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**DISEMPOWERING THE WITCH:  
A PATRIARCHAL PORTRAIT OF THE  
WITCH IN ANNE RICE'S *THE LIVES OF THE  
MAYFAIR WITCHES***

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## 0. Introduction: Reclaiming the Witch

Anne Rice (1941 -) is an American writer, born in New Orleans. Most of her novels, including the trilogy here analyzed, in which she mostly employs dark themes and settings, belong to the gothic genre. The novel which launched Rice into literary fame, *Interview with the Vampire* (1976), is an innovative retelling of the tale of the vampire from the vampire's point of view<sup>1</sup>. Rice's narrative is often subversive and shocking, as it attacks established social conventions<sup>2</sup>, much like previous gothic works (Hoppenstand & Browne, 1996: 7). Borrowing Radcliffe's tradition of the victimized gothic heroine character, Rice updates this convention with a contemporary twist (Hoppenstand & Browne, 1996) in *The Lives of the Mayfair Witches*, consisting of the novels *The Witching Hour* (1990), *Lasher* (1993) and *Taltos* (1994)<sup>3</sup>.

The books that comprise *The Lives of the Mayfair Witches* were the first gothic stories I read, aged 14. What I read left me with a strong impression, and throughout my teenage years I regarded Rice's trilogy as groundbreaking. However, after four years of a university education and an awakening to feminism, I could not but see the trilogy in a different light, which is why I offer here a feminist critique of Rice's novels.

I was drawn to and interested in the character of the witch because of this trilogy; specifically the first volume, *The Witching Hour*, with its long recounting of the lives of the witches. I still believe that the history of the lives of the witches from the 17<sup>th</sup> century to the present day of the novels is masterfully written and the fascinating and unusual

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<sup>1</sup> *Interview with the Vampire* (1976) centers on the story of Louis de Pointe du Lac and his struggles to accept his new life as a vampire. The vampire who turns Louis, Lestat, eventually becomes the protagonist of *The Vampire Chronicles*, a series of novels which focus on his character. One of the novelties that *Interview with the Vampire* presented was the humanization and erotization of the vampire. In 1994, a film adaptation was released, starring Brad Pitt as Louis and Tom Cruise as Lestat.

<sup>2</sup> Rice's novels often include topics considered taboo: rape, incest and pedophilia are among the themes which the author often deals with.

<sup>3</sup> A fourth book which would follow *Taltos*, *Blood Canticle* (2003) is not included within the trilogy because it blends in different characters from other novels. In *Blood Canticle*, Rowan, one of the main characters in *The Lives of the Mayfair Witches*, falls in love with Lestat, from the *Vampire Chronicles*, and Mona also falls in love with a vampire from the novel *Blackwood Farm* (2002) and she becomes a vampire herself.



lives of the women presented in the trilogy is captivating. These novels have shaped my academic interest in the history of witchcraft, but also in the representation of the witch in Literature. The attractiveness of the gothic as a literary genre, its themes and the exploration of the human psyche also appealed to me. Therefore, I decided to focus my research interests on gothic fiction, focusing on female gothic and its depiction of female characters, specifically that of the witch in Rice's trilogy.

Academically, much has been said about the figure of the witch, yet she continues to be a major topic for discussion. The configurations and understandings of what a witch is and what the character represents for women are a current debate in cultural and feminist studies. Besides, her presence in contemporary cultural manifestations increases the interest in how she is represented and whether that representation supposes an advance or a stagnation of the character. It is my belief that *The Lives of the Mayfair Witches* is a case of the latter. The trilogy cannot be considered feminist Literature in full; the text is problematic in its depiction of abuse, pedophilia and, to a certain extent, women. Yet, the trilogy succeeds in raising valid questions about womanhood and rebellious femininity. My main research questions when re-reading the trilogy for this dissertation, therefore, were: why do the powerful female characters at the beginning of the story end up dismissed and subjugated to patriarchy? And why is abuse eroticized? In order to understand and be able to criticize the text and its representation of the witch, I consider briefly the witches' role in Literature, feminism and gender studies. Moreover, I look into the gothic aspects of Rice's work and what place she occupies within the so-called female gothic.

The witch, obviously, is not a character that belongs exclusively to the gothic; there are many examples in fiction of all kinds that include her as their main protagonist. The witch has been prominently present in children's literature (*The Witches*, 1993, by

Roald Dahl); in fantastic literature (*Good Omens: The Nice and Accurate Prophecies of Agnes Nutter, Witch*, 1990, by Terry Pratchett and Neil Gaiman); and even in theatre (*The Crucible*, 1953, by Henry Miller). We can conclude, therefore, that the witches' importance within literature should not be underestimated.

As it has been stated before, Rice's texts belong to the genre of the female gothic, a term coined by Ellen Moers in *Literary Women* (1976). According to Moers' definition female gothic "bonded the gender of the author with her subject matter" and "did succeed in placing the question of gender at the heart of any critical analysis of this body of fiction." (in Wright, 2015: 59). Traditionally, the female gothic has been associated with the combination of a female heroine, an unsettling environment, a villain and the fact that the author is a woman. The trilogy of *The Lives of the Mayfair Witches* features many of these gothic characteristics: its protagonists are women in distress, threatened by a powerful, impulsive, tyrannical male; ancient prophecies and supernatural elements condition the plot. As the trilogy progresses, however, it seems to move towards science fiction, a genre that finds its roots in the gothic (Aldiss, 1973), because the plot revolves around a new humanoid species, the Taltos, and their shared history with the witches<sup>4</sup>. Nevertheless, the majority of elements that allow us to identify *The Lives of the Mayfair Witches* as female gothic remain throughout the narrative.

Much has been written about Rice's inspiration source, and critics and biographers<sup>5</sup> generally agree that her life experiences are her principal motivation. Relevant to this dissertation, however, are the comments she has made on feminism and women's freedom in writing as they provide an insight into why certain topics are explored in her novels. Thus, in 1993, in an interview for *Playboy*, she stated that: "I

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<sup>4</sup> The connection between the Taltos and the Mayfair witches is portrayed in *Blood Canticle* (2003).

<sup>5</sup> Katherine Ramsland analyses Rice's work, as well as the author's life, in *Prism of the Night: A Biography of Anne Rice* (1991). Ramsland draws connections between key events in Rice's life to the plots of her novels.

believe absolutely in the right of women to fantasize what they want to fantasize, to read what they want to read. [...] I think one of the worst turns feminism took was its puritanical turn, where it tried to tell women what was politically correct sexually” (Diehl, 1993: website). Rice’s opinion is reflected in her writing; *The Lives of the Mayfair Witches* trilogy deals with highly controversial topics —incest, necrophilia, rape— and feminists of the time criticized her for being sexually and politically incorrect. In regards to Rice’s comments, the aim of this dissertation is not to censure Rice’s choice of topic but to criticize the way in which these topics are represented.

Second-wave feminism began in the early 1960s and lasted until the late 1980s in the United States, yet its origins and internal divisions are complex. According to Gamble (2001), two major strands of feminism were initiated in the 1960s. After publishing *The Feminine Mystique* (1963), Betty Friedan founded NOW (National Organization for Women) in 1966. Quoting Gamble: “NOW’s aims lay very much within a liberal Equal Rights tradition. It sought to bring women into full participation in the mainstream of American society now, assuming all the privileges and responsibilities thereof in truly equal partnership with men” (2001: 25). On the contrary, the Women’s Liberation was inspired by “the civil rights, anti-Vietnam War and student movements of the 1960s” but “Unlike NOW, these groups had no national organization; instead they drew on the infrastructure of the radical community, the underground press, and the free universities” (2001: 26).

Appropriate to this dissertation is the movement that sprung from the Women’s Liberation strand. In 1969, the radical feminist movement, W.I.T.C.H (Women’s International Terrorist Conspiracy from Hell) was founded in New York by Robin Morgan and Florika. W.I.T.C.H was an action-based group, and its main targets were corporate America and patriarchy, not all men. Nevertheless, tensions rose between the

New York Radical Women (N.Y.R.W.) and W.I.T.C.H, which used to be part of N.Y.R.W. After a while, however, W.I.T.C.H abandoned action and it only became a consciousness-raising group (Echols, 1989).

The choice of the witch as a symbol by the W.I.T.C.H members is best explained by Cynthia Eller: “by choosing this symbol, feminists were identifying themselves with everything women were taught not to be: ugly, aggressive, independent, and malicious. Feminists took this symbol and molded it - not into the fairy tale ‘good witch’, but into a symbol of female power, knowledge, independence, and martyrdom” (1993: 55). Therefore, the witch became a hallmark of the woman who stands up to patriarchy and defies it by being everything patriarchy does not want her to be: assertive, strong and independent.

Choosing the witch as a feminist emblem was not a random act; the witch had been associated with evil, sin and immorality for many centuries and she was employed in accusations of blasphemy to control women. The *Malleus Malleficarum* (Krammer, 1487; Sprenger, 1519), the most influential treaty on witchcraft and witch extermination, vilified witches and made their status akin to that of criminals. By reversing the patriarchal conception of the witch, feminists were reclaiming a despised character and turning her into a woman they could identify with, and be proud of. Later on, many feminist scholars, Luce Irigaray (*Speculum of the Other Woman*, 1974); Hélène Cixous (*The Laugh of the Medusa*, 1975); Mary Daly (*Gyn/Ecology: The Metaethics of Radical Feminism*, 1978 and *Webstersø First New Intergalactic Wickedary of the English Language Conjured in Cahoots with Jane Caputi*, 1987) and Barbara Creed (*The Monstrous Feminine*, 1993), among others, analyzed the figure of the witch within culture, feminism, history and literature. Most relevant to this dissertation are the works

by Diane Purkiss (1996) and Justyna Sempruch (2008), two of the most recent scholars who have focused their research on the representation of the witch within Literature.

The witch, then, has been a prominent research topic within Literature studies, especially during the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century, and particularly popular among feminist scholars. Purkiss' research in *The Witch in History: Modern and Twentieth-century Representations* (1996) covers different periods, although not exhaustively. Her research begins with representations and reinterpretations of the witch by radical feminists and modern 'real' witches.<sup>6</sup> Nonetheless, her focus falls on the early modern stage, focusing on works such as *The Tempest*, by William Shakespeare (1610-11) and *The Witches of Lancashire*, by Thomas Heywood and Richard Brome (1634).

Purkiss analyzes how historians and feminists have reinterpreted the witch and one of her main arguments is that the character of the witch has been manipulated not only by patriarchy but also by feminists. The first witch within the Mayfair family, Suzanne, is the perfect example of a character that feminist scholars would use to reinterpret the figure of the witch. Suzanne was an esteemed village healer in Donnelaith, Scotland, and when a witch judge went to her for a cut he had on his hand, he told her to be careful with dark magic, and showed her the *Daemonologie* (1597)<sup>7</sup>. Suzanne, who was believed to be a little imprudent, called forth Lasher without really knowing what she was doing. Therefore, Suzanne never learnt how to control Lasher, and thus her power was known, which led her to be burnt at the stake. Suzanne's story perfectly fits within

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<sup>6</sup> When Purkiss talks about "real witches" she refers to the neopagan religion, Wicca. Wicca was developed in England during the 20<sup>th</sup> century and introduced by Gerald Gardner in 1954. Wicca encompasses theists, atheists, and agnostics and it is typically duo theistic, worshipping a Goddess and a God, and it does not have a central authority. Because of its decentralized nature, there is some disagreement as to what constitutes Wicca. There are different denominations and traditions of Wicca and its sacred scripture is *The Book of Shadows*, written by Gardner between the 1940s and 1950s.

<sup>7</sup> *The Daemonologie* was a book written by King James VI of Scotland. The book affirmed the King's full belief in magic and witchcraft, and intended to prove the existence of such forces and dictate what sort of punishment these practices deserved.

the traditional view of what witches were: midwives and healers persecuted by misogynistic, patriarchal men. Feminist scholars would use Suzanne's burning story for their own agenda; quoting Purkiss:

The witch offers opportunities for both identification and elaborate fantasy, standing in a supportive or antagonistic relation to the contemporary feminist-activist-historian inscribing her. To remark this is not to side with those notorious critics of women's history who see feminist historians as unreasonably 'biased'; feminist histories are no more 'biased' than those male historians who have taken up the figure of the witch and reformulated it according to their needs and fantasies. (Purkiss, 1998: 10)

In other words, witches are attributed special features and singular stories to help the feminist cause. Purkiss refers to this phenomenon as the myth of the "Burning Times":

The myth of the Burning Times was invented at the point when the women's movement began to turn away from rights-centered public-sphere issues towards crime-centered, private-sphere issues. Domestic and sexual violence against women were foregrounded as the representative crimes of patriarchy, to the exclusion of other issues. Sexuality was to be identified as the site of women's oppression in the sense that property was for Marx the site of class oppression. Rape, sexual violence, pornography, wife-battering and (eventually) child sexual abuse became the central signifiers of patriarchy, replacing signifiers such as legal asymmetries and pay differentials. These trends were influential inside as well as outside the academy. (Purkiss, 1998: 15)

So, the myth that women were burnt because of their daring sexuality was used by second-wave feminists to reclaim the witch as a powerful symbol. Purkiss also warns us from the beginning that: "the witch is not solely or simply the creation of patriarchy, but women also invested heavily in the figure as a fantasy which allowed them to express and manage otherwise unspeakable fears and desires, cent[er]ing on the question of motherhood and children" (1996: 3).

In her conclusion, Purkiss reminds us that the witch is most present, even in modern Literature, in children's fiction and folktales:

The witch's consignment to the world of childhood infects historical accounts of her. She is the bogey of Western society's infancy, a feature of our early years as a culture. She exemplifies the dark ages, the primitive, the superstitious, the unenlightened. (1996: 278)

Sempruch's study *Fantasies of Gender: The Witch in Feminism and Literature* (2008) revises the configuration and understanding of the figure of the witch in different North American and European texts from a feminist perspective. Sempruch's aim, then, is to "develop a new concept of the witch, one that challenges stigmatized forms of sexuality, race and ethnicity as linked to the margins of culture and monstrous feminine desire" (Sempruch, 2008: 1). In order to do so, Sempruch pinpoints three theoretical positions for what the witch represents according to different scholars who have dealt with the character (real or fictional):

1) [the witch] as a radical feminist (political) figure representing the culturally subjugated and victimized woman (Daly, Dworkin), and her subsequent herstorical reconfiguration into a sovereign, mythic and powerful "superwoman" (Cixous, Wittig, Gearhart, Walker); 2) [the witch] as a problematic dialogical figure collapsing into the archaic forms of the pre-symbolic mother and the phallic monstrous feminine (Kristeva, Creed); and 3) [the witch] as a borderline phenomenon suspending logocentric discourse and opening thus heterogeneous spaces beyond the accumulation of stigmas, but also beyond the mythic origin, maternal *jouissance* or femininity (Irigaray, Butler, Braidotti). (Sempruch, 2008:5)

Sempruch examines the witch archetypes and contrasts them with fictional texts from different political and cultural contexts. The first and second theoretical approaches that Sempruch establishes are especially useful to my dissertation, since two of the trilogy's characters, Mary Beth and Rowan, might be analyzed according to these categories. Mary Beth is a transgressive figure; she fulfils the ideal of a liberated woman who challenges established norms of conduct, whereas Rowan remains static and even degenerates the notion of the witch as a disobeying figure.

In the same *Playboy* interview that has been previously mentioned, Rice defended herself and her artistic freedom from the feminists who criticized her pornographic work, *The Sleeping Beauty Quartet*<sup>8</sup>: "to hear the feminists then telling me that having

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<sup>8</sup> *The Sleeping Beauty Quartet* is formed by *The Claiming of Sleeping Beauty* (1983), *Beauty's Punishment* (1984), *Beauty's Release* (1985) and *Beauty's Kingdom* (2015). Rice published the novels under the pseudonym of A. N. Roquelaure. The novels are labelled as BDSM pornography, and the plot is set in a

masochistic fantasies or rape fantasies just isn't politically correct, I just thought, Oh, bullshit. You're not going to come in and politicize my imagination" (Diehl, 1993: website). Remarkably, rape is one of the major issues in *The Mayfair Witches*. Rice's work contains a depiction of a strong matrilineal line of witches who have defended themselves against patriarchy and who have defied gender normative constructions. Yet, the main protagonist in *The Witching Hour* (1990) and *Lasher* (1993), Rowan, is repeatedly abused, raped, and deprived from all the strength she presents in the beginning of the series. The power given to Rowan through her status as a witch is undermined and dismissed: not even her supernatural capacities prevent her from being harmed.

When asked specifically about rape, Rice offered two contrasting positions: "I think it's important to women's freedom and important to our dignity and our rights as human beings, that rape be a crime, that nobody has a right to force himself on you, whatever you are. [...]" (Diehl, 1993: website). In her answer, Rice is clearly condemning rape. Nevertheless, when asked about the representation of rape in culture, she answered: "I praise that movie [*Thelma & Louise*] because I think it showed how awful rape is. And *it's hard to show it without its being sexy because it [rape] is sexy.*" (Diehl, 1993: website; *my italics*). Authors are entitled to their personal opinions and beliefs, and these might be of interest to the readers. Nonetheless, texts which present such controversial topics ought to be analyzed and criticized accordingly, especially when rape is a major theme within literature and gender studies. Susan Brown's *Against Our Will* (1975), Gloria Steinem's "Erotica and Pornography: A Clear and Present Difference" (1980), Andrea Dworkin's *Pornography: Men Possessing Women* (1981), and Susan Faludi's *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against American Women* (1991) are among the works that particularly

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medieval fantasy world in which Beauty is awakened through copulation by the Prince. Afterwards, Beauty is trained as a sex slave and the novels describe the sexual adventures of Beauty and the male characters Alexi, Tristan and Laurent.



tackle this issue. Rowan's psyche, power and position within the series shift so drastically during and after the act of rape that its representation and its consequences within the text are worth analyzing. By using the text as support, and the author's assumptions about rape and rape fantasies, I shall argue that an incorrect, eroticized representation of this issue is harmful not only to readers, particularly the younger ones, but to the text itself. Certainly, witches are often regarded as attractive characters, and even considered feminist role models within Literature. Nevertheless, according to Ringel, "the witch belief was not central to the first Gothic revival, nor are witches common protagonists in modern horror" (Ringel, 1998: 260). Nonetheless, the situation has completely changed. The figure of the witch has gained presence in gothic fiction and horror and she has become a commonly used character.

The witches in Rice's trilogy lose their status as powerful women as the story unfolds, to finally be subjugated to the most horrifying aspects of patriarchy, embodied by Lasher. It is my aim, then, to analyze the change of *status quo* within *The Mayfair Witches* as well as the implications that the eroticization of abuse supposes in the representation of women within female gothic.

This dissertation will be organized into two main chapters, each focused in one of the major issues within the trilogy. The first chapter will deal with the witches' decline from progressive and antipatriarchal characters to conventional and passive ones, as well as its consequences for female representation, femininity and the female gothic. The second chapter will focus on the text's eroticized language when describing abuse and rape, as well as the problematics of considering and labelling such controversial issues as erotic literature. Since the trilogy is extensive and difficult to summarize, a plot summary will be included in the appendix.



## **1. From Strong Women to Damsels in Distress: Disempowered Witches in *The Lives of the Mayfair Witches***

As I have already explained in the Introduction, Rice's *The Lives of the Mayfair Witches* (1990-1994) is a gothic romance trilogy recounting the story of a New Orleans family of witches since the 17<sup>th</sup> century. The Mayfair witches are haunted by an incubus spirit, the Taltos Lasher, whose main goal is to become flesh again. The plot focuses on Rowan Mayfair, the thirteenth witch of the family line, and her struggle to prevent Lasher from entering the human world, and the terrible consequences once she fails to do so.

My purpose in this first chapter is to highlight the ways by which *The Lives of the Mayfair Witches* seemingly transgresses gender normative roles regarding women within the female gothic genre. *The Lives of the Mayfair Witches* might seem a progressive work in terms of female desire, femininity and women's representation within female gothic, yet, the text fails to produce a convincing feminist heroine who challenges established rules. Although Rice alters some premises of the female gothic genre, the text perpetuates stereotypes regarding femaleness, mainly those concerning conventional femininity and maternity.

In order to explain the witches' disempowerment in Rice's trilogy, I will first analyze the gothic elements of the text. Different gothic aspects of the trilogy will help understand the limitations of representing women within this genre, and shall provide clarifications as to why it seems impossible to move beyond set stereotypes. Subsequently, the witches within the story will be examined: the development of the leading female protagonist, Rowan, is not towards a progressive representation of women or witches. In fact, it is a regression of the character and of the text itself. While representations of the witch in culture have moved towards a more feminist portrayal during the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries—with characters such as Willow, from *Buffy*; Queenie,

from *American Horror Story*; Hermione, from *The Harry Potter Series*, by J.K Rowling, and Bonnie McCullough, from *The Vampire Diaries Series* by L.J Smith— Rice’s main witch is not only static, she deteriorates even in comparison to other witches within the same trilogy. Hence, the transgressive portrait of the Mayfair witches is ambiguous: the open-minded picture of the Mayfair witches within the *Talamasca File*<sup>9</sup> fades when the action is focused on the contemporary women of the story. Consequently, the witch as a feminist figure will also be analyzed in order to answer the following question: is the witch a powerful female character as represented in Literature or does she still carry misogynist connotations and, therefore, cannot fulfill her role as a feminist icon?

### **1.1 The Gothic in *The Lives of the Mayfair Witches***

Rice’s popular fiction undoubtedly belongs to the gothic/horror genre. Hoppenstand and Browne (1996) analyze Rice’s gothic leanings, arguing that “Her most popular novels, such as *Interview with the Vampire* (1976) and *The Witching Hour* (1990), though situated within the gothic narrative tradition, go far beyond the conventions of the formula and explore important contemporary social issues” (Hoppenstand and Browne, 1996: 2). Rice’s gothic influence is also considered in their article, tracing it back to Horace Walpole’s *The Castle of Otranto* (1764), Ann Radcliffe’s *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794) and Matthew Gregory Lewis’ *The Monk: A Romance* (1796):

The traditional gothic narrative has always been a subversive literature, shocking its audience by attacking established social conventions, and Rice continues this

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<sup>9</sup> The *Talamasca File* is a body of files, letters and documents within *The Witching Hour* which recounts in detail the history of the Mayfair witches from the beginning. The File is kept and updated by the Talamasca, a secret society which investigates the supernatural. To exemplify, in the *Talamasca File* the reader finds out that Charlotte Mayfair (1667- 1743) founded and ruled the Maye Faire plantation in Louisiana, something unusual at the time. It is made clear that she was not the plantation mistress, but the plantation owner. She gave birth to Jeanne-Louise Mayfair (1690 - 1771) through copulating with her father, Petyr Van Able. Jeanne-Louise was the first woman of the family to retain the Mayfair surname after marrying. After Jeanne-Louise, all Mayfair women had to keep their family name if they wanted to inherit the Mayfair fortune.

practice in her own work. Pornographic images function as a subtext in much of her gothic fiction. Rice does what Clive Barker does in writing horror fiction: blending what has worked successfully in the past as formula with a very personal, contemporary voice that engages important modern-day issues. (Hoppenstand and Browne, 1996: 7)

Undeniably, *The Lives of the Mayfair Witches* contains a strong sexual component which intends to provoke the audience. Whether Rice's representation of female sexuality is adequate—in the sense of it being literary relevant or merely written for shock purposes—remains to be discussed in the second chapter of this dissertation.

Specifically, Rice's work belongs to the female gothic genre, which according to Moers is “the work that women writers have done in the literary mode that, since the eighteenth century, we have called the Gothic” (Moers, 1976: 90). Also in *Literary Women*, Moers stated that “Ann Radcliffe firmly set the Gothic in one of the ways it would go ever after: a novel in which the central figure is a young woman who is simultaneously persecuted victim and courageous heroine” (Moers, 1976: 91). Hoppenstand and Browne also discuss Radcliffe and establish her to be one of Rice's influences:

Radcliffe replaced Walpole's use of supernatural horror in the gothic with romantic suspense, and thus she was the founder of both the gothic romance formula in the horror genre and the new, separate genre of romance fiction. Romance is also an important element in Rice's gothic fiction, as perhaps best illustrated in *The Witching Hour*. (Hoppenstand and Browne, 1996: 8)

Following Moers' argument, while the protagonist's status as a courageous heroine is debatable, there is no doubt that the main female figure in the trilogy, Rowan, is young and persecuted. Although female gothic primarily deals with issues related to the female experience (childbirth, rape, female sexuality) its topics are neither limited nor its characters exclusively female: *Frankenstein*, by Mary Shelley (1818) is considered a female gothic text according to Moers' definition, and though it does not feature a female heroine, the text noticeably deals with childbirth, one of the dominant female anxieties portrayed within the genre. Hence, the division between male and female gothic,

according to Milbank, is “customary and usually follows the gender of the author” (Milbank, 1998: 121). Even though the majority of topics are common to both male and female gothic texts, “in the female tradition, the male transgressor becomes the villain whose authoritative reach as patriarch, abbot or despot seeks to entrap the heroine, usurps the great house, and threatens death or rape” (Milbank: 121). However, it is important to notice that “the modern female form differs from the eighteenth-century romance in moving to release the male protagonist from guilt or evil purposes to allow his marriage with the heroine” (121) and that “writing on the female Gothic plot reads it psychoanalytically” (122).

I shall, then, next proceed to analyze the elements which make *The Lives of the Mayfair Witches* a female gothic text. According to Mulvey, “Rice’s novels share a preoccupation with eroticism and gender” (Mulvey, 1998: 84) and certainly, Rice’s texts contain a strong erotic—if not pornographic—element related to female sexuality and the female experience, which will be further analyzed in the present dissertation. In all, though, it is difficult to judge Rice’s text as either male or female gothic. If we base our assessment exclusively on Moers’ definition, Rice’s text is, then, female gothic. Nonetheless, many themes explored within the text might also be considered to belong within the male gothic genre. According to Ingebreetsen, “Rice is accomplished in both modes. [...] Consequently, it is often difficult, critically, to place a specific text” (Ingebreetsen, 1996: 94). To provide an analysis of the differences between male and female gothic, however, is beyond the scope of the present dissertation.

Following Harris’ (2015) classification, there are mainly two general classic gothic elements relevant to this dissertation which shall be discussed. One of the most important elements applicable to the trilogy is that within the gothic:

Women [are] threatened by a powerful, impulsive, tyrannical male. One or more male characters has the power, as king, lord of the manor, father, or guardian, to demand that one or more of the female characters do something intolerable. [...] In

modern gothic novels and films, there is frequently the threat of physical violation.  
(Harris, 2015: website)

Rowan Mayfair and the other female witches within the story are directly threatened by Lasher, the evil spirit that has haunted the Mayfair family for centuries. Even though it could be argued that a spirit has no biological sex and thus, it might not qualify to be a source of a tyrannical, patriarchal force, Lasher insists in asserting his status as male. In a conversation with Julien Mayfair<sup>10</sup>, he proclaims:

“And you?” I asked. “Are you male or female, or simply a neuter thing?”  
“Don’t you know?” it asked.  
“I wouldn’t ask if I did,” I answered.  
“Male!” it said. “Male, male, male, male!” (*Lasher*, 284)

Harris’ definition furtherly applies when we consider what Lasher asks of Rowan: she must make him flesh again by giving birth to him; he threatens her with physical violation, inasmuch as the only manner by which Rowan can fulfill the prophecy and turn the spirit into flesh is by giving birth to him in the form of physical possession. In the past, Lasher had been able to inhabit corpses but the fact that they were decaying bodies prevented him from living in them for too long. Therefore, in order to occupy a healthy body, Lasher needs to possess the fetus growing in Rowan’s womb and use the unborn baby’s flesh to make it his own. The fact that Rowan is not in control of her pregnancy further exemplifies the anxieties which the female gothic deals with.

The other element pointed by Harris to consider is that of women in distress: “As an appeal to the pathos and sympathy of the reader, the female characters often face events that leave them fainting, terrified, screaming, and/or sobbing. A lonely, pensive, and oppressed heroine is often the central figure of the novel, so her sufferings are even more pronounced and the focus of attention” (Harris, 2015: website). Despite the fact that Rowan Mayfair does not fit this description at the beginning of the novel, and though she

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<sup>10</sup> Julien Mayfair (1830 - 1914), 8<sup>th</sup> Mayfair witch, and only male within the family to be favored and accepted by Lasher.

is not the typical woman in distress of the gothic genre, she certainly becomes one by the end of the first novel. Rowan's change from powerful witch to damsel in distress will be further discussed within this chapter.

Another element that allows for the categorization of the trilogy as a female gothic romance is, of course, the plot. As Tracy points out: "Here, approximately, is what happens in Gothic Romance, from Ann Radcliffe and her many imitators in the 1790s [...]. A young female is stripped of her human support, her mother usually dead before the novel begins, her father or other guardian dying in the early chapters" (Tracy, 1998: 170). Without a doubt, *The Lives of the Mayfair Witches* follows the aforementioned aspect. Rowan's two mothers (biological and adoptive) die before the action begins. Moreover, Rowan does not know who her biological father really is, and she killed her adoptive father. Continuing with Tracy's description:

The lover (if any) who might protect her is sent away or prevented from seeing her. Her task is to defend her virtue and liberty, to resist evil, and especially to penetrate disguises—spot the plausible seeming villains, trust the suspicious looking heroes—and thereby rebuild a support system that will restore her to a quiet life. (1998: 170)

Michael Curry, Rowan's lover, goes away to New Orleans after they spend their first night together. Rowan's task is to defend herself against Lasher, the evil spirit who wants to possess her body. Yet, Rowan is not rewarded for her efforts because she succumbs to Lasher's seduction<sup>11</sup>, subsequently triggering her downfall. Finally, Tracy argues that "With pluck and luck she manages these near impossibilities and is rewarded with the discovery of lost relatives and/or the promise of reliable domestic love in a household of her own" (1998: 170). The last point is never reached within the trilogy, thus breaking the established text construction of female gothic. Because Rowan does not fulfil her task,

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<sup>11</sup> Lasher continually insists on sexually pleasuring Rowan until she craves his presence as much as she hates it.



she is not “rewarded” by the end of the first novel. In fact, the trilogy’s ending is doubtfully a happy one.

Finally, the fact that the women of the story possess supernatural powers and try to explain them provides further signs of the female gothic nature of the text: “one element of female Gothic writing that has perplexed critics is its use of the explained supernatural” (Milbank, 2007: 157). In the last book of the trilogy, there is an explanation on what witchcraft constitutes: “witchcraft is an immense science,” she [Mona] said drowsily. [...] “That it is alchemy and chemistry and brain science, and that those things collected make up magic, pure love magic. We haven’t lost our magic in the age of science” (*Taltos*, 283).

In view of this, the use of the female gothic genre in the trilogy must be analyzed accordingly. As a literary genre, the gothic is bound to incorporate certain elements within the text, as highlighted in the paragraphs above. Yet, the fact that a 20<sup>th</sup> century gothic novel still depicts a victimized female heroine reveals that the gothic might be a static genre: the possibility to have a feminist heroine within the gothic seems out of reach. Even though Rowan is not presented as a damsel in distress at the beginning, she conforms to this traditional gothic role by the end of the first novel.

20<sup>th</sup> century female gothic is in line with the classic gothic tradition when it comes to dealing with feminine anxieties: transgressive sexuality, monstrous childbirth and the threat of rape. As Horner explains: “twentieth-century women writers have come to realize that the conventions of Gothic fiction offer a useful way to explore crises of identity peculiar to women, particularly those connected with the rites of passage associated with adolescence, loss of virginity, marriage and childbirth” (Horner, 1998: 183). In this light, Larabee argues that Rowan’s scientific inclinations bring her downfall: “The occult scientist is a woman who willingly volunteers her womb for her own

experiment, birthing a giant, autistic baby” (Larabee, 1996: 178). To begin with Rowan never willingly volunteers her womb, Lasher possesses her baby, forcing her to give birth. In trying to kill the baby, however, Rowan finds herself powerless and, as a consequence, she is tricked by Lasher into helping rather than destroy him.

Following the female gothic tradition, the terror in *The Lives of the Mayfair Witches* does not come from the supernatural elements, the horror is embedded in the female inability to be in control of herself and her body. The fact that the female protagonist is a witch, a powerful female figure characterized by her autonomy, only adds distress to the analysis of *The Lives of the Mayfair Witches*: seemingly, Rice is arguing that not even in a position of power women are free from the patriarchal threat.

## **1.2. A Disempowered Gothic Heroine: Portraying the Witch in *The Lives of the Mayfair Witches***

*The Lives of the Mayfair Witches* theoretically offers a transgressive depiction of female sexuality, femininity and womanhood, abandoning prescribed gender roles. Certainly, the women presented in the trilogy are neither ordinary nor submissive at all, but they are not exempt from patriarchal violence. Therefore, their status as witches and, thus, as women outside of patriarchal control must be analyzed to determine whether the portrayal of the witch offered in the trilogy compares to feminist reinterpretations of the character. Moreover, I intend to revise the figure of the witch, considering whether she is a feminist figure or, on the contrary, the symbol carries implied misogynist implications. In order to do so, I will focus my analysis on two of the most powerful female Mayfair witches: Mary Beth and Rowan Mayfair.

While most of the witches presented in the *Talamasca File* defy conventional gender and behavior expectations, the contemporary witches of the story fail to challenge

the patriarchal *status quo*. My purpose here is to demonstrate that Rowan's predecessors are far more transgressive than she is, thus indicating a deterioration of the figure of the witch within the trilogy as well as a weakening of the text itself. Finally, I shall determine that the portrayal of the witch in *The Lives of the Mayfair Witches* problematizes the notion of the character as a feminist icon.

Born in 1872, Mary Beth Mayfair became heiress to the Mayfair legacy when she became nineteen. Being the ninth witch within the Mayfair line, Mary Beth was the most powerful witch alive before Rowan's birth, according to the Talamasca. Apart from her extraordinary magical powers (telepathy, bilocation and spirit communication) what draws attention to Mary Beth is her nonconforming gender performativity. Mary Beth's unconventionality is especially interesting in comparison to Rowan who, albeit living in a more advanced society, still conforms to gender expectations. Mary Beth's and Rowan's dissimilarities towards gender conformity are necessary to understand how Rowan is, ironically, the least empowered witch within the Mayfair family.

According to the Talamasca, Mary Beth started cross-dressing once she became the head of the family:

She appears in numerous photographs wearing the emerald [symbol of being the designated heiress] and in many of these photographs, she is wearing men's clothing. In fact, scores of witnesses verify Richard Llewellyn's statement that Mary Beth cross-dressed, and that it was common for her to go out, dressed as a man, with Julien. [...] Though society in general was shocked by this behavior, the Mayfairs continued to pave the way for it with money and charm. (*The Witching Hour*,<sup>12</sup> 467)

Moreover, the Talamasca also point out that:

Some other stories we have are very fanciful. It was told to us several times, for instance, that Mary Beth didn't just dress like a man, she turned into a man when she went out in her suit, with her cane and hat. And she was strong enough at such times to beat off any other man who assaulted her. (*TWH*, 471)

While the Talamasca, understandably, question Mary Beth's transsexualism, it is implied

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<sup>12</sup> Hereafter referred to as *TWH*.

that she did not perform as it was expected from a woman during her time. Therefore, Mary Beth's cross-dressing prompts the following question: did she cross-dress as a subversive act or did she feel more powerful being disguised as a man and, therefore, adopting and embracing patriarchy? Boag argues, in reference to female cross-dressers in the United States' Old West, that

“she” changed her clothing for some purpose related to securing personal advancement in a world with a deck that was otherwise stacked against her. For example, she might have dressed in male attire to pass herself off as a man so that she could obtain better-paying employment. Perhaps she wanted to succeed in a profession that her biological sex excluded her from. [...] Or a woman might also find that dressing in men's clothing could provide her safety when travelling in a male-dominated society. (Boag, 2011: 19)

Mary Beth did not have to dress as a man to achieve power, she already had it. Any of the reasons why women cross-dressed mentioned in Boag's argument cannot be applied to Mary Beth: she did not have to achieve a higher social position, she was already wealthy; and her witch powers protected her from any harm people might cause her. Therefore, Mary Beth's cross-dressing offers a picture of a woman who rejects social gender expectations just because she can.

Additionally, Mary Beth was not aware that she was being revolutionary at all: she was ahead of her time and gendered categories and expectations were not her concern.

As the *Talamasca File* disclosures:

But when all the many descriptions of Mary Beth's love of wine, food, music, dancing, and bed partners are considered, one can see that she behaved more like a man of the period than a woman in this regard, merely pleasing herself as a man might, with little thought for convention or respectability. (*TWH*, 481)

According to this description, Mary Beth perfectly fits into Sempruch's definition of a witch: “Both as the ‘trace’ of an archetype and as a specific literary character, the witch displays gender resistance to the phallogocentric culture in which she is physically and philosophically placed” (Sempruch, 2008: 44). Mary Beth resists acting as she is expected

to. What is more, Mary Beth behaves as a *man*<sup>13</sup>, something intolerable for a woman in her position during the 19<sup>th</sup> century. However, as pointed by the Talamasca, the Mayfairs had the influence and the money to ‘cover up’ any misbehavior that could bring shame to the family, so appearances were maintained. Granted, the Mayfairs always benefitted from class privilege. Evidently, Mary Beth was seen as something sinister at the time, which emphasizes the theory that women who did not conform were witches: “they thought her love of pleasure to be rather mysterious and even sinister” (*TWH*, 481). In behaving like a ‘man’, both in her business dealings and her private life, Mary Beth was not subscribing to the idea that women should be submissive. As Purkiss points out:

This relentless repression of characteristics traditionally considered unfeminine in patriarchy—anger, hate, aggression, desire for sex or money—is dispiriting. This conception of benignity as ‘natural’ to women does not merely uphold gender hierarchy; it also offers women no way to understand or deal with situations other than pacifically, which often means passively. (Purkiss, 1996: 48)

By refusing to be passive and benevolent, Mary Beth was rebelling, perhaps unconsciously, against a whole system which was set to confine her: “More than one Mayfair close cousin begged her to ‘behave’, and more than once Mary Beth shrugged off this suggestion” (*TWH*, 481).

As for Mary Beth’s dressing like a *o c pit* it is clear to us now that gender is performative and that Mary Beth’s nonconformity to her gender did not imply that she suffered from gender dysphoria. Quoting Butler:

Gender reality is performative which means, quite simply, that it is real only to the extent that it is performed. It seems fair to say that certain kinds of acts are usually interpreted as expressive of a gender core or identity, and that these acts either conform to an expected gender identity or contest that expectation in some way. (Butler, 1988: 527)

The cross-dressing phenomena has been extensively discussed within gender studies, especially to highlight that gender is, really, performative: “the notion of an original or

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<sup>13</sup> Italics are used to show that binary categories of gender do not reflect gender’s performativity.

primary gender is often parodied within the cultural practices of drag, cross-dressing, and the sexual stylization of butch/femme identities. [...] In imitating gender, drag implicitly reveals the imitative structure of gender itself—as well as its contingency” (Butler, 1990: 137). Mary Beth performing as a *man* contested society’s expectations that she ought to behave as a *woman*. However, Mary Beth was never seen as unfeminine. Rice offers in Mary Beth a different and progressive view of femininity:

For all her strength and height, however, she was not a mannish woman. [...] Mary Beth greatly resembled the striking and “larger than life” American film stars who came after her death, particularly Ada Gardner and Joan Crawford. [...] There can be no doubt, however, that Mary Beth had scant interest in her physical beauty. (*THW*, 468)

Finally, to answer the question posed at the beginning: Mary Beth did not cross-dress or behave as a *man* neither to challenge society’s expectations nor because she wanted to achieve some kind of power she did not have as a woman. Mary Beth represents a woman who has overcome gender expectations and consequently, she is free to act as she pleases. Besides, Mary Beth’s femininity or status as a woman is never questioned and it is not challenged. Thus, one could argue that Mary Beth Mayfair offers an image not only of a feminist witch, but also of a feminist woman. By offering a picture of a woman who disregards gender conventionalities because she is beyond them, Rice is offering an almost post-feminist view of the Mayfair Witches. Nonetheless, this image is disrupted by Rowan who, although born a century later, is far more conventional than Mary Beth.

Rowan’s disempowerment derives from different circumstances. I shall consider how some aspects of femininity, especially pregnancy and maternity, and the gothic genre interconnect, change and limit Rowan’s beliefs and strength. Moreover, I will discuss the trilogy’s inconsistency: the text presents a heroine who, in comparison with other female characters within the text, as seen in Mary Beth, regresses the perceptions of femininity and womanhood, thus problematizing the text itself. Hence, I shall devote the second

chapter of this dissertation to the third method by which Rowan is deprived of her powers: psychological, physical and sexual abuse.

By definition, the female gothic genre places an innocent female victim in danger. The premise is that the victim must resist and battle against the monster in order to succeed in her quest to be empowered and finally rewarded. The victim's challenge is to confront the monster without becoming the monster herself, or aligning herself with it. In *The Lives of the Mayfair Witches*, Rice experiments with the gothic genre: the plot and the heroine in the trilogy are reversed, regarding the aforementioned aspect. Rowan Mayfair fails to fulfil her role as a victorious heroine over the monster because she allies herself with Lasher once he succeeds in seducing her. As a consequence, Rowan becomes a victim after she cooperates with the monster, not before, occasioning her downfall.

Following the gothic tradition, the heroine's mother is dead. Interestingly, Rowan had two mothers, Deirdre and Ellie, both of them deceased at the beginning of the story. As Kahane notes: "What I see repeatedly locked into the forbidden center of the Gothic which draws me inward is the spectral presence of a dead-undead mother, archaic and all-encompassing a ghost signifying the problematics of femininity which the heroine must confront" (Kahane, 1995: 336). Definitely, much of the monstrosity presented in *The Lives of the Mayfair Witches*, and especially in *The Witching Hour*, is the connection between womanhood, femininity and maternity.

Still, Rowan does not express any conventional feminine tendencies until she discovers that her biological mother, Deirdre, is dead. Being a neurosurgeon, Rowan "justifies" herself arguing that there is no place for femininity in her working environment. Peculiarly, when her biological mother dies, Rowan is drawn to her more traditional feminine side. When packing to go to her mother's funeral, Rowan is surprised by her own 'feminine' choices:

In fact, her packing had been a bit of a surprise to her, as she watched her own choices and actions, seemingly from a remove. Light silk things had gone into the suitcases, blouses and dresses bought for vacations years back and never worn since. A load of jewelry, neglected since college. Unopened perfumes. Delicate high-heel shoes never taken out of the box. [...] She also packed a cosmetic kit which she hadn't opened for over a year. (*TWH*, 269)

Cautiously, it could be said that the death of the mother allows Rowan to embrace her once lost femininity. Following Kahane: “the female child, who shares the female body and its symbolic place in our culture, remains locked in a more tenuous and fundamentally ambivalent struggle for a separate identity” (Kahane, 1995: 337). I would follow Kahane's argument by adding that the child remains ambivalent until the mother dies and she is finally able to take her mother's place within the symbolic order. It might be argued, therefore, that once both mothers are dead, Rowan is allowed to become herself, occupying the places previously held by her biological mother: that of head of the family and that of becoming a mother herself. Nonetheless, Rowan's embrace of conventional femininity contrasts her previous rejection of it, thus causing inconsistency within the text.

Rowan also represents the compassionate wise-woman at the beginning of the trilogy, “the feminist heroine of the 1980s and 1990s, a professional woman who has a beautiful country garden, bakes her own bread, makes her own quilts, and demonstrates unconventional sexuality” (Sempruch, 2008: 12). Rowan is firstly presented as an empowered independent woman: she belongs to the upper-middle class, she has a job she loves, and she enjoys casual sex with different partners. According to the Talamasca:

I do not think that this aspect of Rowan's life [her sex life] is any concern of ours, except to note that her taste seemed similar to that of Mary Beth Mayfair, and that such a pattern of random and limited contacts reinforces the idea that Rowan is a loner, and a mystery to everyone who knows her. (*TWH*, 657)

Although Rowan's sense of independence begins to shrink when she falls in love with Michael Curry, she preserves a sense of who she is, what she wants and, more importantly, what she does not want. After having sex with Michael, Rowan wonders:



“She had forgotten completely to use a contraceptive with Michael. [...] Imagine having a child by him. But that was crazy. Rowan didn’t want babies. She had never wanted babies. [...] No, her destiny was to save lives, not to make them” (*TWH*, 223). In rejecting maternity, Rowan is renouncing a trait conventionally associated to femaleness and femininity. It must be highlighted, however, that such refusal of maternity does not make her unfeminine. Yet, Rowan’s conviction is oddly overturned once she is married to Michael:

“Rowan, you’re not... unhappy about the baby, are you?”  
“No, God no! Michael, I want the baby.” (*TWH*, 914)

The reasons why Rowan suddenly seems to embrace maternity are unclear. On the one hand, Rowan knows that she will be asked to provide an heiress for the family legacy if she wants to continue being the head of the family and therefore having a child is something is requested from her. On the other hand, knowing Michael’s past<sup>14</sup>, she might feel it is the right thing to do: if Michael can accept that she is a witch and that they will be haunted by Lasher until they defeat him, she can give him a baby. Rowan’s change and embrace of pregnancy and, therefore, of maternity is essential to the gothic genre and to the text: female gothic primarily examines female anxieties, and maternity is at their core. Curiously, it could be argued that *The Lives of the Mayfair Witches* resembles *Frankenstein* as in both novels “emphasis is not upon what precedes birth, not upon birth itself, but upon what follows birth: the trauma of the afterbirth” (Moers, 1976: 93). Undoubtedly, Rowan’s nightmare begins once she gives birth to Lasher, thus fulfilling the prophecy that the incubus would be made flesh again. Consequently, in *The Lives of the Mayfair Witches*, maternity proves to be a source of anxiety which the heroine needs

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<sup>14</sup> One of Michael’s ex-girlfriends had an abortion without Michael’s consent: “Michael didn’t contest Judith’s right to abort the child. [...] But he had never foreseen that a woman living with him in luxury and security, a woman whom he would marry in an instant if she permitted it, would want to abort their child” (*TWH*, 66). Michael’s inability to understand that a woman, under any circumstance, would want to give birth, shows the traditional values embedded in the text.

to experience in order to continue her journey. Nevertheless, as Doane and Hodges express:

Rice's dramatic and thematic emphasis upon the mother is not so much empowering as obsessive, and it is certainly conservative. Not only does it lock us within the repetitions of near hysterically intense symbiotic union [...] the very embodiment of the maternal in patriarchal culture [...] Rice's story itself is framed within the conservative, oedipally-based narrative that holds out the promise of progress and discovery only to be obsessed with repetition and return (Doane & Hodges, 1990:432)

Moreover, Lasher's birth is horrifically, bloodily presented, reinforcing patriarchal ideas of birth and pregnancy as a source of monstrosity, mirroring medieval beliefs about witches birthing evil creatures. Rowan's birthing of Lasher clearly represents Julia Kristeva's definition of the abject in *Powers of Horror* (1982). What is more, one could argue that Rowan becomes and represents the monstrous mother that Barbara Creed defines in *The Monstrous Feminine*: "when woman is represented as monstrous it is almost always in relation to her mothering and reproductive functions. These faces are: the archaic mother; the monstrous womb; the witch; the vampire; and the possessed woman" (Creed, 1993:7).

The protagonist's change from independent, powerful witch to damsel in distress is necessary if we accept that the gothic needs an innocent victim to function as a genre. However, Rowan's drastic change completely disrupts the character's arc, which also weakens her and the text. Rowan's paradoxical change poses a significant regression when analyzing the figure of the feminist witch, especially in contrast with the image Mary Beth presented. Mary Beth had been able to resist and use Lasher to her own advantage<sup>15</sup> whereas Rowan, having more information and being more powerful than her, fell into his trap. Rowan is clearly a victim of patriarchy but she is not reconfigured to

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<sup>15</sup> Mary Beth used Lasher to find out information about her enemies to use it against them in her business transactions. Moreover, it is believed that Mary Beth did not have sexual intercourse with Lasher and that she learnt from Julien how to prevent Lasher from reading her thoughts by playing music.

become a powerful heroine. Rowan Mayfair embodies and mirrors the problematic the witch figure presents: can she be a feminist figure while retaining misogynistic connotations?

The present dissertation might be situated within the framework of third-wave feminism, in which the ambiguity of the witch as a feminist symbol arises. The key to understand the figure of Rowan as a witch relies on the impossibility to define exactly what makes a witch a feminist figure. As Sempruch points out:

there is no formula that can predict when or how the historical or traditional identity of the unencumbered woman can be released from its derogatory origins, or can avoid the abjection that persistently echoes in the insulting and proliferating names given to her (witch, hag, slut, bitch, whore). The witch, in particular, as a supposedly imaginary feminine transgressor, seems to be suspended between a traditional cultural structure that she has already been made to abandon, and another, unknown, culturally unrestricted structure that she is about to enter. (Sempruch, 2008: 98)

Therefore, a witch becomes a feminist symbol when feminists turn her into one. As a consequence, one might argue that Rowan *is* and *is not* a feminist icon. The sole fact that Rowan is a powerful witch, an outcast, automatically provides her with the status of feminist witch:

The witch as a fantasy of gender [...] has thus crossed over some line which should not have been crossed and this structural displacement unleashes danger (Sempruch, 2008:44)

The fact that Rowan is a witch automatically places her “over the line”, meaning that her status is not that of a submissive woman. Yet, Rowan’s actions and behavior also fit the description of the monstrous feminine and monstrous woman which, although used as feminist symbols by some scholars, cannot be a figure of power for feminists.

Doane and Hodges, in analyzing *Interview with the Vampire*, argue that “written in the aftermath of feminism's “second wave,” Rice's novel self-consciously insists on the affinity between women and monsters that Linda Williams has noted in the horror film” (Doane and Hodges, 1990: 424). The same premise can be applied to the trilogy. The allure in praising the female monster (in this case, the witch), as a feminist icon relies in

“that seeing ourselves as triumphant monsters is a step forward in comparison to the humiliation of having men portray us as abject monsters. Hence, the sense of triumph” (Martín, 1999: 195). Nonetheless, as Martín demonstrates: “this seems to be a very limited solution, quite inadequate to make post-feminist women, if this is what we are, consider the dangers of not facing our own weaknesses” (Martín, 1999: 195).

As formerly mentioned, the 1990s are commonly marked as the beginning of the third wave feminism and, interestingly, *The Witching Hour* was published in 1990. The term was coined by Rebecca Walker in her essay “Becoming the Third Wave” (1992) and it is agreed among scholars that it signified a redefinition of what it means to be a feminist:

To be a feminist is to integrate an ideology of equality and female empowerment into the very fiber of my life. [...] It is to search for personal clarity in the midst of systemic destruction, to join in sisterhood with women when often we are divided, to understand power structures with the intention of challenging them. [...] I am not a postfeminist feminist. I am the Third Wave. (Walker, 1992: 41)

According to Sheftall, the third wave is “a younger generation of women in the 1990s who were certainly influenced by their feminist foremothers but who would define feminism differently, and in some ways, reject what they perceived to be the doctrinaire aspects of an ideology, mainstream feminism, that they both respect and find limiting” (Sheftall, 2002: 1091). Another feminist scholar, Rosemarie Tong, points out that “For third-wave feminists, difference is the way things are. Moreover, contradiction, including self-contradiction, is expected and even willingly welcomed by third-wave feminists” (Tong, 2009: 271). It is especially interesting to focus on this aspect of third-wave feminism: contradiction, since it is the core of the complexity in defining the witch as a feminist symbol.

It is also during the third wave when it is questioned whether derogatory terms used against women should be reclaimed. Authors Inga Muscio (*Evil Women: A Celebration of the Dark Side of the Female*, 1998) and Jessica Valenti (*Hypocrite Women: How the Patriarchy Keeps Us from Being the Good Girls We Think We Are*, 2007) explore the controversy in recovering pejorative

terms. Although the reclaiming of such terms might be seen as an act of disobedience, they will always carry derogatory and misogynistic associations: therefore, it seems quite impossible to accept that insults such as cunt, whore, and, of course, witch, will (ever) carry a positive meaning. *V j g " N k x g u " q h "* *ve y i d e n c e s* *Q t e n*, *the on-going* *Y k v e j g u* debate among feminists about the challenge of adopting patriarchal figures as feminist symbols. In this aspect, the trilogy proves to be an interesting text for feminist criticism: the figure of the witch depicted in the text is a fitting analogy to current debates on feminism. The depiction of rape and abuse in the series which offer an eroticized view of sexual violence, however, prevent the text to be labelled as feminist.

In conclusion, there are two elements which condition Rowan: maternity and the gothic genre itself. Maternity will turn Rowan into a victim and a monster, and so it could be argued that monstrous maternity weakens the notion of Rowan as a heroine and as a feminist witch. Rice displays maternity as horrific, following the gothic and horror conventions, thus the text does not break with the tradition of presenting witches as the monstrous feminine. Moreover, Rowan's paradoxical change from powerful witch to helpless victim problematizes the text in terms of uniformity and limits its perception as a feminist text.



## **2. Eroticizing abuse: Rowan's exploitation in *The Lives of the Mayfair Witches***

As seen in the previous chapter, the gothic genre itself and the depiction of maternity in the trilogy challenge and regress notions of femininity and womanhood, directly inflicted on the main character of the story. Yet, the use of the female gothic genre for shocking purposes remains to be discussed within the present dissertation, as well as the adequacy of the text's depiction of female sexuality. Therefore, this section of the dissertation considers the use Rice makes of the female gothic to portray sexual abuse as a normalized sexual practice.

Furthermore, my purpose is to criticize the eroticized language used in the text to describe this abuse. In eroticizing the language of exploitation and portraying it as sexually arousing, the author and the text perpetuate the misconception that, in fact, the victim enjoys being violated. Moreover, using rape as an erotic trope for provocative purposes jeopardizes interpretations of women's desire. This brings up to the question of whether the problem of depicting eroticism without it conveying patriarchal ideas has to do with the restrictions of patriarchal language itself.

I shall argue, then, that while assault, rape, sexuality and violence could and ought to be explored in literature, *The Lives of the Mayfair Witches* does not do so in a helpful and meaningful manner. In fact, the trilogy does quite the opposite: the text contributes to spread harming fallacies, especially those regarding romantic love and sexual desire. In other words: the text continues to propagate detrimental ideas which might affect real-life women. As expected, some scholars—as well as the author—might argue that the text need not have such an impact, yet I differ. Young readers who are uninformed about consent and healthy sexual practices—just as I was when I first read the trilogy—might regard what is portrayed in the text as representative, even acceptable behavior.

Consequently, it is essential to use literature—and literary criticism—as a means to depict and assess such controversial topics in their true light: as disgusting and horrifying acts of terror.

## **2.1 The Female Gothic: Perpetuating Stereotypes of Women’s Sexuality**

As seen in Chapter One, Rice’s trilogy is ambiguously considered female gothic. When labeling a text as female gothic, it is important to take into account, among other issues, that “the formulation of this category [female gothic] was the result of the rise of feminism and feminist literary criticism in the US during the late 1960s and 1970s” (Fitzgerald, 2004: 8). A distinction between male and female gothic was needed in order to establish women’s place within the literary canon. As a consequence, “the gothic heroine thus became a proto-feminist in her resistance to patriarchal control” (Milbank, 2007: 155). Understandably, the minor presence of female heroines within the canon pushed the feminist literary criticism of the 1960s and 1970s to elevate the status of female protagonists within the gothic to that of proto-feminist. The vast majority of gothic heroines were portrayed only as victims and were analyzed as such, so in uplifting their status to that of heroines a new paradigm of female representation within the gothic was offered. *The Romance of the Forest* (1791), by Ann Radcliffe is an example. However, to consider victimized and terrorized women to be feminist figures poses a contradiction within the genre itself. The female gothic *per se* requires a female victim in the first place, who faces, fights and supposedly overcomes the threat. In my perspective, the fact that a woman first needs to be victimized in order to become a heroine seems counterproductive in feminist terms.

The female gothic is considered to be such because of different features. As previously mentioned, one of them is the feminist intention to recover female authors and



distinctively place them within a genre. A second characteristic—seen in Chapter One—is Moers’ contention that a gothic novel written by a woman is, logically, female gothic. Finally, and perhaps more relevant to the nature of this present dissertation, is Milbank’s argument that within the female gothic the reader of the text is also usually female: “A third strand of femininity is located in the Gothic reader who, like most imagined readers of fiction, is held to be female” (Milbank, 2007: 156). The importance of the text’s gender and its perception is reflected directly on the influence the text will have on the targeted reader: female readership.

As blatantly sexist as it was, it was not uncommon to think that women might be too influenced by the gothic novels they read. Many critics used the argument that women would take the novels “too literally”: “women were held to be particularly at risk of reading without critical distance” (Milbank, 2007: 156). The often-cited *Northanger Abbey* (1817), a parody of Gothic by Jane Austen, exemplifies this point by ridiculing it. In my view, and without underestimating the readers’ awareness, here lies the importance of adequacy when dealing with topics such as rape in literature. Even though the vast majority of the readership will be informed about rape, the idea of what consent is and what rape constitutes might not be clear for some. What is more, feminists still disagree on these controversial topics: “Virtually all feminists agree that rape is a grave wrong, one too often ignored, mischaracterized, and legitimized. Feminists differ, however, about how the crime of rape is best understood, and about how rape should be combated both legally and socially” (Whisnant, 2013: website). One of the major works on the subject of rape is Susan Brownmiller’s *Against Our Will: Men, Women, and Rape*, published in 1975. Brownmiller argues that rape is “nothing more or less than a conscious process of intimidation by which all men keep all women in a state of fear” (Brownmiller, 1975:15). The presence of the threat of rape within female gothic is unquestionable, since

it is one of the major threats to women. Disputable, however, is the use each author makes of the trope.

Since female gothic primarily deals with experiences commonly associated to the female experience, it is important to highlight that the female gothic “depends as much on longing and desire as on fear and antagonism. Yet if it frequently indulges some of the more masochistic components of female fantasy—representing the pleasure of submission, it also encourages an active exploration of the limits of identity” (Kahane, 1995: 342). It is my aim to prove that *The Lives of the Mayfair Witches* clearly indulges on the masochistic components of female fantasy, but it does not do so to show how harmful these fantasies are. Quite the contrary: it portrays them in a favorable light.

Therefore, one might conclude that even though the female gothic was conceived as feminist in acknowledging women, it cannot be considered a feminist genre by its very nature. The need to portray women who need to be wronged in order to become heroines, and the common themes of rape and abuse to portray female anxieties, no longer benefit women looking for female empowerment within the gothic. Female gothic texts as Rice’s *The Lives of the Mayfair Witches* do not contribute to present women’s concerns in a progressive manner. In fact, as I mentioned before, they perpetuate misconceptions of womanhood and femaleness. I shall proceed, in the following subchapters, to analyze how the eroticization of rape and abusive language harms, rather than empowers, female sexuality.

## **2.2. Rowan’s Exploitation: The Representation of Rape as an Erotic Fantasy**

Rowan Mayfair is raped, throughout the trilogy, several times. Yet, she is not the only woman within the trilogy to be forced: once he is flesh again, Lasher goes on a raping spree to try and impregnate all the Mayfair women (witches or not) in order to repopulate

the earth with his species: the Taltos. Nevertheless, only a few of the Mayfairs have the extra genetic factor which allows them to give birth to a Taltos so the ones who do not possess this extra DNA segment, as a consequence, die of internal bleeding minutes after they are raped.

In order to assess how the text shows rape as a sexual fantasy and hence, endangers notions of what rape constitutes, I shall look at specific moments within the trilogy in which Rowan is, on the one hand, consensually enjoying sex and, on the other, being abused. The problematic which the trilogy presents, especially in the first two novels, is that Rice dims the line which distinguishes a (arguably) healthy sex life from actual rape. One might assume that Rice does so on purpose, defending herself by saying that it is difficult to portray rape without it being sexy, and that her intention is to provoke the audience since she is writing within the gothic genre. Nonetheless, blurring the line between consensual sex and rape endangers the understanding of what rape actually is. In the same interview for *Playboy*, Rice maintains the opinion that “the idea that you can blame a piece of writing or a picture or a film or a magazine for inciting you to rape a woman is absolutely absurd” (Diehl, 1993: website). Certainly, a simple piece of writing will not encourage people to rape someone, but how rape is portrayed might lead people to think that such an act is admissible.

The first novel within the trilogy, *The Witching Hour*, ends with Rowan giving birth to Lasher, helping him with her magical powers to regenerate his skin tissue so that he can become a healthy being; and with her abandoning Michael, her husband, who tried to fight Lasher but lost, and is left drowning in the house pool. Rowan feels overprotective

of Lasher, and her scientific interest of him<sup>16</sup> and her desire to study the genetics of the Taltos eclipses her love for Michael.

The second novel, *Lasher*, is the one which deals most extensively with the issues mentioned before: rape as a sexual fantasy and abuse. Rowan and Lasher have been travelling and hiding from the rest of the family, and Lasher finally takes control and kidnaps and coerces Rowan who, after giving birth and almost bleeding to death, is incapable of defending herself. In the scenes to be analyzed, Rowan is confined to a small room, tied to the bed, unable to free herself and surrounded by her own filth:

She lay still, trying not to fight, to struggle, to tense, to scream. Just lie as if it were her choice to be on the filthy bed, her hands chained with loops of plastic tape to the ends of the headboard. She had given up all deliberate efforts to break the tape, either with her own physical strength or with the power of her mind. (*Lasher*, 218)

From the very beginning, it is made clear to the reader that Rowan lost any power she had before: she is at the total mercy of Lasher. When trying to understand what happened, she blames herself: “It was one wrong judgement call after another. I had only certain choices. But the mistake was pride, to think I could do this thing, to think I could handle it” (*Lasher*, 220). It is not unusual for rape victims to blame themselves for the attack. The fact that rape has been considered a crime of sexual nature, the victim might think that s/he provoked the assault. When analyzing rape, too often the focus is placed on the victim and not on the aggressor or the act of rape itself. In this light, critic James R. Keller writes that Rowan “desires men who are representative of the most sexist, potentially abusive, and exploitative element of the male population. She specifically desires them for those qualities that are considered most detrimental to the integrity of women’s rights” (Keller, 2000: 135). Keller bases his argument on Rowan’s sexual preference, expressed in the following passage:

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<sup>16</sup> Rowan’s intention is to study Lasher and turn him into her scientific project. However, her plan backfires once she realizes she is incapable of controlling Lasher. Ann Larabee’s article “We’re talking science, man, not voodoo” (1996) extensively deals with the trilogy’s scientific aspect.

I'll take them for their ego and their rambunctiousness, and their ignorance and their rollicking sense of humor; I'll take their roughness and their heated and simple love of women and fear. I'll take their talk.... They don't want you to say anything back to them, they don't even want to know who I am or what I am. (*TWH*, 110)

And, so, Keller reaches the following conclusion: “Rowan confesses that she likes being treated as a sex object” (Keller, 2000: 135). Keller is, then, allegedly blaming Rowan for being raped. In my view, rather than admitting that she enjoys being treated as a sexual object, Rowan confesses to liking a certain type of men who do not want to form a bond beyond sexual intercourse. Assuming that Rowan likes being treated as a sex object is diminishing the character and setting a precedent to argue that Rowan enjoyed being abused.

Therefore, it is important to make clear that “rape is a crime of ‘violence, not sex’—that is, a form of assault whose sexual nature is irrelevant, and which is analogous to other violent crimes” (Whisnant, 2013: website). It is crucial to understand that rape is an act of terror in order to eradicate the belief that there might be enjoyment during the assault, or that women consider rape to be a sexual fantasy waiting to be fulfilled. As Whisnant expresses, rape is not based on sexual attraction, rape emerges from the belief that one has the power to possess another person's body. If there is not willing submission, physical violence is used to control the victim. Rape, then, does not convey the notion of sex as a pleasurable act between two people giving full consent. In relation to Rowan's preference for rough sex, it is valid to apply Whisnant's argument:

Feminists often emphasized rapists' non-sexual motivations, such as anger and the desire for dominance and control; on this view, the rapist is a violent criminal like other violent criminals, not just a guy seeking sex a bit too vigorously. Similarly, this approach emphasizes that rape victims are real crime victims, not vaguely titillating people who had some overly rough sex and might just have liked it. (Whisnant, 2013: website)

What Whisnant is expressing in the above quotation is the fact that rape is used as a valuable tool to threaten non-compliant women. Therefore, the argument that rape is just rough sex that some women might like is no longer valid.

Interestingly, Keller compares Rowan and Lasher's sexual encounters to those of Rowan and Michael's, and he comes to the following conclusion:

The politics of rape involves power inequities between males and females. Rape necessitates the violent possession of the female by the male, a meeting of power and powerlessness. This paradigm, however, is not appropriate to the rough sex that Rowan and Michael practice. It is true that their encounters are brutal, but they are also consensual. (Keller, 2000: 138)

Indeed, Keller pinpoints what makes Rowan and Lasher's relationship a case of abuse: the lack of consent. Consent is, still nowadays, a much-discussed topic among feminists.

Moreover, what constitutes consent has varied through time:

[...] women's sexual consent has in many instances been understood quite expansively, as simply the absence of refusal or resistance. [...] A vital task on the feminist agenda has been to challenge and discredit such ideas—to deny that what a woman wears, where she goes and with whom, or what sexual choices she has made in the past have any relevance to whether she should be seen as having consented to sex on a particular occasion. (Whisnant, 2013: website)

Certainly, considering the aforementioned argument by Keller, the notion of consent is problematized in Rice's fiction.

Therefore, before analyzing the passages in which Rowan is being abused, I shall provide a definition of what consent is. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, consent is “permission for something to happen or agreement to do something” and “give permission for something to happen.” Since the issue is extremely complex still today, and for the purposes of this dissertation, I will consider Whisnant's distinction between two types of consent. Referring to Kazan (1998), and being extremely wide-ranging, Whisnant argues that “Consent in general may be understood as either attitudinal or performative. Attitudinal accounts see consent as a mental state of affirmation or

willingness, while performative accounts see it as a certain kind of action or utterance (for instance, saying ‘yes’ or nodding)” (Whisnant, 2013: website).

The first time Rowan is raped happens while she is flying to New Orleans to attend her biological mother’s funeral. Lasher, still a spirit, rapes her while she is asleep.<sup>17</sup> When Rowan is telling Michael about the encounter—which she herself cannot explain at that time—she says: “It was pleasurable, because I was half asleep. But when I woke up, I felt like I’d been raped. I loathed it” (*TWH*, 724). In this passage, Rice blurs the line between the acknowledgement of being raped and the uncertainty of it, by using sleep as a sort of in-between state. To Rowan, it is unclear whether she was raped, and so it might be to the uninformed reader. In this instance, it could be argued that because she felt pleasure, Rowan liked being violated.

Another problematic scene occurs when Rowan and Lasher are fighting and he begins to touch her. At first, Rowan backs away from Lasher: ““Get away from me!”” (*TWH*, 944); but seconds after she yells: ““Harder, rougher. Rape me, do it! Use your power”” (*TWH*, 945). Rowan is literally asking to be raped, and the fact that she does enormously problematizes the notion of consent mentioned above. Finally, here’s another passage in which Rowan and Lasher have an encounter:

She felt her dress opening, she felt the buttons slipped out of the holes.  
“Yes, make it rape again,” she said. “Make it rough and hard, and slow.”  
Suddenly, she was flung over her back, her head was forced to one side against the pillow; the dress was ripping, and the invisible hands were moving down her belly.  
Something like teeth grazed her naked sex, fingernails scraping her calves.  
“Yes,” she cried, her teeth clenched. “Make it cruel” (*TWH*, 949)

By eliminating Rowan’s utterances, such a scene would be considered rape without a doubt. Nevertheless, once again Rice writes of rape as if it was a fantasy which the woman wants to fulfill, problematizing the concept of consent, rape and the reader’s

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<sup>17</sup> Lasher has the ability to knead molecules and solidify for a short period of time. Lasher has accumulated power over time through the witches, and he can materialize and be seen by the people he chooses.

understanding of abuse and violation. Using an eroticized rape trope to depict a sexual encounter is diminishing to women and extremely harmful and disrespectful to women's sexuality<sup>18</sup>. Even when Rowan is clearly being forced, Rice portrays the assault as a pleasant act:

He struck her. The blow was astonishing to her. He knocked her back on the bed, and the entire side of her face was bruised. He lay with her, suckling her, and then entering her, and doing both at the same time, the pleasure washing through her. [...] Paralyzed with pleasure, she lay with her fingers curling up, her feet to the side, like one who is dead. (*Lasher*, 236)

The only difference between a scene in which Rowan seems to provide consent and one in which she does not is the fact that in the latter, Rowan does not directly ask to be raped. In fact, the narrative point of view during the act becomes third person omniscient rather than third person indirect to show the act of rape from a different perspective. Nevertheless, the text clearly states that Rowan feels pleasure all the same.

The scenes analyzed establish a precedent in the reader's imagination: Rowan likes being raped, therefore in all the scenes in which she is being assaulted she is 'asking for it'. As Keller points out: "The most disturbing feature of the sexual exploitation of Rowan is the suggestion that she actually enjoys it despite the threat to her safety. That is, she experiences pleasure during the actual sex act. This comes close to affirming the phallogocentric assumption that women enjoy, and perhaps even seek, rape" (Keller, 2000: 143). Moreover, I completely agree with Keller in the following aspect:

Rowan's sexual appetite confirms the male fantasy that women actually like being raped, that they enjoy the experience when they are raped, and that despite their complaints, women long to be treated as sex objects. To perpetuate such notions is to legitimize the excuse of every date rapist who claimed that his companion really desired him despite her resistance. (Keller, 2000: 147)

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<sup>18</sup> Some people might consider that the fantasies shown in the trilogy are representative of women's sexuality within BDSM circles and therefore, one could argue that Rice's works are real depictions of female sexuality. Nevertheless, the fact that the trilogy is not assessed as such, it cannot be considered representative of these practices.



Therefore, Rice's argument that a text might not have any influence at all on the readers is invalid. The author is, as Keller says, legitimizing the rape fantasy by giving it power within her trilogy, as well as misrepresenting female sexuality by assuming that women have these fantasies. As Goodreads user Amy says:

This book [*Lasher*] is bad in so many ways. The most offensive being her erotic descriptions of incest and child sexual abuse activities. She writes these as steamy harlequin romance moments with no alluding to the wrongness and damage these activities and crimes truly are in real life. It's as if she champions them as some great sexual experiences. (Goodreads, 2013)

Finally, it would be reasonable to think that the female gothic also plays a role in allowing for such representation of female sexuality. If one were to consider rape fantasies as a dark aspect of female sexuality, it might be logical that such aspects were explored within the gothic. Nevertheless, even if the trilogy was constructed in such a way that it might be considered a rape-revenge<sup>19</sup> text (borrowing the term from the cinematic subgenre), it would not make sense that Rowan enjoyed being battered. What is more, Rowan is not victorious. Although she manages to escape from Lasher's control, it is not her magical abilities which allow her to do so. Keller argues that "Rowan's telekinetic powers constitute a substantial physical equalizer between the two partners; Rowan can kill merely by becoming angry" (Keller, 2000:139); but Rowan is incapable of killing Lasher—her powers do not work against the Taltos. Rowan escapes thanks to the little physical strength she has left, and on the way back home, she gives birth to yet another Taltos, Emaeth<sup>20</sup> (a product of the multiple rapes) and she almost bleeds to death again:

Rowan had been hemorrhaging, just like the others, though she was not dead. At twelve last night, they had performed an emergency hysterectomy on the unconscious woman, with only Michael there—in tears—to consent. It was either

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<sup>19</sup> A rape-revenge film is a subgenre of exploitation films particularly popular during the 1970s. In rape-revenge films, the victim is tortured/raped and left for dead, but s/he survives the attack and takes revenge on the rapist.

<sup>20</sup> Emaeth is killed at the end of *The Witching Hour* by Rowan, who fears that she might be just as evil as her father, Lasher.

that or she'd never make it till morning. Incomplete miscarriage. Other complications. "Look, we're lucky she's still breathing." (*Lasher*, 447)

Rowan is seduced by her rapist—who is also her son—, raped, brutally abused, almost bled to death and finally loses her reproductive capacity. The text, therefore, seems to suggest that because Rowan had previously enjoyed an unconventional sex life and allowed Lasher to become flesh, she had to be punished. In *Taltos*, the third novel within the trilogy, Rowan laments losing, according to her, what made her feminine: "Sad for a kind of femininity that I've lost or never had." [...] "I can have no more children. And my children were monsters to me" (*Taltos*, 377). In equating motherhood to something monstrous, the text is reinforcing again ideas that female sexuality and the female reproductive system are something to be eliminated.

Furthermore, she is not the one who finally kills Lasher and gets revenge. Michael, her husband, is the one who confronts Lasher while Rowan is still unconscious:

"You killed my child, that's what you did," said Michael. "You left my wife on the brink of death. You took the living flesh of my child and subjugated it to your will, your dark will, that's what you did. And you killed my wife, you destroyed her, like you destroyed her mother and her mother's mother and all those women, all the way back! Kill you! I will kill you with pleasure!" (*Lasher*, 604)

Following the gothic tradition, it is the male hero who kills the monster<sup>21</sup> and rescues the defenseless victim. Using the classical structure of the gothic at the end of the second novel disrupts the layout of the first one. Rowan and Michael had decided to face Lasher together, therefore both of them, man and woman, would ideally face patriarchy united. However, the text's continuity is interrupted so that Rowan can become the typical victim of the female gothic genre, going through the worst nightmares of female experience and ultimately needing a savior. Consequently, it is impossible to assess *The Lives of the Mayfair Witches* as a feminist text, as there is no advancement within the female gothic

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<sup>21</sup> Michel violently and repeatedly hits Lasher with a hammer, until Lasher's skull is shattered and his face disfigured.

genre in portraying womanhood and female sexuality in a fair, satisfactory light. I shall proceed, in the last subchapter of this second section, to analyze specifically how the eroticized language Rice uses to express abuse and rape further endangers depictions of women's sexuality.

### **2.3. The Eroticized Language of Abuse: Erotica and Pornography**

This final section of the dissertation deals with the problematic choice of presenting an eroticized language of abuse, as well as rape as an erotic trope, within *The Lives of the Mayfair Witches*. In order to assess how the language of abuse is portrayed in the trilogy, I shall provide a clear distinction between erotica and pornography. Subsequently, I will offer a close analysis of some passages which depict scenes of abuse, undermined by the use of erotic/pornographic language, proving that the portrayal of crimes as erotica and the use of an eroticized language of exploitation is harmful not only to the readers' understanding of such topics, but also to the erotic genre.

As it has been mentioned, before writing and publishing *The Lives of the Mayfair Witches*, Rice had written three BDSM<sup>22</sup> novels between 1983 and 1985, which would form *The Sleeping Beauty Quartet*, once she published the last novel of the series in 2015. Loosely based on the tale of Sleeping Beauty, the novels are wrongly considered erotica by many critics when in fact, they are pornography. What is interesting, however, is that Rice's inclination to writing "erotic" scenes clearly lingers on her following novels, especially in *The Lives of the Mayfair Witches*. It is important to notice that Anne Rice

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<sup>22</sup> BDSM stands for Bondage and Discipline, Domination and Submission, Sadism and Masochism. BDSM is defined as "a range of sexual preferences that generally relate to enjoyment of physical control, psychological control, and/or pain. It can be broken down into six overarching components: bondage and discipline, domination and submission, and sadism and masochism. Bondage and discipline consist of using physical or psychological restraints, domination and submission involve an exchange of power and control, and sadism and masochism refer to taking pleasure in others' or one's own pain or humiliation." (Merriam Webster Dictionary, website; Accessed 10/07/2017)

herself considers her BDSM novels pornography, not erotica: “I think the masochistic fantasies explored in my pornography, and rape fantasies in general, are fascinating things” (Diehl, 1993: website). The trilogy under study cannot be labelled as erotica, but there are definitely some pornographic elements. It is not my purpose to censor the use of erotic elements within the gothic but there should be an awareness that using rape and abuse as erotic tropes is harmful when portraying women’s sexuality, not empowering.

In *Take Back the Night: Women on Pornography* (1980), Gloria Steinem provides a useful and clear distinction between erotica and pornography: “‘erotica’ is rooted in ‘eros’ or passionate love, and thus in the idea of positive choice, free will, the yearning for a particular person” (Steinem, 1980: 37). One could argue that within the trilogy, Rowan and Michael’s encounters are, in fact, erotic. However, if we look into Steinem’s definition of pornography:

“Pornography” begins with a root “porno”, meaning “prostitution” or “female captives,” thus letting us know that the subject is not mutual love, or love at all, but domination and violence against women. [...] It ends with a root “graphos”, meaning “writing about” or “description of,” which puts still more distance between subject and object, and replaces a spontaneous yearning for closeness with objectification and voyeurism. (Steinem, 1980: 37)

Some of the couple’s encounters are definitely about domination. Although there seems to be consent between the lovers, there is also an imbalance of power. The text masquerades Rowan and Michael’s sex as passionate, yet the language demonstrates that there is, certainly, violence: “Ride me hard,” she whispered. [...] Her fragile form, her tender *bruisable* flesh—it only incited him. No imagined rape he had ever committed in his secret unaccountable dream soul had ever been more brutal” (*TWH*, 189; *my italics*)

The fact that Michael already has rape fantasies and seems to be fulfilling them by having rough sex with Rowan damages not only women, but also men. Assuming that all men have rape fantasies is detrimental and insulting, and it is far from being erotica. The following passage plainly exemplifies that the words chosen to describe consensual

sex lean towards pornography rather than erotica: “The cock entered her, its size shocking her, *hurting* her, *bruising* her. *The pain was gorgeous, exquisite, perfect.* She clenched the cock as best she could, the muscles weak and aching and not under her command—her *wounded* body betraying her” (*Taltos*, 102; *my italics*). By using and associating words such as hurt, bruise and pain—words associated with brutality—to pleasure, Rice is portraying sex as a pleasant violent act. Language, thus, is misused: linking pain with pleasure might be confusing to the uninformed reader, especially in a text in which the practice of BDSM is never mentioned or acknowledged.

Rice’s pornographic scenes are depicted through the male gaze. Coined by Laura Mulvey in “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” (1975), the term ‘male gaze’ makes reference to how “women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote to-be-looked-at-ness. Women displayed as sexual object is the leitmotif of erotic spectacle” (Mulvey, 1975: 809). Undoubtedly, Rowan is displayed as a sex object and the pornographic, rather than erotic, spectacle seems to be constructed for a male readership.

The passages in which Rowan is being raped by Lasher illustrate more clearly how the text is glamorizing abuse. As Steinem argues: “One could simply say that erotica is about sexuality, but pornography is about power and sex-as-weapon—in the same way we have come to understand that rape is about violence, and not really about sexuality at all” (Steinem, 1980: 38). Precisely, Lasher is using sex as a weapon: he sees Rowan as a womb: “To the reader, Rowan is the central character, but to Lasher she is merely the latest in a long line of Mayfair witches whom he has cultivated in order to obtain what he wanted; she is expendable” (Kinsella, 1996: 91). Hence, it is not surprising at all that

Lasher treats Rowan as a sex object. The following quotation describes rape, yet once again the language used to depict it eroticizes the brutal attack:

Her body was pinned to the carpet, and the cock *burned* her as it drove inside her, scraping her clitoris, plunging deeper into her vagina. I can't stand it, I can't bear it. Split me apart, yes. Laid waste. The *orgasm* flooded through her [...] She heard her own *cries*, but they were far away, unimportant, flowing out of her mouth in a divine release, her body pumping and helpless and stripped of will and mind. (*TWH*, 946; *my italics*)

In this passage, there is no sign of passionate love but domination and submission. Dismissing the victim's cries and actually writing that she had an orgasm only furthers the false assumption that women like to be raped. Rice's depictions of abuse cloud the clear distinction that should be made between erotica and pornography.

In the succeeding passage, such blurring is plainly visible: "It was *degrading* as anything else to feel this sudden *utter joy* that he was here, *to kindle beneath his fingers as if he were a lover, not a jailer*, to rise out of her isolation towards any kindness or gentleness proffered by the captor in a swoon" (*Lasher*, 221; *my italics*). Rowan is acknowledging that longing for the visit of her rapist is humiliating yet she cannot control her impulses. This eroticized language misrepresents what women actually feel when they are held against their will, and writing about abuse as if it was an erotic trope is profoundly damaging. A uniformed reader might understand Rowan's captivity as voluntary, or contradictory at the very least. The confusion between willing submission—if such a thing exists outside BDSM circles—and a forced one is at the core of the problematic *The Lives of the Mayfair Witches* presents when eroticizing abuse. This eroticized language misrepresents women's sexuality and belittles women's rape experiences. Nevertheless, the fact that there are people who are unaware of what healthy relationships and consent are is not the text's fault. The trilogy is not the cause of spreading romanticized abuse. The trilogy is a symptom—it idealizes abuse because abuse has already been idealized within society. As Steinem concludes: "until we

untangle the lethal confusion of sex with violence, there will be more pornography and less erotica. There will be little murders in our beds—and very little love” (Steinem, 1980: 39).

One of the reasons why the erotic language used in the trilogy is harmful to women’s representations of sexuality is because language itself is patriarchal: “Male supremacy is fused into the language, so that every sentence both heralds and affirms it. Thought, experienced primarily as language, is permeated by the linguistic and perceptual values developed expressly to subordinate women” (Dworkin, 1981: 17). Certainly, if the language used already carries misogynistic perceptions about women, these will be also transmitted through writing.

A second reason is that:

[...] the major theme of pornography as a genre is male power, its nature, its magnitude, its use, its meaning. Male power, as expressed in and through pornography, is discernible in discrete but interwoven, reinforcing strains: the power of self, physical power over and against others, the power of terror, the power of naming, the power of owning, the power of money, and the power of sex. (Dworkin, 1981: 24)

Unquestionably, a genre which conveys patriarchy in all its glory cannot be favorable to women in any way. To argue that “good pornography does what good mystery fiction does or good Western fiction or good science fiction: It takes you to another place. It allows you to enjoy that place for a little while, and then you come back. If it’s really good, you know something you didn’t before you went” (Diehl, 1993: website) is a fallacy. The sole fact that pornography is constructed to portray and diminish women to sex objects cannot be enjoyable or pleasing, and never be considered erotic<sup>23</sup>.

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<sup>23</sup> Currently, there are women who claim to be producing feminist pornography. Mia Engberg and Erika Lust are among the directors who are directing and producing feminist porn for a genderqueer audience.

In conclusion, using an eroticized language to depict abuse harms notions of abuse itself, blurring the lines between what is erotica and pornography. The main female character in *The Lives of the Mayfair Witches* is completely disempowered through the use of such a language. Clearly, Rice's texts are pornographic in the sense that they diminish women and wrongly portray female sexuality.

The reasons behind such a portrayal of abuse are varied: language itself is patriarchal so an effort needs to be made to write erotica without it being misogynistic. Unfortunately, Rice's texts depict abuse as a normalized sex practice and glamourize rape, which does not contribute to a healthy representation of women's sexuality. In fact, the use of such a language for shocking purposes adds little literary value to the issues represented. Moreover, the genre itself, pornography, and the female gothic—the need to have a victim—also contribute to portray mistreatment as an accepted practice.





### 3. Concluding Remarks and Further Research

The complexities that *The Lives of the Mayfair Witches* presents have proved to be varied and difficult to analyze. On the one hand, the magnitude of the text and the density of the plot make it almost impossible to assess the text as a whole. Therefore, the focus of this dissertation has been the figure of the witch in the text, and how the female gothic genre uses such an icon to portray an ostensibly transgressive female sexuality, and fails. The eroticized tropes of rape and abuse, and the language used to depict them have also been a main topic to analyze since they convey misleading notions of female desire.

As seen in the introduction, the witch was first reclaimed by feminists during the 1960s as a symbol of femininity and power. Even though she still is a powerful figure among feminists, I reached the conclusion that she cannot be a feminist icon: she is a patriarchal construction and, therefore, she will always carry misogynist connotations. As seen within the trilogy, the witches presented are powerful yet they are at the mercy of the evil spirit, Lasher, who represents patriarchy itself. Such factor is especially manifest in the character of Rowan Mayfair, who even though being the most powerful of the witches, cannot defeat Lasher by herself. Hence, the use Rice makes of the witch is not a vindication of the character as a feminist symbol. Although there are witches within the family who might be considered transgressive—such as Mary Beth—the fact that they do not actively fight against patriarchy erases any chance to consider the characters as feminist. As aforesaid, the witches represented stick to their role as “evil women”, using their powers to achieve their goals and punish those who wronged them. What is more, the Mayfair witches become powerful because Lasher allows them to do so; they are powerful within the boundaries authorized by patriarchy. When they try to fight the

established order or they do not fulfil the purpose they were given power for, they lose, as seen in Rowan.

The second issue discussed within the dissertation was the use of the female gothic to present an apparently transgressive female sexuality. However, as I have argued, the female sexuality portrayed in *The Lives of the Mayfair Witches* is employed as a tool to disempower women and it is not transgressive at all. The female protagonist is still presented as a victim whose sexual appetite is the cause of her downfall. Moreover, the representations of womanhood and femaleness conform to society's expectations and yet the text intends to present them as revolutionary. It is fair to argue, then, that the female gothic has not progressed in terms of presenting womanhood in a different light. The need to have a female victim so the text and the plot can work as a whole is outdated and based on patriarchal assumptions that women need to be rescued. The fact that a supposedly powerful witch needs a man to rescue her shows that the female gothic as used in the trilogy is stagnated and, as a consequence, cannot be considered a favorable genre to women.

Finally, one of the main criticisms made of the texts is their use of an eroticized language to describe rape and abuse, and using rape as an erotic trope. By eroticizing abuse, the text is acknowledging that such behavior is acceptable. However, using rape and abuse as erotic tropes damages both the erotic genre and the uninformed reader's perception of sexuality, problematizing notions of consent and valid and healthy relationships. My main criticism, therefore, is not the representation of rape and abuse within literature but the manner in which these topics are presented by Rice. Arguing, as the author does, that everyone has rape fantasies and therefore, these should be portrayed erotically is extremely damaging. Besides, the fact that the author seems to be condoning such practices further problematizes the perception of the text among the targeted readers.

It is extremely important to portray abuse as it is and not as a romanticized relationship. As I have argued, by suggesting that the victim enjoys being raped, misogynist ideas about female sexuality are perpetuated and used to control and police women. Ultimately, I reached the conclusion that neither the text under study nor the female gothic genre can be considered feminist: the women in the text are victims of patriarchy and can never fully escape being under patriarchal control.

It follows, then, that it is essential for scholars to analyze representations of rape and abuse in order to discern whether they are truthfully represented, not only in literature but also in popular culture. If that is not the case, then it is our responsibility to highlight the ways in which such representations are harmful and these works are incorrectly representing abuse. Throughout this dissertation I have sought to make a criticism of the harm in presenting an abusive relationship as female desire. Sadly, Rice's works are not the only ones portraying abusive relationships as healthy ones. The success of works such as *Fifty Shades of Grey* is discouraging and demoralizing. It is essential, therefore, to seek accurate representations of female sexuality within literature. Unfortunately, as I have argued, the female gothic is unfit for such a task. Finally, even though there is plenty of research to be done, my dissertation is pointing at what is being wrongly represented, claiming that abuse and rape ought to stop being romanticized and start being acknowledged as they are: acts of patriarchal terror.



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## Appendix

### *Lives of the Mayfair Witches*, Anne Rice—General Summary

*The Lives of the Mayfair Witches*, by Anne Rice is a long and complex trilogy. The story covers thirteen generations of witches guided by a spirit, from the seventeenth to the twentieth century. Each book has an independent plot but all lead to one basic storyline: the efforts of the Taltos—a humanoid species—to survive. It is implied in the trilogy that the Taltos and the Mayfair family have always been blood-related. The main characters of the trilogy are Rowan Mayfair, an exceptional neurosurgeon and the thirteenth witch in the line, and Michael Curry, a contractor who is also related to the Mayfair family. Mona Mayfair, a thirteenth-year old cousin of Rowan's and a powerful witch herself, is also a major character, as well as Ashlar Templeton, the last surviving Taltos.

The first book, *The Witching Hour* (1990), comprises the story and history of the Mayfair witches, as well as the affair between Rowan and Michael. It also includes their befriending of Aaron Lightner, a member of the Talamasca (a secret society that does research on the supernatural); Lightner oversees the investigation on the Mayfair witches. In *The Witching Hour*, Lasher (the evil spirit) manipulates Rowan into abandoning her husband and he possesses the fetus of Rowan and Michael's unborn child. Lasher's intention is to become flesh again and with Rowan's help (her magic/telekinetic powers) he achieves his goal. After his birth, Lasher reveals that he is a Taltos. After quarreling and almost killing Michael, Lasher and Rowan leave together.

The second book, *Lasher* (1993), focuses on the search for Rowan and Lasher. Mona Mayfair is introduced as the designated heiress of the Mayfair legacy. Michael is seduced by Mona, who is only thirteen years old, and he commits statutory rape. Meanwhile, Lasher and Rowan have been travelling and he has abused her both physically and psychologically. Lasher's plan is to repopulate the Earth with Taltos like himself and, thus, extinguish the human species. To do so, Lasher repeatedly rapes Rowan, who constantly miscarries until she gives birth to Emaeth, a female Taltos. Rowan manages to escape from Lasher and she is returned to her family in New Orleans.

Yet, due to the multiple miscarriages she needs to undergo an operation and remains in a coma for several days. Lasher then embarks on a journey of raping and trying to inseminate every Mayfair woman, as some Mayfair women have a special genetic structure that allows them to give birth to Taltos under the right circumstances. However, the ones who do not have this genetic structure hemorrhage to death. Finally, two Talamasca members find Lasher and bring him to Michael, who kills both Lasher and the Talamasca members. When Rowan wakes up from the coma, she kills her own daughter Emaeth, afraid that she would turn evil like her father, Lasher.

The third book, *Taltos* (1994), deals with the story of the Taltos and their downfall, caused by humans. The reader is introduced to Ashlar and he explains the Taltos mythology and the Taltos history to Rowan and Michael. However, before meeting Ashlar, Rowan is in a catatonic state (after having killed her daughter) and she wakes up only when Aaron Lightner is murdered by the Talamasca. When Michael and Rowan are looking for the murderer, they meet Ash and another female Taltos, Tessa, who is too old to procreate. Meanwhile, Mona discovers that she is pregnant with Michael's child and she gives birth to Morrigan, another female Taltos. The couple and Ashlar part ways and when they return to New Orleans they accept Mona's decision to name Morrigan designee of the legacy. However, Morrigan can smell Ash's scent on Rowan and Michael, and she makes them promise that they will let her meet him eventually. Nevertheless, when Ash does not hear from Rowan and Michael in a while he decides to go to New Orleans and there she sees Morrigan. At the end, Morrigan and Ashlar run away together and it is believed that they will fulfill the prophecy of populating the Earth with Taltos.