of Richard's lack of interest in the matter and the relatively little effect it appears to have had on him, she has probably been absent for a long time and not really been an important figure in his life. The fact that the losing of the mother has already taken place and is accepted by Richard is the main difference between him and Jack. Richard never questions this fact, but accepts it, while Jack rebels against the possibility of losing his mother with all his might. In connection with this, the difference between Richard and Jack extends to their father-relationships as well. While both boys loved their fathers, their attitudes towards them and the loss of them vary. Jack has already lost his father, but has never accepted it and still feels loss and sorrow as a result of it, while Richard accepts the loss of his father even before it has actually taken place: "[My father is] dead. All that's out there is his . . . what do call it? His Twinner."¹⁴³ In this sense, Jack's love for his parents seems more potent or at least more active and unremitting than Richard's, since he is willing to challenge forces greater than himself and to try and change

¹⁴³ King and Straub, 713.

his life and future, while Richard just seems to accept his as an orphan who has now lost even his one remaining parent.

The attack on traditional family values and the disintegration of the family are central aspects of *The Talisman* as well as the Gothic. In the novel, the traditional family structure comprising of mother, father and child/children has already been shattered before the beginning of the novel with the death of Jack's father, and Jack feels that his whole family is dying around him; all his loved ones dead or dying: "[there] was too much death, the world was half-made of death."¹⁴⁴ In this case the disintegration is of the ultimate kind, one that cannot ever be restored, since it is brought about by death and not by, for example abandonment, indifference or animosity within the family unit itself. The disintegration or more accurately the complete destruction of the Sawyer family is the ultimate goal of Sloat who tries to get rid of both Jack and his mother just as he got rid of Jack's father. Sloat had actually already attempted to kill Jack as a baby:

[Jack] saw Uncle Morgan take a throw-pillow from a nearby chair, saw him put it gently and yet firmly over the sleeping baby's entire head, holding it there with one hand while he held the other hand flat on the baby's back. And when all movement had stopped, he saw Uncle Morgan put the pillow back on the chair . . . If his mother hadn't come in to check on him almost immediately . . . Had it been that way? It could have been. His heart told him it *had* been. The coincidence was too utterly perfect, too seamlessly complete.¹⁴⁵

Sloat now tries to finish the job thus not only disintegrating, but completely annihilating the Sawyer lineage.

Furthermore, Sloat is responsible, directly or indirectly, for the deaths and near deaths of other members of the "extended" Sawyer family and thus also attempting to disintegrate even the few scattered remains of what Jack considers his family. These incidents include the hit-and-run death of Uncle Tommy Woodbine, one of Jack's guardians,¹⁴⁶ the death of Jack's friend and "brother" Wolf and the nearly fatal illnesses of Jack's friend and a surrogate father

¹⁴⁴ King and Straub, 4.

¹⁴⁵ King and Straub, 108.

¹⁴⁶ King and Straub, 88.

figure Speedy Parker and even Sloat's own son Richard.¹⁴⁷ Tommy Woodbine was the second member of Jack's family that Sloat obliterated, his father being the first, and after the death of Uncle Tommy the pace only quickens and the scope of destruction widens; now everyone near and dear to Jack becomes legitimate prey if they get in the way. Therefore it can be said that in the novel, the disintegration of the family starts with the nuclear family, but expands to cover everyone at its perimeters as well.

The disintegration of the family is also visible in the relationship of Sloat and Richard. As opposed to the Sawyer family, in this relationship the destructive force comes from within the family unit itself and brings about total chaos in it, finally destroying it completely. The other difference to the Sawyers is that here the disintegration is not deliberate or planned, but rather happens as the result of the actions of the father, even though they are not directly directed against the son or their mutual relationship. Here disintegration is the consequence and not the intended goal of action. Ironically, the deeds of Sloat designed to bring about the destruction of another family in the interest of the prosperity and wealth of his own miscarry and result in the destruction of his own family. This is something that is reminiscent of the strong moral backbone of the Gothic that evil deeds are not left unpunished.

What is interesting about *The Talisman*, is that the threat of the traditional family values and the disintegration of the family derives from and is caused by an outer force, Sloat, rather than from within the family unit itself. In the novel, the family structure is first broken by the removal of one parent, the father, and then the attempted eliminations of the mother and child. However, in this case the subtraction of the father from the family unit and the looming disruption of the bond between of the surviving family members are orchestrated and carried out by someone else than the members of the family themselves. In the novel, the stunted family unit fights back and manages to survive, even adding a new member to the family,

¹⁴⁷ King and Straub, 643.

when Richard is being integrated into it¹⁴⁸ after his own family has been destroyed. The attack on family values and the disintegration of the family are rejected and faith in the importance and integrity of the family is once more restored. The family unit itself, even though in altered form, is reintegrated back in its proper place in society as an integral part of it.

Child abuse is a topic frequently touched upon in the Gothic, along with the abuse of women as well. Here the emphasis is on the abuse of children rather than women, since the protagonist of *The Talisman* is a child. In the novel there are several instances of blatant child abuse, most often that of Jack at the hands of various malevolent characters, such as “Sunlight” Gardener and his Twinner Osmond, Smokey Updike and, of course Morgan Sloat.

‘Sonny! Andy!’ Gardener screamed. ‘Unlace his left hand [from the straight-jacket.] Hold it out to me.’ . . . Sonny pulled Jack’s ring finger and his pinky in one direction; Warwick pulled his pointer and middle finger in the other. A moment later, Gardener had applied the Zippo’s flame to the webbing at the base of the V they had created. The pain was exquisite, bolting up his left arm and from there seeming to fill his whole body. A sweet, charring smell drifted up. Himself. Burning. Himself.¹⁴⁹

The abuse Jack faces is most often physical and very extreme, as in the example above, but it often involves actual imprisonment as well, for example at the hands of Updike who enslaves Jack in his bar and regularly beats him for his “mistakes”: “Smokey hit him . . . a quick looping blow that drove Jack into one of the storeroom’s splintery walls.”¹⁵⁰ In addition to Jack, there are also other children who face abuse during the course of the novel, for instance the residents of the Sunlight Home who are systematically abused and enslaved by Gardener and his assistants. In other words, the world of *The Talisman* is filled with potential abusers and is a very dangerous place for a child to be caught alone in, but despite all this, Jack still manages to overcome these obstacles and triumph in the end. It can be argued that all the difficulties and abuse he faces and conquers during his quest actually make him stronger and therefore almost function as a form of incentive that drives him onward towards his goal.

¹⁴⁸ King and Straub, 751.

¹⁴⁹ King and Straub, 423.

¹⁵⁰ King and Straub, 156.

One of the things that practically all of the families portrayed in the Gothic writings have in common is that they are all invariably aristocratic, or at the very least, of a higher social standing. This is also true in connection with the families depicted in *The Talisman*, since both the Sawyer and Sloat families can actually be regarded as aristocratic, even if not in the absolutely strictest and most traditional meaning of the word. As was stated in subchapter 1.1., the novel is set in two parallel realities, that of the United States of the early 1980s and the medieval Territories. The aristocracy aspect of the novel is most clearly visible in the latter of these two which in fact is a monarchy populated with queens, lords and other members of aristocracy. This aristocratic society of the Territories is connected to these two families through the Twinner-concept of the novel.¹⁵¹ In the novel, the Twinners of some of the central characters, for example those of Lily and Sloat are, in fact, genuine aristocrats in the Territories. Lily's Twinner is the Queen and Sloat's is of a member of a somewhat lower class, but still an aristocratic figure: "the Lord of the Outpost . . . [also known as] Morgan of Orris,"¹⁵² the undisputed ruler of the western Territories.

While aristocracy is clearly displayed in the Territories, it is also present in the part of the novel set in the United States, even though more latent. As is the case with the Gothic heroine, similarly Jack's family, as well as that of Sloat, can both be considered to be aristocratic, even though not in the strictest and most traditional of senses. Jack's mother Lily and father Phil as well as Sloat are or were all involved in the film industry of Hollywood. In the lack of real royalty or aristocracy in the USA, this seemingly sophisticated and glamorous industry is often regarded as the country's version of royalty, a kingdom with its kings, queens, princes and princesses as well as pretenders to the crown. Hollywood's most famous and influential actors are often admired, even worshipped, and treated as royalty, as superior to the common people. Both the aristocratic society and families of the Gothic as well as

¹⁵¹ See subchapter 1.1.

¹⁵² King and Straub, 529.

those of Hollywood are something unattainable and inaccessible for the common people. Both communities have become secluded from ordinary people, they are something that can be admired from afar, but not really attained or entered. Wealth, power, social standing and reputation are central in both; money or power is needed to enter the aristocratic community of Hollywood, just as a noble birth is required to enter that of the Gothic. In this sense, the aristocratic society of Hollywood is somewhat easier to enter than the Gothic, since in the latter all depends on pedigree and without it access is invariably denied.

In *The Talisman*, as was already stated, Jack's family belongs to the Hollywood aristocracy. His grew up in a "sophisticated . . . family where his father had been an agent and his mother a movie actress,"¹⁵³ who was actually known as "Queen of the Bs. Queen Lily Cavanaugh."¹⁵⁴ This and the fact that her Twinner is a real queen make her in a way doubly a queen, royalty in both worlds. As her son, Jack thus also becomes royalty, a prince by birth, and as such he is perfect for the role of the untarnished Gothic hero(ine). It is this noble birth that separates him from Sloat who can also be considered aristocratic in both worlds. Sloat's aristocracy, however, is of an attained kind; he has entered both the patrician society of Hollywood and that of the Territories not by birth but by force, and thus is always inferior to those of noble birth, just as the Gothic villain is always inferior to the hero(ine) in both status and character. And just like the Gothic villain, also Sloat is destroyed in the end because of his evil deeds and his inferior social standing and origin. He is simply not of good enough stock or lineage to prevail over the "true" aristocrats of noble birth.

Past family secrets is a widely used theme, almost a commonplace, in the Gothic. These secrets and especially their discoveries and the effects they have on the family they come back to haunt are central. *The Talisman* abounds in past family secrets: there are good secrets and there are bad secrets, and both of these have an effect on the Sawyer and Sloat families.

¹⁵³ King and Straub, 226.

¹⁵⁴ King and Straub, 36.

As Magistrale points out, in Stephen King's fiction "personal pasts and family histories pervert and eventually dominate the present"¹⁵⁵ and this is strikingly visible in *The Talisman*. The only family secret in the novel that can be considered good is that of the Territories. It is a family secret shared by both the Sawyers and the Sloats, since in both cases only the fathers of the families know about it, and the rest of the families do not. The effect of this particular secret, when it is revealed to the two sons, Jack and Richard, is basically positive, even though shocking and unbelievable at first. Not all of the ramifications that the revealing of the secret of the Territories entails are necessarily good, especially for Sloat and his plans for his son's future, but in the end more good than bad comes from it, since it opens up a whole new world for both Jack and Richard. This secret is also one that was actually meant to come out eventually, since especially Sloat intended all along to share it with his son:

And sometime when this obedient son was, say, in his senior year at Stanford or Yale, Sloat would introduce him to the Territories. Richard would be six or seven years younger than he had been himself when [he was first introduced to the Territories.] . . . And when Richard saw the Territories, [sic] that would be it – if he had not already done it himself, they'd change his mind for him [and make him believe in the Territories]. Even a small peek into the Territories shook your confidence in the omniscience of scientists.¹⁵⁶

Only the manner in which, and the timing of this secret is eventually revealed is not planned and the source of trouble, not so much the secret itself.

There are more family secrets of the disturbing and guilty kind in the novel than there are good ones, and most of these revolve more or less around the Sloat family, and in particular Morgan. His indiscretions and outright crimes were already discussed in connection with the sins of the father-concept, but these actions constitute as family secrets as well, since his son and the Sawyers are totally unaware of them. The secrets, when revealed, end up having a huge effect on the lives of both families. The biggest and gravest of these is naturally that Sloat is responsible for the deaths of Jack's father and Uncle Tommy as well as those of other

¹⁵⁵ Magistrale, 72.

¹⁵⁶ King and Straub, 82.

people. This secret and its eventual revelation have huge effects on the two families and eventually play a part in completely destroying the relationship of Sloat and his son and eventually cost him his life as well. The dark and sinister past of Sloat and his actions cast a long shadow on the lives of all the people around him, but in the end, these secrets are brought out in the open and dealt with and they cease to haunt the lives of the surviving Sawyer and Sloat family members who can now carry on with their lives.

The patriarchal family structure of the Gothic literature with the father, or some other elder male figure, as the undisputed head of the family is clearly challenged in *The Talisman*. As opposed to the Gothic, the novel can be said to represent a matriarchal family structure with the mother as the head of the family and thus disrupt the Gothic tradition. Lily has been widowed and thus the only left adult in the family, the only figure that has authority. This position becomes nevertheless challenged by three incidents and by two males. First of all, Sloat tries to undermine her position and to restore the patriarchal order by attempting to gain control of the business and through it also of Lily's and Jack's lives thus making himself the head of the family. Sloat attempts to obtain the standing that the patriarchal male figure has in the Gothic tradition, but fails as the result of fierce resistance from both Lily and, in particular, from Jack. The unwarranted power and patriarchy of the evil father figure remains thus unfulfilled in the Sawyer family in the end.

The second and third threats to the matriarchy of the Sawyer family come from within Lily herself and, consequently, from inside the family, that is, from Jack. The first one is her growing cancer and because of it "[she is] withdrawing . . . in all ways."¹⁵⁷ She is becoming unresponsive and distant; her position as the authoritative figure responsible for the family is crumbling. This then forces Jack to take on more responsibility not only of himself, but also of his mother, to become the authoritative figure in the family. As was already discussed in

¹⁵⁷ King and Straub, 20.

chapter 2.1., the roles of mother and child are reversed: the child becomes the caretaker and the parent the one taken care of; the mother loses her position and the child is promoted to her place. However, Jack's challenging of the matriarchal family structure is not voluntary nor is it because of desire for power or control. It is simply because of necessity; he has no choice in the matter. Nevertheless, this reversal of the roles of mother and child is not permanent. In the end of the novel, after Lily's cancer is cured, she takes back her former position as the head of the family and Jack his as the child, and thus matriarchy is once more restored to the Sawyer family, although the positions of mother and child within the family have become more flexible and less absolute.

3. The Male and Female Gothic in *The Talisman*

The topic of the male and female Gothic and how these two are manifested in *The Talisman* was already touched upon in the previous chapters on the absent mother and the Gothic heroine and the evil father figure and the hero/villain. I will now discuss and analyze further the differences between the male and female Gothic traditions and how demonstrations of these can be found in the novel in the following subchapters to find out with which one of these traditions, the male or female, the novel can be said to have more in common with, if indeed, either one. The aspects the novel has in common with the male Gothic will be discussed in the first subchapter, and those it shares with the female in the second.

The differences between the male and female Gothic traditions were already discussed in the chapter introducing the whole genre. The most obvious of these is connected to the gender of the writer, in the sense that men write male and women write female Gothic. This generalization is, however, under constant debate and will also be questioned in this thesis. The other differences between these two traditions that I will discuss in the following subchapters have to do with the techniques and plot devices employed in them, including the distinction between the concepts of horror and terror. Other aspects of the male and female Gothic that I will discuss in the following subchapters are the narrative techniques and point of view, the tragic or happy end as well as narrative closure or the lack of it, the attitude towards female characters, the separation from and integration to family and society, identity issues, the attitude towards the supernatural, the overt or the covert display of violence and gore as well as the relationship of the protagonist to the prevailing Gothic space around them.

3.1. The Male Gothic, Horror and the Supernatural in *The Talisman*

The most prominent argument on behalf of *The Talisman* adhering more to the male than female Gothic tradition is naturally based on the fact that it is written by, not one but actually two, men, Stephen King and Peter Straub. However, this dichotomy has relatively little importance in the definition of the novel. Contrary to the views of Ellen Moers, I believe that the novel cannot be labeled as strictly male Gothic just based on the gender of its authors. Instead, I agree with Punter and Byron in that the gender of the author is not as important in branding a novel as male or female Gothic than the actual novel itself. How it is written is more important than by whom, and therefore *The Talisman* cannot be labeled as male or female Gothic simply on the basis of its male authorship. In order to answer this question, the themes and characters of the novel need to be discussed in light of the differences between the male and female Gothic and how they appear in the novel.

In the male Gothic, the hero or hero/villain invariably pays for his transgressions in the end, most often with his life. In *The Talisman*, there is an ambivalence regarding this particular subject. It can be said to be true with regard to the character of Morgan Sloat who was identified as the hero/villain of the male Gothic in chapter 2.2., since he is punished for his evil deeds and pays for them with his life and, thus the novel can be said to have a tragic end and can be placed within the male Gothic. However, if Jack is in fact regarded as the hero of the novel, or more in keeping with the findings of this thesis, as the Gothic heroine, this is no longer so. Jack succeeds in his quest and survives, saving his mother and the whole world as a consequence and this would place the novel within the female Gothic. In the case of *The Talisman*, this question is not simple or straightforward, and depends on the point of view from which the characters are perceived from. In this thesis, with regard to this particular question, the novel is perceived from the point of view of Sloat as the hero/villain and thus it places the novel in the male Gothic with regard to the question of the tragic end. And in

relation to this, the novel does have a tragic end typical to the male Gothic, since Sloat rejects society, fails in his unholy quest and dies in the end, but in any other sense and from the point of view of the entire novel, its ending is a positive one thus connecting the novel to the female Gothic instead. While endings that seem to adhere to both the male and female Gothic can be found in the novel, it is, however the female one that prevails in the end, since the all-around atmosphere of the ending is a happy and peaceful one.

The rejection of and separation from society that Sloat goes through is another theme found in the male Gothic and in both cases, one of the reasons for the eventual downfalls of Sloat and the Gothic hero/villain. While Sloat is not an outcast right from the beginning, he does eventually turn into one. This transformation along with his unending desire for power and money begin already at Yale when he feels inferior to his friends and seeks comfort in his fantasies where he will get his revenge on them by becoming hugely rich, successful and powerful at any cost. This is also the guideline that Sloat follows through his life, thus also alienating himself from other people and eventually even society and his own family, turning himself into an outcast in the process. And as in the Gothic, the chances of survival outside society, all the while violating all of its rules and regulations, is impossible.

Identity issues are central to the male Gothic and these abound in *The Talisman*. In the novel, there is a whole multitude of issues relating to identity, the most notable of these being the Twinner-concept. As was already stated earlier, Twinners are the “doubles” that some of the novel’s characters have in the Territories. They are basically the same as their “real world” counterparts, but at the same time not quite; they can be described as being two sides of the same coin. The most noteworthy differences between the Twinners and their “real world” counterparts are mainly of the physical kind, while those in connection to their nature seem to be much less noticeable. For example, the characters of Morgan Sloat and his Twinner, Morgan of Orris are nothing alike physically, but they are still both depicted as

ruthless, greedy, cruel and relentless when it comes to getting what they want. Also the characters of “Sunlight” Gardener and his Twinner, Osmond are both referred to as completely crazy and unpredictable. This Twinner aspect creates an interesting addition and twist to the whole identity issue in the novel, making it even more complex. The characters that have Twinners and are aware of having them, seem to have a double identity, one in which these two aspects become somewhat intertwined and virtually impossible to separate from each other. In fact, the connection between these two identities is so strong that when one of them dies, the other invariably soon follows, too. However, there are exceptions to this rule, since both Jack and Richard’s Twinners have died as children, while they themselves have survived, thus making them “single-natured” and special:

*Some things are not excluded. Some people are not excluded. They are . . . well . . . single-natured . . . They are like it – the Talisman. Single-natured. Me. I’m single-natured. I had a Twinner, but he died. Not just in the Territories world, but in all worlds except this one. I know that – I feel that . . . When I’m here, I’m not there. When I’m there, I’m not here. And Richard, neither are you!*¹⁵⁸

What is the absolute and true identity of these “double characters” is difficult to answer, since both of the Twinner and the “real world” counterpart are portrayed as real and viable beings, each as genuine as the other.

Identity issues are also present in connection to the roles and identities of both Jack and Sloat. In the beginning of the novel, Jack is identified and also identifies himself, as a rather ordinary young boy who is then thrown in the middle of extraordinary events. These events not only shape his perception of the world around him, but also that of himself as well. It can be said that his quest redefines Jack’s whole identity, from the ordinary boy to the potential savior of entire worlds. Jack grows up during his quest and finally embraces this new role and identity, even though the full extent of it is only temporary, since he resumes his former role and identity of a relatively average adolescent, even though one enriched with his many

¹⁵⁸ King and Straub, 614.

experiences and trials on the road, at the end of his quest when reunited with his mother. In this sense, it can be said that the identity of Jack is not an absolute and concrete one, but rather one that changes and shifts during the course of the novel. Jack's quest is not only a quest for the absent mother, but a quest to discover and redefine his identity as well. The role and identity of Sloat is one of special interest. Sloat is a man of many identities, one of them the aforementioned Morgan of Orris, but he also has others reserved for the people of the "real world" as well. Among these are the father identity reserved only for Richard, the harassing "Uncle Morgan" side of him displayed to Jack and Lily and the ruthless and greedy business man and criminal identity mostly kept secret from the views of other people. The last of these seems to be his true identity, the one closest to his heart, and it is this one that ultimately destroys him. In a way, Sloat is also on a quest to find and finally disclose his true identity, but the revealing and unleashing of it creates a completely opposite effect than that of Jack's finally resulting in his death.

The role of women in the novel is ambiguous and cannot be said to really be derived completely and exclusively from either the male or the female Gothic, but is rather a mixture of these two. In *The Talisman*, the attitude of Sloat to women, namely Lily, is just that of the male Gothic: she is seen as an object of his desires of power and control and as inferior and destroyable. However, this is not the view of the whole of the novel, since Lily, although ill and weak, is still portrayed as determined and mentally, if not physically, strong. In the end, she fights back and actually overcomes Sloat with the help of her son. In the novel, Lily is depicted as strong and independent, but not enough so to conquer evil on her own, so it can be said that she displays characteristics from both the male and female Gothic's portrayal of women.

As I already stated in chapter 1.2., in the male Gothic, horror prevails over terror and that is clearly the case with *The Talisman* as well. Therefore, it can be labeled without a doubt as

adhering to the male Gothic tradition. In the novel, this use of horror over terror is clearly displayed in the way in which the numerous horrific events and occurrences are portrayed and described openly and as realities, making it clear that overt horror is favoured over suspense caused by terror, whereas in the female Gothic just the opposite is the norm. This is clearly seen, for example, in the scene where Jack enters the Black Hotel where the Talisman is imprisoned and is forced to fight its guardians.

Standing on the other side of the drop-gate was a figure in blackish, rusty armor. Its cylinder helmet was broken only by a black horizontal eye-slit no more than an inch wide. The helmet was topped by a frowzy red plume – white bugs squirmed in and out of it . . . The helmet ended in a coif of mail which draped the rusty knight's shoulders like a lady's stole. The upper arms and forearms were plated with heavy steel brassards. They were joined at the elbows with cubitieres. These were crusted with layers of ancient filth, and when the knight moved, the cubitieres squealed like the high, demanding voices of unpleasant children. Its armored fists were crazy with spikes. [Jack] stood against the stone wall, looking at it, unable in fact to look away; his mouth was dry as fever and his eyeballs seemed to be swelling rhythmically in their sockets in time to his heartbeat. In the knight's right hand was *le martel de fer* – a battle-hammer with a rusty thirty-pound forged-steel head, as mute as murder.¹⁵⁹

One of the major and most obvious aspects that the novel shares with the male Gothic is the blatant display of violence and gore throughout it, even though sexual violence is not really an issue as such in the novel as it is in the male Gothic. Contrary to the female Gothic, where violence is rarely depicted as such, but usually only alluded to and presented as a menacing possibility, in the novel it is very much real, frequent and often extreme and depicted rather candidly, for example in the scene when Wolf tears apart the Sunlight Home and several of its inhabitants.¹⁶⁰ The blunt display of violence is highly typical to both Stephen King and Peter Straub, so it is not surprising that it is the case in *The Talisman* as well. The horrors of the novel are most real and form a concrete part of the protagonist's life, as opposed to female Gothic where they are usually the product of the female protagonist's overactive imagination and eventually dismissed as such. Jack is not creating these horrors in

¹⁵⁹ King and Straub, 669.

¹⁶⁰ King and Straub, see 426-442.

his head, but has to face them as a reality that can be very violent and terrifying, and has to deal with them in the best way he can, since simply wishing them away is not an option for him.

In *The Talisman* the supernatural plays an integral part as it often does in the male Gothic. The whole concept of the parallel world, the Territories and Twinners have to do with it and are accepted as reality that just is and not questioned or labeled as a figment of the characters' imagination, as something that they conjured up at will, as it would have been in the female Gothic. Such things as werewolves and a Talisman that can cure cancer and save worlds and other fantastic events and characters are not frowned upon or eventually dismissed as unreal, but are embraced as a part of the "real world" giving it a magical and fantasy-like feel. The supernatural present in the novel is plainly visible, for example, in the scene where Jack and Richard arrive in Sloat's "military camp":

Some of [the "soldiers"] looked a bit like medieval paintings of devils and satyrs. Some looked like degenerate human-beings – cave-people, almost. And one of the things had lurching into the early-morning sunlight had scaly skin and nictitating eyelids . . . it looked to Richard Sloat like an alligator that was somehow walking upright . . . [The] bullets . . . tore open the whitish-green belly of the alligator-thing, and a blackish fluid – ichor, not blood – began to pour out of it. It uttered its rough, powerful cry . . . [and] there was something hideously feminine in that cry . . . Its eyes sparkled with murderous fury . . . and intelligence. The vestiges of breasts bounced on its scaly breast.¹⁶¹

And just like in the male Gothic, the supernatural is an excellent method of creating and causing horror and anxiety to the novel's protagonists.¹⁶²

The male Gothic concentrates not only on the male central character, but also on his "attempt to penetrate some encompassing interior"¹⁶³. He is trying to move from the outside in, as is the case with the hero/villain character of *The Talisman*, Morgan Sloat. Even though he cannot be considered the absolute central character of the novel, he is, nonetheless, central enough to be regarded as such in this context. In the novel, Sloat's main objective is to

¹⁶¹ King and Straub, 583.

¹⁶² King and Straub, see, for example, 188-191 & 475-476.

¹⁶³ Punter and Byron, 278.

become the undisputed sovereign of both the Sawyer & Sloat business as well as that of the Territories via his Twinner, Morgan of Orris. He is trying to enter by force the roles and spaces of society otherwise inaccessible to him, in a way raping his way in. This attempt proves unsuccessful in more ways than one, since both the Gothic hero/villain as well as Sloat not only fail in their endeavours, but end up losing their lives as well.

3.2. The Female Gothic and Narrative Closure in *The Talisman*

In addition to the aspects *The Talisman* has in common with the male Gothic, it, nevertheless, shares some central features with the female as well. The most important of these, in which Jack can be seen as the equivalent of the Gothic heroine, was already discussed to a great extent in chapter 2.1. Here it is sufficient to say that even though the gender of the protagonist is different, Jack, nonetheless, can be considered the male equivalent of the Gothic heroine, since his plight shares almost all the features of that of the Gothic heroine, for example, the initial imprisonment and subsequent flight from a malevolent male figure. Also the quest for the absent mother is a central theme in both the female Gothic as well as in *The Talisman*, where it forms the basis for the whole novel.

The issue relating to the gender of the protagonist becomes less important in the novel, since both the Gothic heroine and Jack are considered weak, defenseless and inferior as well as easy targets by the dominant males harassing them. In the Gothic heroine's case this is because of her gender, in Jack's because of his age. It can be said that in *The Talisman*, the anxieties deriving from the gender of the protagonist are replaced by those deriving from his age, or rather, the lack of it. Being an adolescent in *The Talisman* is the equivalent to being a female in the female Gothic, but, nevertheless, both Jack and the heroine come out as winners in the end and order is once more restored to their lives and the world.

Both Jack and the Gothic heroine manage to escape their respective imprisonments and

menacing male figures and, most importantly, survive. They are both successful in their quests and are integrated back into society as its accepted members and this happy ending ties *The Talisman* firmly into the female Gothic tradition, since in the convention-bound female Gothic, it is the only possible kind of ending. This reintegration of the protagonist with their family and reintroduction into society are central to both the Gothic and the novel, since they are the rewards for their completed quests. In both the novel and the female Gothic, good deeds and virtuous characters are rewarded, usually with the granting of their most precious wish, be it a husband and family or the miraculous healing of the dying mother. However, in Jack's case there is naturally no marriage in store for him at the end of his quest and as a sign of completion and success as it often is for the Gothic heroine, but Jack's reunion with his now cancer-free mother can be argued to act as an equivalent to this. Since Jack is still a child, the whole marriage issue can be ignored, but it still does not diminish the similarity between him and the Gothic heroine.

In the female Gothic, the protagonist is always a pure, innocent and virtuous young maiden who herself, as well as her perception of the world and events around her, are the centre of attention. She is also always the acting subject of these narratives just as Jack is in *The Talisman*, and this is something that ties the two together. Even though depicted as helpless victims of malevolent males, especially in the beginning of their respective stories, both Jack and the heroine take on a more active role later on and break themselves free through their action; they move from victims or submissive objects to more or less active subjects that at least try to take their lives, fates and futures into their own hands, even if only momentarily. This attained control is lost, to some extent, at the end of their quests with the reintegration to the family and society, when they return, once more, under the control of others, in the heroine's case her family and future husband, in Jack's his mother. However, it needs to be said that in both cases this loss of independence is in fact voluntary, since both actively seek

this reintegration and reunion, and it is not considered at all unwelcome or forced in any way. In both cases, the temporary increase of autonomy is only a phase through which a more lasting and socially accepted balance of independence and dependence from others can be reached.

The point of view of both the female Gothic and *The Talisman* are, for the most part, that of the protagonists, that is, events are depicted through their eyes. However, in the novel the perspective occasionally shifts and the reader is sometimes given information from the point of view of the all-knowing narrator and from the other characters as well, most notably that of Sloat,¹⁶⁴ which is usually not the case with the female Gothic, where the reader only knows as much as the protagonist herself. Even though this shifting of perspectives occurs in the novel, it does not make the narrative technique disrupted or fragmented in any way as it is in the male Gothic, since the attention still remains clearly on Jack and his perception of the world around him. Instead, this shifting of perspective acts as a device which in a way broadens the narrative and gives the novel more depth and a little more objectivity as well, instead of preventing the reader from getting a clear and concrete picture of the story, as it often does in male Gothic. However, in the novel there is another important aspect that it seems to share with the male Gothic. While the centre of attention is most of the time on Jack, a truly female Gothic feature, this does not exclude the occasionally immense interest in and open description of violence and gore typical of the male Gothic. Nonetheless, with regard to the point of view of the novel, it can be said to have aspects from both the male and female Gothic, but in the end have more in common with the narratives of the female tradition of Gothic.

One other major structural aspect that *The Talisman* and the female Gothic have in common is the complete sense of closure at the end of the story. In both, all loose ends are tied,

¹⁶⁴ King and Straub, see, for example, the interlude chapters, 80-89 & 535-538.

evil people and deeds are punished and the good rewarded and harmony and order are restored. The reader is not left in doubt of anything and the faith in that everything will be well from now on is assured, while in the male Gothic, there often is no clear closure and the reader is left wondering and in a state of uncertainty. In the novel, this clear closure is attained by the reunion of Jack and his mother, the healing of her cancer by the Talisman and the death of the villain Sloat. Jack's quest had a clear beginning and end, and once he has accomplished his goal, the quest and his story come to their natural end where all things are resolved. This sense of closure and faith in the future are clearly displayed and restored in the final pages of the novel, in the scene set in Lily's bedroom in the Alhambra:

All the disease fled from [Lily's] face. It did not happen in the manner of a time-lapse sequence in a movie. It happened *all at once*. It happened *instantly*. She was sick . . . and then she was well. Rosy good health bloomed in her cheeks. Wispy, sparse hair was suddenly full and smooth and rich, the color [sic] of dark honey . . . She would not be needing the medicines anymore . . . [Jack's] ordinary life . . . had been returned to him. . . .¹⁶⁵

However, in the novel the supernatural is not explained away at the end as it invariably is in the female Gothic, and in particular in the works of Ann Radcliffe, where this strengthens the sense of narrative closure. On the contrary, the supernatural is embraced as an integral and entirely real part of the novel, as it is in the male Gothic, but in *The Talisman's* case this does not diminish the sense of closure that is reached at its end in any way, but rather seems to strengthen it instead.

Jack hurriedly set the altering Talisman down in his mother's hands. It knew its job; it had been made for this moment; in some fabulous smithy it had been created to answer the requirements of this particular moment and of none other . . . A seam, once one of the vertical grooves in the Talisman, had soundlessly opened. Light slowly poured out and pooled over his mother's hands . . . The grey-golden cloud from the heart of the Talisman was lengthening over his mother's body, coating her in a translucent but slightly opaque, delicately moving membrane . . . a river of worlds and tilted galaxies and universes were pulled up and out of the Talisman . . . pulled up in a stream of rainbow colors [sic] . . . That rainbow radiance was fading now . . . [and] something crumpled like cellophane

¹⁶⁵ King and Straub, 765-766.

under [Jack's] fingers. It was the brittle husk of the Talisman . . . He put the husk down with gentle reverence, suspecting – no, *knowing* – that even that would be gone very soon.¹⁶⁶

All of these scenes involving the supernatural, especially those at the very end concerning the Talisman healing Lily, create a sense of conclusion that things finally are as they were always supposed to be and create a faith in a good and peaceful future, just as in the female Gothic.

One of the basic themes of the female Gothic, as identified earlier in this thesis, is that of the female protagonist's relationship to the prevailing Gothic space in the novels. What is meant by this is that "[the] female Gothic more typically represents a female protagonist's attempts to escape from a confining interior."¹⁶⁷ Although this definition cannot be taken literally and as absolute with regard to *The Talisman*, it can, nevertheless, be found in the basic structure of the novel. As was also stated earlier, the two major differences between this definition and the novel are the gender of the protagonist and the lack of concrete confining Gothic spaces, such as the castle or labyrinth in which the heroine is imprisoned in. However, Jack was also already identified as the equivalent of the heroine of the female Gothic and his mother's cancer and its repercussions as those of the confining space and also his road of trials across America as that of the labyrinth. When these superficial differences are overcome, the basic plot of the novel becomes nearly identical to that of the female Gothic, since the novel, too, centers around the protagonist's attempts to escape his confinement, to break free from the threat of his mother's cancer and approaching death, to move away from being trapped in his personal Gothic castle to the freedom of the outside world, that is, his previous happy life. Just as in the female Gothic, this is accomplished by Jack by finding his way through the symbolic labyrinth of the many roads of North America and the Territories that he has to travel in order to complete his quest and to be free.

¹⁶⁶ King and Straub, 762-765.

¹⁶⁷ Punter and Byron, 278.

4. Conclusion

The goal of this thesis was to analyze Stephen King and Peter Straub's novel *The Talisman* in the light of the Gothic literary tradition, especially from the point of view of the Gothic family, and also from the two main varieties of the Gothic, namely the male and female Gothic. I attempted to find out how the Gothic family can be found in the representation of family in the novel and to analyze the common Gothic themes of the quest for the absent mother and the evil father figure, and the characters of Jack Sawyer and Morgan Sloat from the point of view of the Gothic hero(ine) and the Gothic hero/villain, respectively. I also attempted to determine whether the novels seems to adhere to the male or female Gothic, if indeed to either one, and how these two genres are present in the structures and themes of the novel.

While *The Talisman* is not what can be considered a traditional Gothic novel, it nevertheless employs many of its stock elements and basic concepts. Some of these, Stephen King and Peter Straub have developed, shaped and combined into new combinations unique to the novel, while others have been kept relatively unchanged. The ones I analyzed in this thesis are the three most central to the novel, although it employs a number of other Gothic themes as well. Some of these include, for example, the werewolf motif, fascination with medievalism in connection to the whole Territories-concept and allusions to the Inquisition present in the scene where Gardener interrogates Jack.¹⁶⁸ Analyzing these and other Gothic themes found in the novel would have also been very interesting, but the question of how the family is represented in the novel and in the Gothic tradition and the application of the male and female Gothic patterns to the novel seemed more rewarding and fascinating, and this is why I did not pursue these questions in favour of the others.

I began my thesis by an introductory section of both the authors of *The Talisman*, Stephen

¹⁶⁸ King and Straub, see, for example, 267-273; 32, 93-94 & 212; 398-401 & 422-424.

King and Peter Straub as well as of the novel itself and some of its basic concepts, including the Territories and Twinners. I then proceeded to introduce the Gothic genre in general and to give the information and background required to examine the novel in the two following analytic sections of the thesis. I then applied this information to the novel and drew my conclusions on the basis of this application. I will present and discuss these conclusions next.

In the section on the Gothic family and its subthemes of the quest for the absent mother and Jack as the Gothic hero(ine) as well as the evil father figure and Sloat as the Gothic hero/villain, I discussed *The Talisman* with these questions in mind. In the first subchapter, I applied the theme of the quest for the absent mother to the relationship of Jack and Lily and to the whole basic structure and plot of the novel. I found that this theme was not only a vital concept in the novel, but actually the very basis, or the heart and soul of it, around which the entire novel is built. Even though the superficial features of the Gothic theme were somewhat reshaped and developed further by King and Straub, the basic concept still holds true: the novel is all about the quest of the absent mother. Some variations to the Gothic version included the fact that the mother was not actually yet completely absent, but was only becoming that, since she was dying of cancer and withdrawing at first mentally, but in the end physically as well while the cancer was eating her alive. This gave a whole new take on the absent mother concept, a cyclic feel in the sense that the child must in fact first leave the mother in order to rediscover her again, which made Jack's quest in a way even harder. I argued that the cancer and its effects on Lily not only represent, but also bring forth the actual physical distance between mother and child, in the sense that Jack must actually physically leave his mother to go on his quest. But apart from these, King and Straub's view of the absent mother theme still remains recognizable and fairly true to the original.

In the same subchapter, I addressed the question of the Gothic heroine in connection to the protagonist of the novel, Jack Sawyer. As a result of this analysis, I reached the conclusion

that Jack can, in fact, be labeled as the novel's version of this Gothic character, but with some obvious, even though superficial, anomalies. The most notable of these are, of course, the gender of the protagonist, the novel's male versus the Gothic's female, but also the amount of responsibility and pressure that Jack has to endure. Jack is on a quest the successful end result of which determines the fates of not only himself and his mother but that of the rest of the world, or worlds, as well, since the fate of them all depends on the recovery of his mother and her Twinnings in all the other worlds. However, despite these differences, Jack and the Gothic heroine of the female Gothic have more features in common than not, and due to this I have labeled Jack as the equivalent of the female Gothic's heroine, especially those found in Ann Radcliffe's novels. These similarities included the integration of both Jack and the Gothic heroine back to society, imprisonment by a malevolent male and the subsequent escape from this male control, the pursuit by that same male and finally the happy ending of both their quests, either in marriage and/or the reunion with the mother/the family.

In the subchapter on the evil father figure and Sloat as the hero/villain of the male Gothic, I concentrated on the character of Morgan Sloat and how he was depicted in the novel. Sloat seemed to fit perfectly into the role of the evil father figure, displaying all the characteristics associated with the character in the Gothic, for example he pursues, haunts and harasses Jack all through the novel, and even his relationship with his own son Richard is ultimately based on potential profit and the oppression of the child. In addition to Sloat, there were also other characters that seemed to fit the definition of the evil father figure. These included the "sugar daddies" Jack met on the road and Sloat's right hand man, the crazy Reverend Gardener.

I also discussed Sloat in connection to the hero/villain character found in the male Gothic. Again here, as was the case with Jack as the Gothic heroine of the female Gothic, Sloat's character is King and Straub's stylized version of this character with both differences as well as similarities. The most notable difference was that Sloat was not the absolute central

character of the novel, even though a relatively central one all the same. But here again, the similarities outweigh the discrepancies, since both Sloat and the hero/villain share the same condescending attitude towards women, they both are depicted as transgressive and break the taboos of society and, most importantly, are severely punished for their actions. Here, a clear sense of morality is displayed that in the end everyone must pay for their actions.

In the subchapter on the Gothic family, I examined the representation of family and related issues in the novel from this point of view. I addressed the Gothic themes of “the sins of the father” in connection with the relationships of Sloat to his father as well as to his son Richard, and also those of Jack and his father Phil and Sloat; the concept of inheritance and succession in connection with Jack and Phil and Sloat, but also with Sloat and Richard as well as Sloat and Phil. Furthermore, I discussed mother-relationship and orphan topics from the point of view of Richard, and the attack on family values and the disintegration of the family seen in both the Sawyer and Sloat families. I then continued to discuss child abuse in the novel, that of mainly Jack, but also of other children as well and then proceeded to the topic of aristocracy in the Sawyer and Sloat families as well as their Territories counterparts. Finally, I examined the past family secrets and their repercussions in both families as well as the challenging of the traditional patriarchal family structure of the Gothic in the Sawyer family. I found that the representation of family in *The Talisman* does share quite a few characteristics with the representation of family found in the Gothic, and that the novel’s families can be considered as King and Straub’s somewhat unusual version of the traditional Gothic one.

In the second analytic section of this thesis, I explored the male and female Gothic and their influences on the novel. In the subchapter on the male Gothic, I discussed its influences on and manifestations in the novel; beginning with a discussion of the gender of the authors and continuing with the topics of the tragic end and the rejection of and separation from society in connection with Sloat as the hero/villain. I approached the identity issues central to

the male Gothic from the point of view of both the Twinner-concept of the novel as well as that relating to Jack and Sloat. I addressed next the role of women as objects regarding Lily. I identified the male Gothic's central aspects, such as the preference of horror over terror, the blatant display of violence and gore and the embracing of the supernatural as part of reality, as extremely central to the novel as well, thus strengthening the connection between it and the male Gothic. Finally, I discussed the male Gothic's concept of the central character's attempts to "penetrate some encompassing interior" in connection to the character of Sloat, and found that he does resemble the hero/villain of the male Gothic in this sense as well. The novel seemed to share many of the concepts and characteristics of the male Gothic, thus seeming to adhere closely to this tradition. However, as is seen in the following chapter, the novel shares several central attributes with the female tradition of the Gothic as well, thus creating confusion concerning its labeling as strictly male or female Gothic.

In the subchapter on the similarities of the novel and the female Gothic I continued the analysis that I already began in chapter 2.1. I continued the discussion on Jack as the equivalent of the Gothic heroine as well as that on the role of women in the novel in connection with the reintegration of the protagonist with family and society. I found the point of view and narrative technique of the novel to contain some differences from the female Gothic ones, but perceived the happy end and complete sense of closure of the novel as firmly adhering to the female Gothic. Finally, I compared the relationship of the female protagonist of the female Gothic to prevailing Gothic space to that of the novel's adolescent male and found them to be basically the same, with differences in appearances only. As a result, I would like to argue that although the novel and the female Gothic do display some variations in their respective plot devices and narrative techniques, they do, in the end have the most central and important features, such as the role and representation of the protagonist, in common. Thus the novel does seem to adhere rather strongly to the female tradition of the

Gothic as well.

The issue of the Gothic family and how it manifests itself in *The Talisman* is an intriguing one and can be approached from a variety of perspectives. The ones I used in this thesis were, to my opinion, the most central and relevant ones in connection to the novel. In conclusion, I would like to argue that the representation of family in the novel seems to have quite a lot in common with that of the Gothic; yet again it can be viewed as King and Straub's somewhat twisted and altered version of it with plenty of contemporary characteristics to spice it up and make it uniquely their own.

The answer to the question posed in this thesis of whether *The Talisman* can be considered to comprise more of the male or female Gothic staples is not an easy one, since both seem to make their appearances in it. In their novel, King and Straub have combined these two to create a unique blend that cannot be said to be clearly either. They have also added several others themes and elements of the Gothic, but also of horror, fantasy, science fiction and even fairy tale, thus making the novel a hybrid that is extremely difficult to categorize as absolutely belonging to any certain literary tradition. The novel is vastly complex and operates on various levels, moving rapidly from one genre and style to another. In this sense, it is highly reminiscent of the Gothic itself, since that too is notoriously difficult to classify in exact terms. However, returning to the question at hand, the novel, in my opinion, does ultimately have more in common with the female Gothic tradition than the male one. Even though it does manifest some rather obvious deviations from the female genre, the most notable being the Lovecraftian embracing of the supernatural horror as reality instead of the Radcliffean rejection of it, these deviations are, nevertheless, only superficial in nature when compared to the major underlying basic themes of the novel that can be said to be very reminiscent of those of the female Gothic. In conclusion, the features the novel shares with the explained female Gothic of Ann Radcliffe and her followers are more profound in their

nature than the more, albeit obvious and visible, superficial ones it shares with the male Gothic of Walpole and Lovecraft, where supernatural horror is an accepted part of reality.

The elements of the female Gothic found in the novel can be said to form its backbone, while those adhering to the male one are the tissue around it; these two thus forming the body of the novel. If the male aspects, or the tissue, are to be stripped away, the basic structure of the novel would still be intact and unchanged, but if the female characteristics, or the backbone, are removed, all that would be left is pile of miscellaneous tissue. This would clearly seem to label the novel as a descendant of the female Gothic, but it needs to be stated that echoes of the male Gothic are obviously very strongly present as well. *The Talisman* can therefore be said to Stephen King and Peter Straub's "horrific progeny", a hybrid of the male and especially the female Gothic, as well as many other Gothic features, but also of horror, fantasy, science fiction and even fairy tale, all combined to create this "Frankenstein" of a novel; a real monster that defies any absolute and definite classification.

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