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## The Angel and the Whore in Gothic Literature: Sexuality, Transgression, and the Female Body

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### Abstract

This research looks into the common angel-whore duality in Gothic literature. It looks at how this binary both reflects and challenges patriarchal ideas about what it means to be a woman, sexuality, and transgression. The study examines significant literary works, such as *Frankenstein* by Mary Shelley, *Dracula* by Bram Stoker, and *The Monk* by Matthew Lewis, to illustrate how female characters are frequently restricted to dichotomous portrayals of virtue or vice. By contrasting the virtuous heroine with the sexually deviant woman, these works both support and undermine strict gender standards. The idea of the "liminal female body," which includes both human and posthuman forms, is looked at as a place of resistance that challenges fixed identities and offers different ways of showing women's power. The research illustrates that Gothic literature addresses cultural worries over female desire and liberty, ultimately challenging the binary constraints placed on women. Through physical abuse, unclear boundaries, and grotesque depictions, gothic stories challenge common ideas and make people rethink their gender identities.

**Keywords:** Gothic literature, angel-whore binary, female sexuality, transgression, *liminality*, female agency, monstrosity, patriarchy, corporeal boundaries, Victorian fiction

### Introduction

The contrast of the angel and the whore in Gothic literature serves as a thorough investigation of feminine identity, sexuality, and societal transgression. Rooted in the patriarchal traditions of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, this binary opposition depicts the contrasting roles placed upon women, swinging between virtuous purity and harmful promiscuity. The female body becomes a primary location of power and anxiety, often depicted as either a symbol of moral virtue or a vessel of sexual transgression. By depicting women in dual positions as objects of desire and victims, the female Gothic novel questions conventional gender norms, argues Mulvey-Roberts (2016). This contradiction embodies the larger concerns about women's independence and sexuality during a time when societal standards are changing. By juxtaposing the tropes of the virtuous heroine with the sexually deviant woman, Gothic literature often illustrates the conflict between female virtue and sexual transgression. The protagonist, a virgin, is frequently paired with the figure of the seductress in Gothic literature from the eighteenth

century, as pointed out by Catnach (2016). This reinforces the moral dichotomy of the virgin versus the whore. This duality serves to both uphold patriarchal notions and highlight the female body's revolutionary capacity to question societal norms. By expressing desire and monstrosity, the transgressive female body destabilizes conventional concepts of femininity and reflects the underlying fear of female sexual agency (Lindsey, 2011). Aktari (2010) looks at how postmodern British female Gothic literature uses the degraded female body as a way to protest against patriarchal oppression. This explores the Gothic genre's interest in the female form, including depictions of female deformity and abjection. These stories subvert the stifling dichotomy between the angel and the whore by depicting feminine sexuality as disturbing and freeing both. In a similar vein, Reyes (2014) contends that modern Gothic literature and horror films challenge conventional depictions of female sexuality through corporeal transgression, which highlights women's visceral, bodily experiences.

The vampiric woman further complicates the link between feminine sexuality and monstrosity. Sceats (2001) highlights that the vampiric female protagonists in Gothic fiction blur the boundaries between victim and predator, challenging the simplistic categorization of women as either virtuous or evil. Genre works have a way of challenging cultural fears about female sexuality and transgression through depictions of female desire that are both powerful and harmful. Gothic novels' sexualized portrayal of female aggression critiques patriarchal efforts to control women's bodies and desires (Hritz 2014). The overarching message of Gothic literature is that feminine identity defies reduction to black-and-white moral categories; specifically, that sexual transgression is a recurrent motif in Gothic literature. Kohlke (2012) says that neo-Victorian Gothic books fight against these limiting binaries by having female protagonists who deal with complicated and often contradictory ways of showing desire and agency. Gothic literature encourages readers to reevaluate the connection between sexuality, transgression, and the female body by emphasizing the diversity of female experiences.

### **Historical Context of the Angel-Whore Binary**

Patriarchal societies, particularly those of the Victorian and earlier ages, are the cultural incubators of the angel-whore dualism. This dualism established two distinct categories of women: the ethically pure "angel" and the sexually corrupt "whore." The binary system limited women's agency and expected them to act in ways that were stereotypically associated with men. Dittmer (2021) posits that the binary representations of women in Victorian Gothic literature reflected societal concerns about women's agency and sexuality. The similar subject is explored by Crachiolo (2019), who looks at how the angel-whore binary was utilized by early modern English discourses to control women's desires and education. This demonstrates how society wants women to be perfect while being scared of their immorality. Stage performances of female identity were the subject of either laudation for the actors' virtue or condemnation for their immorality, as Lee (2014) demonstrates. This duality served to exacerbate gender inequality while simultaneously exposing the frailty of patriarchal systems that sought to relegate women to subordinate roles in society. There are many literary, theatrical, and cultural narratives that

feature the angel-whore duality, and this has influenced historical perspectives on female identity and morality.

### **Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*: The Absence of Female Agency**

The absence of female agency in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818) acts as a critical reflection on the patriarchal systems of the day, reflecting the marginalization of women in both literature and society. Throughout the work, female characters like Elizabeth, Justine, and Safie are typically consigned to passive roles, with their voices suppressed or overwhelmed by the strong male characters. The suffocating gender dynamics that governed women's lives in the 19th century are highlighted by this dearth of female representation. In her story, Shelley shows how disastrous things are when women aren't included in positions of power and expertise (Ens, 2014). In a similar vein, Cardillo (2022) contends that the book shows how women are helpless in a patriarchal culture where men control most of the power. *Frankenstein* is both a story of scientific arrogance and a mirror of gendered power imbalances. It is a representation of patriarchal tyranny and the victimization of women, as shown in the book. By removing women's agency from her works, Shelley subverts the social conventions of her time and compels readers to reconsider the constraints imposed on women in fiction and in real life.

### **Bram Stoker's *Dracula*: Sexual Desire and Female Transgression**

An important part of Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897) is the exploration of sexual desire and female transgression, which questions the strict Victorian-era gender standards. The sexuality of strong female characters, like Mina Harker and Lucy Westenra, is frequently depicted as a source of both allure and terror. Craft (1984) argues that the story portrays female vampires as symbols of sexual deviation and challenges to patriarchal norms. Similarly, Cranny-Francis (1988) emphasizes how the text depicts the repression and violence that women face when they defy established sexual norms. This underscores the concerns of that time about women's autonomy. Domínguez-Rué (2010) delves deeper into the ways in which the novel's depiction of feminine hunger and sexual desire exposes cultural apprehensions about women expressing their sensual desires. The depiction of female vampires sheds light on the hidden power relations that attempt to regulate female sexuality while simultaneously challenging heteronormative norms. As a reflection of societal concerns about changing gender roles in Victorian England, Stoker's writing highlights the patriarchal urge to regulate women's bodies and aspirations by associating them with horrific imagery.

### **Matthew Lewis's *The Monk*: Corruption and Female Power**

The dichotomy of "angel/whore" has been a recurring issue in literary discourse, particularly within Victorian Gothic fiction, when female characters are generally depicted within rigid binary frameworks. This depiction illustrates society's apprehensions regarding women's aspirations and the possibility of ethical degradation. Dittmer (2021) examines how this distinction underscores the apprehension around feminine inclinations, with wildness symbolizing female deformity and unrestrained desire and hence contesting patriarchal confines within Gothic narratives. Chatterjee (2008) analyzes Charlotte Dacre's paintings, which disrupt the usual angel/whore dichotomy by depicting female characters with masculine attributes, thus challenging established gender roles and interrogating the binary distinction between feminine virtue and corruption. Moreover, Chow (2023) examines how eighteenth-century works, such as

Matthew Lewis's *The Monk* (1796), perpetuate the angel/whore dichotomy while concurrently depicting water as a queer, destabilizing force that challenges strict gender conventions. These works jointly illustrate how Victorian Gothic fiction simultaneously sustains and undermines the patriarchal systems that aim to regulate female sexuality and subjectivity.

### **Blurring Boundaries: The *Liminal* Female Body**

The concept of *liminality*, frequently linked with transitory areas and blurred borders, plays a key role in constructing identities, particularly those of marginalized groups such as women and non-binary individuals. Frenkel and Wasserman (2023) examine how women-only religious spaces function as *liminal* locations that contest conventional societal norms, enabling women to forge identities that straddle traditional and modern responsibilities. Robertson (2018) expands upon Victor Turner's idea of *liminality* by emphasizing how non-binary individuals inhabit precarious in-between areas, both socially and physically, where conventional gender boundaries are perpetually contested. In 2005, Gough looked at cyborg subjectivities as transitional experiences that make it hard to tell the difference between human and machine. She used these experiences as a powerful metaphor for how women's identities are broken up in modern society. Hegde (2024) elaborates on this by examining posthuman female bodies in science fiction, highlighting their *liminal* characteristics that challenge rigid classifications and subvert patriarchal structures. MacDonald (2007) looks at how menstruation leaks can change people's lives by showing that they are crossing boundaries and questioning how society controls women's bodily functions. These studies collectively demonstrate how *liminal* places disrupt fixed identities, providing underprivileged bodies with a pathway for resistance and redefinition.

### **Conclusion**

Looking at the angel-whore contrast in Gothic literature helps us understand how difficult it is for women to deal with their sexuality, identity, and breaking the rules in a society dominated by men. This research examines pivotal texts including *Frankenstein*, *Dracula*, and *The Monk*, illustrating how the strict moral binary of the virtuous woman against the sexually deviant woman simultaneously reinforces and contests prevailing gender ideas. The recurrent reduction of female characters to passive victims or perilous seductresses highlights the apprehension over female desire and agency throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The destabilization of this dichotomy through representations of *liminal* female bodies and monster women undermines conventional gender norms and presents alternative narratives of female empowerment.

The allure of the transgressive female body in Gothic literature mirrors wider cultural conflicts regarding women's societal roles, particularly during times of social upheaval. When desire, monsters, and power interact symbolically, they challenge rigid ideas of what it means to be a woman and show how complicated and often contradictory female identity really is. The archetype of the vampiric lady, the hideous feminine form, and the disadvantaged female subject serve as potent symbols of female defiance against patriarchal oppression. These narratives reveal the vulnerability of patriarchal systems while suggesting alternative frameworks for understanding female agency beyond binary constraints. The Gothic genre continues to provide a rich context for examining the interplay of gender, power, and physicality. By conflating the distinctions between the angel and the whore, Gothic literature interrogates essentialist

conceptions of female identity and underscores the diversity of women's experiences. The genre pushes readers to interrogate the societal frameworks that attempt to define women in reductive terms and fosters a more sophisticated comprehension of female subjectivity. The subversion of traditional binaries in Gothic literature reflects and challenges the repressive systems that influence women's lives, illustrating the genre's lasting significance in feminist discourse.

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