

Gothic Remembering in Stephen King's "It Grows on You"

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ABSTRACT: This article introduces the notion of gothic remembering as a means to conceptualize hauntings in a small-town setting. It emphasizes the breakdown of a normative construction of communal past by focusing on the remembrance of abject images and semiotic processes of signification that undermine communal strategies of closure and thus lead to gothic hauntings.

KEYWORDS: gothic; small-town; abjection; semiotic; remembering; Stephen King

Introduction

The preoccupation with everyday places and their past has a longstanding tradition in American gothic fiction. As Robert Mighall remarks, the conflation of place, past, and its destabilization is so intrinsic that it becomes a defining feature of an entire mode of writing (54-55). It is so intrinsic that, among others, Eric Savoy bases his theory of the American gothic upon this representational feature. He poignantly writes:

Poe's House of Usher, Hawthorne's Custom House, James's house on the "jolly corner," Sutpen's Hundred, Stephen King's Castle Rock, and Capote's Kansas farmhouse are structures whose solid actuality dissolves as they accommodate [...] a psychic imperative – the impossibility of forgetting. (9)

The examples Savoy uses all deal with individual houses, except for one. King's Castle Rock is a fictional town that, in the context of Savoy's theory, contains the same amount of historical gothicness as an individual structure. The haunted house in Stephen King's Castle Rock is replaced by the haunted town as a gothic site. For Savoy the past of a place does not vanish but it destabilizes the community's self-definition and identity by inadvertently reverberating in the fictional present. Therefore, "the imperative to repetition" (Savoy 4) is the central destabilizing force in gothic writing. So then, what exactly does the gothic remember?

Drawing on theories of communal identity and Othering (especially Elisabeth Bronfen's reading of Julia Kristeva's theories of the semiotic and of abjection), this paper proposes a theory of what I call 'gothic remembering' by examining how remembering as an attempted

symbolic act of self-definition is undermined by gothic visions of marginalized bodies.¹ These visions prevent symbolic strategies of closure. Images of the past border on non-signification and persist because they cannot be symbolically integrated into coherent communal identity. Thus, these images (instead of some fantastic or supernatural being) haunt the community. To illustrate ‘gothic remembering,’ I will, first, give a detailed theoretical account of what I call gothic remembering; and second, provide an exemplary reading of the Stephen King short story “It Grows on You.”

Theorizing Communal Identity and Gothic Remembering

Drawing on the example of the haunting eyes of a killer in Truman Capote’s *In Cold Blood*, Eric Savoy surmises that remembering constitutes a resurgence of images of physicality that intrude into narratives of the present by overcoming repression (Savoy 4-5). Through its imaginative nature, the past uncannily returns not as sober fact but as a “haunting textual return” (4), an intrusion of the past into the present that eludes signification except for the symbolic dimension ascribed to concrete images of the past by those who remember. So *In Cold Blood*, the eyes of a killer in a photograph metonymically represent a complete narrative of the past that is persistent and elusive. This example illustrates that remembering in gothic fiction constitutes a “failure of repression and forgetting” (Savoy 4). Remembering does not re-tell from a safe distance but conjures up the imagery that haunts in the first place and must, therefore, be contained symbolically (Savoy 4).

The elusive nature of this remembered, i.e., constructed, past constitutes a battleground of communal identity in a gothic context, especially through its selectiveness and focus on images. The past becomes a place where identity is negotiated based upon subjective criteria, constantly redefined by the participants who remember. It can only be grasped in perhaps the most gothic trope of all: the bodily return of “horrific history” (Savoy 4), a manifestation based on criteria of physicality and the body that constitutes *the* gothic imperative, the aforementioned “impossibility of forgetting” (9).

This focus on concrete images of the past leads to a second characteristic of gothic

¹ Especially conceptions of the female body as complicating symbolic processes play an important role in this dynamic, as will be seen in this paper.

remembering: a pervasive sense of place ties the aforementioned images of the past together in an (at least superficially) coherent context and anchors both the necessity to repress dark aspects of the past and their gothic return firmly in a community and its everyday surroundings as a site of remembering (Savoy 9). The destabilization – occasioned by the struggle between repression and remembering – in turn, makes those who remember strive for a coherent communal identity and a version of the past that makes sense for that identity. This act of sense-making favors a construction of communal identity that is based on the “social construction of ‘normative’ and ‘Other’” (15).

Edward J. Ingebretsen theorizes communal identity constructions in terms of social mechanisms of Othering that foreground the symbolic function of the Other and the importance of communal boundaries. Drawing on King’s representation of women, he focuses on two aspects: first, social rituals that cast out the Other, and against which normative identity is defined; and second, the female body, onto whom a rhetoric of Otherness is inscribed, which then becomes constitutive of the symbolic wholeness of the community (22-23). Ingebretsen identifies the “abstract, ideological boundaries of a community” (15) as central for “rhetorics of normalcy” (14) that hold discursive power over the Other and facilitate the expulsion of said Other based on the notion of a violation of these boundaries. In communal rituals, “a threatened order organizes and defends its boundaries by repudiating those who fail them” (14). At the same time, the community depends upon an expunged Other who reaffirms these “abstract, ideological boundaries of [the] community” because the community has successfully punished the Other for violating the communal norms. Borrowing from religious terminology, Ingebretsen remarks that “orthodoxy and heresy create, and depend upon, each other for definition” (19). The ideological move towards normative communal identity thus depends upon a symbolic structuring of communal life, its past, and a shared understanding of what constitutes deviancy (cf. Jackson 52-53).

This aberrant element constitutes a defining element of normalcy, and is central for an understanding of communal identity. Tying in these thoughts with Savoy’s theory above, the repressed Other remains a part of communal identity through an act of remembering that evokes its presence and simultaneously denies its existence. This process facilitates the

textual return of a dispossessed Other exactly because it is Other; its Otherness reaffirms the communal order because its deviancy draws even more attention to the importance of maintaining the norms of the community. Ingebretsen emphasizes the symbolic dimension of such acts of remembering in that he claims that a social “rite of deviancy” (14) serves the function of an aberrant individual to be “erased as an individual and rewritten as symbol” (18). Such acts of communal policing of discourse in turn legitimize themselves by re-integrating the Other into normative communal identity as symbol, thus again defining normalcy: “What is socially discredited is often symbolically central” (22), as Ingebretsen maintains.

The female body plays an important role in such mechanisms of identity-building in gothic writing. Ingebretsen defines ‘woman’ as one of the driving “cultural anxieties” (22) that are often considered “objects of social regulation” (22) in the construction of communal identity. Women, who have traditionally been conceptualized in terms of the body in western culture,² are attributed a biological power that threatens symbolic systems and, thus, stoke fears of “radical instability and boundarylessness” (Ingebretsen 23). In *Over Her Dead Body: Death, Femininity and the Aesthetic*, Elisabeth Bronfen formulates a theory of female marginality that addresses the closeness of constructions of ‘woman’ and ‘death.’³ Symbolic strategies of unification aim at re-integrating images of femininity and death into a symbolic system that annihilates the marginalized body and returns it to a normative symbolic status as signifier. Since these strategies will turn out to be one of the central concerns of gothic remembering in “It Grows on You,” they require some contextualization. Early on in her analyses Bronfen establishes the conflict between acts of signification (or in terms of this paper: remembering as a means of achieving communal identity) and the presence of physical markers that are not part of the symbolic system (e.g. the corpse).⁴ For

² Bronfen traces this association back to the basic metaphor of femininity = nature, by which “European culture could express nature as the mother and bride, whose primary life-giving functions were to comfort, nurture and provide. Yet nature also embodied unruly disorder, uncivilized wilderness, famines and tempests [...]. In the equation with nature, earth, *body*, Woman was constructed as Other to culture [...].” (66, my emphasis).

³ E.g., Bronfen calls “[d]eath and femininity” the “two central enigmas of western discourse, [which] are used to represent that which is inexpressible, inscrutable, unmanageable, horrible; that which cannot be faced directly but must be controlled by virtue of social laws and art” (255).

⁴ Rosemary Jackson’s, for example, identifies similar mechanisms at the heart of ghost stories, which, by subverting the clear separation between life and death also subvert “those discreet units by which

Bronfen “signification works on the basis of replacing an object with a sign. [...] Therefore signification can be seen as implying an absent body or causing the signified body’s absence” (6). Thus, the presence of the Other’s body stands in the way of normative signification and the cultural task of identity construction is based upon the reconfiguration of women’s bodies into an element of normative symbolic order. In a culture where the self is coded masculine, the Other, in turn, is coded feminine (181). Bronfen remarks further that the female body becomes the target of a “social sacrifice [...] where the death of a beautiful woman emerges as the requirement for a preservation of existing cultural norms and values [...]. Over her dead body, cultural norms are reconfigured and secured” (181). Here again the notion of communal boundaries comes into play. The “anxiety of boundary disintegration” (182) leads to a symbolic reaction aimed at reinforcing these boundaries.⁵ “[I]mages of difference” become the means by which a community aims to overcome the “fear of an ultimate loss of control, of a disruption of boundaries between self and Other, of a dissolution of an ordered and hierarchical world” (182).

The special connection between death and the (female) Other is furthermore defined by the association of these two concepts in terms of their representation. Unable to represent death as anything but the “death of the Other” (Bronfen 190), symbolic conceptualizations of death are intimately connected to the female body. But at the same time they conjure images of the masculine self’s own mortality and reaffirm as well as destabilize identity (191). Again, images of a constitutive Other must be maintained to differentiate it from and reaffirm the stable self. At the same time, their presence constantly calls to mind the Other as a destabilizing force, which in gothic remembering is foregrounded as a haunting and conceptualized as an obstacle in a constant struggle for normative communal identity.

The focus on the Other as body brings me to the next point: the association of the female Other with a pre-symbolic state of physicality and Elisabeth Bronfen’s reading of Julia Kristeva’s theory of the abject as a way of explaining the marginalization of woman in symbolic discourses of unified identity. Normative identity construction depends upon

unitary meaning or ‘reality’ is constituted” (69), thus, positioning death in opposition to symbolic strategies.

⁵ According to Bronfen, these essential differences are “self and other,” “the masculine and the feminine,” “the living and the dead” (182).

mechanisms that guarantee the representation of the symbolic.⁶ Thus, the presence of a pre-symbolic meaning conceptualized as ‘chora’ or ‘semiotic,’ a pre-symbolic process that harkens back to the “instability of the symbolic function” (Kristeva 14), is subjected to “social censorship that is also culture’s protection” (Bronfen 194). The concept of the semiotic chora introduces a signifying process that predates a strictly linguistic means of signification in that it articulates meaning not via language but via “indeterminate articulation of rhythms, ruptures and movements” that respond “to the constraints of the social, symbolic order imposed on the body” (194). In that respect, the presence of the female body as part of the (pre-symbolic) semiotic becomes a signifiatory crisis for the symbolic and occasions the breakdown of signification by “transgress[ing] into the symbolic and disrupt[ing] the societal norms imposed by the symbolic” (Wenk 49). At this point, the structural identification of the female body with death and the violation of boundaries culminate in the notion of the abject. Death as the ultimate Other and the female “metonymically representing the semiotic chora of undisposed, uncertain mobility, of death drives” constitute the abject (Bronfen 195). It provokes an ambivalent violent reaction aimed at reincorporating this aberrant element of unchecked or absent meaning into symbolic order (Wenk 56). In its most basic understanding, the abject as an expression of revulsion as well as transgression plays itself out as that which is not considered part of a clean and proper self, be it vomit, pus, blood, excrement or, in its most extreme state, the corpse (Lloyd-Smith 97). On a larger scale, the abject is used to represent a whole range of deviant elements in social relations governed by the symbolic, the most eminent being the uncontrolled physicality of women, bringing together the threateningly physical and the socially condemned (Wenk 56).

In this context, Bronfen’s analysis of the social sacrifice of women deserves further attention. According to her such a sacrifice constitutes a symbolic act by which “Woman [...] is secured into a fixed position as a dead body” (195). The disturbing elements in a community are thus expelled when

one member of the community draws all the evil or pollution on to its body and purifies the city metonymically through her or his destruction. Sacrifice is ritual violence that keeps the communal violence, agitation and disorder at bay, or ends a

⁶ Bronfen calls that “the symbolic order's main legitimizing edifice” (194).

sequence of violent events to re-found a social order. [...] the physical body is actively offered up so that it can be reborn symbolically, as an image. (196)

Communal order is restored by erasing the abject female body and perpetuating it as an image of difference to establish fundamental communal boundaries. These are based on the symbolic as the cornerstone of communal identity. If an individual (un)consciously ignores or violates the rules of the symbolic and the community, s/he enters a state of boundary dissolution expressed through liminality, a state that can be conceptualized as 'in transition' between realms. The liminal individual is in an ambiguous state where it "is dangerous, inauspicious or polluting precisely due to the fact that this person cannot be clearly classified or falls between classificatory boundaries and unambiguous concepts" (Bronfen 198). The corpse as a special form of liminality receives special attention in theories of the abject for the same reasons. It is a state of being neither subject nor object, it becomes the "utmost of abjection" (Kristeva 4) by being outside of life and the symbolic, without being readily re-integrated into a symbolic framework. That is why Kristeva emphasizes the abject nature of the corpse in terms of "being without God and outside of science" (4),⁷ as both religion and the natural sciences constitute such a symbolic way of conceptualizing death (cf. Becker-Leckrone 34-35).

Here the notion of communal ritual comes into play again, when states of liminality or symbolic uncertainty need to be dissolved (sometimes with torches and pitchforks) for a stable social order to emerge: This is the basic situation of gothic remembering. In gothic texts where the past inadvertently returns as an image of the body of the (often female) Other which must be maintained and contained as symbol but constantly eludes signification by its association with the Kristevan abject, the project of a communal identity shaped by a common past is undermined by the image of the past not persisting as a symbol but as haunting.

Gothic Remembering in "It Grows on You"

Stephen King's short story "It Grows on You," which was published in its final version in his 1993 collection *Nightmares & Dreamscapes*, offers an interesting example of how a community fails to achieve symbolic closure of its past because it remembers gothically and

⁷ Cf. Creed for further explanations of this aspect of the abject (10).

can be considered to be haunted by its own memory. It tells the story of a group of old men in Castle Rock, which is part of King's fictional Maine topography. They meet at the nearly defunct store Brownie's, which is run by one of their peers. As they spend their day talking about the past, their conversation and thoughts inevitably return to the house and the history of early 20th century local magnate Joe Newall and his relations. They recall people and events connected to Joe Newall, his unlucky house, and especially his wife Cora. As the old men's narrative progresses, a pattern emerges: every time someone connected to the house and its inhabitants dies, extensions to the house mysteriously appear. The short story concludes with the death of one of the old-timers, Gary Paulson, who passes on in his sleep after reliving a sexual encounter with Cora in his dreams. Shortly thereafter, "a new cupola starts to go up on the new wing on the Newall house" (King 215).

The narrative structure of "It Grows on You" fits the content in that it switches back and forth between fictional past and present, framing the events concerning Joe with scenes at the store. By doing so, the story intimately links the past to the present via acts of remembering; and, by being internally focalized through the old men, the perspective of the story remains at all times a perspective of analepsis. Thus it invites a reading of the story as mirroring the workings of memory. This narrative move leads, on the one hand, to a conflation of past and present and, on the other hand, to a subjective perspective, that highlights the status of the past not as fact but attributes to it the quality of subjectivity, of gossip, of half-truths, which are colored by the old men's stance towards Newall, a stance that is strictly shaped by their standards of communal identity.

The most obvious example of the marginalized status of Joe Newall comes from the fact that he is not of the town,⁸ an a-priori mark of ostracism, which is reflected in statements like "Joe Newall was not popular in Castle Rock, partly because he made his money out of town, partly because [...] his predecessor [...] had been an all-around nice fellow [...], but mostly because his damned house was built with out-of-town labor" (King 198). The value judgment is transferred to the physical structure of his house, which is considered "ugly beyond all measure" (199) by the town people. In presenting the house as an enduring and

⁸ This becomes evident from the clear limiting of his time in Castle Rock to a fixed period from 1908 to 1925 (King 196).

directly visible fixture of Castle Rock's landscape, "It Grows on You" draws attention to the focus of remembering on images of physicality, a textual move that is also reflected by the focus of narratives of the past on concrete images of the female body of Cora.

The Newall house and the figure of Cora are two manifestations of an imagery of the past that needs to be integrated into unified discourse to be made sense of in terms of communal remembering. Similar to what Allan Lloyd-Smith calls "domestic abjection" (94), images of the house are closely linked to images of the female body. Corresponding to the ugliness of the house, the physical and abject qualities of Cora are emphasized:

She was a grainbag of a woman, incredibly wide across the hips, incredibly full in the butt, yet almost as flat-chested as a boy and possessed of an absurd little pipestem neck upon which her oversized head nodded like a strange pale sunflower. Her cheeks hung like dough, her lips like strips of liver; her face was as silent as a full moon on a winter night. She sweated huge dark patches around the armholes of her dresses even in February, and she carried a dank smell of perspiration with her always. (King 198)

Conversely, the house itself is only described vaguely and takes on qualities of the in-between, like its "deathly look" (194), its "strange angles" (198), hinting at the conflation of femininity and death in remembering. Cora's abject body and "engulfing flesh" (Badley 59) is linked to the house not only by temporal criteria (the house was built by Joe Newall for Cora after their marriage) but both are the subject of social regulation. The short story mentions, for example, acts of vandalism committed against the house (King 198, 204), or the gossip surrounding Cora's death: "A rumor went through town (it probably originated at a Ladies Aid bake sale) that she had been stark naked at the time" (200). The abject imagery culminates in the birth of Cora's child, which again is retold not by a distant omniscient narrative voice, but foregrounds the perspective of the community:

In January of 1921, Cora gave birth to a monster with no arms and, *it was said*, a tiny clutch of perfect fingers sticking out of one eyesocket. It died less than six hours after mindless contractions had pushed its red and senseless face into the light" (199, my emphasis).

Immediately following that scene, the story again shifts back to the fictional present: "In the store they talked about Joe Newall and Joe's wife and Joe's house [...]. Mostly it was the house of which they spoke; it was considered to be an affront to the sensibilities and an offense to the eye. 'But it grows on you,' Clayton Clutterbuck [...] sometimes remarked"

(200). In the titular statement about the house, the physical features of the house are foregrounded to mirror the reactions to the physical qualities of Cora. What remains of the past are memories of and feelings towards Cora and the house that are difficult to articulate because they evoke images that emphasize the body over the mind, such as boundarylessness, revulsion, and feeding.⁹ The abject images of female physicality are foregrounded in remembered images and, when linked to the house, become not only constructions of social mechanisms within the town, but remain unresolved in the conflation of a past characterized by rumor and a present characterized by lack of anything but these images as vehicles of memory.

This poses the question of how these abject images are integrated into a coherent symbolic construction of town identity. The violent reactions against the house in the past point towards the urge to make sense of it by annihilation. What is more important, though, is the retrospective fragmentation of memory and meaning that leads to the gothic element of the story: the haunting here takes place in the fissions between actual remembering and the silencing of certain aspects of the past (to construct a normative version of past events). Clayton Clutterbuck's statement that the house grows on you points towards the core problem of this process: remembering is no longer a symbolic act; instead, it has become a pre-symbolic form of processing signification that happens below community's consciousness. The quote above continues with a remark about the meaning of the titular phrase: "There was never any answer to this. It was a statement with absolutely no meaning . . . yet at the same time it was a patent fact" (King 200). This points towards a different kind of signification process, namely that of gothic remembering. Here images of the past dissolve into shards of pre-symbolic signification, which are rather sensed than mastered. It is at the same time bound up with the community as it is elusive in its meaning.

I read the phonic correspondence of Joe's wife's name 'Cora' with Kristeva's semiotic 'chora' as an escalation of semiotic processes, where the female body escapes clear signification and is bound up with the two other components of female marginality: sexuality and death.

⁹ A further indicator for the identical affective dynamics surrounding Cora and the house is the voyeuristic spectacle that both represent for the town. Both Cora and the house draw the community's gaze, despite their revolting physical features. The assessment that "[s]ooner or later, you had to look" (King 200) is true both for the house and for Cora's growing presence in memory.

Steven Bruhm conceptualizes the presence of the Other in King's work as producing "flickers of signification" (79) that lead to the feeling of horror that pervades King's writing. In terms of gothic remembering, these flickers manifest themselves as images of the Other that are "unintelligible" (Bruhm 79). Their quality as unintelligible stems from their closeness to themes of the Other in "It Grows on You." These are again made visible as images of the female Other's body and linked intimately to femininity and death.

"It Grows on You" establishes a close connection between death and the female body. For instance, childbirth does not transform Cora from wanton body into a mother,¹⁰ but it is steeped in grotesque images of death. Because they persist in memory, these images transport not a cohesive narrative of the past (of Cora, of the house), but incoherently emerge to the surface in the process of remembering. In that respect, the unintelligibility of the female body becomes a crisis in meaning that turns allegedly factual memories into manifestations of the pre-symbolic in their closeness to the physical. Images of Cora's female sexuality become the most prominent vehicle of representing what cannot be comprehended: These images increase in intensity, violate conventions, and intrude into the normative narrative of the past that the old men attempt to explore in their conversations. At times the attempted factual retelling of the house's history progresses beyond the Newall couple and revolves around legal matters and the intricacies of ownership of the house (King 207). However, their narrative inevitably and seemingly unconsciously returns to images of Cora and the house that interfere with the closure to the house's story, a fact that the men themselves are vaguely aware of (211). Their memories about individual townspeople's involvement with the house are repeatedly interrupted by stories about Cora, most importantly by rumors about her having molested a local boy (King 212). This disclosure does not reward them with closure, however, but with uneasiness and "[s]ilence again, except for the wind and the clapping shutter" (King 212). In "It Grows on You," images of the Other achieve the breakdown of unifying discourse instead of establishing discursive power over the Other (cf. Bruhm 83). The old men are left with memories, unable to share and articulate them. They are caught up in their own impending death mirrored for example

¹⁰ Cf. Waller who contrasts the "'natural' mother" as a figure who gives birth to healthy children under the "authority of doctors and husbands" with the abject mother, whose "womb is fatal" (150).

by images of their friends dying in a hospital.¹¹

These (present) images of doom and decay permeate the story and cater to the final point of my analysis, namely how these excesses of physicality and death,¹² these hauntings, are transported from the past into the present as symptoms of an unsuccessful normative remembering that fuels the dynamics of gothic remembering. The excess of physicality persists through time and is manifest in the constant presence of the house, the indestructible gothic edifice in the story. It is a solid remains and reminder of physicality that ties remembering firmly to physical structures in the community. The house, which feeds on death and grows whenever someone associated with it dies, becomes a threatening liminal monument to the signification processes of the pre-symbolic that cannot be absorbed into a unified narrative of the past. Death becomes an active force in the community through the house in that it denotes the gothic impossibility of forgetting. The fact that the house persists marks the inability to fully integrate the Other into communal identity as a symbol. The house is inscrutable, creates uneasiness and mirrors the uneasiness of remembering. It cannot take up the role of the fixed body that provides closure because it is itself uncanny, abject, liminal, “a booger you can’t flick off the end of your finger” (King 207).

In that respect the house stands for a quasi-infection of Castle Rock by the pre-symbolic as a powerful, elusive condition of remembering steeped in the abject imagery of the past. The town seems to be “dying” (King 206); it is compared to “a dark tooth ready to fall out” (213); it is itself transforming into a corpse (cf. Collings 40). As indicated by the failing bodies of the old men who remember, death is a persistent element in remembering. It is ever elusive, Other, bound up by images of the female body as hauntings. In that respect, the gothic of “It Grows on You” is not so much grounded in the supernatural, although it is never made clear how the house expands. What haunts and destabilizes Castle Rock is the intrusion of the past into the present via remembering, a process that invariably focuses on abject images of the past and the inability to account for their presence in symbolic terms.

¹¹ One of them thinks about how, for example, one of their friends died of cancer and “looked as if he had already started to rot” (King 213).

¹² Another prominent gothic image of the past is, for example, Joe's aspirations to become a “gentleman farmer” (King 201) which ends in “sixteen cows layin dead on their backs with their legs stickin up like fence posts” (King 202), as one onlooker remarks.

The final manifestation of this haunting and the most direct literalization of its destabilizing power comes at the end of the story. Gary Paulson directly experiences Cora as the recurring abject female in a dream/memory where sexuality and death are conflated as directly as nowhere else in the story.

She saw Gary and reached down with her free hand to grasp the hem of her housedress. She did not smile. That tremendous moon of her face was pallid and empty as she raised the dress, revealing her sex to him [...]. And still not smiling but only looking at him gravely, she pistoned her hips at his gaping, amazed face as he passed her by. (King 213)

In the end Paul dies in his sleep, obliterated by the direct confrontation with the abject female body, the “cannibalizing black hole from which all life comes and to which all life returns” (Creed 25). Driven by the compulsion of remembering in abject images and the *jouissant* encounter¹³ with Cora’s “exclamatory slit” (King 214), the collapse of symbolic order is literalized in the death of the phallic rememberer. In that passage, the ambivalent condition of gothic remembering in “It Grows on You” is made clear: it is in the necessary image of the Other that identity is grounded, but at the same time, the Other is an image that borders on and provokes collapse because it is itself outside of the symbolic. It is appealing because it is so blatant and archaic¹⁴ but dangerous because it remains abject. It cannot be unified in normative discourse, its culmination is death without symbolic closure.

Conclusion

“It Grows on You” broaches the issue of remembering and identity in a gothic context. It relates the abject qualities of physical bodies to social regulation but shows how images of the past must be maintained to define communal and personal identity. The central gothic element of the story is the inability to incorporate images of the past into present identity. This leads to a haunting that persists because it cannot be integrated into symbolic order but retains the qualities of the pre-symbolic in its focus on themes of the unnameable, like femininity and death. The story shows these excesses of physicality as destructive by ascribing to them a haunting quality that cannot be overcome because they cannot be

¹³ Cf. Waller, who establishes *joissance* as a recurring theme in King's work, where the subject is both repelled and fascinated by the abject (154).

¹⁴ Cf. Creed for a discussion of the archetype of the archaic mother and its association with death and the monstrous (28-30).

forgotten. The story literalizes the destructive influence and the power of the past in the persistent physical structure of the house. Remembering is thus directly related to place and the everyday surroundings of the community. It culminates in the realization that recurring images of the past (femininity/sexuality/death) lead to a never ending repetition of collapse because of the inability to consciously integrate the past symbolically into the present and provide normative closure as an alternative to remembering. This is a crisis that I call gothic remembering.

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