



Winter 2019

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Recommended Citation

Jensen, Sarah, "Francis Gregg and Horror Feminism" (2019). *Modernist Short Story Project*. 19.
<https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/mssp/19>

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ENGL 376

April 23, 2019

Francis Gregg and Horror Feminism

For centuries, humankind has been fascinated with horror. From the cruel arenas where gladiators fought to the death in Ancient Rome, to today's Halloween blockbusters, there is no short history for a genre that can creep into any particular story, with just a few ingredients. I believe that horror captures attention through the storytelling mode of relatability. Horror asks of its readers and viewers "what would you do?" Horror is inherently scary because it triggers human empathy and fear for the characters. Experiencing a horror movie or listening to a true crime podcast today can be a validating experience as people see their own fears played out. The world may be full of darkness, but when it is pretend, when it is safe, fear loses its power. This is especially true for women in the 21st century. As Alison Gillmor describes, women have taken a firm interest in horror films as of late—Entertainment Weekly reported that the majority audience is mostly women. Gillmor quotes Gita Jackson, who said: "Horror movies are one of the few places women are told their fears are real." Thus, Gillmor is arguing that for women horror is deeply cathartic; it allows them an unreal and therefore safe space to work through real life fear and trauma.

The horror films of today have a long history rooted in literature. Shakespeare wrote such early tragic works as *Hamlet* or the cursed *Macbeth*. The gothic novel emerged as a frontrunner in horror with an emphasis on death and the otherworldly (Masters). Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* gained popularity because of its combination of psychological horror and science

fiction. Gothic romanticism gave way to the Victorian ghost story and the penny dreadful—cheap magazines that published some of the first mass produced reading for young people (Masters). At the turn of the century, English thought was turning away from Victorian ideals. Women were fighting for the vote, technology was advancing, and the world was on the cusp of war. In 1913, Dora Marsden, a famous suffragette, began publishing *The New Freewoman*. It began with a feminist platform, and it provided space for women to publish their writing. Frances Gregg was one of these young women. Her horror story “Contes Macabres” was written before the traumatic events of the Great War. However, that didn’t hinder Gregg from capturing terrifying drama on the page. Her own experience of witnessing terrible events as well as the intimate and sometimes dark personal relationships she was involved in enabled her to write a convincing psychological horror story that comments on how she perceived women were viewed in her time. Through using the digital analysis program Voyant as well as a careful study of the text and Frances Gregg’s life, women are revealed to be seen as possessions, corrupted by the world they live in, with beauty only a matter to the eye of the beholder—the man. Gregg’s feminist view is hidden under layers of crafted mystery and death. Demons, ghosts, and murder draw the reader in, but the meaning of each of the three short narratives in “Contes Macabres” connect by the female characters who are affected by the male narrator’s actions. Gregg therefore created an early version of a feminist horror film—a short story for women by a woman who understood fear, but rather than cower from it, she would not tolerate it or let it control her.

To understand “Contes Macabres,” one needs to also understand Frances Gregg. She was born in America to a formidable mother, Julia Vanness Gregg. Julia was a suffragette as well as a school teacher (Wilkinson 21). She brought her daughter up with American values, and

together they were very determined in their care for their charges (Wilkinson 21). In Philadelphia, Gregg met Ezra Pound and Hilda Doolittle. They became great friends, and she loved them both (22). She and H.D. were lovers for a time, and in 1911, they toured England with Julia as chaperone (22). The Greggs returned to America, but H.D. stayed and later became a famous writer. In 1912, Gregg met and fell in love with John Cowper Powys, a famous lecturer and writer (20). Their relationship was frustrated due to Powys being a married man, so he arranged for Gregg to marry his best friend Louis Wilkinson (24). Powys's obsession with Gregg eventually led to the failure of her marriage. According to her son Oliver Wilkinson, Powys had a dark and sadistic side that troubled Gregg (23). She saw Powys as a mind with great potential, but his particular lusts held him back (22). Powys saw her as "carbolic soap"—because she had such strong morals (23). Her drastic contrast to Powys's own darkness only made him want her more. In his memoir of his mother, Oliver reflected on Gregg's relationship with Powys, his sexual behavior and how "Jack [Powys] bought books full of pornographic torments and heaved them home for mental raping" (23). And yet, Gregg's relationship continued with Powys until her death in 1941. Powys continued to write to Gregg and she to him—he even urged her to write her own memoir, which she called *The Mystic Leeway*.

To connect Gregg's personal history to her early short story "Contes Macabres" it is vital to note that even though all three stories come from men, the women are actually the focus of each story. The first narrative is called "My Case" and is from the perspective of a man who claims to be normal but undermines his own claims by reflecting on the sexual excitement he feels from death and decay. He becomes the custodian of an ill young woman whose sickly appearance and "lewd" eyes fascinate him (Gregg 234). When he finds that she is merely becoming blind, and she returns to health, he loses interest. He frightens her one night, and

Gregg's writing makes it clear that the narrator has ill intent toward the woman as he creepily tells her "we are alone" (Gregg 235). The woman panics and is helpless in her blindness to escape him, and her "little cries" and pale, terrified face excite the man to his "peculiar lust" (Gregg 235). Although the narrator does not admit he murdered her, he is the one who finds her body in his own tower room, and this sight pleases him the way an earlier experience did as a young boy. However, the man's feeble defense is that he didn't know the woman very well, that she wandered off, and easily could have been murdered by some lover. Because the man's blatant transparency in showing that he had little care for the woman, this illustrates his view of her as an object and not a person.

Gregg further colors the landscape of "My Case" with words such as "red," "blood," and "flame." Voyant showed that the use of these words was mostly confined to this first story, giving it a uniquely gory horror setting (Sinclair). Even the woman has reddish "copper" hair (Gregg 235). However, the narrator also focuses intently on the appearance of the woman. She has greenish, sickly skin, and dark eyes with a "dull lustre" (Gregg 235). The narrator frequently refers to her eyes, and Voyant showed that the word "eyes" showed up in reference to her at least six times (Sinclair). By using the context tool on Voyant, I was able to see that the woman's eyes were often paired to adjectives with a negative connotation (Sinclair). The narrator uses "evil," "baleful," "malevolent," and "strange" in an attempt to otherize the woman rather than himself (Gregg 235). The reader only knows of the woman's beauty as it is described by the narrator. She is corrupted by nature in the loss of her eyesight, but the man finds pleasure in her frail appearance and could care less about her health. Gregg repeats the man saying, "to will perfectly is to create the desired" (234). The man sees his ward as an object, and not a person—not even really a woman. He compares her fear of him to an animal (Gregg 235). "My Case" thus

establishes the correlation between corruption and womanhood that also carries over to the other two stories.

The second story “Condemned to Die” connects well with the first story in that the male narrator is also potentially guilty of murdering a woman, in this case, his new bride who he claims was possessed by a demon on their wedding night. In his attempt to free her, he ended up cutting her throat. The scene is just as blood tinged as “My Case,” but “Condemned” drives home the simple detail that the man is overly possessive of his wife, who he repeatedly refers to as “my girl,” which Voyant totaled at eight times (Sinclair). Gregg creates a connection here between what it means to possess something versus to possess someone. The man possesses the woman as a wife, but the demon possesses the woman like a ghost. The man claims that the demon inside his wife intended to kill her, and so the man and the demon fight over the body—as if the body of the woman is what matters. The tone of the second story is less educated than the first and the last. The man says that his wife “was a big girl, strong, with a way of holding her head like a colt not yet broken. She was all brown and red...” (Gregg 235). The couple have the feeling of the lower class in comparison to the upper-class privileges that the man in “My Case” had—servants and a manor house. In both cases, Gregg created men who view women as belongings. I believe that when the condemned narrator says he loved his girl, he loved her convenience as a well-chosen help meet for him in their future life. She would be able to help farm or perform other heavy labor. She was also likely a good candidate for motherhood. However, when the man began to notice the change in his girl, he described her altered appearance as “a lady born,” or “a great lady,” which terrifies the narrator (Gregg 235). Her altered status is the “corruption” that she is associated with that creates a shift in her being. This corruption is alien to the man because until that point they had a relationship as equals in class.

What is most disturbing about the man's explanation for killing his wife is that while the demon was inside trying to strangle her, the husband not only didn't stop fighting when he realized he'd drawn blood, he was also concerned about the new gifts the couple had been given for their marriage. As the small items and the "pitcher" shattered on the floor, the man thought "what a pity" (Gregg 236). There is a connection between how the man sees his wife as solely his, and how she is taken from him by a demon, and how the gifts—symbols of a new life—were shattered by his violent actions toward his bride.

Gregg's third and final story in "Contes Macabres" is called "A Letter," and is perhaps the most difficult to connect with the previous two stories. A man writes a letter to his ex-fiancée, explaining why they could not wed because he had discovered he was possessed by a ghost who he then fell in love with. The ex-fiancée is the only woman in the stories who is given a name, Therese (Gregg 236). I argue that this is because she is no longer viewed as a possession by the male narrator, even though he calls her "my beautiful" and "my dear one" (Gregg 236). However, the man does not give a name to the ghost, and while I say she "possesses" him, a more accurate description would be that she is "haunting" him. The man writes to Therese that he has "possessed her [the ghost's] spirit" (Gregg 236). They cannot get away from each other because it is like her spirit shares his body. As in "My Case" and "Condemned to Die," "A Letter" has similar themes including female corruption, sensitivity, and beauty. The narrator describes the ghost, who he first sees when she reveals herself to him. He believed he was going mad, and had resolved to shoot himself, when the ghost woman stopped him with a kiss. What is different about this story is that the man realizes that the ghost sees through his eyes and that she is anguished to be bound to him and see the horrors of the world because she "sees clearly," and therefore she shows to him the unhappiness in the city, the "blighted children, sickly midgets,

blind, [and the] lame imbecile” (Gregg 236). When he realizes it is she who teaches him to see the horror in the world, he sees her as both grotesque and beautiful—“complete pain and perfect beauty” (Gregg 236). The tone of the third story feels middle class. The man is not common, because he sees the street urchins and has compassion on them, but nor is he wealthy, a man who would take no notice of the underbelly of the city. The ghost teaches him the horror of the Earth, but instead of seeking to do anything about it, the man can only think of the ghost, her beauty and suffering at what he sees. He resolves to blind himself because he can’t bear to witness her suffering. The contradiction between pain and beauty is curious, because the ghost sees that cruelty leads to brutality, which has no beauty. The man also characterizes the Earth as the “mother”, who uses cruelty like a knife to “shatter” lives (Gregg 236). Because the man is so taken by the beauty of the ghost, he loses to her his health, his ability to experiences joy outside of their relationship, and eventually his sight. Gregg is saying through this analogy that beauty is a blinding tool. The final narrator blinds himself from everything to save his ghost and himself from the horror of life.

An element of each story that Voyant could not pick up was the sexual tone that weaved through each of the stories. This is because Voyant does well at spotting repeating words and phrases, but has a more difficult time spotting synonyms, word families, or underlying context. In “My Case,” the narrator uses words like “fondled,” “exotic tremors,” “provocative,” “groping,” and “quiver and throb” (Gregg 234). The narrator uses these words in relation to the woman. In a similar way, “Condemned to Die” has a few moments of sexual current that give it a sadistic charge. In the end, the struggle between the man and the demon over the girl reads like a rape scene. The girl had “her clothing...torn from her” and at last, when the demon leaves her body, it says “I conquer, and I die” (Gregg 236). In its act of winning the fight, it frees itself from

the girl's body, indicating that it's first statement to the man that it would kill the girl and thus have "no body" was fulfilled. In the end, the girl sighs "take me" to her husband, and then she dies. Her death is symbolic of a sexual release, as death is a release from life. Finally, the man who writes the letter describes how he has "ravished" the ghost, and that they feel "exquisite anguish" like a "flame" that is "darting, flickering, and biting" (Gregg 236). In some strange, mystical way, the man and ghost are able to kiss. The sexuality in these passages tie each story together. Each man takes pleasure in their relationship to who they see as *their* women. Each woman cries in fear, pain, and sadness. Crying is seen as a feminine action, one that is weak, manipulative, or embarrassing. In each story it is the man who makes the woman cry, but while "My Case" feels pleasure from her cries, the other men do not. In "A Letter" the man wants to spare his ghost tears, so he blinds himself. It is significant that Gregg goes in three stories from having a blind woman to a blind man. Voyant revealed that "eyes" was one of the top words in the story, which suggests that sight is the top theme of the stories and that sexual sight leads men to suppress and use women as objects rather than equals (Sinclair).

Frances Gregg experienced dark and often graphic sexual experiences with her lover John Cowper Powys. In her youth in America, Oliver Wilkinson recorded that "Frances had seen lynching...and she had seen horrors and cruelties unknown to Jack (except in his darkest imagination, and that was indeed dark)" (Wilkinson 21-22). They wouldn't have known to call it sadomasochism in their time, but Oliver felt that his mother was troubled by the way Powys treated her, physically and psychologically (Wilkinson 27). "Contes Macabres" is a tale of a young woman, newly married, confused by her relationship to two powerful men—Powys and her new husband Wilkinson, and the way they saw her. As a suffragette and writer, herself

“Contes Macabres” is an early precursor of feminist thought on confronting a woman’s fears in the face of what men thought of them. Gregg said of her life:

So far, in all my life I have met no single Man—though I have done my best to make one of Oliver Marlow [Wilkinson]—nor has any man encouraged me, or indeed been willing for me, to be a Woman. Mumbo-jumbo, superstitions, muddled mythologies, have been my fate among these artists and prelates and magicians, these escapists from life—from Life! (Mystic Leeway 61)

Frances Gregg unapologetically saw herself as a woman, and she believed and lived by the philosophy that loving people was more important than creating art as an “escape” from life (Wilkinson 32-33). In “Contes Macabres,” Frances Gregg reveals herself to be a young woman on the verge of putting together her view on what it means to be alive, to be a sexual being in the new age, to make mistakes and to truly love people even in uncertainty and fear. Gregg saw abuse, and she probably was abused, but she raised a voice for women by showing them their fears long before Hollywood started making feminist horror films.

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