



## THE DOLLHOUSE AND MOBILITY OF THE SOUTHERN GOTHIC LEGACY IN SHARP OBJECTS<sup>1</sup>

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### ABSTRACT

The text explores several issues connected to the relationship between the gothic house and its miniature double, a dollhouse, on the example of a Southern Gothic TV series *Sharp Objects*, an HBO production from 2018. It addresses their similar position as gendered spaces (the house being a profoundly feminine business, the dollhouse a field for girls to practice femininity), their gothicization (both host traumas and secrets of the past), and the work they perform in the perpetuation of their Gothic legacy. The foregrounding of mobility and agency in the treatment of the gothic dollhouse helps to question and reread one of the basic building blocks of Southern Gothic fiction: its reliance on the sense of place. In this view, the dollhouse operates as an interface between the world outside and inside and thus dissolves the boundaries set by the master house. It is not just its mirror image, propelling a *mise-en-abîme* project of perpetual proliferation, but, when properly noticed, provides a tool for the healing of past wounds and traumas via their contemporary embodiments, and sets new directions for the social relevance of Southern Gothic fiction.

*Keywords:* Southern Gothic, American Gothic, haunted house, gender studies, TV series, adaptations, plantation Gothic.

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This article will explore several issues connected to the relationship between the gothic house and its miniature double, a dollhouse, using the Southern Gothic TV series *Sharp Objects* (HBO, 2018) as case study. My analysis will address their similar position as gendered spaces (the house being a profoundly feminine business, the dollhouse a field for girls to practice femininity), their gothicization (both host traumas and secrets of the past), and their function in the perpetuation of their gothic legacy. The foregrounding of mobility and agency in the treatment of the gothic dollhouse helps to question and reread

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one of the basic building blocks of the Southern gothic fiction: its reliance on the sense of place. In this view, the dollhouse operates as an interface between the world outside and inside and thus dissolves the boundaries set by the master house. It is not just its mirror image, propelling a *mise-en-abîme* project of perpetual proliferation, but, when properly noticed, provides a tool for the healing of past wounds and traumas via their contemporary embodiments, and sets new directions for the social relevance of Southern gothic fiction.

### 1. THE LEGACY OF THE (SOUTHERN) GOTHIC HOUSE

The trope of the haunted house has been one of the defining characteristics of gothic fiction since the publication of Horace Walpole's *Castle of Otranto* in 1764; Edgar Allan Poe's "The Fall of the House of Usher" has transposed the trope into the American imaginary, where it has occupied a fixed place ever since. Fanny Lacôte sums up the various functions of the gothic house in a following manner:

Whether it is a castle, a convent, a manor house or a mansion, Gothic fiction typically stages a paradoxical and ambiguous place, which plays the role both of an asylum and of a refuge, but which also provides a base for all kinds of far-fetched situations and excess: the most terrible secrets are revealed there. (Lacôte 2016, 200)

The role of the house is foregrounded in southern gothic narratives. In their essay on the Southern Gothic, Caroline Ruddell and Brigid Cherry (2012) emphasize the importance of a fixed place when arguing that "Southern Gothic has as much to do with location, and the nature of life, as determined by geography, as it does with the supernatural and the monstrous" (42).

The "sense of place," including the history specific to a region and thus a sense of time, is one of the few touchstones gothic criticism agrees on and it has been used to differentiate the gothic mode from the emotion-driven horror genre. As Maisha Wester and Xavier Aldana Reyes (2019) state in their introduction to *The Gothic in Twenty-First Century*, while the horror genre is built around affects—mostly fear and terror—the gothic revolves around geography:

The specificity of setting ... may ultimately prove invaluable in separating the Gothic – which we see as strongly marked by time, characters, and place – from horror, largely defined by the emotion it aims to generate. (3)

Contrary to the regular house, the gothic mansion is always somehow haunted, be it by its social history, personal traumas of its current users, or a combination of both. Eric Savoy goes so far as to dub the haunted house as "the most persistent site ... of American Gothic's allegorical turn" (1998, 9).

The double-faced nature of the gothic house is also evident once the topic is approached from the perspective of women, for whom the domestic sphere offered the only

arena of agency for a long time. In his monograph *Women and Domestic Space in Contemporary Gothic Narratives: The House as Subject*, Andrew Hock Soon Ng (2015) presents the long and varied history of feminist critical writing about haunted houses, strongly influenced by psychoanalysis and points to an intriguing paradox. As he outlines, while for some—such as Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar (1979)—the house is representative of domesticity and thus embodies a clear policing tool of patriarchy, intended “to protect [a woman’s] innocence but ... fundamentally meant to subordinate her to male dominance and control” (4), others—e.g. Elaine Showalter (1977)—approach the house “as a site of female empowerment” (ibid.). The gothic house in *Sharp Objects* embodies both aspects of this paradox. The master house is presented as a beautifully designed trap, but it is owned by a woman instead of an evil patriarch, which adds a twist to the narrative. While her house empowers the woman, the agency it provides her with is deeply flawed and traumatizing. Similarly, the dollhouse mirrors this dynamic, but in the end, it exposes the buried evils in both structures, leading to a space for healing.

## 2. *SHARP OBJECTS* AS SOUTHERN GOTHIC STORYTELLING

*Sharp Objects*, a miniseries released by HBO in 2018 and based on Gillian Flynn’s 2006 novel of the same title, can be framed in the cartography outlined above. The narrative develops across several locations, yet the crucial locus around which it revolves is the mansion owned by socialite Adora Crellin—who is also the protagonist’s mother and the main business owner of the town. The Victorian-style plantation house is located outside the urban center of Wind Gap, placed on a hill surrounded by woods and fields (Fig. 1).



Figure 1 Adora Crellin’s family house © Netflix.

Here, the domestic drama between Adora and her two daughters unfolds. Teenage Amma aims to leave the small town and engages in reckless behaviors behind her mother's back, while adult Camille is an alcoholic reporter and returns home after several years to cover a case of two murdered girls. Within the walls of the mansion, Camille's past traumas begin to emerge in a series of flashback-cum-hallucination sequences featuring not only the current dead girls but also her younger sister Marian (who passed away when Camille was a teenager) and Alice, her roommate from rehab with whom she had developed a sisterly relationship and who dramatically committed suicide. Furthermore, she engages in self-harm and has cut herself from an early age: her body is covered in hateful writing through which she releases social and emotional pressure. The mechanics of Camille's complicated relationships with herself, her mother Adora, and her younger sister Amma soon reframe the murder investigation around the mansion and recalibrate it to focus on hidden past crimes. The collapse of the past into the present is backed by the series mise-en-scène, camera movement, editing, and music, which deliberately portray Wind Gap as a town in the present yet stuck in the past. Teenagers use SUVs as well as retro roller-skates, the walls are lined by 1950s murals as well as peeling posters from 1992 presidential elections, and songs in her earplugs transport Camille from St. Louis to Wind Gap and merge her childhood tomboyish self into her adult identity with nothing more than a jump cut.

The time-space liminality of the setting is further enhanced by its location. *Sharp Objects* take place in the fictional town of Wind Gap, allegedly situated in the bootheel of Missouri. While Missouri joined the Confederate Army in the Civil War, it is not necessarily what people imagine under the label of "South." Rather, the state is considered part of the Midwest and thus could be easily approached under the rubric of Midwest Gothic, characterized by "visual rhetoric, the repressed secrets of the archive, monomania, insanity and familial trauma framed through the lens of economy and national mythology", as Charlotte Louise Quinney argues (2005, 5). However, I will analyze *Sharp Objects* as a text inscribed in the Southern Gothic imaginary, as this lens helps me to underline the fictionalized, mass-medialized facet that the American South has acquired over many years of filmic and televisual representations. The streets of Wind Gap were shot in Barnesville, Georgia, whose inhabitants were mostly happy to join the TV-tourism map and even created the "Downtown Barnesville Walking Tour" in response to the show (see Czoka 2018).

A survey of *Sharp Objects* criticism reveals how reviewers and scholars undoubtedly project the show onto the coordinates of the American South. "[A]fter eight episodes of eerie, languid Southern Gothic storytelling, the HBO murder mystery 'Sharp Objects' reached its ugly conclusion," writes *New York Times* reviewer Judy Berman (2018, n.p.), while Philippe Corcuff describes Wind Gap as a "town defined by Southern traditions"

(2022, n.p.) and Adora Crellin is for nearly everyone a “wealthy aristocratic southern lady” (Jaber 2022, n.p.).

Writer Gillian Flynn herself addresses the issue of the southernness of her novel through metacommentary within the narrative. When Camille speaks with her boss Curry before publishing her first piece from Wind Gap, the two discuss the quirks of the locals: “Before we hit press, Curry made fun of all the middle initials. Good God, Southerners love their formalities. I pointed out Missouri was technically the Midwest and he snickered at me” (2018, 178). In an interview with Lacey Rose for the *Hollywood Reporter*, Flynn talks about her penchant for dark female characters and the way she thought readers may buy her message more easily:

I tricked people into reading about women and violence and rage and what that looked like in three different generations of women. That’s what I wanted to write about, and I figured out I could do it if I coated it in this yummy Southern Gothic mystery. (Rose 2018, n.p.)

The treatment of *Sharp Objects* is consistent with what Michael Kreyling dubbed as the “postsouthern South,” borrowing the term from Lewis P. Simpson’s *The Brazen Face of History* (1980), and what Jay Wilson develops in terms of “postsouthern cinema” (2011). The South, Kreyling (1998) writes, no longer holds any fixed meaning or core, it no longer has a foundation of cultural or social distinctiveness. Thus, “postsouthern” helps to point out that what is left is “an ever-proliferating series of representations and commodifications of ‘southernness’” (154).

### 3. THE TOXIC MONSTROSITY OF THE GOTHIC HOUSE IN *SHARP OBJECTS*

As I have outlined above, the mansion in *Sharp Objects* carries many characteristics typical of gothic haunted houses. In this article, I will address two specific questions: how the house incorporates and manifests past traumas (social as well as personal), and how it meets the southern-gothic specific sense of place. I will approach these issues not only through narrative close-reading but also from the perspective of the series’ mise-en-scène materialized in the production design. The guiding principle of *Sharp Objects*’ layout, visual as well as thematic, is based on sets of contrasts—between the calm serenity of the small town and the gruesomeness of the murders of teenage girls, who have their teeth pulled out completely, between the elegance and polish of the upper class (especially of Adora, her husband and the circle of her female friends) and their misdeeds drowned in alcohol and silence, between the behavior of teenage girls inside their homes and outside.

In episode five the town celebrates a fictional Calhoun Day, based on real Civil War Commemoration celebrations, on the lawns surrounding Adora’s mansion. At one point, Adora gives Richard Willis, the out-of-town detective who was called to help with the case, a tour of her house. She shows him two items that she is particularly proud of: a



special wallpaper and the floor of her bedroom. The wallpaper is hand-painted— “on silk, from Paris” as she proudly states (“Closer”, ep. 5)—and decorates the walls of the downstairs hallway, the parlor, and her bedroom; it depicts flowers and birds on a sharply green background. John Paino, the production designer of the show, commented on the choice of the wallpaper talking about the way it characterizes Adora—in the catalogue, the color was called Arsenic (Paino 2019, 93). As the viewers gradually learn, Adora has been engaged in toxic relationships with her daughters and much of their trauma stems from her behaviors. She has masked her dominance as motherly care and, while being soft-spoken and delicate, she is also an expert poisoner and suffers from Munchausen-by-proxy syndrome—a condition afflicting mothers who intentionally weaken their children to care for them as “good mothers” and thus be needed. In the past, Adora had already killed her middle daughter Marian in this way, and in the present imposes the same treatment on Amma. Towards the finale of the series, Adora tries to take care of Camille (episode 8), who has always refused “the blue,” Adora’s red mixture of various drugs and poisons served from a blue bottle. However, she finally succumbs to it to make Adora’s attention focus on her so that Amma can leave the house and bring help. While giving Camille a bath, Adora talks about her own mother Joya’s cruelty towards her, revealing a familial streak of motherly dysfunction:

Once, Joya woke me in the... in the dead of night. I was seven, eight. She didn’t say a word to me. Just shook me awake, walked me outside... barefoot in my nightgown. I knew better... than to open my mouth when Joya was punishing me. It was the same whether I’d done something wrong or not. She drove me to the woods, walked me deep, sat me down, and left me. Took me hours to get home. When I finally made it, I walked in the door, my mother said, “You’re home.” I believe, if you had asked her, she’d have said what she was doing was right. We all have bad childhoods. At some point, you have to forget it, move on. Anything else is just selfish. (“Milk,” ep. 8)

The link between the green color and arsenic that Paino mentions has another layer of meaning. In the Victorian era, on which the house’s décor is modeled, wallpapers from Europe were often made with arsenic-laced colors to make them stay vivid. As many current doctors reported, and Charlotte Perkins Gilman fictionalized in “The Yellow Wallpaper” (1892), the beauty of the wallpapers came with slow poisoning as the chemicals evaporated, especially in humid settings (see Hawksley 2016). When Adora is standing in front of the ornamental green wallpaper, the pattern on the wall outflows onto her light green dress as if she were a mere continuation of the wall design, a remediation of its toxic history.

The second item Adora shows to Richard Willis is similarly troublesome. The floor in Adora’s bedroom is paved with ivory (Fig. 2). As she explains to Richard, it was “a wedding present for my great-great-granddaughter before anybody knew what endangered was. It was supposed to last forever, and it has” (“Closer”, ep. 5).



Figure 2 The African American help cleaning Adora Crellin's ivory floor © Netflix.

The post-colonial angst that this fixture triggers in contemporary viewers is clearly not an issue in the diegesis of *Sharp Objects*; the floor is “culturally approved,” as on one of her walls Adora proudly hung a framed *Southern Home* magazine cover photo of it as a cherished piece of the region’s history, captioned “Legacy and Ivory: Together in Perfect Harmony” (“Closer”, ep. 5). While the series does not delve much into the region’s history indeed, presenting it as a timeless pastiche, the celebrated existence of animal bones in the most intimate part of the mansion—the matriarch’s bedroom, where before entering shoes must be taken off—is a definite statement reminding the viewer of the cruelty hidden beneath southern luxury, as many similar mansions were built on the backs and bones of African American slaves.

Both the wallpaper and the ivory floor, and Adora’s intimate relation to them, allow us to read the mansion as part of a global history. Yet, both Adora and locals from Wind Gap choose to ignore it—in their view, the house is a testimony to times when people knew how to appreciate beautiful and precious things when everybody knew their manners and elegance and soft-speak mattered in women, when gruesome things had no place in decent conversations. As Camille arrives to report on the murders, Adora sets a strict rule: “I just can’t have that kind of talk around me. Hurt children. Just don’t tell me what you’re doing, what you know. While you’re here, I’ll just... pretend you’re on summer break” (“Vanish”, ep. 1). This is shown to be a general attitude towards problems in

the town. In episode 7, Jackie O’Neill—a former female friend of Adora and the town’s voice-of-reason figure, long afflicted by genteel alcoholism—meets the town’s sheriff and, when he avoids her probing questions about his extramarital romance with Adora, she says: “Well, we can do what we always do around here, and pretend it doesn’t exist,” to which the sheriff quickly responds with “I like that better” (“Cherry”, ep. 7). This attitude, along with love for things past that Adora’s house and manners represent best, strengthen the timeless atmosphere of the setting, and make it a perfect place to perpetuate its traumas in endless cycles, visualized by the ever-present fans dotting the show’s *mise-en-scène*. Adora is molded by her personal history to the same extent as she is shaped by the history of her surroundings, making *Sharp Objects* a succinct demonstration of Southern Gothic focus on the place and its relevance. Moreover, the use of fans as a visual as well as aural metaphor for timelessness and circularity is a perfect example of *Sharp Objects*’ work with Southern imaginary—fans were no longer prevalent in Southern households in the 21st century, and were long before replaced by air conditioning, as Raymond Arsenault points out (1984).

#### 4. THE DOLLHOUSE AND GOTHIC MOBILITY

*Sharp Objects* goes a step further in reflecting the (southern) gothic houses, as the series features the master house’s exact miniature replica, a dollhouse, located under the same roof, which mirrors as well as distorts and uproots some of the features of its prototype. The dollhouse is the pride and property of Amma, the youngest daughter of Adora and Camille’s teenage stepsister. Despite being a teenager, Amma cares excessively about her treasure, adamant that it matches its model in every detail. She even throws a fit when Adora orders the wrong hue of upholstery for her. The dollhouse is the first thing Amma shows to Camille in the first episode, describing it as “my fancy,” while talking about herself as Adora’s “little doll to dress up” in the same scene (“Vanish,” ep.1). In this respect, both the dollhouse and Amma are passive, reflexive, and objectified. The dollhouse replicates the cyclical structure of trauma and its *mise-en-abîme* nature (to be perfect, it should logically also include a tiny dollhouse within its walls). Just as Adora perpetuates her mother’s toxic style of upbringing, Amma (her name being an anagram of Mama) doubles its setting—just as Adora is a product of her past and surroundings, Amma performs as Adora’s living doll when inside the house, wearing frilly dresses in pastel colors and having her hair neat and decorated with bows. The house and the dollhouse are extensions of their owners but, as the intricate play between history and personal trauma in relation to the wallpaper and the ivory floor showed, the owners are to an extent also shaped by the houses. The dollhouse is crucial in this respect, as it foregrounds gender as a quintessential lens—the house belongs to Adora’s legacy and her husband has no private room in it, and dollhouses are usually played with by girls—as well as fabrication and masquerade. This aspect is a fundamental component of Amma’s



identity. Inside Adora's house, she plays the role of her doll, to the extent that she lets Adora poison her slowly. Outside, "in her civvies," as she calls it ("Vanish," ep. 1), she wears shorts, her hair is loose, and she cruises the town on retro roller skates, often after curfew, intoxicated with alcohol or drugs, flirting with boys. Her masquerade is bestowing her with agency and a degree of independence of Adora.

Two details from the design of the dollhouse show that it is imbued with a similar autonomy vis-à-vis the master house. The walls are decorated in plain unadorned wallpapers approximating the colors of the original ones, yet without replicating their historic toxicity. The second relates to the ivory floor. Elephant tusks are hard to get in the 21st century and thus, to address this issue of reproducing the bedroom's floor, Amma devises a truly gothic solution. She targets girls deviating from the doll stereotype typical of her upbringing, who threaten her position of the master doll with Adora as she spends much of her time trying to "fix" these girls. Amma kills them and uses their teeth to build the precious floor in her dollhouse.

As long as the dollhouse is under its master's roof, Amma's crimes are not revealed and her dollhouse looks just normal, as if protected by a spell of its master model. This peculiar connection is evident in one detail of the meticulous production design and editing of the series—at the beginning of episode 2, we see the African American help entering Adora's bedroom to clean the floor there. With an abrupt cut, keeping the closeup framing, the viewers are transferred into the dollhouse, where Amma continues the help's circular movement in cleaning the floor of her creation as if to finish the job. This is one of the few moments the viewers are allowed to peek inside the dollhouse, but at this point, there are no human teeth, only a linoleum with a similar structure to Adora's floor. This moment is open to a myriad of interpretations. It can be seen as a slip in continuity on the part of the series production team, which I would argue is not likely, given the precision exerted everywhere else. It can be read as a subjectively motivated shot—it is a POV close-up taken over Amma's shoulder, so one can speculate it shows her perspective in which there is nothing wrong with teeth in her floor, just as there is nothing wrong for Adora in having her floor made of elephant tusks. At the same time, the sequence can be approached from a pragmatic angle (maybe Amma needed to have enough teeth to redo her floor at once, which is not the case when the viewers catch a glimpse of it in this episode).

I want to argue that Adora's house is not a regular house, but a gothic one, and as such, it materializes and updates past crimes and traumas in various forms. Camille experiences the house in a highly subjective manner—she regularly sees the ghost of her deceased sister Marian when at home, and flashes back to her younger self when she passes through various places in Wind Gap, which hints at the importance of her and her family's traumas for the investigation of the murders. At the beginning of episode 7, Camille is intuitively led to the dollhouse at night, and it lights up on its own as if giving her

a cue. But Camille ignores it; she tries to bury her past and wishes to be an objective reporter. To her as well as local authorities, it is unimaginable and too painful to see Adora's family as culpable, as it would uproot the whole community of Wind Gap, where Adora is the main employer and a cherished role model.

In the final episode, Camille succumbs to Adora's toxic care, hoping that she could use her own body as evidence against her mother. She is nearly killed but eventually, her boss Curry warns the local police, who break into the house, save Camille and Amma, and arrest Adora, who is then charged with the murder of Marian as well as the two local girls. Camille takes Amma to live with her in St. Louis and everything seems to fall on the right track. Yet one day, Amma's new friend goes missing and the dollhouse, which Amma took with her, reveals its grim secret to Camille, letting her see the teeth floor (fig. 6), and thus realize that it was Amma who killed the girls, not Adora.



*Figure 3* The teeth floor in Amma's dollhouse © Netflix.

The dollhouse has been a crucial piece of evidence in the story, yet it went unnoticed, while it was protected by its surroundings, the master house as well as the setting of Wind Gap. Once its umbilical cord to its mother house is cut, it emancipates itself and finally sheds light on the horrors it has witnessed and contained over the years. Amma's gothic replica of the floor draws a contemporary metaphor for the pain associated with the ivory and legacy aura and makes past horrors understood in a very graphic manner. Moving the dollhouse helps the historical guilt associated with its model to be made visible and discontinued. In this way, the series performs a crucial social role beneath its suspense-crime veneer and falls well into the Southern gothic register in which contemporary

dramas often draw their depth from regional history, be it the Civil War, the Reconstruction era, or the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s.

The mobility of the dollhouse is crucial here. While the master house is a long-lasting construction that has accumulated much personal as well as social history, the dollhouse performs a more ambiguous role. On the one hand, it necessarily mirrors and perpetuates its model; on the other hand, it is movable. As an object that still looks like a house, the dollhouse can be invested with the burden of its archetype. Yet, it can be dislocated and reveal the horrors hidden behind the respectable façade of its master. In this way, the gothic dollhouse dynamizes and challenges one of the fundamental baselines of the gothic mode—its dependence on a specific setting.

Most stories about haunted houses end with the necessary destruction of the haunted building, along with people and/or ghosts within, sealing off the troubled times and removing the sick element from the layout of the community. The dollhouse in *Sharp Objects* is elusive in this respect and foregrounds an important issue in this debate—the role of the outside/inside binary in gothic stories. The outside/inside dichotomy, translatable as self/other, we/they, is particularly felt in Southern Gothic criticism as well as writing. In “Southern Gothic Film: An Overview,” David Greven (2016) explores the image of the South in the national imagery and remarks that “if the South is always the ‘Other’ America, Southern Gothic works give this Other America a voice and a prominence” (474).

In many ways, the dollhouse in *Sharp Objects* challenges fixed binaries. Although it is positioned inside the big house and is shown to shelter ghosts in episode 7, as does the big model, it can be taken out and relocated, no longer dependent on its master. As the finale of the series shows, there are limits to the dependence and passivity of the dollhouse and its role goes beyond mere doubling. In this respect, the dollhouse can be approached as an interface, an interactive space endowed with its own agency (see Gallo-way 2012, vii). This agency, and agenda, have the power to subvert the dynamics of dependence between the dollhouse and the master house—in displaying the crimes of the present, the dollhouse unveils the roots of past traumas. In this way, it interacts both with its closest exterior (the master house) and the outside world, making the boundaries between them open in both directions and the exchange dynamic.

Andrew Hock Soon Ng (2015) phrases the protean nature of gothic houses through Freudian terms, stressing the liminality of the uncanny:

It is unsurprising that stories of haunting are almost always about architecture, usually a house. It is also unsurprising that Freud’s treatment of the uncanny is metaphorized as the home – a bounded space (place) where comfort effortlessly slides into terror. Within such a place it is never certain that the specter is “real” or ultimately a projection of the dweller’s trauma. (92)

The threshold between the subjective and objective rendering of the house as the central location is much played with in gothic fiction, often leading to their collapse into each other.

Often, the reader/viewer is left puzzled about what came first—does the gothic house (with its past, location, and décor) trigger the traumas of its inhabitants, who then project them onto their surroundings, or is it vice versa? And most importantly, is it possible to tell for certain? My discussion of the mansion in *Sharp Objects* and its small replica so far has shown that it is an unresolvable dilemma until both the house and the dollhouse are approached as interfaces operating on the subjective-objective threshold. They are liminal spaces yet act only in mutual interaction with their inhabitants. It is precisely this cocktail of history, location, and individual psychology that sets the dynamic in motion, and it is exactly this agency allowed to nonhuman entities, even to objects, that makes the gothic so pertinent in current post-humanist and post-anthropocentric thinking.

## 5. THE SKIN AS A DOLLHOUSE AND GOTHIC INTERFACE

In the diegesis of *Sharp Objects*, danger comes knocking at the door, from outside. As Adora's mansion represents the whole community, outside means out-of-town. Therefore, Wind Gap is not shaken by the crimes themselves, graphic as they are, but by the publicizing of them beyond the county limits. The town has good coping mechanisms when it comes to strangers, as is evident in the investigation carried out by the Kansas City detective Richard Willis. The community members refuse to talk to him, mock him, and leave him lost in the cobweb of local habits. It is the liminal position of Camille that helps to solve the case. Her leaving the town made her an outsider with foreign views and manners, but her past clearly marks her as an insider. Adora sums up Camille's ambiguous status upon their first meeting, on the doorstep of the family house: "My house is not up to par for visitors, I'm afraid. ... Your old room is the best for visitors" ("Vanish," ep. 1). Camille is let in and given permission to sleep in her old room but, at the same time, she is not treated as family but rather as a foreigner. This paradoxical and fluid shifting between the position of outsider and insider, used by the series' dramaturgy in developing the relationship between Camille and Richard, is reflected by the dollhouse itself. Just like the dollhouse, Camille is at once molded by the master house, caught by its spell, and independent of it. It is not just a stage for her childhood, but an active interface underlying her current actions.

*Sharp Objects* feature yet another dollhouse, a metaphorical interface between Wind Gap and the world beyond. Its connection to Amma's dollhouse is set from the very beginning. After Amma shows Camille her dollhouse in the first episode, the camera follows Camille to her room and into the bath. When she takes off her robe and submerges

in water with a glass of vodka in her hand and music in her earplugs, we see a close-up of her arm, with scars forming a glowing “Vanish” prompt.

Since her early adulthood, Camille has engaged in self-injury by cutting her skin. Her body is a canvas covered by painful words and becomes the walking and burning legacy of her southern home, her family house in proxy, created carefully over the years, yet hated at the same time.<sup>2</sup> There is hardly a more explicit articulation of the futility in the running away than the words covering Camille’s body, which become the titles of individual episodes forming a map of the southern imaginary and an oddly poetic haiku at the same time—“Vanish,” “Dirt,” “Fix,” “Ripe,” “Closer,” “Cherry,” “Falling” and “Milk.”

Camille’s scarred skin may be seen as an active interface between her southern legacy and her new life outside her native town, dissolving them into one spectral presence through the series’ meticulous editing, connecting seamlessly the past, present, and imagination, its sound design, highlighting subjective perception using diegetic sound bridges between diverse temporal and spatial settings, and the *mise-en-scène*, realistic yet highly symbolic at the same time. In the opening of the title sequence of each episode, we see a closeup of a gramophone stylus descending on a record and hear a tune start. The reproduction of music is only possible through the contact of engrained grooves on the record and the spiral movement performed by the stylus. The vinyl and the stylus can be separated and exist independently of each other, but in this way, they are useless. Without a turntable, the vinyl is just a whim, and vice versa.

Camille’s skin works similarly—the cutting, while penetrating the skin’s surface and thus disrupting its integrity, defines her body, it makes her skin her own projection screen, an amalgam of her present and history, and forms Camille into who she has been. There is no way Camille can escape her own skin. It is part of the body she was born with, it has grown with her, but it is also her own making, her diary. Often, in scenes when she is upset, she sees the inscriptions on her skin leave their surface and float around the whole setting, materializing on her car, on the walls of Amma’s dollhouse, replacing street signs. At the very beginning of the series, in episode 1 when Camille is leaving St. Louis on her assignment, the dust on her trunk reshapes into “DIRT” written in the same style as the scars on her body. At the end of episode 3, “St. Louis” on a street sign transforms into “SPITEFUL,” as Camille struggles with a painful memory of the suicide of her roommate from rehab to which she reacted by a relapse to self-injury, the close-up of her forearm dripping with blood and outlining the word “FIX,” intercut with flashes from her past interactions with her sisters Amma and Marian. As Mihaela P. Harper (2020) notices, Camille’s “vocabulary” does not only extend beyond her body, but the words also morph:

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<sup>2</sup> For the complex relationship of people who suffer from self-injury of this kind to their bodies, see Hart (2007).



Many of these words transform before the viewer's eyes: from caterpillar to catfight, billiards to belittle, open to omen, scared to sacred. The blurring itself constitutes a way of querying into the dynamic between internal and external modalities, the material surfaces of objects as an extension of one's skin and one's skin as an extension of ideology-driven cultural practices to which the relentless struggle between past, present, and imaginary serves as a fitting correlative. (146)

Camille hides her skin beneath layers of dark, un-ladylike clothes, interpreted by her mother as her attempt at rebellion against the codes of southern femininity, but at the same time, their existence extends the toxicity of her birthplace well beyond the county limits, making her nomadic lifestyle a postponement instead of a solution to her problems.

## 6. CONCLUSIONS

Camille's skin and Amma's dollhouse both operate as protective shelters for them. They are also supplements of the big house in a Derridean sense. They support the argument that the southern gothic house is not just a horrid place where the living are haunted by ghosts that need to be exorcised, but that the house is our own doing, our own shell from which we can hardly ever disconnect. At the same time, just as the décor of Adora's house, "elegant, with a whiff of decay" (Paino 2019, 92), exposes her gentleness and forms of femininity—inherited from her foremothers and approved by her community—as profoundly toxic, blurring the boundaries between care and poison. Amma's dollhouse and Camille's scars foreground the manufactured, and thus malleable, nature of reactions to familial as well as social traumas.

The position of the dollhouse in the outline of the series, as well as the femininity-as-masquerade agency of Amma—the dollhouse operator—joins the two, supposedly oppositional reactions to local toxicity, stay-and-control vs. escape, acted out by Adora and Camille. It is also through Amma's operations around the dollhouse, that the colonization wounds upon which the whole house is built, are open, articulated as gothic, and brought into the open to heal in the future.

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