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Women Running from Houses: How Gothic Romance Paperbacks of the 1960s and 1970s Adapted a Romantic-era Visual Language of Women in Danger

Steve Witherspoon

Art History
The University of North Carolina Asheville
One University Heights
Asheville, North Carolina 28804 USA

Faculty Mentors:
Leisa Rundquist, Ph.D.
Eva Bares, Ph.D.

Abstract

From Romantic paintings of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, to Gothic paperbacks of the mid-twentieth century, to horror and sci-fi imagery of the contemporary era, portrayals of women in danger have haunted Western visual culture. Romantic-era painters, such as Henry Fuseli, Francisco Goya, and Theodore Géricault, often staged women in various states of vulnerability, threatened by supernatural forces, male violence, and isolated, hostile surroundings. Along with other Romantic artists, they forged a visual vocabulary of women in danger that mass-market Gothic romance novels would inherit and form into their most recognizable trope – women running from houses. During their heyday, Gothic romance paperbacks could be found on countless drugstore

shelves, and most of their covers were illustrated with some version of a woman in a flowing gown fleeing a remote mansion, bathed in moonlight, searching over her shoulder for an unseen pursuer. Unlike classic romance stories, Gothic romance revolved around suspicion, betrayal, and physical harm, and the covers reflected that tone. Some scholars argue that Gothic romance novels reinforced patriarchal scripts and normalized abuse because heroines were often physically and emotionally manipulated into submission. Other scholars argue the novels acted as subversive warnings from women authors to women readers about the dangers of marriage and domesticity. This paper leans toward the subversive and argues that Gothic romance paperbacks helped condition audiences to expect women-centered stories of danger and survival. As such, the "women running from houses" trope of Gothic romance laid important groundwork for the subsequent appearance of new generations of heroines who would run to danger instead of running from it.

Introduction

The road to Mount Mellyn snakes through cliffs, wind howling across the heath, as Martha Leigh, a young governess, approaches a vast Cornish estate in her carriage. Waves strike the rocks while her coachman mutters about the master's wife who disappeared recently. Each turn in the road reveals another slope, and when the house finally appears, Martha catches her breath. The house seems carved from the cliff itself, an enormous structure with turrets and chimneys jutting into the sky. For a moment, Martha thinks of turning around, but where would she go? London only offered disappointment and debt. This new post, however uncertain, seemed the only future available to a woman alone in the world. As the carriage rattled up the final slope, Martha steadied herself and the house waited.[1]

In her book, Victoria Holt, author of Mistress of Mellyn, conjures what would become an iconic visual world of a single woman, a scary house, and an isolated landscape. Published in 1960, this novel was among the first modern Gothic romances to reach a mass-market audience, effectively igniting the Gothic paperback craze that would dominate women's popular fiction for more than a decade. The novel's blend of mystery, romance, and female-centered suspense introduced Gothic storytelling to a new generation of readers and within a few years, the "women running from houses" trope would become one of the most recognizable visual motifs in popular art (Fig. 1). The cover illustrations immediately signaled to readers what they would find inside the pages, which was usually another story featuring an intelligent and curious heroine who would

[1] Victoria Holt, *Mistress of Mellyn* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1960): 5-15.

unwittingly end up confined to a wealthy estate where she would be simultaneously threatened and wooed by a controlling man.[2]

Gothic romance was a stark departure from classic romance, which typically offered comforting stories of heroines who might face conflict related to social misunderstandings or class barriers, but who never truly faced danger. In classic romance, the male love interest was steady and reassuring, and any conflict was resolved safely in marriage. While Gothic romance might have appealed to the same female readership, it delivered an entirely different message that said desire and danger could not be neatly separated. Gothic romances both normalized patriarchal control and provided a cultural space where female anxieties about marriage, entrapment, and resistance might be staged to other women. Their covers, endlessly repeating the image of a woman running from a house, distilled these contradictions into a single symbol (Fig. 2). The image was shorthand for everything a reader could expect to find inside the pages, including mystery, passion, danger, and the uneasy thrill of confronting whatever might lurk behind domestic walls. *Mistress of Mellyn* helped define that visual language and would continue to define it throughout decades of reprints. It distilled an entire visual and emotional tradition into something immediate and accessible, translating the sublime fears of Romantic art into a modern story of curiosity and escape.

The Gothic romance boom had largely faded by the mid-1970s, but its recurring literary and visual themes helped condition audiences to expect women-centered stories of danger and survival, and laid important groundwork for new generations of heroines, from Ellen Ripley in the movie *Alien* to Buffy Summers in the television series *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. Although these early contemporary heroines and their stories were largely created, written, and directed by men, they were built upon a cultural history of women in danger who had started out as helpless subjects for Romantic painters, developed into quietly subversive heroines for Gothic romance writers, and eventually evolved into fully developed characters who would openly confront and defeat their enemies in contemporary media. This throughline charts a continuum from entrapment to agency, and Gothic romance paperbacks were an essential bridge along the way.

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[2] I have collected a wide variety of Gothic romance novels, both physically and digitally. Of the physical copies, I obtained about 25-30 paperbacks. They're fragile, the pages have yellowed, and the covers have faded, but they were useful supplements to digital images for my visual analyses. It was difficult finding the names of artists who illustrated Gothic romance covers, but I found two who contributed to my analyses: 1) Lou Marchetti: http://loumarchetti.com/index.html; and 2) R.A. Maguire: http://www.ramaguirecoverart.com/.

Romanticism as a Precursor to Women Running from Houses

According to Leon Rosenthal, the "canons of Romanticism" were first formulated in Germany at the end of the eighteenth century as a rebellion against the Enlightenment, essentially making a religion of individualism and nature. Rosenthal argues that European literature of the eighteenth century paved the way for Romanticism, but it was the visual art of the nineteenth century, particularly in France, where Romanticism reached its zenith.[3] "Revolution had expanded everywhere…[and] landscape painting was bubbling with excitement," while illustrations had started to appear in books of perfect typographic quality. According to Rosenthal, deep changes had become visible in furniture, interior design, clothing, and even hairdressing, as art was considered in all areas. "The choice of a jacket or haircut or the growth of a beard showed aesthetic beliefs and were perceived as manifestos." Romanticism had swept across the whole of society.[4]

According to Jean Robertson and Deborah Hutton, ongoing war in Europe that ended in 1815 with the death of Napoleon had demonstrated the "instability of human affairs and institutions," and created a much less rational and predictable universe than had been explored by the well-reasoned Enlightenment thinkers of the previous 150 years.[5] Hugh Honour agreed that war revealed the complexity of what had previously seemed simple and demonstrated "the frailty of reason and the force of passion, the insufficiency of theories, and the power of circumstances…in a constantly changing world."[6] Against this volatile historical backdrop, Romanticism emerged and was widespread by the 1830s.

The common characteristics of Romantic visual art are less easy to agree upon. Robertson and Hutton contend that Romantic artists emphasized "imagination, emotional expression, intuition, and individualism," and searched for new ways to express themselves in a world that was becoming faster all the time. This search often led to dramatic portrayals of current events or landscapes that expressed passionate feelings. Robertson and Hutton go on to say that understanding the concept of the "sublime" is key for understanding Romanticism because sublime refers to experiences that deeply affect the viewer without being beautiful in a classical way, and includes experiences of things "vast, disturbing, painful, frightening, or ugly." In other words, sublime art should appeal to

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[3] Léon Rosenthal, *Romanticism*, (New York: Parkstone International, 2008), 7-8.
[4] Ibid., 28.
[5] Jean Robertson and Deborah Hutton, *The History of Art: A Global View* (London: Thames & Hudson Ltd, 2021), 936.
[6] Hugh Honour, *Romanticism* (New York, NY: Fleming Honour Ltd, 1979), 19.

the imagination and stir strong feelings.[7] These same qualities of vastness, pain, and fear would later be incorporated into Gothic paperback covers, where a lone woman fleeing an isolated mansion dramatized the sublime on a dime store scale.

Throughout his book, Honour takes an even stronger stance, seeming to insist that Romanticism is undefinable because of the many disparate styles and themes of artworks that hold the Romantic label. He says Romanticism can't be regarded simply as an expression of anti-rationalism, and emphasizes that there is no Romantic "style," or common language of Romantic visual forms. Honour goes on to say there is no single work of art that personifies the Romantic movement and that "Romantic ideals and visions of the world were conveyed…in such a variety of visual languages that the term Romantic can be applied to works which, in a formal sense, have nothing whatever in common."[8] In fact, for Romantic artists, "individual sensibility" was the only criteria for judging an artwork's aesthetic value.[9] Rosenthal reminds us that even though Romanticism reflected the human genius of sensitivity versus rationality, there has not been a period without Romantic elements to it as it's hard to imagine an artist not putting thought or feeling into their work. However, Romanticism in the nineteenth century was in many ways a return to Baroque tradition, and in the eternal battle between feeling and rationality, Romanticism gave priority to images over pure ideas. To put it another way, Romanticism didn't appear out of nowhere, but was preceded by much preparation and had just been waiting for the time when it could blossom. Similarly, it did not disappear in one day when tastes and the environment changed. It gave way, but did not die out, and it continued to have an impact on art in general, continuing to this day.[10]

In a similar vein, Gothic visual stylings originate mostly from eleventh to fourteenth century Gothic architecture. According to Steven Zucker and Beth Harris, the most fundamental element of the Gothic style is the pointed arch, which functionally relieved stress on other structural elements of a building. Visually, this allowed for a reduction in column sizes that supported an arch, which led to more fantastic examples of vaulting and ornamentation, and eventually ornate stonework that became more florid and exuberant. Windows, tracery, carvings, and ribs made up "a dizzying display of decoration that one encounters in a Gothic church," almost every surface decorated, making a sense of order difficult to discern.[11] When the Gothic fell out of style, "tastes again shifted back to the neat, straight lines and rational geometry of the Classical era. It was in the Renaissance

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[7] Robertson and Hutton, *History of Art*, 936.

[8] Honour, *Romanticism*, 15.

[9] Ibid., 16.

[10] Rosenthal, *Romanticism*, 55-61.

[11] Steven Zucker and Beth Harris, "Gothic architecture, an introduction," *Smarthistory*, January 25, 2023, https://smarthistory.org/gothic-architecture-an-introduction/.

that the name Gothic came to be applied to this medieval style that seemed vulgar to Renaissance sensibilities," and Gothic is still the term we use today for such vulgarity.[12]

However, when moving forward in time and speaking of Gothic style during the early nineteenth century, most scholarly contributions seem to focus on the literary arts. Michael Gamer tries to split the difference and defines Gothic neither as a visual mode, nor as a type of fiction, but as an aesthetic that "moves, and that must be defined in part by its ability to transplant itself across forms and media: from narrative into dramatic and poetic modes, and from textual into visual and aural media…[constantly] shifting."[13] Likewise, David Annwn Jones sees Gothic, particularly today's Gothic, as a term that is both hybrid and hybridizing, simultaneously morphing to new cultural media while expanding retrospectively from media of the past, and therefore becoming more amorphous and difficult to contain. According to Jones, although the first Gothic novels are easy to locate chronologically, the Gothic generally "leaches acquisitively" backwards and forwards across time and borders. Whether through contemporary festivals, exhibitions, vampire balls, television shows, jewelry, posters, or toys, the term Gothic is typically used to signify artistic and literary movements of the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.[14]

Yet, even though obscurity, darkness, and invisible forces are quintessential to the Gothic, Jones says there is ample evidence to argue that terror and fear have always existed in the interplay between disclosure and evasion, obscurity and clarity, and the seen and unseen. Therefore, Gothic expression naturally comprises a threat that is eerily just out of view, starting "at the point at which these terrors become visible, however faintly or freakishly, to the human eye."[15] As such, the Gothic "splendidly contains paradoxical, contradictory, and discordant impulses," as well as a need for care, idealism, and an urge to commemorate.[16]

Dale Townsend and Angela Wright argue that when it comes to both Gothic and Romantic literary stylings:

> *[N]either category is natural nor self-evident…[rather], both the 'Gothic' and the 'Romantic' are the critical by-products of a complex historical process of literary canon formation, one begun in the culture of periodical review during the 1790s and early 1800s, extended in numerous literary histories over the course of the nineteenth century, and culminating in the*

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[12] Ibid.
[13] Michael Gamer, *Romanticism and the Gothic: Genre, Reception, and Canon Formation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 4.
[14] David Annwn Jones, *Gothic Effigy: A Guide to Dark Visibilities* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2018), 1-4.
[15] Ibid., 6-8.
[16] Ibid., 14-15.

> *formal institutionalisation [sic] of academic literary criticism at the beginning of the twentieth. Consequently…the terms 'Gothic' and 'Romantic'…came to be regarded as the two major but antithetical literary strains in British, American and European culture of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, strains perceived, for the most part, to be locked into a relationship of mutual antagonism and suspicion, and coming together only in a few select instances.*[17]

Regardless, visual and narrative characteristics of both Romanticism and the Gothic certainly carry over to Gothic romance novels of the twentieth century, and particularly to the "women running from houses" trope portrayed by their cover art. For example, *Stranger On a Cliff*, published in 1964 (Fig. 3), features a young woman in the foreground, a shadowy male figure in the midground, and an imposing mansion on a cliff in the background. As mass-market paperback, it was likely a painted illustration, which would have been common practice before digital design existed, and its dimensions were likely standardized to fit paperbacks of the time, which were roughly 7 x 4.5 inches.[18] The woman on the cover wears a long, flowing white dress made of seemingly fine, silky fabric. The dress has a high neckline, long voluminous sleeves, and cinches at the waist, possibly resembling a wedding dress or an elaborate nightgown. The dress reflects the moonlight, making it glow brightly against the dark background. Her long, blonde hair blows over her shoulders, and her head is turned to the side as she looks back with an expression of fear. Her arms are delicately extended, and her posture suggests she is running, though in an impractical, dainty manner.

In the midground, the shadowy man stands on the rocky bank of a body of water, which is possibly a lake or a sea. His form is almost entirely black, absorbing light rather than reflecting it. Though his features are indistinct, his broad shoulders, thick build, and implied clothing suggest he is male. His posture gives the impression of covertly stalking the woman, though his presence is highly visible to the viewer. A barren tree and scrubby bushes are situated near him.

The background features a dark, castle-like mansion perched atop a high cliff. The structure has pointed turrets and a single illuminated window. The perspective makes the mansion appear distant and inaccessible, with no visible path leading to it. The cliff itself is shadowy and indistinct, blending into the mansion, giving the impression that the house and landscape are one looming, inescapable entity.

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[17] Dale Townshend and Angela Wright, "Gothic and Romantic: An Historical Overview," in *Romantic Gothic: An Edinburgh Companion*, ed. Dale Townshend and Angela Wright (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016), 4.

[18] I measured a sample of about twenty Gothic romance novels myself.

The composition of the cover creates a clear visual hierarchy that guides the viewer's eye through the scene. The woman in the foreground is the brightest and most detailed element, drawing immediate attention. Her head turned toward the man leads the viewer's gaze to him. The diagonal shoreline reinforces that gaze, starting at the woman and ending at the man. From there, the point of the barren tree and diagonal line of the sloping cliffside direct the viewer's attention upward toward the mansion, where the single lit window adds a final focal point.

The cover makes strong use of contrast, particularly through chiaroscuro lighting. The woman's glowing white dress stands out starkly against the murky water and the dark, rocky bank, possibly emphasizing her vulnerability. The figure of the man, by contrast, is entirely black, making him appear unnatural and menacing. He is positioned next to a horizontal line in the lake, where the water transitions from smooth and iridescent, to dark and choppy. His positioning could symbolize a turning point from relative safety to danger and reinforce his role as a menacing force.

The color palette also reinforces the ominous atmosphere. Deep blues, purples, and blacks dominate the water, sky, and landscape, while a white haze shimmers in the moonlight at the bottom of the mansion's cliff. The font for the title of the book is a bright yellowish gold, making it stand out against the darker tones, while the author's name is white, mirroring the woman's gown. The woman's rosy skin, dark eyes, and red lips make her appear heavily made-up. When considered in context with the fineness of her dress and the isolation of her surroundings, she seems to be spontaneously running from unexpected peril.

Overall, the cover conveys strong themes of fear, isolation, and suspense. Symbolically, the mansion could represent old wealth and danger, reinforcing Gothic literature's frequent theme of women trapped in grand yet oppressive environments. The shadowy man serves as a literal threat, but he could also be interpreted as an early critique on the dangers of marriage and domesticity, positioning the male antagonist as a stand-in for patriarchal control. The mansion then, might symbolize not just physical imprisonment, but also the societal expectations that confine women to traditional roles. As an example of the "women running from houses" trope, this cover seems highly effective as it utilizes standard visual language that would immediately communicate the novel's genre to familiar readers.

Dark Romanticism

Romanticism was messy, and Gothic romance of the twentieth century was a messy offshoot. Just as Romanticism refused to settle into a single visual style, Gothic romance refused to settle into a single meaning. Some saw the novels as reinforcing patriarchy,

others as subverting it, but like Romantic painting, the power of the Gothic might lay in the contradictions themselves.

Silvia Riccardi coined the term "Dark Romanticism" to encompass both literary and visual artistic forms of "dark sensibility," including the Gothic.[19] Riccardi contends the Gothic was part of a broader Romantic framework that thematized oppositions revolving around the human body, focusing on "life and death, pleasure and pain, beauty and monstrosity."[20] As such, Dark Romanticism sits uncomfortably at the crossroads of acknowledged and stigmatized notions of the body, and this aesthetic "murkiness" is where anxieties arise.[21] Riccardi went on to propose that literature and art that has dealt with dark themes predominantly revolving around the body are deeply interrelated across media, encouraging broader debates around the relationships between words and images, verbal and visual media, and in the case of Romanticism, the culture surrounding literature and art at a time when "aesthetics and empirical knowledge were both sites of fierce intellectual debate, ideological contention, and revolutionary rethinking."[22]

When speaking of Romantic themes of life and death, pleasure and pain, and beauty and monstrosity as they relate to the human body, Henry Fuseli seems as natural a place to start as any. Fuseli (1741-1825) was a Swiss painter who spent most of his career in Britain as a member of the Royal Academy. Originally trained as a theologian, he turned to art after moving to London and quickly gained a reputation for dramatic, often unsettling subjects. Fuseli's public exhibits were accompanied by unusually high levels of press interest as he was perhaps the leading painter of sublime and supernatural themes, whose work had both sensational immediacy and rare physical grandeur.[23] There are perceived connections between Fuseli's works and the sensationalist, Gothic literature of the time, as Fuseli's paintings were recognized almost immediately as constituting a particular and distinct genre of fantastic representation that could be associated with those similar aesthetics and social experiences.[24]

Arguably, Fuseli's most famous, or perhaps infamous, work was *The Nightmare* (Fig. 4), which was painted in 1781 and first exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1782. Its portrayal of a sleeping woman with a squat incubus perched on her chest and a demonic horse eagerly thrusting its head through a curtain of shadow, immediately caused a sensation. The image was quickly engraved, reproduced, and parodied in prints and popular culture,

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[19] Silvia Riccardi, *Dark Romanticism: Literature, Art, and the Body* (Springer Nature Switzerland: Cham, 2025), 27-28.
[20] Ibid., 3.
[21] Ibid.
[22] Ibid., 4-5.
[23] Martin Myrone, "Henry Fuseli and Gothic Spectacle," *Huntington Library Quarterly* 70, no. 2 (2007): 289. https://doi.org/10.1525/hlq.2007.70.2.289.
[24] Ibid., 292.

circulating widely.[25] As such, *The Nightmare* became one of the most recognizable images of Romanticism's preoccupation with the irrational and the sublime, and can be seen as a precursor to the "women running from houses" motif which similarly portrayed distressed and threatened figures of women.

The painting presents a young woman sprawled on a bed, her body stretched horizontally across the center of the canvas. She lies on her back, head and left arm hanging limply over the edge of the bed toward the floor, while her right arm falls behind her head and partly out of view. She wears a thin white gown that clings to her figure, its folds emphasizing the curves of her body and gathering at her pelvis. The brightest light falls on her chest, neck, and face, then continues down her outstretched left leg, which glows in contrast to her shadowed right leg. This theatrical spotlighting first draws the viewer's eye to her exposed, vulnerable body before leading it across the composition to the incubus and horse. Her neck is fully exposed, her cheeks and lips painted with red makeup, and her posture is defenseless and slack. She appears deeply unconscious, possibly drugged, as if caught in a dream she cannot escape.

Sitting on her chest is the brown, hairy form of an incubus. Its bulging facial features, pointed ears, and odd fingers render it simultaneously humanlike and grotesquely unreal. The incubus rests its head on one hand in a casual pose, and even though it sits on the woman's stomach, it seems to be weightless because it doesn't make any indentation on her figure. The incubus's gaze meets the viewer's directly, pulling the viewer into the painting as if trying to make them a complicit witness. Behind the incubus, a red curtain reflects light, and through the edge of darkness the head of a black horse emerges. Its head is too small for a proper horse, while its white eyes bulge unnaturally, its mane stands upright, and its nostrils flare in an almost comic distortion. The horse is both demonic and absurd.

The color palette reinforces this unsettling mix. The woman's gown shines stark white against the warm, ominous reds of the curtains, some of the bedding, and the enveloping blacks of all the room's nooks and crannies. The incubus's brown flesh resembles the brown of the small table at the woman's feet and the blanket underneath her, giving some sense of grounding with earthy tones. The table, dimly lit in the bottom-left corner of the painting, holds a book, a bottle, and what appears to be a mirror, which are all reasonable objects to see in an unreasonable room.

The composition radiates tension. The woman lies exposed, possibly paralyzed, and totally unaware, while the incubus casually sits on her chest and the horse "smiles" in the direction of the incubus, perhaps in anticipation of whatever the incubus has planned.

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[25] Noelle Paulson, "Henry Fuseli, The Nightmare," *Smarthistory*, August 9, 2015, https://smarthistory.org/henry-fuseli-the-nightmare/.

Theatrical chiaroscuro further isolates the woman in a bright cone of light, while the corners of the canvas, under her bed, under the table, and under her head are all engulfed by darkness. The scene feels menacing with its suggestions of helplessness and sexual violation.

In its subject and style, *The Nightmare* is "an early work of terrorizing splendor which is often seen as an avatar of Romanticism," as it embodies Romanticism's fascination with the sublime, the irrational, and the grotesque.[26] The culture of the time, which could be characterized as having deep fissures of uncertainty, provided opportunities for artists who were willing to exploit the radical instability and contradictions that were newly forming from the Neoclassical era.[27] Fuseli's art and its Gothic spectacle became possible because of this same irresolution or indeterminacy, as culture took on its modern forms.[28]

Indeed, Mary Shelley, author of the Gothic novel *Frankenstein* (1818), knew Henry Fuseli personally.[29] Fuseli's impact on Shelley's work can be seen in Elizabeth's death scene from *Frankenstein*, where Shelley describes Elizabeth's body as "lifeless and inanimate, thrown across the bed, her head hanging down, and her pale and distorted features half covered by her hair…her bloodless arms and relaxed form flung by the murderer on its bridal bier."[30] Shelley's choice could be argued as a deliberate attempt to give voice to figures whose painted silence had been historically promoted as passive femininity, her text transforming Fuseli's women into more complex individuals.[31] Shelley essentially transforms Fuseli's painterly, static representations of women into narrative, dynamic images, giving passive female figures a voice and the power to become social agents of change.[32] Her "re-drawing" breaks the silence of Fuseli's stereotypically submissive women and engages her readers in questions regarding those women's individual experiences.[33] Riccardi argues that what brings the work of Fuseli and Shelley into meaningful association with Dark Romanticism is that they share a "corporal obsession" that doesn't account for taste or genre. Their treatment of the human form revolves in some manner around "the breakdown of a stable anatomical order or an aesthetic ideal, articulating different facets of the concept of dark sensibility."[34]

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[26] Frederick N. Bohrer, "Public Virtue and Private Terror: A Two-Sided Oil Sketch by Henry Fuseli," *Zeitschrift Für Kunstgeschichte* 53, no. 1 (1990): 89. https://doi.org/10.2307/1482506.
[27] Myrone, "Henry Fuseli and Gothic Spectacle," 297.
[28] Ibid., 310.
[29] Sophia Andres, "Narrative Challenges to Visual, Gendered Boundaries: Mary Shelley and Henry Fuseli," *Journal of Narrative Theory* 31, no. 3 (2001): 261. http://www.jstor.org/stable/30224566.
[30] Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley, *Frankenstein; or, The modern Prometheus* (London: Printed for Lackington, Hughes, Harding, Mavor, & Jones, 1818), 189.
[31] Andres, "Narrative Challenges," 262.
[32] Ibid., 258.
[33] Ibid., 263.
[34] Riccardi, *Dark Romanticism*, 27-28.

Fuseli's painting has been interpreted as everything from forcible rape to the emergence of the woman's libido while she sleeps.[35] However, *The Nightmare* can more conclusively show how Romantic art made women in danger both visible and their fates inevitable by depicting them in moments of terror from which there was no escape. Even Shelley's engagement with these Romantic images, which gave formerly silent female figures a narrative and a voice, still centered on women immobilized by violence. This visual tradition of endangered women becomes a key foundation for the Gothic paperbacks of the twentieth century that inherit Fuseli's dramatic lighting, isolated settings, and threatened autonomy. However, the paperbacks shift one crucial element: the woman in danger moves. Rather than lying unconscious beneath a monster's gaze, she is shown fleeing the house that confines her. Thus, the "woman running from houses" trope adapts and evolves the Romantic visual vocabulary of danger, transforming the terrified stillness of *The Nightmare* into motion, suspense, and – however limited – female agency.

Unlike Fuseli's *The Nightmare*, Francisco Goya's *Bandit Murdering a Woman* (Fig. 5) offers no ambiguity. It seizes the viewer in the very moment of violence, spotlighting a man pinning a woman to the ground and pointing a knife at her throat. The composition is shallow, almost stage-like, as a harsh beam of light falls on them from the top corner of the painting, exposing her white chest and neck while the rest of the canvas remains indiscernible earth and shadow. The man's muscular body is sharply defined, while hers is softened and slack, her form anonymous. A smear of red marks the ground near her head, signaling her likely death. In his portrayal, Goya renders danger as brute human cruelty.

Goya (1746–1828) is regarded as one of the most important Spanish artists of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Over the course of his career, Goya's work can be seen to transition from jolly and lighthearted to deeply pessimistic and searching, as he survived an extended period of illness that left him completely deaf while living through the atrocities of war he often depicted in his paintings.[36] Ugliness in Goya has deep roots, and those roots are often social and ethical, manifesting in people who act in bad faith or who fail to understand the true sense of their actions. Ugliness often shows in his renderings of the true horrors of the world, such as rapes, tortures, murders, executions, and human sacrifice. The most striking feature of Goya's work might not be the caustic social

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[35] Maryanne C. Ward, "A Painting of the Unspeakable: Henry Fuseli's 'The Nightmare' and the Creation of Mary Shelley's 'Frankenstein,'" *The Journal of the Midwest Modern Language Association* 33, no. 1 (2000): 24. https://doi.org/10.2307/1315115.

[36] James Voorhies, "Francisco de Goya (1746–1828) and the Spanish Enlightenment," in *Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History* (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2003). http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/goya/hd_goya.htm.

commentary, but the radical departure from the ideals of beauty, nobility, and harmony that largely characterized previous Neoclassical paintings.[37]

Bandit Murdering a Woman shows what could be considered a typical rendering from Goya, where he created an image that devotes remarkable attention to an anonymous figure who might otherwise have merely been playing a role. Goya imagines her as an individual worthy of the sympathy that he, as an artist, seems able and willing to express, thereby capturing the value of the individual.[38] As such, Goya rejects an idealized notion of beauty for something more human, while embracing the value of constructive activity with a social purpose.[39] Goya's work involves a "penetrating, critical reflection on the world…that engages religion, society, politics, history, ethics, and of course, the conventions of art making themselves."[40] He acted as a critical observer, able to see things as they were, able to see how others failed to recognize them, and then able to show those things through his art. However, while it would be tempting to see Goya as having a fierce respect for the public good, he admits to both darkness and light on a continuing basis, sometimes simultaneously.[41]

History of the participation of women in Spain's War of Independence makes clear that Goya registered the phenomenon more extensively than any major European artist before him. Historians have documented that, within theaters of combat, sexual violence and the threat of such violence was in fact an important psychological weapon in the struggle to control a hostile civilian population. The fact that Goya denounced the practice is, historically speaking, a relatively novel and modern moral stance on sexual violence that continues to speak to us today.[42]

Like Goya's painting, Théodore Géricault's *The Storm (or The Wreck)* (Fig. 6) also portrays the woman in danger as anonymous, powerless, and resigned to her fate. Géricault places a collapsed female body on a narrow strip of beach as waves crash toward her. Her body lies in the foreground, twisted on her stomach, with her right arm bent under her head as if to rest, and her left arm awkwardly twisted beneath her torso. She wears a red skirt and pale blouse, but the colors blend into the ochre tones of the beach and the dark rock that looms behind her. At first glance, she might be mistaken for another fragment of debris. Only the pale white of her shirt signals her presence clearly, echoing the foam of the breaking waves.

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[37] Anthony J. Cascardi, "Beauty and Sympathy," in *Francisco de Goya and the Art of Critique* (Princeton: Zone Books, 2022), 304-307.
[38] Ibid., 309.
[39] Ibid., 311.
[40] Ibid., 301.
[41] Ibid., 303.
[42] Michael Iarocci, "Goya on Sexual Violence: Testimony and Critique," *Revista Canadiense de Estudios Hispánicos* 46, no. 3 (2022): 616–18. https://www.jstor.org/stable/27388098.

The canvas is divided roughly into thirds, with the sand and woman's figure in the foreground, the vertical cliff on the left, and the dark sea and sky dominating the upper half. The eye is drawn first to the bright white crest of the waves on the right, then it is carried diagonally toward the woman's body, before climbing the cliff face and finally out toward the dim light of the horizon that cuts a thin, horizontal strip against the engulfing darkness of sea and cloud. The woman's figure lies prone, her feet at the edge of the waves and her torso stretched onto dry land. Her pose could be seen as exhaustion or death, as she might have crawled to shore or she might have been washed lifeless onto it. Either way, she is dwarfed by the towering cliff and roiling sea, her small figure a fragile contrast to the sublime power of nature. The scene registers as the aftermath of a tragic event that remains a continuing threat as the sea could reclaim her at any moment.

The palette is dominated by earthy browns, stormy grays, and deep blacks, with small flashes of white and red. Unlike Fuseli's spotlighted woman, the figure here is camouflaged in her environment, visually diminished against the immensity of land, sea, and sky. Still, her small figure versus nature's overwhelming forces embodies the Romantic fascination with the sublime and again anticipates the later Gothic paperback motif of women running from houses.

As Lynn Kronzek outlines, Géricault was a French painter perhaps best known for his contributions to Romantic art that blend emotional intensity with social consciousness. His early works often depicted military subjects and equestrian themes, but his later works engaged with dramatic narratives and realistic portrayals of human experiences. He typically sketched numerous life studies before proceeding with a master painting, where he added the motion, light, and drama that often characterize him as a Romantic. He died at the age of thirty-two from ongoing health issues resulting from multiple horseback riding accidents.[43]

Géricault was generally noted for the sparse presence of women across his portfolio of work. According to Linda Nochlin, when women do appear in his work, they are subject to abjection and marginalization as "a child, a cripple, two madwomen, a corpse, and perhaps a portrait or two." Even when the representation of women might have occupied a more central place, such as with his famous painting *The Raft of the Medusa* (1818-1819), that representation is omitted.[44] Of course, women are represented in Géricault's work, as seen in *The Storm (or The Wreck)*. Nochlin argues that even if female figures are marginalized "in every sense of the word," Géricault makes them profoundly engaging and significant, or "marginal for good reason." To put it another way, "the marginality of women

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[43] Lynn C. Kronzek, "Théodore Géricault," *EBSCO Research Starters*, 2023, https://www.ebsco.com/research-starters/history/theodore-gericault#research-starter-title.
[44] Linda Nochlin, "Géricault, or the Absence of Women," *October* 68 (1994): 45, https://doi.org/10.2307/778696.

is so conspicuous in Géricault's visual production that it may be said to constitute a central issue in the critical discourse surrounding his work."[45] Likewise, according to Nochlin, Géricault's banishment or marginalization of women, like his representation of other oppressed groups, is a positive intervention. "By removing women from his representational field in the way he did, and by establishing feminine presence where he did, [Géricault] was one of those – highly exceptional – interveners in the dominant discourse of his time."[46]

Twentieth-Century Gothic Romance Emerges

Despite their compositional differences, the Romantic-era works of Fuseli, Goya, and Géricault share an obvious preoccupation with women in danger. Each painting isolates a female figure against engulfing darkness or overpowering forces; each heightens the figure's vulnerability through pose, lighting, or proportion; and each makes her suffering the visual core of the composition. Fuseli emphasizes the anticipation, Goya the moment, and Géricault the aftermath, but they all dramatize a cultural script in which women are staged as symbols of danger, loss, and fragility. Whether struggling against nature, pinned beneath a man, or pleading amid ruins, this Romantic visual tradition laid groundwork for the Gothic paperback covers that would repeatedly portray a woman brightly lit, dwarfed by hostile surroundings, caught between freedom and entrapment.

These visual tropes differ starkly from those of classic romance novels. This is because even though love stories provide the foundation for both classic romance and Gothic romance, the two genres diverge significantly in their narratives. The heroine in a classic romance is often secure in her world, and while she may face challenges of a personal nature, she doesn't face life-threatening dangers. Likewise, the male protagonist is usually portrayed as a steadfast partner whose love for the heroine is never truly in doubt. Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* (1813) exemplifies this structure, where conflicts arise through misunderstandings, social class differences, and personal growth; and the tone remains warm and reassuring, ending with a happily-ever-after. This is a formula that has seemed to persist throughout the history of classic romance novels.

By contrast, Gothic romance often blends the love story with danger. The heroine is usually a young woman thrust into an unfamiliar, isolated setting where she must navigate both romantic feelings and unfolding dread. Rather than merely overcoming social obstacles or personal insecurities, she is often confronted with a literal threat. For example, in Phyllis A. Whitney's *Thunder Heights* (1960), the novel's heroine, Camilla,

[45] Ibid., 51.
[46] Ibid., 59.

travels to an isolated mansion where she becomes entangled with family secrets and a tyrannical love interest. Camilla is both drawn to her surroundings and fearful of them, which is a common theme in Gothic romance. As Joanna Russ observed, the Gothic romance heroine often fears that her lover may also be her destroyer, saying, "[the heroine] is vehemently attracted to him and usually just as vehemently repelled or frightened – she is not sure of her feelings for him, his feelings for her, and whether he (1) loves her, (2) hates her, (3) is using her, or (4) is trying to kill her."[47]

This narrative contrast carries over visually to the cover art of Gothic and classic romance novels, as both genres developed distinct visual languages that conveyed the dramatically different moods, themes, and representations of women, romance, and setting. Classic romance covers of the 1960s and 1970s typically feature the prominent figure of a young woman accompanied by a man (Fig. 7). The woman's presence usually dominates the composition, and in some cases, her face alone fills most of the image. The man, if present, appears in the background – not as a threat, but as a warm or admiring figure. He is fully visible, often dressed in a suit or athletic clothing, and posed conversationally or ready for play. Interaction between the man and woman usually seems minimal and non-physical. Instead of passion or danger, the covers suggest budding affection or even longtime familiarity.

In contrast, Gothic romance covers rely on suspenseful, emotionally charged dynamics (Fig. 8). The central figure is also a woman, but she is typically in flight or distress, wearing a dramatic gown. Her body language often conveys fear and vulnerability, and a shadowy male figure sometimes lurks behind her. This figure is usually ambiguous and not entirely visible, adding to the Gothic cover's sense of tension and isolation.

Furthermore, classic romance covers are usually set in adventurous, idyllic locations. Scenes include sailboats, jungle huts, convertibles on mountain roads, exotic landmarks, and starlit beaches. The settings are well-lit, often sun-drenched, and contribute to the playful, optimistic tone. The color palettes are bright and pastel-heavy where pinks, turquoises, and golden hues dominate. The stylized illustrations give the images a soft, appealing finish, making the mood upbeat. Gothic romance covers, by contrast, often feature stormy cliffs, remote mansions, and dense woods that are dark, shadowy, and difficult to navigate. They create a sense of danger, mystery, and entrapment, as light sources are limited to a single window or the moon. A more dramatic, chiaroscuro style, with moody blues, purples, blacks, and grays, emphasizes the woman's figure while cloaking the dangers around her, creating a sense of foreboding.

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[47] Joanna Russ, "Somebody's Trying to Kill Me and I Think it's My Husband: The Modern Gothic," *The Journal of Popular Culture* 6, no. 4 (1973): 668. https://doi-org.proxy177.nclive.org/10.1111/j.0022-3840.1973.00666.x.

As for clothing and demeanor, women on traditional romance covers typically present themselves modestly, wearing clothing such as sweaters, swimsuits, athletic wear, and blouses. Their style is casual yet classy, matching the sunny, idealized settings. They are usually smiling, sometimes looking directly at the viewer, suggesting confidence or self-awareness. Other times, they gaze into the distance like they are daydreaming, perhaps of their romantic futures. Men are typically portrayed in suits or athletic wear, admiring or engaging the woman, their gazes affectionate.

On Gothic covers, the woman typically wears long, revealing gowns that are theatrical and impractical, ill-suited for her surroundings as they flutter in the wind. Her gaze is frequently directed away from the viewer or over her shoulder, again suggesting fear and danger. Meanwhile, the man's gaze, when visible, would imply pursuit or possession rather than affection, making the danger environmental and mildly psycho-sexual.

Laurie A. Paige describes an environment in the 1960s when consumers in search of a Gothic romance had no difficulty finding it because they were widely available in grocery and department stores where their target audience, which was overwhelmingly female, tended to shop. As a result, Paige says women purchased these inexpensive books steadily and in large quantities.[48] "[B]y the later 1960s works of top Gothic authors outsold the works of equivalent writers in all other categories of paperback fiction, including mysteries, science fiction, and Westerns."[49] Gothic romance's popularity waned in the 1970s and faded out in the early 1990s, but by then it had given birth to contemporary fiction categories like modern horror, urban fantasy, paranormal romance, and vampire erotica. "Even the recent publishing mega-sensation *Fifty Shades of Grey* can trace its ancestry directly to the gothic novels of the 1960s."[50]

The rise of the mass market Gothic in the 1960s and 1970s also overlaps what is now known as second-wave feminism. Paige argues that because Gothic romance novels seem so quaint and chaste relative to today's fare, such as *Fifty Shade of Grey*, it is "easy to overlook or misinterpret their positive and occasionally even progressive attitude toward the heroine and gender relations."[51] This is likely because Gothic paperbacks were traditionally set in patriarchal structures, such as feudal castles or manor houses, overpowering the new twist that the heroine was "now an agent of change, liberation, and

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[48] Lori A. Paige, *The Gothic Romance Wave: A Critical History of the Mass Market Novels, 1960-1993* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2018), 7.

[49] Ibid., 7. Paige attributed this quotation to Jennifer McKnight-Trontz, *The Look of Love: The Art of the Romance Novel* (New York: Princeton Architectural, 2001), 19–20.

[50] Ibid., 8.

[51] Ibid.

transformation, not only for the architectural structure itself but for the man who inhabits it."[52]

According to Josephine Ruggiero and Louise Weston, the plots of modern Gothic novels combine romance, suspense, and local historical color, and derive from classics such as *Jane Eyre*, *Wuthering Heights*, and *Rebecca*.[53] The plots usually follow a standard formula, where a young girl, penniless and well-educated, arrives to a large house on a deserted moor, staffed by frightened servants and a handsome, mysterious master. Somewhere along the line, the young girl discovers a flaw in the master's character. Nevertheless, they fall in love, even though he neglects to tell her of his love until the final pages. Throughout the story, the young female heroine endures forces of evil which threaten her and the household, but finally she is saved and all ends well.[54]

Helen Leedy is less diplomatic with her description of Gothic romances, saying:

> *[The] basic plot for most romantic novels is of a single, independently wealthy woman (her money usually gained through inheritance), who becomes involved with an aggressive, self-centered man. She usually is minding her own business and he 'spies' [on] her, rapes her, and then can't remove her from his mind.*[55]

Leedy goes on to say that the woman generally resists as long as possible, but is eventually carried away by her passion, feeling guilty over succumbing to her carnal desires without the sanction of marriage. This love-hate relationship continues throughout the book, until the man finally realizes the error of his ways and tells her that he loves her. In the end, she "thanks God he has made her an honest woman, and is joyous that she now has him to herself."[56]

To further investigate these plots and themes, Ruggiero and her team conducted a study. They selected a random sample of Gothic romance novels published between 1950 and 1974, analyzed the development of the principal and supporting characters in their plots, and explored their characterization regarding traditional and nontraditional sex-roles.[57] On the surface, Ruggiero generally found a female protagonist was "between 19 and 30 years old, and either a virgin, a widow of high moral standards, or a 'respectable'

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[52] Ibid., 8-9.
[53] Josephine A. Ruggiero and Louise C. Weston, "Sex-Role Characterization of Women in 'Modern Gothic' Novels," *The Pacific Sociological Review* 20, no. 2 (1977): 280. https://doi.org/10.2307/1388936.
[54] Ibid.
[55] Helen Leedy, "The Portrayal of Women in Romance Novels," *Michigan Sociological Review*, no. 1 (1985): 62. http://www.jstor.org/stable/40968918.
[56] Ibid.
[57] Ruggiero and Weston, "Sex-Role Characterization," 282-283.

married woman." She usually had a special talent useful to the storyline, was very inquisitive, and looked pretty but not beautiful. The male protagonist (or antagonist), was usually 10 to 15 years older, widowed or married, and had an entanglement that prevented him and the heroine from getting together until the end. He had "wide sexual experience, strong convictions, and a certain imperviousness to the opinions of others."[58] Paige seems to embrace the formula, saying:

> *[L]ike the folk ballads that came before them, [Gothics] are actually expected to retell an established formulaic tale, the outcome of which would be already known by its audience. The audience, in turn, is expected to respond to the story emotionally, taking it as a paradigm for certain aspects of modern living.*[59]

Female readers, Paige contends, supported Gothic romance with the money they earned in their modern careers, and they demanded stories from the heroine's perspective, which often came through in a first-person narrative style. Today, it is common for romance novels to present the male point of view also, probably in alternating chapters. However, in the mass market Gothic paperback, the lead male character's main purpose was to serve as the heroine's love interest, and the reader sees him through the heroine's eyes and interprets him through her words. The traditional male viewpoint is distinctly secondary to that of the heroine and the presumed female author. "From beginning to end, it is a woman's story to tell."[60]

Just as Gothic romance novels followed a standard narrative formula, their cover art relied on recurring visual motifs to signal genre expectations to potential readers. The most iconic and recognizable element of these covers was the lone woman fleeing from a mansion, her wispy dress caught in motion as she glanced fearfully over her shoulder. By repeatedly employing these visual cues, Gothic romance covers acted as silent narrators, the sole advertisements that set up the story's conflict before a reader had even turned the first page. As Beth Timson said:

> *You will find that they tend to look remarkably similar. The cover nearly always features a woman in the foreground; she is young, attractive, long-haired, and dressed in a flowing gown. Frequently, she is running, and almost always she looks terrified. In the background are a shadowy great house with lots of turrets and windows and often the figure of a man. The titles too of these books are consistent: the Curse / Secret / Mystery of*

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[58] Ibid., 281.
[59] Paige, *Gothic Romance Wave*, 12.
[60] Ibid., 9.

> *some ancestral House / Castle / Manor. The authors' names, usually pseudonyms, are invariably feminine and either faintly aristocratic or alliterative: Victoria Holt, Mary Stewart, Edwina Doone, Rona Randall. Credits with the names often show a dozen or more novels of this same kind already published.*[61]

Timson described the color palettes as often dominated by a moody range of deep blues, purples, and greens, creating a mysterious Gothic atmosphere. The mansion itself would be frequently perched on a rocky cliffside or the edge of an imposing forest, bathed in moonlight, looming ominously. High-contrast shading would typically be used, where the heroine would be depicted in glowing light, while the mansion and the male figure lurked in shadow. The scale and positioning of the running woman would further reinforce her vulnerability. According to Timson, these compositions were not just marketing tools, but extensions of the novel's themes surrounding love and peril that helped create an immediate emotional response in readers who were already familiar with the tropes of Gothic fiction.[62]

Michelle Masse argued that "repetition in the Gothic functions as it does for certain other traumas: the reactivation of trauma is an attempt to recognize, not relish, the incredible and unspeakable that nonetheless happened…[and] the structural and thematic repetition [emphasizes that the] originating trauma is the prohibition of female autonomy in the Gothic, in the families that people it, and in the society that reads it."[63] This repetition could apply to Gothic cover art too, as artists repeated the techniques that reflected this trauma, whether wittingly or unwittingly, depicting heroines as vulnerable to the towering mansions or to the shadowy male figures, and thereby visually reinforcing the idea that women were trapped in a world dominated by forces beyond their control.

Along similar lines, Brenda Ayres asserted that Gothic romance novels throughout history have spoken to female entrapment within patriarchal structures.[64] She used an example from a 1965 Victoria Holt novel where the protagonist was lamenting her plight after giving birth, saying, "The agony of the walled-up nun could not have been greater than mine."[65] In this scene, the protagonist was alluding to a nun who had been killed in the

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[61] Beth S. Timson, "The Drug Store Novel: Popular Romantic Fiction and the Mainstream Tradition," in *Studies in Popular Culture* 6 (1983): 88–89. https://www.jstor.org/stable/45018109.

[62] Ibid., 89.

[63] Michelle A. Massé, "Gothic Repetition: Husbands, Horrors, and Things That Go Bump in the Night," *Signs* 15, no. 4 (1990): 679. https://www.jstor.org/stable/3174638.

[64] Brenda Ayres, "'Through a Glass Darkly': The Gothic Trace," In *Neo-Gothic Narratives: Illusory Allusions from the Past*, ed. Brenda Ayres and Sarah E. Maier, (Anthem Press, 2020), 19-20. https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvsn3p31.5.

[65] Victoria Holt, *The Legend of the Seventh Virgin* (Leicester, UK: Ulverscroft, 1965), 161.

same mansion by being bricked into a wall. Ayres said that Gothic texts repeatedly used this type of symbolism to suggest that women have almost always been figuratively locked up and entombed alive by domesticity, and that female readers should never forget that marriage is dangerous and needs to be taken seriously.[66]

If Gothic romance plots used physical entrapment to symbolize anxieties about marriage and domesticity, then it makes sense that their cover art would reinforce those themes visually in the countless Gothic romance covers that featured a lone woman fleeing a dark, imposing mansion, trying to escape a terrible fate. The towering architecture behind her seems to mirror the claustrophobic horror of the walled-up nun, representing the threat of being swallowed by domestic life, and although escape is possible, a scary house still looms. The mansion is both alluring and oppressive.

Paige recognizes that others have argued the covers symbolize a panicked flight from enforced domesticity, with a woman running from a patriarchal castle or manor house, often in skimpy clothing, bare feet, eyes wide, the very picture of vulnerability. However, she says this scenario rarely occurs within the text itself. In the actual stories, the woman may be poor, alone, or in some other reduced circumstance, but she usually enters the house with an agenda and forges her way through conflict without fleeing. While she pursues short-term goals of earning a wage or negotiating a relationship with a man she thinks might be trying to murder her, she "generally manages to solve a mystery or two, defeat a curse that is plaguing the house, and rescue the hero or some other vulnerable member of his family."[67] Paige goes on to say that it seems likely many of the book illustrators did not know anything about their novel's plot or setting, and she asserts that the ubiquitous, flowing white gown remained a favorite costume because it could fit any time period, climate, or twenty-year-old woman. Paige relays the experience of one anonymous Gothic writer, who recalled:

> *Once, just to see what would happen, I wrote a story set in a suburban ranch house in a densely-populated valley, with every single scene taking place in broad daylight; the heroine was a short-haired redhead who wore jeans throughout the entire book. But when the paperback came out, sure enough, there on the cover was a long-haired blonde in a flowing white dress, haring away from some frightening mansion at the top of a lonely hill in the dead of night!"*[68]

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[66] Ayres, *Neo-Gothic Narratives*, 19-20.
[67] Paige, *Gothic Romance Wave*, 10-11.
[68] Ibid., 19. Paige attributes this quotation to the website http://bookscans.com/Oddities/gothicromance.htm and speculates that the author in question was Joan Aiken because Aiken was open about her experiences in publishing and the description of the book's contents seems to fit Aiken's novel *The Fortune Hunters*. In turn, Bookscans attributes the quotation to: Piet

Conclusion

The Waiting Sands, written by Susan Howatch and published in 1966 (Fig. 9), features a woman in a flowing, white, floor-length gown with long sleeves and a golden-yellow ribbon tied at her waist. The gown's scooped neckline bares her ample chest, and her red hair flows behind her as she runs away from a mansion in fear. Her arms flail outward, and her hands are delicately upturned, while her gaze is directed skyward rather than toward the uneven ground in front of her. Her entire figure occupies the right half of the cover in the midground, making her the clear focal point as she runs on a crumbling brick path. Behind her, a dark mansion sits atop a hill shrouded in shadow except for one side that is illuminated by a full moon. A dead-looking tree is rooted beside the mansion, and rocks, boulders, and dying vegetation are scattered through the scene. The mansion has a single lit window.

The color palette is dominated by muted browns, grays, and the purplish blues of the cloudy night sky. Despite the nighttime setting, the scene seems well-lit, with moonlight reflecting off both the woman's gown and the mansion. Notably, there is no male figure present, so the threat here is implied instead of visible. The woman is clearly fleeing, but what she's fleeing from is left to the viewer's imagination. Even though *The Waiting Sands* omits a visible antagonist, its cover communicates the core themes of fear, vulnerability, and mystery that are prevalent in Gothic romance's visual language. It was this visual language that kept readers coming back. As Janice Radway argued, Gothic romances were both conservative and subversive, as they provided a temporary, safe space for feminist protest. She went on to explain that generally the heroine was shown rejecting patriarchal dominance early in the novel, only to be lured back by the end, and that the novels did not promote open feminist rebellion but instead offered a fantasy where submission could be reinterpreted as empowerment. Perhaps most compellingly, Radway said that no matter how simple these popular novels appeared on the surface, they were composed of narratives whose ultimate meanings needed to be found by individual readers.[69]

Romantic-era paintings often made the plights of women in danger inevitable as artists portrayed them in moments of terror from which there was no escape. Whether attacked, possessed, or overwhelmed, Romantic artists frequently sealed an imperiled woman's fate with suffering or death. Even Mary Shelley's rewriting of Fuseli's visual tropes in Frankenstein still located women within this tragic framework. Ultimately, during the Romantic period, women in danger usually did not get out alive. Twentieth-century Gothic

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Schreuders, *Paperbacks, USA: A Graphic History, 1939-1959* (San Diego: Blue Dolphin Enterprises, 1981), 114. https://openlibrary.org/books/OL3789785M/Paperbacks_U.S.A.

[69] Janice Radway, "The Utopian Impulse in Popular Literature: Gothic Romances and 'Feminist' Protest," *American Quarterly* 33, no. 2 (1981): 140–62. https://doi.org/10.2307/2712313.

paperbacks inherited this imagery of female inevitability but shifted its trajectory. On the paperback's covers, the woman in danger runs not toward death, but toward the next chapter. However manipulated, frightened, or betrayed she might have been in the novel's story, she ultimately survives, and survival was key because survival often led to happiness and love.

Therefore, the "woman running from houses" motif transformed the Romantic legacy of female doom into a new narrative of endurance and possibility. What were once anonymous images of helplessness became rehearsals for female agency, increasingly suggesting that a woman running from a house was not an endpoint, but a bridge to future iconic heroines of the 1970s, 1980s, 1990s, and beyond (Fig. 10). Contemporary media now features women who enter the house on their own terms, confront its monsters, and perhaps claim the house as their own. From the self-directed ferocity of Ellen Ripley, who repeatedly returns to the Nostromo's cramped shafts and corridors to confront the creature, to Buffy Summers, who stalks countless crypts and high-school hallways to slay baddies, the contemporary heroine now operates beyond the restrictions that were beginning to loosen in the Gothic romance era, frequently doing what her Gothic foremothers could only gesture toward.

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Figures

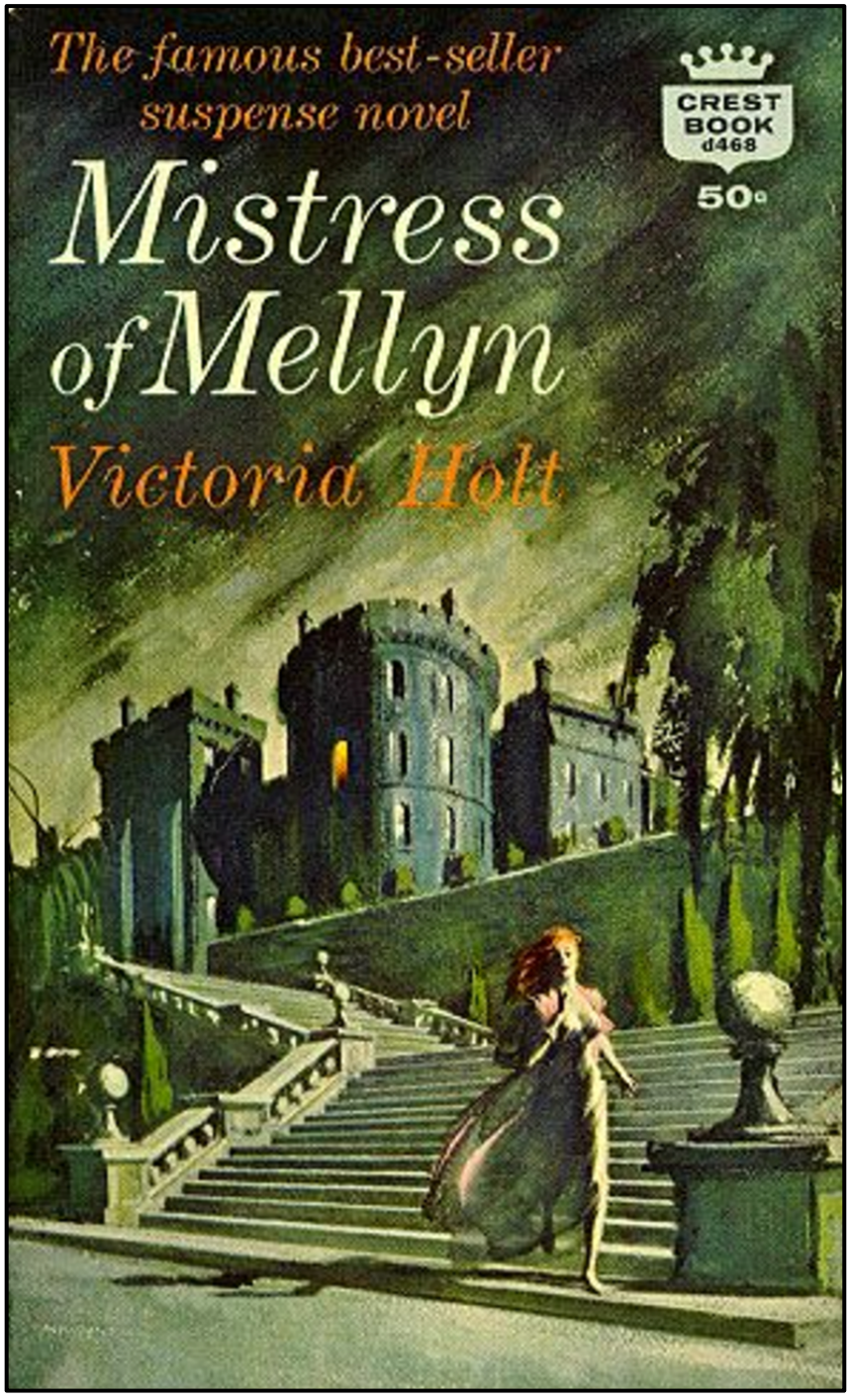

Figure 1. Unknown illustrator, original publication 1960. Re-print of the gothic romance paperback *Mistress of Mellyn* written by Victoria Holt, dimensions likely around 7 inches x 4.5 inches.

Figure 2. A collage of images from physical and digital copies of Gothic romance novels I collected.

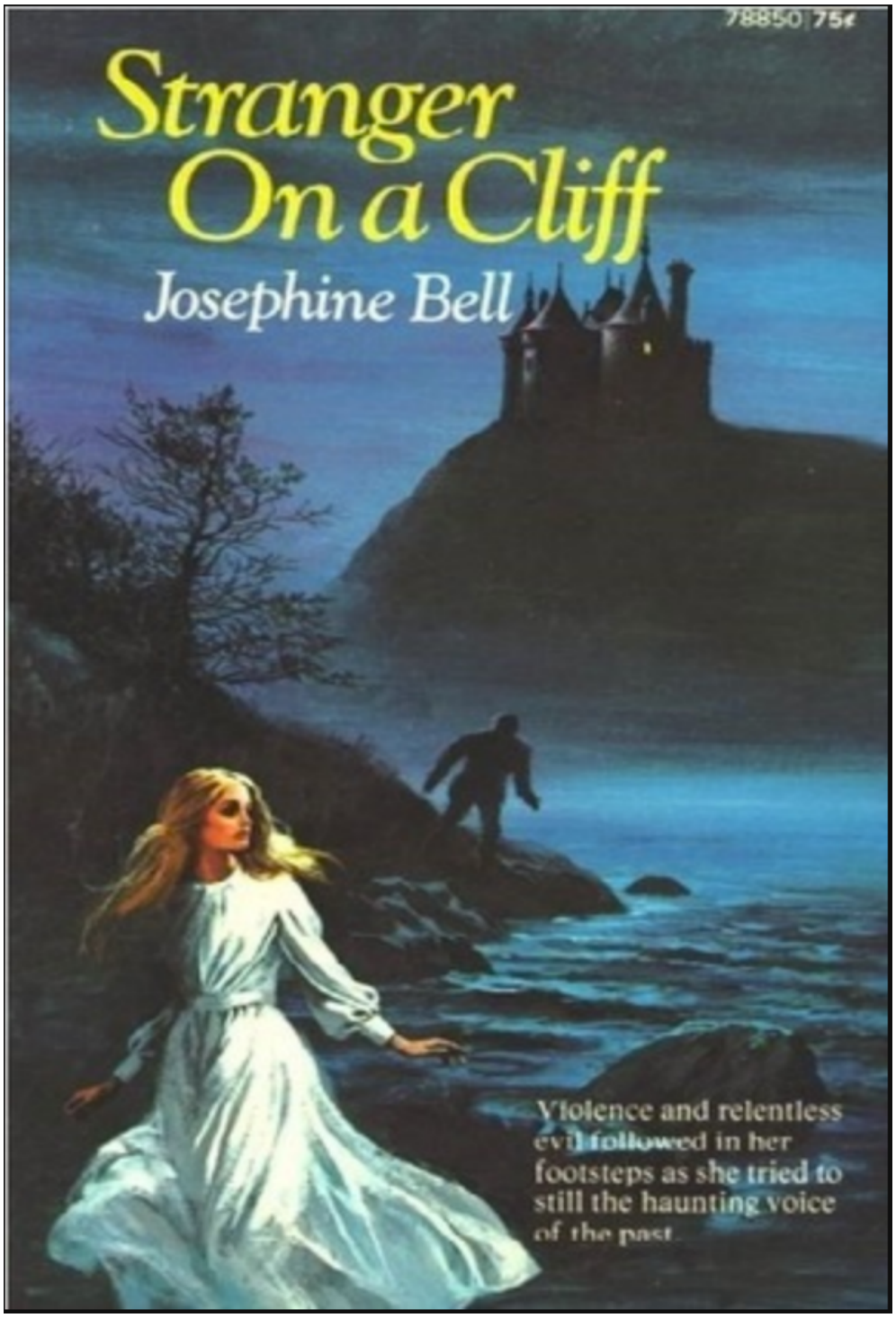

Figure 3. Unknown illustrator, 1964. Cover of the gothic romance paperback *Stranger On a Cliff* written by Josephine Bell, likely around 7 inches x 4.5 inches.

Figure 4. Fuseli, Henry. *The Nightmare*, 1781, oil on canvas, 40 inches x 50 inches. Detroit Institute of Arts, Founders Society purchase with funds from Mr. and Mrs. Bert L. Smokler, and Mr. and Mrs. Lawrence A. Fleischman. https://dia.org/collection/nightmare-45573.

Figure 5. Goya, Francisco. *Bandit Murdering a Woman (Bandido asesinando a una mujer)*, 1806-1808, oil on canvas, 15.75 inches x 12.5 inches. Marquis of La Romana Collection, Madrid, Spain. https://fundaciongoyaenaragon.es/eng/obra/bandido-asesinando-a-una-mujer/565#datos.

Figure 6. Géricault, Théodore. *The Storm (or The Wreck)*, circa 1800-1825, oil on canvas, 7.5 inches x 12 inches. Louvre Museum. https://collections.louvre.fr/en/ark:/53355/cl010063565.

Figure 7. A collage of cover art images from traditional romance novels to provide contrast with Gothic romance novels (see Fig. 8 below).

Figure 8. A collage of cover art images from Gothic romance novels to provide contrast with classic romance novels (see Fig. 7 above).

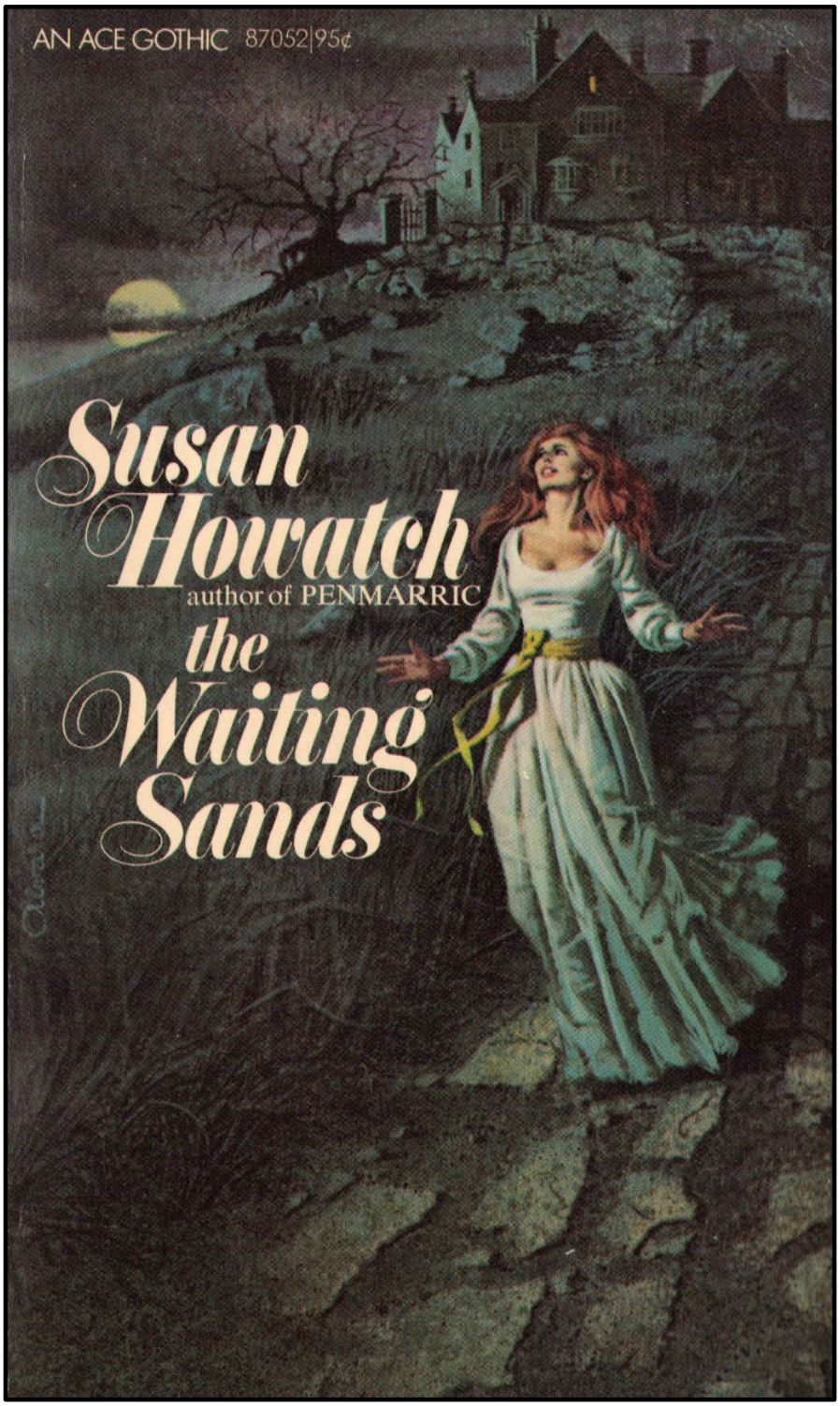

Figure 9. Unknown illustrator, 1966. Cover of the gothic romance paperback *the Waiting Sands* written by Susan Howatch, likely around 7 inches x 4.5 inches.

Figure 10. Women running to danger. Top Left-Right: Hermione Granger (*Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows: Part 2* movie); Buffy Summers (*Buffy the Vampire Slayer* television show); Ellen Ripley (*Aliens* movie); Princess Leia (*Star Wars* movie). Bottom Left-Right: Laurie Strode (Halloween movie); Sarah Connor (*Terminator 2: Judgement Day* movie); Sabrina Duncan, Jill Munroe, and Kelly Garrett (*Charlie's Angels* television show).