

The Function of the Gothic in Susan Glaspell's *The Morning Is Near Us*

I. Susan Glaspell

Susan Glaspell (1876-1948) was a prolific writer whose work spans the genres of drama, short fiction, and novels. She “along with her husband George Cram Cook, and, later, Eugene O’Neill—established the Provincetown Players, the first modern American theater company” (Ben Zvi 1). Prominent theater critics of her day and age, Issac Goldberg, Heywood Broun, and Ludwig Lewisohn, cite Glaspell as the mother of American drama. She wrote eleven plays for the group, giving them their first commercial success with “Trifles” (Ben Zvi 1; Ozieblo 2). In 1931, she won a Pulitzer for her play, *Alison’s House*, and during her lifetime, her short stories were published in journals like *Harpers*, *The Black Cat*, and *Ladies Home Journal*. Three of her novels made best sellers lists and were praised highly by the *New York Times*; however, despite her success and popularity during her lifetime, Glaspell’s works were largely forgotten about and left out of the American literary canon. Martha Carpentier explains, “This solid body of work should have ensured her place in the annals of American fiction, but Susan Glaspell is a classic case study of gender-biased marginalization” (2). Rather, Glaspell’s body of work follows the trajectory of many women writers, as Linda Ben-Zvi elucidates, she “was well known in her time, effaced from canonical consideration after her death, and rediscovered years later through the resurfacing of one work, around which critical attention has been focused” (1).

Glaspell’s mature novels often invoke Gothic modes and forms, especially relating to the haunted house formula in American literary tradition. *The Morning Is Near Us* makes extensive use of a house and family haunted by its past. The novel also features other tropes common to Gothic literature, such as a barren and desolate landscape, an aura of foreboding mystery, a preoccupation with death, character doublings, and the appearance of a ghost. While

exemplifying the traditions of the American Gothic, Susan Glaspell's novel also participates in the tropes and elements particular to the Female Gothic, such as the heroine's search within the house as a search into her identity and her relationship to her mother, and the heroine's existence as "dark Other." Glaspell's novels develop Gothic peculiarities, and as I will show, *The Morning Is Near Us*, in particular exemplifies this literary tradition.

At the opening of *The Morning Is Near Us*, the Chippman house has been unoccupied for three years. According to the Father's will, the property will be ceded to the cemetery trust if Lydia does not return to live in the house. Lydia misreads her father's will as an invitation home, believing he is calling and wishing her home. Thus, Lydia returns back to the home and thoughts of the past she had long since left and tried to forget, and which her brother, Warren, tries to convince her to abandon. She is forced to reopen and reexamine her past and in doing so, she uncovers the Chippman family secret—the true life and identity of her mother. Therefore, the novel deals with a challenging mother-daughter relationship. Lydia Chippman had been sent away from home as a teen, leaving her with few positive memories of her childhood for relations in her home were always estranged, and she grew up feeling as though her mother never truly loved her without understanding why. She spent her adult life abroad, traversing the globe, but never quite settling down and growing roots, thus avoiding her home—a past she had yet to confront.

The Morning Is Near Us adheres to many Gothic conventions and tropes including: a house haunted by the family's past, a preoccupation with death, Lydia as dark "Other," a characteristic sense of foreboding mystery, the father's death-in-life existence, an incestuous undercurrent, and the use of character doubling. Most notable, *The Morning Is Near Us*, explores the murkier aspects of the mother-daughter relationship through the patterns of the Female

Gothic. In the Female Gothic tradition, a woman's troubled relationship with her mother, either living or deceased, and to her house, examines apprehensions which correspond with the Female Gothic's ultimate, as Ellen Moers has noted, "fear of self" (107). Accordingly, as Kahane states in *The Gothic Mirror*, "the heroine's active exploration of the Gothic house in which she is trapped is also an exploration of her relation to the maternal body that she shares, with all its connotations of power over and vulnerability of forces within and without" (338). Lydia's return home parallels this for through examining her ancestral home she explores her and her mother's past. Lydia's search of the house becomes a metaphor for the active exploration of her mother's true identity which is inextricably linked with her own.

Glaspell begins *The Morning Is Near Us* through describing a barren landscape and a desolate house, with the cemetery and the gravestones as the most prominent images. In the opening, the reader becomes aware that "[y]ou didn't see the house from the road" for "the hills were just high enough to hide the Chippmans" (4). In the same page, as Warren is approaching the family home that no one has stepped foot in for three years, he pauses before crossing the threshold: "As if getting courage for the house"; while delaying his entrance, he looks to the cemetery thinking, "for really, the most cheerful thing about the place was the cemetery, there in the sun, though now the house was shadowed" (4). The Chippman house is disharmonious and discordant as it is described as "a cock-eyed house" misshapen to make it appear "like an ill-formed bird" because it was built in three parts, "the work of three generations, and the two later builders had not worked in harmony with the man who built the first" (6-7). The house further follows Gothic conventions for it performs almost as if it is a character in the novel: "For it had secrets—the Chippman place—and it was fitting it go. It had been justly condemned to destruction" (29). Moreover, objects within the house are personified: Warren upon entering

struggles for “The lock did not want to let him in, wanting to hold its secrets”; household items “did not seem, to know they were left for good, seemed waiting for the family to come back” for the “album on the center-table waited for someone to open it and say, ‘This was Uncle Ephraim,’” and the “Boston rocker waited for someone to sit in it, so it could squeak once more”; and the “stairs made little surprised sounds” (8-9).

Lydia returns home to save the ancestral house from destruction for it is only she who can “save the past from being dead and buried”; further, she is drawn back to the site of her past discontent for she felt it “was a command upon her, saying: ‘Lydia, come home’” (53). She returns to find out the secret of her past and answers to questions concerning the family: “Through that question the truth would lie—the whole truth. Why mother had not loved her, why she had been kept away from home. Deep underneath the answer to that question lay the secret of unhappy glances, of troubled looks. Know this true answer and she would know the secret of this house” (104).

The novel’s emphasis on the mystery of the house and the family adhere to Gothic conventions and allow for the text to read like a detective story in the style of Edgar Allan Poe. These descriptions show the past as haunting the daily lives of the family: “Their past had been taken from them by what happened in that downstairs room. Yet it was funny. Even though you’ve given up a past it hasn’t given you up. It comes uninvited—and sometimes half welcome” (12). Glaspell creates an aura of foreboding mystery relying on unclear phrases such as “—right after the dreadful thing happened,” and Lydia’s coming back home “boded no good” for “[i]t would all start over again” (28). Warren and Lydia are unsure “about what made things strange in their house” and Lydia remembers growing up with “a child’s lost feeling of things not as they should be,” these instances allude to the secret of the Chippman family and home (31-

32). The culmination of these elements results in a portrayal of the house as haunted, and shows a characteristically Gothic return of the past where the house becomes a symbol for the hauntings which continue to disturb the family, for “[o]pening up the old place meant opening up a great many other things” (21). Warren upon stepping into the house becomes overtaken by “—that smell of the past, reproachful smell of things that have been lived with and left alone,” and he warns his sister to give up her notion of moving into the old home: “The place is too lonely. Don’t go in. The old things are all in there and they’ll—they’ll just make you feel badly. A person can’t go back and live in the past like that” (8, 62). Throughout the novel, the characters feel “the past alive there,” and “more real than anything of the moment”; and it has left them scarred because “[a]nxious and unhappy glances had left ghosts in this house” (76-77). Ultimately, “The house had nothing to offer now except thoughts that would destroy her... The past had gone down into a mire. To live in that world would be destruction. Better the house pulled down than she” (263). Lydia struggles against the house for selfhood as it reminds her of her troubled childhood and events she has tried to repress; however, in coming home she is forced to reexamine them.

Lydia returns literally to “save our past” –as Warren puts it, but her ulterior motive is to make peace with her identity and to do this she must uncover the secret of her parents and her mother’s identity. As Martha Carpentier in “*The Morning Is Near Us* (1939) as Euripidean Tragicomedy,” explains, “Lydia’s quest is to return the mother’s body (life and fertility) to the ancestral home. In doing so, she will rediscover her mother for herself, which is crucial to her identity formation” (134). Upon returning home, Lydia is under the false assumption that her father is dead, but she soon discovers that her father is in fact still alive and is in an insane asylum—a locale that connotes a particular Gothic resonance—serving a life sentence for a

murder he committed. Thus, the “mystery” or “secret” of the Chippman family operates on two levels –the true identity of her mother’s character and her father’s crime. Furthermore, Glaspell adheres to the conventions of the Female Gothic for throughout the text she “deposits several hints that ‘the secret of this house’ is maternal sexuality” (Carpentier 138).

The novel displays a Gothic preoccupation with death as the property of the Chippman house is flanked by the town’s cemetery, and the family has sold plots of land making more room for the dead. At the opening, “The Chippman family home is deserted and the cemetery is encroaching upon it, as if to engulf the living body into the realm of the dead” (Carpentier 131). Walter remembers that “Twice in his own memory those bars that fenced the dead had moved nearer the house” (5). The cemetery figures as a character, for “the cemetery needed more breathing room” and they are in a battle for the land: “The cemetery needed it too, for the dead were moving down this slope; right against the Chippman fence they were now, and the fence breaking down as if to let them in” (28, 6). Aside from the prominence of the cemetery, there also features a dialogue between the living and the dead as the characters, due to their proximity to the cemetery, are conscious of their imminent deaths and often compare their lives with the dead: “Twilight was dimming the day. Another night for the living and the dead” (136-7). The Judge, in talking with Lydia, looks at the cemetery explaining, “I have more friends here than I have in houses,” and Lydia, in preparing her children for school holds up her daughter’s dress and thinks: “Dress a little girl would wear her first day of school. That was a beginning. And up on the hill was an ending” (191, 228). In true Gothic fashion, death pervades and permeates the pages of the text.

In her return and upon reexamining the strange events of her childhood, Lydia realizes that it was not only mother which was the root of her feelings of insecurity, but her father as

well: “She had thought it was Mother didn’t want her. But no, it was Father too” (48). Lydia returns home believing her father dead; however, she soon learns that this is not the case. John resides at an insane asylum as a result of his murder of a man who was slandering Hertha’s name. The town, taking pity on him for his help with the cemetery, arranged so that he could spend the life sentence in the asylum instead of jail. The man he murdered was threatening to expose Hertha’s true character; thus, the motive behind the father’s crime lays the reality of her mother’s sexuality—her “infidelity” (Carpentier 138). John and Hertha were raised as brother and sister, and when Hertha reached maturity John became attracted to her. Their parents died in a relatively short time of one another and social services were looking to separate them. Hertha, anxious of losing her home, especially after the trauma—the molestation which occurred in her childhood—wished to remain with John, who she viewed him as a protector and brother. John, seized the opportunity, and convinced her to marry him. While Hertha was torn, she acquiesced, but viewed their marriage as unnatural and wrong, and their sexual encounters were rapes in her eyes. John began to feel guilt after the birth of their son, Warren, and he allowed her to have sexual encounters with visiting men who came to stay as boarders in the house because he began to understand that “sex with him was ‘against nature,’ while ‘love outside—that was natural’” (Qtd. in Carpentier 151). These sexual liaisons are what the murdered man was threatening to expose. Glaspell’s portrayal of sexuality in, *The Morning Is Near Us*, is confusing and complicated, and ultimately, unsettling for both Lydia and the reader.

Claire Kahane argues that at the center of the Female Gothic lies a pre-oedipal conflict, “a primal apprehension toward an archaic, all powerful mother, and the conflict over the nature of identity, and in particular, female identity, raised by that spectre” (Qtd. in Fleenor 23). Fleenor adds to this discussion, “these dichotomies and subsequent tensions” with the mother

figure are essential to Female Gothic plots, and further “[t]his maternal figure is also a double, a twin perhaps, to the woman herself” (16). Lydia and her mother, Hertha, are presented as character doubles. Through exploring the house, Lydia finds hidden in an old trunk the secrets of Hertha’s past. Lydia uncovers it when her adopted daughter, Koula discovers the trunk, which “opened the way back into Mother’s girlhood” (143). Carpentier provides a psychoanalytic reading in which the trunk represents, “a vaginal symbol, and it is the mother’s body that Lydia discovers within it”; however, the womb-like image of the trunk has Female Gothic connotations as well (Carpentier 146). In finding Hertha’s girlhood letters, Lydia realizes that her mother also mysteriously lost her home as a girl for her family were “drifters,” and after being separated from her brother and running away in an attempt to find him, she had been molested. The Chippmans’ find and adopt Hertha as part of the family after they find her alone and crying, a fact Lydia becomes aware of through reading her mother’s letters to her missing brother. In examining one, Lydia is confounded as “the last of it she could scarcely read—so blurred. Tears had fallen on the words Hertha wrote and fell now as Hertha’s daughter read” (162-3). The deliberate repetition of the name Hertha in this line figures the characters as doubles; it adds emphasis and forces the reader to parallel the characters by referring to Lydia as “Hertha’s daughter” and not by her name. Lydia repeats her mother’s actions in writing a letter to her father—a letter she is unsure if he will ever read. In composing it, Lydia “thought of Hertha’s words—‘Now it seems I am not going to see you again. Am not going to find you’” (237). According to Carpentier, “What Lydia discovers through these letters is that her mother was not a cold automaton but a ‘loving little girl, who became not loving because something had been done to her’”; most importantly, Lydia in reading the letters is able to identify with her mother because “[w]ith their mutual experience of difference, Lydia’s identification with her mother is

complete” for she “has inherited her mother’s status as outcast Other” (146). Lydia shares in her mother’s status as “Other”—another characteristic turn of the Gothic—because she is banished from home as a young girl. The narrative frequently makes reference to her “darkness,” for “her looks had never always been—well, not like any of the rest of them”; “This Lydia—what a strange-looking girl she had been. She didn’t look like anyone else—Chippmans or anybody”; and there are repeated mentions to her “dark face,” “dark eyes,” and “brown hands” (18, 28-29, 33, 56). Thus, Lydia ultimately comes to understand her own identity through discovering her mother’s: “It was because of her mother she understood her mother. Because of what her mother had done to *her*” (175).

The house also functions as the place of past traumas and terrors, from the stranger’s murder to the repeated rapings of Hertha by her brother/husband, John. Also in the trunk, Lydia finds an old photo album containing removed portraits of her mother from when she and John were children; Lydia interprets their removal as an attempt to cover-up the past, as a sign that Hertha believed their marriage unnatural and morally wrong. Incestuous themes are a common trope utilized in Gothic texts. Through uncovering the mystery of the Chippman home, Lydia finds evidence of her parents’ twisted relationship, and upon unearthing this secret, she remarks to herself: “Strange how Mother and Father grew up together in this house and then married. Boy and girl who grew up together—well, it was hardly a romantic setting...She should think her mother and father would have felt more like brother and sister” (141). This discovery puts her mother and father’s sexual encounters in a new and unfavorable light: John’s “violation of Hertha’s sororal feelings toward him amounts to a repeated rape of the most repugnant kind” (Carpentier 151).

The ending Glaspell provides concerning Lydia's father is problematic because John, after the murder and subsequent detainment in the asylum, comes to have a life-in-death existence and functions in the text as a living ghost. Carpentier elucidates that Glaspell explores "in depth the painfully contradictory impulses of love and rage daughters necessarily feel toward their fathers in patriarchal culture, again transcending an oversimplified oedipal drama" through this troubling portrayal (147). Lydia desires to visit her father, wishing to receive paternal approval; however, Warren warns Lydia that "He's left this life" and wants to remain in his existence alone with the memories of Hertha (180). Warren exclaims, "He is through with it as if he were dead" (189). Warren is not the only one who recognizes John's mental absence because when Lydia seeks the Judge's permission to visit her father, he too responds, "Should we call back the dead?" (192). In preparing to visit him, Lydia scrutinizes how she presents herself thinking "she looked all right—clothes like everybody else's" as she "didn't want to startle Father" or wanted to "look like "foreign parts" for she "wanted the people there to approve of her father's daughter" (211). He takes on a ghostlike appearance, for upon seeing her father at the hospital, Lydia realizes that "He did not seem, to be seeing or hearing anything"; furthermore, "He dwelt apart and he dwelt alone. . . . She could no more reach him than she could reach her mother in her grave" (214, 217). Driving all the way to the asylum for a visit and witnessing her father's "utter withdrawal from the outer world of phenomenal reality," she "had thought him immured, inviolable, beyond wanting and beyond being reached," causing her too to stand paralyzed, unable to approach him (Carpentier 147, 233). Reading his rigidity, which in turn seemed to "annihilate her," creates in Lydia feelings of denial and loss of his love, and "plunges Lydia into an oedipal regression and an existential crisis" (Carpentier 148). Lydia, after this experience, tries again desperately to receive his acceptance and confirmation through

writing him a touching letter. He responds with a “ruthless blow” explaining that he is not, in fact, her father and that he never wanted her, nor did he ever love her and that is why she was sent away from home because he “didn’t want [her] mother to pay attention to [her], or be loving with [her]” (254, 247). Lydia is heartbroken at the news, “she is angry at her mother’s passivity, but on a deeper level she is angry that her mother chose her father over herself” (Carpentier 150). Lydia’s confusion and inability to identify with paternal love is paramount to the Gothic’s portrayal of abandonment and displacement.

Lydia resolves to flee from the house and the harrowing memories of how her mother and father never loved her. In a bizarre turn of events, her father appears at her window in the dark of night having escaped the asylum and taken a train, and then walked several miles from the station to the home in the pouring rain. Carpentier provides a psychoanalytic reading of John’s return where he “miraculously” appears wishing to repent and “[atone] for [his] patriarchal violations” (150-151). However, his dramatic escape and superhuman feat of enduring miles in the rain as an elderly man in failing health further evoke Gothic modes. His presence is spectre-like and his tappings at the window are reminiscent of scenes from Charlotte Bronte’s *Wuthering Heights*; moreover, his image at the window is not comforting for Lydia, rather it is haunting. He enters to dispel the myths of the past –taking full blame for Hertha’s unhappiness and Lydia’s removal from the home. In confessing his sins to Lydia, he releases his burdens and is allowed to die peacefully in the home “holding Lydia’s hand and speaking Hertha’s name,” thus, the house continues to provide a feminine, womb like space of protection that forgives the father’s sins (Carpentier 152). Lydia, too, receives a sense of catharsis and now truly understands the strange occurrences of the home and childhood.

Ultimately, the Female Gothic does not portray solutions, thus the reader never walks away with a clear resolution to Lydia and her parent's relationship. Overall, the conclusion of *The Morning Is Near Us* is unsettling, seemingly rushed and somehow incomplete for it "requires a too generous suspension of disbelief on the part of the reader," and the novel never achieves a harmonious ending; however, the Gothic does not provide for happy endings (Carpentier 152). Fleenor summarizes that "To see wholeness is unfortunately not part of the Female Gothic," because "the Female Gothic does not establish any new definitions of female sexuality...that is beyond its scope; it does, however, challenge assumptions about the nature of the Gothic by revealing that the central conflict is with the mother and not with the husband/lover/father" (15). The Female Gothic, then, is interested in leaving the reader with an open-ended sense of discomfort and anxiety. While in many ways Glaspell adheres to the "Radcliffean Female Gothic" traditions "of the persecuted heroine in flight from a villainous father-figure and in search for an absent mother," the conclusion does not fully resolve the tensions created by the novel (Wallace and Smith 4). Lydia at the conclusion accepts her mother's true identity, and in doing so, accepts herself. Carpentier's reading of the ending resolves the pre-oedipal and oedipal tensions of the novel for the "rivalr[ies] between father and daughter are resolved in an image of peaceful acceptance," but the ending is not altogether positive (152). The past continues to create a dark shadow over her consciousness because Lydia is relieved at her father's death: "All that remained to be known was locked away now, and for good" (295). The past, while examined and interpreted, effectively dies with her father, and only through his death, can Lydia finally know and accept peace. She chooses to remain in the ancestral house, blessing it with her adopted children and her new found acceptance of her mother's sexuality and her own identity as "Other."

The narrative functions as a perverted coming of age story through her use of the rich tradition of the Female Gothic in which the house encompasses and embodies the Chippman's troubled past and becomes the locus of identity for Lydia. Already close to middle age, she has lived her life and adopted children. Lydia sees her life up until this point as whole and fulfilled, yet in coming home, she is forced to reexamine the past she has repressed and shut out. In opening up the house and metaphorically, her past, she feels defeated and is unable to understand what made her strange and unloved as a child. Her past remains incomplete without a discovery of her mother's true character, and only through exposing the family secrets can Lydia ultimately find a sense of catharsis and peace. Thus, Lydia comes of age when she fully understands her mother's identity, and through this, her own. She begins to live with her whole self, because "to understand would release her, she had thought, and she could then meet the days still there for her—living, not with part of herself, but whole" (231). With her father's death and understanding of her mother's troubled past, Lydia matures and finds herself.