Maternal Absence and Incestuous Desire in Patrick Holland’s The Mary Smokes Boys

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The Gothic is renowned for its portrayals of family centred trauma. Parental figures are at best neglectful or absent, and at their worst, predatory and/or murderous. Female characters are at particular risk of death or abuse, and mothers often die leaving their daughters unprotected and vulnerable to the incestuous desire of older male relatives. Set in a dying country town near the Mary Smokes Creek in the Queensland hinterland in the mid-eighties, Patrick Holland’s melancholic novel The Mary Smokes Boys (2013) incorporates these familiar tropes into a uniquely Australian Gothic, and in particular it is the absent presence of the dead mother and the relentless mourning of her son that informs the unsettling nature of the relationships that occur within the novel. This paper examines these transgressive relationships in relation to absent mothers and incestuous desire within the Gothic tradition.

Introduction

The Gothic is renowned for its portrayals of family centred trauma. Parental figures are at best neglectful or absent and at their worst, predatory and/or murderous. Female characters are at particular risk of death or abuse, and mothers often die leaving their daughters unprotected and vulnerable to the incestuous desire of older male relatives. Set firmly within an Australian Gothic tradition, Patrick Holland’s The Mary Smokes Boys plays to these Gothic tropes, with a dead mother whose absent presence manifests in the character of the daughter who is left behind. This paper examines how this absent maternal presence haunts the male protagonist in the novel, leading to transgressive familial relationships that place the central female character in danger and further threaten to destabilise an already fractured family.

Australian Gothic

Well known for its complexity and elusiveness, the Gothic has proven to be an amazingly dynamic mode which constantly reinvents itself by ‘rework[ing] images drawn from different ages and places’. Emerging in the eighteenth century with the publication of Horace Walpole’s The Castle of Otranto, the novel was the first to refer to itself as a ‘Gothic’ story, and, in terms of the narrative itself, further significance lies in its establishment of the themes, motifs and settings that have become the key features of the Gothic. Transplanted first to America and then to Australia along with

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1 This article is based on PhD research conducted at Edith Cowan University, which was supported by an Australian Government Research Training Program Scholarship.
the convicts and colonists, the Gothic quickly appeared in the literature of the colonies, finding expression in the stories of colonial writers who struggled to come to terms with their new surroundings. Working as a much darker alternative to the pastoral mode that some writers employed in order to paint the New World as a place of ‘order, peace and plenitude’, the Gothic’s nature as ‘a literature that deals with alienation, disjunction, terror and conflict’ positioned it perfectly to articulate colonial experiences of Australia. More traditional European Gothic tropes and settings quickly transformed into a Gothic with uniquely Australian characteristics, and the haunted manor became the run-down homestead or the derelict outback town, and the English woods and moors were replaced by the bush or the endless scrub of the outback. It is useful then, as Ken Gelder and Rachael Weaver suggest, to understand colonial Gothic as ‘a re-staging of European and American Gothic tropes, even as it departs from them in order to assert its identity as a unique...local genre’. The landscape in early colonial narratives more often than not worked as a particularly Gothic site, a place of fear and hopelessness which evoked a ‘weird melancholy’, an alienation that is peculiar to Australian Gothic. This thread is still evident in Australian literature and film, and the rural landscapes illustrated in Australian cultural texts continue to exhibit less than idyllic characteristics, exposing what Bell refers to as ‘a sick, sordid, malevolent underbelly’. In Australian Gothic the countryside is not an Edenic antidote to city life, but rather a sparsely populated place of horror where bad things happen. Whether it presents as a malevolent landscape which actively works to thwart characters who are lost or pursued, a gloomy atmosphere, an overwhelming sense of unease or foreboding, unsettling relationships, murdered or abused women and children, colonial violence, haunted houses, decaying homesteads, disturbed psychological states or past misdeeds which return to haunt the present, the Gothic has become firmly entrenched in the Australian literary tradition. Although many of these characteristics are representative of a uniquely Australian Gothic, the form remains a part of a much broader literary heritage, and as such, it also utilises the more traditional stock tropes and themes that are common across Gothic iterations. Crucially, however, at the core of Australian Gothic is the same element that is central to all Gothic fictions, for, despite its complexities, the Gothic almost always deals with that which is unseen and secret – past events, family secrets, hidden desires, unspoken histories – repressed things which in one way or another rise up to the surface to confront the present.

Displaying a particularly Australian Gothic sensibility is Patrick Holland’s melancholic novel The Mary Smokes Boys. Set in an isolated and dying country town...
near the Mary Smokes Creek in the Queensland hinterland in the mid-eighties, Holland's novel centres around the complicated relationship between siblings Grey and Irene North. Effectively orphaned when their mother dies, they are left to the care of their often-absent alcoholic father and their maternal grandmother, neither of whom seem to have either the capacity or the desire to look after them properly. Grey befriends Ook, an abandoned Aboriginal boy of mixed descent, and the other wild boys of the town who roam the landscape and congregate by the creek at night. The prospects in the town are few, and as the city and its opportunities beckon, Grey is torn between his responsibility to those he loves and the possibility of a new life. The siblings are close, but as time passes and Irene’s resemblance to their dead mother grows, Grey becomes increasingly obsessed with preserving his sister’s purity and innocence— even from Ook. Suspicion and mistrust colours his closest relationships, and, despite his attempts to protect his sister and his friend from outside sources, Grey’s efforts at preserving his family only work to bring about tragedy.

Dysfunctional Families and Absent Mothers

Parental absence or neglect, often in the form of the missing or somehow absent mother, is a cornerstone of Gothic fiction, as is the dysfunctional family dynamic that usually results in catastrophe for the offspring involved. Girls are at particular risk, and Gothic fiction consistently explores ‘themes of abuse and abandonment with an emphasis on female deprivation’.9 Female children are often left unprotected and vulnerable to abuse and murder, either through the actions of, or at the hands of, relatives or people known to them. Like its more traditional counterparts, Australian Gothic literature has always treated women and girls poorly; they frequently die, or are murdered, abandoned, entrapped, hunted, lost, or condemned to ‘a fate worse than death’ at the hands of either a male protagonist or a malevolent landscape.10 Stories such as Barbara Baynton’s ‘The Chosen Vessel’ (1902) and Mary Gaunt’s ‘The Lost White Woman’ (1916) provide colonial examples of narratives that feature isolated female protagonists who die in horrific circumstances, and Joan Lindsay’s Picnic at Hanging Rock (1967), where a group of school girls and their teacher disappear into the landscape, is ‘an enduring example of the Australian Gothic tradition’.11 More recent examples include Craig Silvey’s Jasper Jones (2009), Chris Womersley’s Bereft (2010), Charlotte Wood’s The Natural Way of Things (2015), and Jane Harper’s The Dry (2016), all of which display female characters that are abused and/or murdered in an isolated landscape that exhibits peculiar qualities confirming that ‘isolation, violence and sexual trauma...[are]...central concerns of Australian

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10 ‘A fate worse than death’ colloquially refers to rape or sexual assault.
Gothic fiction’. Furthermore, these contemporary novels confirm a continuing fascination with the trope of the missing mother in Australian Gothic fiction.

Holland’s *The Mary Smokes Boys* exemplifies the poor treatment of female characters in Australian Gothic, opening with the death of Grey North’s mother in childbirth, the death of his grandmother soon after, and ending with the fatal stabbing of his sister Irene. Over the course of the novel all of Grey’s female relatives die. The treatment of these female characters is telling; their absence or abuse is not just incidental to the story, it is vital to it. It is Grandma Finnian’s death that results in the neglect of her granddaughter, and it is the stabbing murder of Irene that provides the conclusion to the story. Most importantly, however, it is the mother’s absence, her death giving birth to her daughter, which allows the story to take place.

Mothers, or to be more specific, good mothers, are detrimental to the progression of the Gothic story – live mothers are especially inconvenient. As such, Gothic texts often portray mothers as either ‘dead, imprisoned, or somehow abjected’. The mother embodies safety, unity and order, hence her removal also removes the safety and order that she represents, ostensibly leaving her children isolated and vulnerable, often at the hands of predatory men. Nancy Armstrong suggests that mothers also perform a moral function, regulating behaviour within the family. Without the mother to act as both protector and moral compass, the Gothic family is thrown into confusion and disarray. The absent mother and all this entails is a staple feature of Gothic fiction, and in true Gothic fashion, *The Mary Smokes Boys* begins with the death of a mother.

Cast as a saintly figure and the ‘most chaste girl who was ever knocked up at fifteen’, Irene North’s premature death in childbirth is attributed directly to her husband’s lust. When ten-year old Grey North asks why his mother has died, his grandmother says:

> Because your father could not keep his hands off her. Because his love was insufficient. Like a dog that plays with a kitten until it’s dead, he had to maul her though it meant it would kill her. And then he left her...he left her all alone. He should have had her in the city already. He should have been home. He should have left you home with her too.”

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16 Holland, p.25.

17 Holland, p. 29.
Rather than blaming his father, however, Grey immediately blames himself for his mother’s death, and prays desperately for her return, promising God that he will protect her from the world if only He would return her to him. Grey and his infant sister, also named Irene after their mother, are left to the care of their elderly grandmother and unreliable and often absent father William.

For many critics, the missing mother is merely a device which enables the enactment of Gothic terror in respect to incestuous desire within the Oedipal plot: these stories depict a powerless young girl under sexual threat from a father or brother figure where the mother is absent, often as an expression of the son’s rebellion against paternal authority.\textsuperscript{18} Whilst this is certainly a characteristic of much Gothic fiction, Claire Kahane points out that restricting the mother’s absence in the Gothic to a bit-part leaves limited space for or even denial of female desire, even in those texts authored by women.\textsuperscript{19} For Kahane, it is not the father-son struggle that lies at the heart of the Gothic plot, but rather the spectre of the absent-present mother:

...the oedipal plot seems more like a surface convention than a latent phantasy exerting force, more a framework that houses another mode of confrontation even more disquieting. What I see repeatedly locked into the forbidden center of the Gothic which draws me inward is the spectral presence of the dead-undead mother, archaic and all-encompassing, a ghost signifying the problematics of femininity which the heroine must confront.\textsuperscript{20}

The absent mother is at the Gothic heart of the \textit{Mary Smokes Boys}, and it is this absence which has implications for the disturbing relationships that develop within the novel. The ghostly presence of the first Irene North returns to haunt her son through her daughter, and it is the resemblance of the daughter to her mother that acts as the catalyst for the transgressive feelings that develop as the novel progresses.

Much like the absent mother trope, the sexual transgression that informs the novel has long been a signifier of the Gothic, a feature that was fixed in the earliest British Gothic fiction including Horace Walpole’s \textit{The Castle of Otranto} (1764) and Matthew Lewis’ \textit{The Monk} (1796), and continuing in the American tradition with possibly the most well-known story containing sibling incest, Edgar Allan Poe’s Gothic tragedy ‘The Fall of the House of Usher’ (1839).\textsuperscript{21} The enduring fascination with sexual transgression is evidenced by its continuing presence in contemporary literature; incest, or at least the intimation of incest, colours a vast array of Gothic works where young women are frequently the target of male family members, be


\textsuperscript{19} Kahane, The Gothic Mirror, p. 335.

\textsuperscript{20} Kahane, p. 336.

they ‘tyrannical fathers, father surrogates or...rapacious siblings’.\(^{22}\) Not only does the incest add an element of danger or what Kokkola and Valovirta call ‘Gothic frisson’ to the narrative, but it also serves to highlight the family as both a site of danger, and a place where female sexuality is contested.\(^{23}\) This is certainly true in *The Mary Smokes Boys*, given Grey’s reaction to what he reads as Irene’s increasing sexuality and the intimation in the later part of the novel that she is being stalked by a sexual predator. It is no coincidence that Grey’s incestuous feelings for his sister occur when he recognises both her resemblance to their dead mother and her sexual desirability to other men; nor is it a coincidence that at fifteen, Irene is the same age as her mother when she fell pregnant with Grey. Arguably, Grey’s response to these things can be read in relation to his relentless mourning for his lost mother, what Freud referred to as ‘melancholia’.\(^{24}\)

**The Desire for the Lost Mother**

Distinct from a painful period of grief that ends when ‘the [healthy] work of mourning is completed’ and the bereaved person finds a way to accommodate their loss, melancholia refers to an extended period of sorrow whereby the lost object-love, instead of being let go, is ‘withdrawn into the ego’, internalised into the psyche of the mourner.\(^{25}\) According to Freud, all forms of sexual desire, with the possible exception of female heterosexuality, are developed through the desire for a lost mother. For Judith Butler, the source of this desire can be found in what she calls the ‘erotics of loss’.\(^{26}\) In Freudian terms, she argues that a person’s loss of a loved object often results in an ‘alteration of his ego which can only be described as a setting up of the object inside the ego, as it occurs in melancholia’. She explains this further by suggesting:

...melancholic identification permits the loss of the object in the external world precisely because it provides a way to preserve the object as part of the ego, and, hence to avert the loss as a complete loss...Giving up the object becomes possible only on the condition of a melancholic internalization or, what might be for our purposes turn out to be even more important, a melancholic incorporation.\(^{27}\)

Traces of the lost object-love are thus inscribed into the self. Haggerty suggests that ‘this incorporation is the way in which identification becomes a “magical, a psychic way of preserving the object” and he further argues that “this form of psychic


\(^{25}\) Freud, p. 154.


\(^{27}\) Butler, pp. 133-134.
experience could also be labelled “uncanny”: psychic life preserves this loss in a form that means that if it is ever found it will be found with a specifically gothic mode of recognition’.\(^{28}\) In *The Mary Smokes Boys*, the death of Grey’s mother results in a melancholic identification whereby he incorporates his lost mother into his psychic self in order to preserve her, since, according to Freud, ‘the character of the ego’ is ‘the sedimentation of objects loved and lost, the archaeological reminder, as it were, of unresolved grief’.\(^{29}\) Likewise, Irene’s melancholy temperament can be attributed to the loss of her mother at birth; although she identifies with her brother instead of her mother, her desire for him, like his for her, can be read as symptomatic of the unfinished grieving for the loss of the mother that they both suffer. Furthermore, Grey’s recognition of his sister’s resemblance to their mother results in the kind of uncanny experience that Haggerty describes. When Irene asks Grey if she looks like their mother, he says ‘You have her smile.’ Although this is said in an attempt to placate her, as he looks at her, something strange happens:

> Then he felt he must be dreaming. As she knelt on the floor before him in the attitude of study, he realised that mother and daughter were all but identical. She shifted her feet beside her, raised her face and furrowed her brow to ask what he was looking at. The vision did not vanish.\(^{30}\)

Grey’s sister becomes at once both familiar and unfamiliar, her features merging with those of her dead mother; in a sense, Grey’s childhood prayer is answered, his mother is returned to him.

The double, or doppelgänger, which literally means ‘double-goer’, can be understood as ‘a second self or alternate identity, sometimes…a physical twin’.\(^{31}\) As a literary device, the double articulates both loss and desire and challenges dominant value systems by rupturing the boundaries that maintain cultural order. According to Jung, the double is a symbol of forbidden desire representing that which is experienced as absence and loss.\(^{32}\) Likewise, Zivkovic asserts that ‘the double…expresses itself as a violent transgression…of social taboos which prohibit the realization of desire’.\(^{33}\) Although Zivkovik is talking here specifically in relation to the doppelgänger as a split or shadow self, it is also relevant to the conflation of Irene and her mother. From the outset Irene is cast as an object of pity, a motherless, sickly baby who suffers from croup and ‘was underweight even into adolescence’.\(^{34}\) Drawn as ‘painfully thin’ with an ‘odd little face’, and a ‘splotchy complexion and watery eyes [that] made her appear as though she had just finished crying’, Irene is

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\(^{30}\) Holland, p. 127.


\(^{34}\) Holland, p. 41.
characterised in stark contrast to her dead mother who is described as ‘the most beautiful girl who had ever lived’. In fact, the younger Irene is depicted as so different to her mother that it is surprising when Grey recognises that the two are identical. This doubling, in both nomenclature and appearance, is especially curious since nowhere else in the novel is Irene described as resembling her mother—Grey seems to be the only character who recognises the likeness, and even then, this does not occur until she is fifteen. Given that Grey is the only one who recognises the resemblance between his mother and sister, this then begs the question, are the pair really identical or is the likeness in Grey’s mind - a psychic transference of his desire for his lost mother? When viewed through the lens of Grey’s melancholia, the doubling of Irene and her mother makes sense; having previously incorporated his dead mother into his own psyche, Grey now projects the desire for his lost mother onto his sister. It is this moment of recognition which triggers his incestuous desire, and there is an erotic intensity to their relationship after this point that is difficult to ignore.

When Irene discovers Grey and his sometimes girlfriend Vanessa in bed together, she is greatly distressed and runs from the house in the middle of the night, sparking a particularly significant scene in the novel. This passage is important not only because it is packed with Gothic themes and symbolism, (blood, violence, the uncanny return of the mother and madness), but also because it acts as the catalyst for the events which ultimately lead to Ook’s and Irene’s deaths.

He ran after her and caught her shoulder. She had cut her hand on the barbs and he saw the blood on her nightdress. She took his hand and put it to her wet cheek. The sight of her blood brought tears to his eyes. His own blood surged through his body and he shivered though the night was not cold.

The repetition of the word ‘blood’ here evidences the highly symbolic nature of the term; it accentuates not only their blood relationship, but also signals the emergence of the transgressive and sometimes violent nature of the relationship that is developing between them. The blood on Irene’s nightgown is redolent of virginal innocence, or rather a loss of innocence, which occurs for Irene when she discovers Vanessa in Grey’s bed. It is also highly suggestive, functioning not only as a marker of Irene’s innocence, but also as a symbol of desire, since the surging of Grey’s blood through his body is indicative of sexual excitement. Furthermore, the use of the term also serves as a reminder that the same blood runs through both their veins, emphasising the fact that as siblings they are blood related.

‘We have to go back to the house.’ ‘Why?’ She turned away from him. She faced the Western plain. ‘Because we can’t stay here all night.’ ‘I can.’ ‘Look there.’ And he pointed to the south where a green-flickering storm had shut out the stars. ‘These are games for children, Irene.’ She shook her head. He held her shoulders. She

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35 Holland, p. 90; p. 43.
36 Holland, p. 140.
stood on her toes and reached up towards him but he caught her face in his hand and squeezed her jaw as though he were a beast trapping prey. She cried and pulled out of his grip. She stood trembling before him and he must do something to reassure her. ‘It’s just that you’re a little girl, Irene. I’m nothing big like you think.’ The awful look on his face was gone, and the words made her smile through her tears. She choked and laughed. ‘When did I say you were anything big? I know who you are, little boy.’ She had spoken out of an almost forgotten dream, sounded an echo that time had almost obliterated, that now obliterated time. He held her shoulders again. Again she was frightened. Again he stared into her deep sad eyes. He felt her trembling. ‘Don’t send me mad, Irene. I won’t be mad.’

This scene also contains the first violence that Grey exhibits towards his sister. The first instance is in response to both her refusal to obey his wishes and return to the house, as well as his own reaction to his awakened desire; the second instance is triggered by an experience of déjà vu. In an uncanny repetition of a childhood memory that occurs earlier in the novel, Irene speaks using a phrase that is identical to the one that his mother used years before when, as a child, he became lost in the woods. In this moment Grey experiences a temporal slippage, an uncanny sense of being at once in and out of time, where the past and the present collapse into one; the voice of his long dead mother reaches out to him from beyond the grave in both recognition and warning, an act which further destabilises the equilibrium and threatens Grey’s sanity.

What is clear from this scene, particularly when read in relation to a previous passage where Grey fails to feel sexually aroused by his girlfriend, is that it is his sister, not Vanessa, that elicits his desire. This plays out again later in the novel when, at the town dance, Grey can feign no interest in an attractive girl, and instead spends his evening watching and worrying about his sister before Irene asks him to dance:

‘What are you frightened of?’ She put her arm around his waist. He felt a stab of pain when he heard a woman’s approving voice from one of the tables, saying how decent it was of him to stick by his poor sister. The woman did not see the desperation gathered in furrow lines across his brow. Grey pressed close to his sister, but suddenly not too close...Then he closed his eyes and prayed that all that had troubled him of late was an iniquitous dream, a dream that would dissolve and all would be as it had been, and she would be his own small sister again, as she had always been, and he did not care who watched.

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37 Holland, pp. 140-141.
38 Holland, p. 78.
39 Holland, p. 199.
Grey’s inappropriate feelings for his sister and his growing fear that others will recognise them also reveals his struggle against his incestuous inclinations. Later, Grey catches Ook staring at Irene and the possibility that she is involved with the much older man, or with anyone, only works to exacerbate both his attraction and jealousy.

When a drunken Grey asks Irene if she loves him she says: “What do you mean? You’re my brother. You’re my best friend in the world.” “But,” he dug the heel of his boot into the dirt, “do you love me?”40 What Grey seems to be asking here is not if she loves him, but how she loves him. In other words, he is asking her if she returns his desire. When she fails to understand the nature of the question he verbally abuses her, accusing her of being ‘spoilt’ and ‘nothing special’, and what follows is a disturbing incident where Grey leads her away from the young men sleeping by the fire and into the bush. Once away from the others, it seems as if Grey is on the point of acting on his desire:

He faced her. He put his trembling hand on her blue cheek, and ran his finger down inside her collar. She did not shy away...If she had it might have been possible. If only she would wince. The pale light brushed her pale, pale face and she was so beautiful tonight he knew he would die of it. He hated that anyone else should see it. He wished it were something he alone could see. And he knew he was alone, that nobody saw it but him. And he knew that everyone could see it. And still no-one could but him.41

In case there is any doubt as to the nature of Grey’s feelings towards his sister, it is dispelled here. The confusion and anxiety that he feels in relation to her is also obvious, as is his longing and desperation to keep her to himself. Grey regularly vacillates between berating his sister for her worthlessness and pushing her away, to inviting her in with his love and attention. The melancholic incorporation/projection that Grey experiences in relation to his mother is on show here, and Freud explains that ‘if the love for an object [or person]—a love which cannot be given up though the object itself is given up—takes refuge in narcissistic identification, then hate comes into operation on this substitutive object, abusing it, debasing it, making it suffer’.42 Thus when Grey accuses Irene of being ‘nothing special’ he is really accusing himself of the same. Grey’s ambivalence towards his sister demonstrates both his love for his lost mother and his hatred towards himself; to Grey, Irene is an abject figure, one who elicits both desire and disgust – and also his shame.

The disgust that Grey demonstrates for his sister can also be read not just as a representation of his feelings towards her, but coded as a reflection of the shame and loathing that he feels towards himself as a result of his incestuous desire and jealousy. As his horror at his own feelings grows, so too does his cruel behaviour towards Irene, behaviour which often seems to border on the edge of sexual violence. Indeed, in the latter half of the novel most of their encounters are marked by a thinly

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40 Holland, p.205.
41 Holland, 2010, p. 205.
veiled eroticism that borders on dangerous, highlighting the intimate nature of the two extremes. Incest and violence are thus ‘double impulses’, and ‘in the Gothic, sexuality—almost covertly incestuous—provokes violence, just as violence is always sexualised, expressing a hidden incestuous impulse’. The combination of cruelty and self-recriminatory ambivalence that Grey exhibits towards Irene reveals the complex nature of melancholia as ‘something more than normal mourning’: ‘In melancholia the relation to the object is no simple one; it is complicated by the conflict due to ambivalence...countless separate struggles are carried on over the object, in which hate and love contend with each other.’

Thus, the self-reproach that Grey displays is a fundamental symptom of melancholia, and his contradictory behaviour can be understood as part of a melancholic cycle stemming from his guilt at failing to prevent the loss of his mother. The anger that he displays towards himself is also unconsciously directed at his mother for leaving him; this in turn leads to feelings of guilt, which instigates more love, followed by more self-reproach, followed by more hate/anger, followed by more guilt and so on. The uniqueness of Grey’s melancholic projection of his mother onto his sister, however, means that Irene becomes the object of these emotions, and, as a result, his attempts to control the threat of her increasing sexuality can also be situated in relation to his perpetual mourning for his mother.

The Return of the Lost Mother

Since Horace Walpole’s The Castle of Otranto (1764), the Gothic has often represented female sexuality as problematic, particularly in relation to concerns about what may happen if it manages to escape the confines of patriarchal authority. The story of a patriarch who attempts to control a much younger relative’s sexuality has become a traditional Gothic staple, and the close connection between familial sex and power means that ‘[q]uestions of possession, control and power seem to always follow representations of incest’. The Mary Smokes Boys reimagines this well-worn trope, and William North’s position as a weak and mostly absent father places Grey squarely in the role of provider, protector and patriarch in relation to Irene, and, for the most part, like his father, he does a poor job. Despite his affection for his sister, over the course of the novel Grey displays a casual carelessness towards her welfare, and it is only when he notices her resemblance to their dead mother along with her transition into womanhood that he begins to pay closer attention to her activities.

Irene’s power to disrupt lays in not just her uncanny resemblance to her dead mother, but also because she acts as a locus of an incestuous desire that transgresses social order. This is especially true if she returns the feelings that both Grey and Ook seems to have towards her. The significance of Irene’s likeness to her mother cannot be overstated: it is this resemblance that sparks not only Grey’s sexual attraction, but

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44 Freud, pp. 167-168.
45 Freud, Mourning and Melancholia, pp. 157-158.
47 Kokkola and Valovirta, ‘The Disgust that Fascinates’, p.129.
also his jealousy and his attempts to control her sexuality, all of which play no small part in her eventual death. Furthermore, in Grey’s mind, his mother remains ‘ideal and untouched, at a vestal fifteen years old’, even though she was forced to marry Bill North by her own father when she fell pregnant with Grey. Since Irene is also fifteen years old when Grey recognises the similarity between his mother and his sister, the way in which Grey remembers his mother, as an idealised and almost saintly figure, has implications for his relationship with Irene, particularly in relation to the way that he responds to her emerging sexuality.48 Whether the traits Grey attributes to his mother are real or imagined, Grey transfers them onto his sister, and his efforts to maintain her pristine quality points to his desire to preserve the incorruptible image of his object-love as a reflection of his on-going mourning. Thus, Grey’s desire to possess and control his sister directly relates to the trauma of his mother’s loss and his attempts to maintain her memory. For Grey, the death of his mother is due entirely to his father’s lust, so what he perceives as his sister’s increasing involvement with either Ook or another unknown male, in his mind, can only lead to harm. His increasing jealousy and obsession with preserving her purity is not just an attempt to deny her sexual agency, but also an attempt to prevent a repeat of the past, to ensure the fate of his mother is not the destiny of his sister. In addition, what Grey reads as Irene’s emerging sexuality further threatens the already fractured North family, especially since Grey suspects that he has been supplanted in her affections by his best friend, Ook. Not only does Irene’s desirability destabilise her relationship with Grey, but it also threatens Grey’s relationship with Ook.

Signalled as ill-fated early in the novel when Margaret Finnian warns Grey against befriending Ook because ‘it’s written in the book of time’ that he’s ‘destined for trouble’, the relationship between the two men is established when the young Grey follows Ook into the night with the other ne’er do wells of Mary Smokes shortly after the death of his mother.49 Grey and Ook in particular are referred to as ‘brothers’ throughout the novel, and on more than one occasion Ook tells Grey that he and Irene are his only family. He says: ‘You’re all I have Grey, you and the boys, and Irene’, and, ‘You’re my brother, Grey. My one true brother...You know you and Irene...are all I have in the world’.50 Despite these familial bonds, Ook also falls in love with Irene, and ultimately, it is his loyalty to Grey, and his love for both of the North siblings, that leads to his death. Like Grey, Ook’s love for Irene is not only doomed, but can also be directly tied to the missing mother. Abandoned by his own parents as a small child, the first Irene North ensured that the young Ook had enough to eat, and it was his love for her that saw him take the young Grey, and eventually the younger Irene, under his wing.

The Motherless Daughter

Whereas the novel makes it clear that the feelings that Grey and Ook have for Irene transgress the boundaries of normal familial love, what is much less apparent is whether Irene returns these feelings. Although Irene loves both of them, there is an

48 Holland, *The Mary Smokes Boys*, p. 43.
49 Holland, p. 45.
50 Holland, p.157; pp. 187-188.
ambiguity in her relationship with both Grey and Ook that makes it uncertain as to whether she views them romantically or not. Irene is represented as a strange, almost fey creature that the men in the novel cannot resist. She is neither child nor woman, occupying instead an enigmatic state somewhere in-between; she is in danger but also dangerous, at risk but also threatening to the normal order of things. In this sense, Irene is a blank slate onto which the men in the novel project their desires.

As the novel progresses, there are hints that Irene’s feelings, like Grey’s, also extend beyond socially acceptable boundaries. Her jealousy over his relationship with sometimes girlfriend Vanessa, for example, ends with her getting lost in a storm and nearly dying from pneumonia. In addition, as Grey’s desire for her becomes increasingly apparent, Irene neither resists nor rejects his advances, which means one of three things: either she does not read the sexual element of Grey’s love, she recognises it but does not know how to respond to it, or, she recognises her brother’s desire and reciprocates it. Unlike other Gothic heroines, it is not the lost mother that Irene longs for, instead, ‘[a]ll Irene’s love was reserved for her brother’. How then, is the reader positioned to view the nature of their relationship? Kokkola and Valovirta suggest that novels which depict sexual relationships between siblings that are fifteen or older encourage the reader to suspend judgement and view the relationship as one of mutual desire and consent rather than one of coerciveness and abuse. This is particularly true of relationships where the sister is older or the siblings are twins. It is this, they argue, that encourages the reader to read the plot as a romance whilst at the same time downplaying the possibility of abuse, which is far more likely if an older brother is the instigator. Although The Mary Smokes Boys does not necessarily attempt to downplay the possibility of abuse – the undercurrent of violence precludes this – if the desire that Grey feels for Irene is read as mutual, then it functions to elicit the sympathy of the reader as well as to lessen the implication of paedophilia given the age gap between the characters. The obfuscation of the ten-year age gap between Irene and Grey, and the fifteen-year age gap between Irene and Ook, is further reinforced over the course of the novel by constant references to the men as being ‘boys’. This often makes the reader forget the true age differences between the characters, further disguising the transgressive nature of the relationships. On the one hand, the age difference between Irene and Grey, and Irene and Ook, means that even if Irene is a willing participant, it is difficult to view the relationships in a positive light; Grey and Ook are both men, and they are old enough to know better. On the other hand, this view negates the possibility of Irene desiring either man, positioning her only as subject and therefore incapable of having her own desires and feelings, effectively negating any possibility of her having any sexual agency of her own. The fact that Irene does at no stage reject her brother (but does seem to reject Ook), gives rise to the possibility that she is not averse to a relationship with him that is outside conventional boundaries, and the suggestion that Irene believes Grey has promised himself to her, that she ‘owns’ him because ‘all things belong to the people who love them most’, gives added weight to this

51 Holland, p. 63.
52 Kokkola and Valovirta, ‘The Disgust that Fascinates’.
53 Kokkola and Valovirta, p. 135.
interpretation. They are tragic figures from the outset. Nevertheless, their relationship is disturbing, and in the corpus of Gothic fiction, incestuous desire cannot go unpunished.

James Twitchell points out that ‘...the gothic deals with sin, guilt and immediate retribution...[and] the most particular sin is family sex’. As such, brother-sister love in Gothic literature is only ever resolved successfully where the supposed siblings turn out not to be related at all. On the other hand, novels that do employ the sibling incest trope to its conclusion usually end in the death and/or madness of those involved. Sonya Hartnett’s Australian Gothic novel Sleeping Dogs, for example, features an incestuous relationship between young adult siblings Jordan and Michelle Willow, that, when discovered, ends in murder. Set in an isolated country town on a broken-down farm cum campground, the novel depicts their pairing as the ‘direct consequence of [the] parental abuse’ inflicted on them by their cruel and controlling father Griffin, and their tragic and withdrawn mother Grace. Although Jordan and Michelle’s siblings are aware of the nature of their relationship and conspire to keep it a secret from their parents, it is discovered by Bow Fox, an artist staying on the farm who threatens to reveal that they are lovers. Enamoured with Michelle and jealous of Jordan’s artistic talent, Fox makes good on his threat after the five Willow children enact an elaborate plan, which includes setting the family dogs on him, in order to drive him away. He sends Griffin an anonymous letter in revenge, and Griffin shoots Jordan, and his dog, dead. Although the novels differ in that the incest in Sleeping Dogs is the result of parental abuse and the possibility of incest in The Mary Smokes Boys is the result of parental absence, both works present the disturbing sibling relationships they depict as the consequence of a dysfunctional family dynamic, one which includes an absent mother. Furthermore, despite the fact that both narratives are sympathetic to the situation of the Willow and North siblings, the death of Jordan at the end of Sleeping Dogs and the deaths of both Irene and Ook at the end of The Mary Smokes Boys confirms that incest, or the possibility of incest, can never end well.

Despite it being an attack on the very core of what makes a family significant, incest can also be viewed as an irrational effort to strengthen family ties. William Patrick Day explains that although incest is a ‘violation of the family, the destruction of the arrangements that make the very concept of family meaningful ... [it is also] ... a typically Gothic extension of the affectational-sentimental family, in which members are bound together by ties of love, rather than ties of power. The attempt to transform emotional and spiritual relationships into sexual ones is, in fact, an attempt to extend and strengthen the family and the identity it supports, though

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54 Holland, p. 118; p. 212; p. 234.
56 Kokkola and Valovirta, ‘The Disgust that Fascinates’, p. 136; Edgar Allan Poe’s ‘The Fall of the House of Usher’, first published in 1839, is a famous example of a story containing sibling incest that results in death and/or madness.
obviously a perverse one. Rather than strengthening family bonds however, the incestuous feelings depicted in Sleeping Dogs and The Mary Smokes Boys instead work to destroy the family; a re-enactment of a Gothic trope which demands that siblings who love each other romantically are denied a happy ending.

Despite their closeness, the secrets Ook, Irene and Grey keep from each other in an attempt to preserve their family and protect each other from harm only results in the very outcome that they are trying to avoid. A high stakes card game leaves William with a large debt that he is unable to pay and, afraid that Irene is in danger, Grey and Ook resort to horse theft and use the proceeds to cover Bill’s gambling debts, unaware that one of the horses they steal is involved in a scam operated by the same criminal they have just paid off. Tragically, Grey and Ook’s actions place Irene in the very peril they are trying so desperately to avert. Realising the threat, and fearful about what a now grown ‘ten-year old boy who had taken on men in a human ring’ may do if he finds out his sister is being harassed, Ook orders Irene not to tell Grey that she is being followed. Underestimating the danger and blinded by jealousy after misconstruing Irene and Ook’s secrecy as romantic involvement, Grey refuses to help his best friend retrieve the stolen horse, and Ook is killed when he attempts to do so on his own. Too late Grey senses the threat to his loved ones, and, just as it seems his strange bout of melancholia is resolved, attributing the ‘strangeness’ between him and Irene simply as ‘growing up’, he is once again undone. Irene and Ook pay with their lives for their transgressions, and the novel culminates with Grey holding his dead sister in his arms, watching the fireworks as he did on the night of his mother’s death, wishing he could turn back time and find Ook, fantasising that ‘they three who loved would walk up into the hills, to a place where secrets could be kept...’ Thus, the novel ends as it begins, only this time there is a sense that Grey’s enduring loss may never be resolved.

More than just a set of identifiable tropes and motifs, the Gothic has always given voice to that which is generally unknowable, uncomfortable, unspeakable or taboo. Firmly embedded in the Australian literary tradition, the Gothic continues to be employed as a means to explore that which otherwise remains hidden from view. Patrick Holland’s novel combines small town isolation, a melancholic landscape, parental absence, disturbed psychological states, the possibility of incest, and a haunting lack of resolution to express a uniquely Australian Gothic. At the heart of The Mary Smokes Boys, however, is the deep psychological wound caused by the death of the mother, and her absent presence pervades the text, haunting both the novel and the son who cannot let her go. Furthermore, it is the unresolved grief of this loss which acts as the catalyst for the often-troubling nature of the relationships which emerge and the trauma that follows, and, given the treatment meted out to incestuous siblings in the long history of the Gothic, the tragic outcome is inevitable. Despite this, The Mary Smokes Boys questions the often complicated and contradictory nature of family relationships, particularly those between siblings whose mother is

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59 Day, In the Circles of Fear and Desire, p. 120.
60 Holland, p. 212.
61 Holland, pp. 237-238.
62 Holland, p. 250.
absent: in doing so, it confirms the strong fascination exerted by the missing mother and can, therefore, be situated firmly within the Gothic tradition.