"Something is Wrong in the House" of Fiction: Domestic and Gothic Hauntings in Kathryn Davis's *Hell*

by Kelcey Parker

> "The house of fiction has... not one window, but a million.... They have this mark of their own that at each of them stands a figure with a pair of eyes, or at least with a field-instrument, insuring to the person making use of it an impression distinct from any other.... The spreading field, the human scene is the 'choice of subject'; the pierced aperture, either broad or balconied or slit-like and low-browed, is the "literary form"; but they are, singly or together, as nothing without the posted presence of the watcher -- without, in other words, the consciousness of the artist."
>
> -- Henry James

In the above quote from the preface to *The Portrait of a Lady*, Henry James sets his "house of fiction" in clear contrast to the "spreading field" outside of it, revealing a comfortable sense of the boundaries between interior and exterior, and, thus, between writer and subject. From the window, the writer watches and observes his (or, parenthetically, *her*)[1] subject, the "human scene," and shapes it into "literary form." But what happens when the eyes gazing out from the windows of the house of fiction are only parenthetically acknowledged? That is, when they are a woman's eyes? The issues implied by these questions have been the concern of writers and critics long before "the woman problem" was named. And, as suggested in the fiction of some of our leading women writers today, the issues remain relevant. Kathryn Davis is a contemporary writer whose critically acclaimed body of work sounds off about these concerns—often quietly—while remaining artful in her prose and focused on the story at hand.

In the opening lines of her novel 1998 novel, *Hell*, Davis's narrator stands before a window that may be in any one of the three houses described in the novel. Or it may, perhaps, be in the house of fiction:

> Something is wrong in the house. Of course you're dismayed. You have every right to be, for haven't you followed the rules to the letter, ridding your rooms of all corruption, the mite-infested cheese, the flyblown mutton, the sour bed linens, the dung-caked boots? […] Yet how can it be that when you permit yourself a moment's relaxation, standing at the window you washed only yesterday, its panes don't reflect back the bright prospect of a clear conscience, but the treacherous face of the world?
> And what's the use, really, if you can no longer tell the difference? What's the use if you can no longer tell where your face leaves off and the gray sky begins? (1)

[1] In the paragraph that precedes the one cited in the epigraph, James speaks of the novel being "created by conditions that are never the same from man to man (or, so far as that goes, man to *woman*)" (7, italics mine).

The boundaries between inside and outside, and between narrator and reader, are immediately and disturbingly blurred. James's "spreading field" becomes a "treacherous face." James's distinctly removed "watcher" becomes a face indistinguishable from the gray sky. And James's "'choice of subject'" is conflated with the "consciousness of the artist" when Davis's narrator insists on placing the reader ("you") before the window. In fact, throughout this relatively short but very complex novel, Davis slants and skews plot, point of view, and generic expectations—not to mention time and space—and in doing so she offers a new perspective on a woman's place in the house of fiction.

The novel has, ostensibly, two first-person narrators. One is Edwina Moss, a nineteenth-century expert on home economics, who idolizes Napoleon's chef, Antonin Carême. Her mind (for reasons our other narrator will explain) is unraveling, and her entire narration is one sentence—a sentence that covers several chapters as well as the last seventeen pages of the book. The other first-person narrator is the elder daughter in the 1950s Philadelphia home looking back upon her childhood. In 1982, she tends to her father who is staying in her former bedroom following a stroke, and we are given his perspective alternately in first- and close third-person, though this seems to be filtered through the grown daughter/narrator. This narrator also provides the story of the doll family living in her childhood dollhouse, whose names, lives, and daily dramas parallel her own. In one section, this narrator offers information about two of the town's earliest citizens, Jacob and Arden Starkweather. Jacob paints two paintings that look identical, but one is titled *Heaven*, the other, *Hell*. Jacob, it turns out, is also the great-grandfather of Edwina Moss, near whose cottage the primary narrator's friend, Joy Harbison, is found dead after Hurricane Hazel in 1955. Thus connected geographically, the three narratives are also linked by plot and by names—Edwina and Edwin (the narrator's father), a servant named Henny, a Dr. Wingfield, and a Miss MacConchie, and a daughter suffering from an unknown disease that causes her to starve herself. The primary motor of the 1950s plot is the mystery of Joy Harbison's death. Was her death an accident caused by the hurricane, or was she murdered—possibly by the narrator's bachelor-intellectual-Jew neighbor, who leads the neighborhood children on woodland hikes and teaches them about "Camoooooo"? But ultimately the novel is not interested in the type of resolution that comes from the answering of mysteries, and in Edwina's closing seventeen-page sentence, the novel becomes increasingly urgent as Moss is unable to find her ailing daughter, who is involved—just upstairs—with a sexual encounter with a gypsy. Chaos reigns both inside the home and outside, where the Civil War is underway, until Moss ends the book by announcing, "YOUR HOUSE IS ON FIRE!" (179).

Hell has been well received by critics who appreciate the novel's complexity. Michael Griffith calls it "an exquisitely written and meticulously architected novel" (587), and Joy Katz praises its "grandly orphic structure" (par. 3). In more neutral terms, Kathryn Harrison calls the novel "the hell of a fever dream," and claims that "[n]ot only does the book make no attempt to orient the reader, it betrays an almost perverse desire to baffle and misdirect" (C3). And this is the very point of the novel, named as it is. Michael Griffith recognizes that Davis "for the most part abjures conventional story elements,

and this may confound the reader who craves the pleasures and palliations of plot." But, he argues, "[p]lotlessness is exactly the right stratagem for this novel, which is in large part about the fact that every plot must necessarily unravel" (587). Davis's complicated structure and defiance of resolution are a response to a set of implied literary expectations. As a result, not all critics have responded favorably.

At 179 pages, *Hell* is a relatively short book. "Brief and relentless" (Harrison C3) though it is, in today's literary market, long books—mostly those written by men—are privileged by prize committees as well as by academic scholars. Tom LeClair calls this "the art of excess," and in his book thusly titled, he lauds long systems novels—novels that are constantly suggesting the interconnectivity of human systems and that point ever outward to global concerns. He has little patience for "domestic" and personal concerns portrayed in novels such as *The Color Purple*.[2] *Hell* is a short novel narrated by women about their households. As one may predict, Tom LeClair wrote a rather scathing review of it. But how could it have been otherwise? As LeClair admits in his opening paragraph, the last three books he reviewed were Thomas Pynchon's *Mason & Dixon* (772 pages), Don DeLillo's *Underworld* (827 pages), and John Updike's *Toward the End of Time* (at 352 pages, it is less than half the length of the others, but twice as long as *Hell*). The good news is that Davis's novel was reviewed in an esteemed journal (*The Nation*) and in such esteemed company. The bad news is that Davis's brand of postmodern fiction is dismissed by LeClair, who concedes rather condescendingly that he might be "sensitive-adolescent challenged." He then suggests other possible reasons for his dislike of the novel: "Gender might be the reason I'm withholding praise. Or maybe Davis and Hell are victims of an assigning accident and Barthian self-consciousness" (30). LeClair puts Davis in a no-win situation: her subject matter is too banal and her self-awareness of this potential problem is passé. "Thirty years later," LeClair says, referring to the years since the publication of John Barth's *Lost in the Funhouse*, "Davis's Trapped in the Dollhouse reads like The Handbook of Postmodernism." And, accordingly, he reviews the novel in a form that mimics "The Handbook of Postmodernism," thus accusing Davis of following a prescribed pattern of postmodernism. Referring to Davis's opening passage quoted above, LeClair writes, "Introduction: After insulting the reader, assault all realistic conventions." Though it is not entirely clear how Davis insults the reader in her beginning, we return to the opening point of this essay when LeClair quips: "Ch. 5: Create meta-dimensions. […] Come forward through dollhouses and James's house of fiction to Barth's funhouse and Hell as a house of tormented souls." Davis, it seems safe to conclude from this review, is an uninvited guest in the house of fiction.

But, as LeClair accuses her, Davis is well aware of her predicament. In a November 2003 interview, Jessa Crispin asks Davis why, as the novel's narrator claims, "the lives of two adolescent girls are not what great books are written about" (par. 19). Davis is quick to acknowledge that this subject is certainly "neglected in what is considered 'serious' literature" (par. 20), and she weighs in on the contemporary scene:

[2] LeClair neglects to acknowledge the very large section of the book devoted to Nettie's missionary work in Africa. If racism, sexism, or domestic violence are not large enough concerns, one would hope that colonialism is.

> I think that's what really infuriates me, that certain level of bigness that a lot of 30- to 40-year-olds are writing great, big, fat books that are supposed to have a great, big, fat scope to them, as if the thickness of the book somehow has to do with the seriousness of the book, and it has to talk about things in a comprehensive way politically and historically in order to be considered serious literature. (par. 21)

Just as Tom LeClair neglects to admit that length was probably also a factor in his negative review of *Hell*, Davis neglects to mention—though one might deem it safe to infer—that the "30- to 40-year-olds" she is referring to, who are writing "great, big, fat books," are primarily men. Following on the heels of Pynchon and DeLillo are the highly praised Michael Chabon, Jeffrey Eugenides, and David Foster Wallace.[3] Davis admits to wanting to make a point with her novel, *Versailles*: "I really wanted my book *Versailles* to be not a big fat book, but I wanted it to be dealing with things that I think of as important things" (par. 21).

But apparently what Davis thinks of as important differs from what critics like Tom LeClair think of as important. It was ultimately Davis's perceived lack of comprehensive politics and history that was the final concern for LeClair, who ends his review by contrasting the bourgeois problems of Davis's narrators—who apparently should count themselves lucky to *have* houses—with those of refugees living in tents: "The [refugee] isn't speaking about childhood unhappiness or gender anxiety or historical uneasiness but fear of persecution, not Davis's spiritual torment but actual terror, torture, disappearance, murder, genocide" (30).[4] LeClair does not recognize or acknowledge the link between Davis's Hell, which stems from the only logical conclusion her narrator(s) can make about life—that it is one big accident caused by a capricious God, that one might be struck dead at any moment for any reason, that home is no refuge—and the "actual" terrors of refugees. In the novel, the narrator's young friend is found dead—possibly murdered by the man across the street, and possibly the culmination of an inappropriate sexual relationship—after a hurricane. The narrator herself has an unnamed disease (tuberculosis is anachronistically intimated) that may or may not ultimately kill her. Both the nineteenth- and twentieth-century narrative threads have war—the Civil War and the Cold War, respectively—as backdrops. Terror? Torture? Murder? Present and accounted for in *Hell*.

That the above issues are filtered through the perspective of an adolescent or insane narrator may cause them to feel less immediate, but they are there nonetheless. And this brings us to another of Davis's self-conscious strategies: the manipulation of the Gothic. By employing Gothic tropes and allusions, Davis is able to offer a feminist critique of the persistence of separate spheres in her book's houses as well as in the house of fiction. At the same time, Davis comments upon the larger political and historical concerns of the structure of American society from the Civil War to the Cold

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[3] Michael Chabon's Pulitzer Prize-winning novel, *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay,* is 656 pages; Jeffrey Eugenides's *Middlesex* is 544 pages; David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest* is 1088 pages.
[4] The end of the review duly notes that LeClair's forthcoming book is about refugees in the Middle East.

War—and beyond. Davis employs Gothic strategies to inscribe her text into a "tradition" of women's writing, manipulating what Anne Williams identifies as Male and Female Gothic plots in order to make a more ambiguous narrative, and ultimately to claim both plots as her own.

In *The Contested Castle*, Kate Ferguson Ellis states that the Gothic "is preoccupied with […] the failed home […] from which some (usually 'fallen' men) are locked out, and other (usually 'innocent' women) are locked in" (ix). Thus the Gothic, she says, is written "by women for women" and acts as "a site of resistance" (xvi). In *Gothic (Re)Visions*, Susan Wolstenholme goes even further by claiming, "the Gothic narrative has special potential to deal with the issues of writing and reading as a woman" (xi). Wolstenholme offers a fresh and compelling argument that the structures and allusions of Gothic fiction "suggest a meditation on the issue of writing as a woman" (xi). She offers an approach that differs from the "masculinist models" of "'influence' and 'inheritance'" (xii) articulated by Harold Bloom and utilized by Gilbert and Gubar, and she asks a question, one that certainly seems at the heart of *Hell*: "how to square any woman writer's 'anxiety of authorship,' her tentative assumption of the masculine-defined, masculine-identified textual voice, with that same writer's reinscription in her own texts of the texts of other women writers?" (xii). Davis's "anxiety of authorship" is reflected in her interview with Crispin. She acknowledges that very little "serious" literature is written about girls and that "you had a couple of women who were grudgingly permitted to enter the canon, but for the most part even what they dealt with was […] always a little suspect" (par. 20). In *Hell*, Davis's narrator reads the sentimental and Gothic works of past women writers—works not considered "serious" within the academy, but which the narrator took very seriously as a young girl. She tries to understand the world she lives in by reading and understanding the systems of justice (i.e. the *plots*) of these tales. I would like to read *Hell*—and its inscription of these texts—according to Wolstenholme's suggestion that "writers reread one another's texts, almost as a special code which conveyed a message about writing" (xii). Ultimately, Davis affirms and validates women's writing—her own, and that of past writers unrecognized by the academy.

In *Hell*, the narrator's playmate is found dead after the hurricane that threatened to destroy the neighborhood's homes. The narrator herself suffers from anorexia, which has either caused or resulted from another potentially life-threatening illness. Her father is having affairs in Atlantic City; her mother is a drunk. She attempts to understand her very confusing world by reviewing the plots of her favorite books:

> Cause of death? It's never simple. For instance does Beth March die of scarlet fever, or is she the victim of her goodness, her unselfishness, the fact that she tends the sick Hummel baby when none of the other Little Women can be bothered? Goodness won't protect you; if you're too good you will die, but then it can be seen as a kind of reward. Both Little Diamond, who dies of goodness and fever, and the Little Prince, who dies of goodness and snakebite, have longed to "go home" to heaven. When the Little Match Girl freezes to death on New Year's Eve it is her only means of joining her dead

> grandmother. (27)

Thus the narrator learns what all readers of sentimental fiction learn: that some children are simply too good to live. Interestingly, Davis both inscribes and inverts this motif in *Hell*. Joy Harbison dies, but no one really liked her much anyway: "She makes my blood run cold, my mother used to boast, miming a shiver. And, truly, there was nothing charming or lovable about Joy" (59). Later the narrator says, "I confess, sometimes I really couldn't stand her, but I never wished her dead" (148). So, in *Hell*, one might die for being too good as well as for not being good enough. Or for no reason at all.

The narrator persists in her attempt to derive a moral pattern from nineteenth-century fiction:

> You'll die if you're too little, but also if you're too loving, especially if, like Anne Shirley's beloved Matthew Cuthbert, the object of your love requires your death to learn an important lesson or advance the plot ("…and no life is ever quite the same again when once that cold, sanctifying touch has been laid upon it"). For this reason parents are frequently expendable: Mary Lennox's mother and father die of cholera in India ("…the place was so quiet…no one in the bungalow but herself and the little rustling snake"); Elnora Comstock's father drowns in the Limberlost ("…that oozy green hole with the thick scum broke, and two or three big bubbles slowly rising that were the breath of his body"). The deaths of animals, unless anthropomorphized (e.g. Charlotte) don't count, ditto supernatural deaths (anything in Poe; the son in "The Monkey's Paw"), though Cathy Earnshaw's an exception, since knowing whether she dies of madness, consumption, or a broken heart ("…nothing that God or Satan could inflict would have parted us, *you*, of your own will did it… I have not broken your heart—*you* have broken it; and in breaking it, you have broken mine") is crucial to measuring her future power as a ghost. (27-28)

This quote illustrates several aspects of our discussion. Wolstenholme is interested in "reflexive gestures in texts […], instances where these texts teach us to read them as re-writings that are re-readings" (xiv), and clearly Davis's analysis of these sentimental and Gothic texts both affirms their place and their importance within a primarily women's "tradition,"[5] and simultaneously establishes her own work within that "symbolic community" (Wolstenholme's term). What Davis's narrator finds is that these nineteenth-century texts which attempted to work within a clear moral and mortal system—that is to say, within established binaries of right and wrong, life and death—revealed a system as spurious and contradictory as the narrator's threatening 1950s world, where, amid fears of polio and other threats, "[t]he public towel is a scourge, likewise public swimming pools, a kiss, a breath. Vaccinations will not help, nor screens on your windows, pounce-boxes, lightning rods, an aligned spinal column, a pure heart, an unblemished soul" (28).

[5] Note that the texts by men—"anything in Poe; the son in 'The Monkey's Paw'"—"don't count."

Davis's extended discussion of nineteenth-century texts suggests that her relationship to them is similar to what Wolstenholme describes. Wolstenholme argues that "[t]he scene of a woman writing, rewritten into another woman-signed text in similar terms, doubly acts as a model for the transaction between reader and text, because by evoking another text it again calls attention to the act of writing it describes" (xiv). Thus, Davis provides an example of a writer (Davis herself) struggling with the very concerns of faith and fate that a previous generation of (primarily) women writers addressed. With her deadpan humor, Davis seems to acknowledge the redundant simplicity of the plots, but at the same time, these earlier texts about "little" women and match girls give Davis permission to write about the life of an adolescent girl in a contemporary world with "sensitive-adolescent challenged" critics.

Importantly, Davis's novel takes Wolstenholme's ideas about the transaction between reader and text one step further by inscribing scenes that don't just refer to women's writing or attempt to understand them, but that present a character in the act of reading. The eldest daughter most is often reading *Wuthering Heights*. The first chapter, for example, ends with a description of the sounds in the house ("rain hitting the roof […] the click-click-click of the dachshund's toenails on the linoleum"), and the narrator, who is in bed reading and has claimed to be drowsy says, "Not drowsy, no. Sad, rather: "Be with me always—take any form—drive me mad!" Nothing saves you from the grave, Cathy Earnshaw, and should passion call you back, well then, watch out…" (11). Two chapters later, the elder daughter of the dollhouse is "lying in her trundle bed reading as per usual, the book's deep blue cover (black twisted tree, yellow moon, yellow-and-black clouds) glued to a single disappointing block of wood" (14). This passage presents an image of reading, but it also suggests that the text is probably, considering the cover, Gothic. The passage also reveals Davis's subtle humor, for the book is a mere dollhouse prop, glued to a "disappointing block of wood."

In *Women's Gothic and Romantic Fiction*, Kay Mussell dedicates a chapter to the importance of reading, which, she argues, previous critics have not adequately addressed. Mussell argues for the "necessity of recognizing the essentially internal, private experience between a reader and a work that is the core of the meaning of such fiction in the lives of readers and in the cultural experience shared over two centuries by some American women" (97). Davis, in this respect, is in a liminal position: she is a person who has read books and who now writes about people reading, and at the same time she is an author/artist whose words are part of a book read by another group of readers. As Wolstenholme points out, "the role of artist is a guilty one for a woman to play" (146). Thus, Davis, unable to be other than self-conscious, provides the perspective of both writer and reader, and her text provides a perfect test case for Mussell's explorations about the motivations of readers. Mussell points to women's boredom as a primary motive for reading. Certainly this is an inspiration for the novel's "bored daughter" (65), though we learn that "when adults got bored they fixed themselves a drink" (67). Mussell also claims that "the world of fiction gives those exciting events a significance that is immediate and certain, a judgment of their quality and power that is much more secure than it could ever be in human life" (99). It is on this point that we are at Davis's mercy as readers of *Hell*. For we have seen that the

elder daughter seeks certainty in fiction, and, taken individually, each book she describes provides certainty within its own moral universe. However, when put together and listed one by one, the rules about life and death vary and change. You might die from being too good, or too little, or too loving, depending on which book you read. By creating a character who is a reader, Davis reinscribes these texts into her own, and her own text defies any hope for certainty and security that her reader may expect to find in fiction. As we have seen, on the very first page, she puts the reader in the narrator's shoes—or rather, eyes. Then, in the last chapter, the she (Davis/Edwina Moss) casts the reader aside—"I have no choice but to wash my hands of you" (162)—probably because she can offer no order or resolution other than to say, "YOUR HOUSE IS ON FIRE" (179). Davis recognizes the important relationship between a reader and a text. The reader's need for plot and story are as desperate as Heathcliff's for Catherine's ghost, but the reader is abandoned "now when you need me the most" (162).

Indeed, *Wuthering Heights* is a text central to *Hell*. It was cited as the daughter's primary exception in a string of books full of clear moral judgments, and Davis goes further than to show her character reading or thinking about the novel: she also reiterates Brontë's plot and structures. In *Hell*, a novel rich with food imagery, three daughters, neglected by their parents, are starving nearly to death. And as Kate Ferguson Ellis points out about *Wuthering Heights*, Cathy "dies simultaneously giving birth and refusing to eat, trying to embody (literally) her vision of a world permeated by parental deprivation" (214). Brontë's "poor fatherless" Heathcliff compares to the "as good as parentless" Joy. And where Ellis calls *Wuthering Heights* a "double Gothic" (209) because of its parallel stories including two villain-fathers and two heroines, *Hell* is then perhaps a triple Gothic in that it presents three parallel households, with—as in *Wuthering Heights*—many names repeated. Further, Ellis argues that *Wuthering Heights*—with its "resistance to arbitrary authority, with its themes of usurpation, primogeniture, imprisonment, marriage choice, sinister religion and its war against innocence" (208)—is a revision of *Paradise Lost*. Likewise, *Hell* presents homes that no longer represent the Garden of Eden but a lonely place where "everything talks to itself" (8) and starving daughters are surrounded by abundant food.

By inscribing Gothic tales like *Wuthering Heights* and employing a series of Gothic tropes outlined below, Davis not only establishes herself within a tradition of women writers and comments upon their collective place in the house of fiction, she offers a new look at the 1950s. The Gothic provides the perfect framework for such a commentary. According to Teresa Goddu, "the gothic [sic] tells of the historical horrors that make national identity possible, yet must be repressed in order to sustain it" (10). Goddu continues: "By resurrecting what these [national] narratives repress, the gothic disrupts the dream world of national myth with the nightmares of history" (11). *Hell* investigates the historical banalities as well as the historical horrors of Cold War culture by manipulating *both* the myths we have inherited and the history we have tried to forget.

Contemporary scholarship of the 1950s aims to demystify and demythologize a decade that is often "remembered"—with the help of sitcom reruns and nostalgic distance—as

being a time of traditional values, stable families, and economic growth. Stephanie Coontz is one of many Cold War critics who set out to prove that "'Leave It to Beaver' was not a documentary" (29). Instead, as Lori Lyn Bogle argues in her introduction to *The Cold War: Culture and Society*, programs like "Leave It to Beaver" were created for the purpose of fulfilling the nation's demand for "the appearance, if not the reality, of a consensus regarding American society—a consensus based on white, Protestant, Anglo-Saxon middle-class values and clearly devoted to the nuclear family and paternal authority" (vii). Such a consensus was seen as the country's best defense against the rising threat of Communism and ultimately against nuclear destruction. But, so successful have critics of the decade been in exposing the differences between appearance and reality, that fifty years after the Fifties, even the problems have become cliché: the unsatisfied mother who drinks too much, the father who is tempted by less matronly women, and the children suffering in silence. *Hell*, as we have seen, is located on this very terrain. Published more than forty years after the primary narrative thread is set—when the appearances as well as the realities of the Fifties have become cliché—the novel turns this relatively distant but familiar setting into the stuff of something equally cliché: the Gothic. Theories of the Gothic are complex and sometimes diverse, but its key themes and conventions have always pointed to an underlying instability of Western culture—and the stability of Western culture is exactly what the Cold War was about.

In *Hell*, Davis slices open the home of the traditional 1950s suburban family—as if it were a dollhouse—and treats it with Gothic conventions in order to expose the uncertainties of the Fifties and to explore the psychological effects of the Cold War on suburban families. Jane Sherron De Hart paraphrases the thesis of Elaine Tyler May's *Homeward Bound*:

> Postwar Americans, finding additional threats to traditional family life in rising rates of out-of-wedlock pregnancy, sexual promiscuity, juvenile delinquency, and the ultimate threat of nuclear war, had understandably sought "normalcy" in marital sex, pronatalism, and suburban domesticity. […] Promotion of family values, policymakers believed, would assure the stable family life necessary for personal and national security as well as supremacy over the Soviets. (125)

In *Hell*, Kathryn Davis explores the instability of family life, and thus the instability of Western culture. Her expression of this instability, like most Gothic works, is located within the walls of the house.

The Gothic tradition, beginning in 1764 with Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto: A Gothic Story*, relies upon a set of common conventions including a house (formerly a castle) haunted or in ruins, an unstable patriarchal order, a setting distant in time and space, an anxiety about boundaries and borders, the presence of the supernatural, and an ever-deepening repression that corresponds with madness (Williams 1-37). All of these conventions are suggested in the short opening chapter of *Hell* where we first encounter the line that becomes a narrative refrain: "Something is wrong in the house"

(1). As we have discussed, Davis's anxiety about boundaries is revealed when she employs the pronoun "you" to conflate reader with the narrator looking out the window, and with the observation that though the window has been scrubbed clean, "its panes don't reflect back the bright prospect of a clear conscience, but the treacherous face of the world" (1). Thus the freshly cleaned inner dwelling is vulnerable to the outside world. But it is not just the boundaries between house and world that are called into question, it is also the boundary between the self and the world. The narrator wonders, "[w]hat's the use if you can no longer tell where your face leaves off and the gray sky begins?" (1). Davis introduces tragedy as well as the possibility of the supernatural with a vision of a yellow-haired girl that may be the ghost of "poor Joy Harbison" (1).

Following a space break, the narrator describes a visit with her father, who is in the hospital after having suffered a stroke. Having lost the upper hand to his wife, we're told that he asserts control by "starving himself to death" (2). The narrator explains his nonsensical ramblings by saying, "[w]hen it's no longer your job to carve the empire, rule the kingdom, balance the scales of justice, often the best position left open is that of prophet" (2). The stroke, we later learn, happens in 1982, just after the women's movement's second wave. The final paragraph of the chapter introduces the haunted houses in this suburb of Philadelphia, the town of X, and in particular "[t]he ruined chimneys of Moss Cottage…where Edwina Moss delivered herself of the single endless sentence that was to be her last word on household management, after she lost her husband, her daughter, her mind" (3). Although, as we will see, the new homes of the suburb are also described internally in terms of Gothic decay, Moss Cottage is a remnant of the even more distant nineteenth century, and its ruins, located near the water mill where Joy Harbison's body is found, reflect the deep roots of domestic repression and struggle that are the key concerns of *Hell*.

Davis is always self-conscious of the potentials of the Gothic as well as the problems of the Fifties domestic and Cold War cultures. Gothic novels traditionally focus on the realm of the "other," those aspects of the binary system that oppose the dominant male categories of reason, light, goodness, etc. Thus, according Anne Williams's analysis in *The Art of Darkness*, the Gothic dwells in the female categories of feeling, darkness, evil (18-19). In its treatment of categories of "other," the Gothic novel revealed cultural instabilities both subtly and subversively. It should come as no surprise that the Gothic novel remained strong through the Victorian period and then, just after the 1950s—which brought about a "superficial revival of Victorian domesticity" (Coontz 27) and a reassertion of cultural binaries—"[t]he latest Gothic revival began in 1960" (Williams 101).[6] *Hell* comes to the point directly:

> Something is wrong in the house. There's always something wrong in the house. Though you'd never know from the outside […]. And even if you were able to see inside, to swing open one whole wall, what you'd find would no doubt confirm your first impression. (4)

[6] Williams argues that the Gothic revival lasted until 1974, when it gave way, in the female market, to a revival of the historical romance (a.k.a. "'bodice rippers'"), and in the male tradition (traced from Walpole through Stoker) to the horror of Stephen King's *Carrie*.

Davis goes on to describe the mahogany furniture, the ivy-laced façade, sheet music on the piano. Everything looks as we might expect on “Leave It to Beaver,” down to the Hotpoint stove. But the narrator describes a scene in which her mother lectures her father through the closed window and concludes that “[i]n this family, everything talks to itself, including the parakeet (hello pretty mommy cupcake) and the exhaust fan (mrrrt mrrrt murder murder)” (8). Despite external appearances, despite even the external appearance of the interior space, the family unit is divided, each member trapped in an isolated world of the mind.

Anne Williams argues that the Gothic tradition literalizes both the Jungian notion of the psyche as house and Freud’s discussion of the uncanny. The external features of the Gothic castle—walls, towers, ramparts—suggest for Williams a public, male identity, and are contrasted by the internal features—dungeons, attics, hidden passages—which correspond to private, female “otherness” (44). Davis is nearly obsessive in her description of interior spaces. “In my father’s house,” the narrator, echoing and inverting the words of Jesus, says, “there were many mansions and they were all the same, labyrinthian interiors smelling of damp plaster and varnish, the dark hallways narrow” (37). For two pages she charts interior appointments of her grandparents’ parlor, Benny Gold’s living room, Joy Harbison’s pantry, and her mother’s dollhouse. Davis turns suburban interiors into Gothic symbols of the psyche.

If the expression of a complex and probably disturbed psyche is found in *Hell*, the root of the problem can be found in the cultural climate of the Cold War. Peter Filene concedes that most Americans were not worried on a day to day basis about “the fate of Czechoslovakia or the treason of Alger Hiss,” but, he argues, “[t]he Cold War nevertheless infiltrated their lives and their psyches. Its effects were subtle, diffuse, and subconscious” (169). As many critics have pointed out, the reassertion of cultural binaries (e.g. capitalism/communism, freedom/fascism) led to certain anxieties by association. Peter Kuznick and James Gilbert claim that a primary psychological effect of the Cold War was that “it persuaded millions of Americans to interpret their world in terms of insidious enemies at home and abroad” (11). Jane Sherron De Hart describes the Cold War link between communism and homosexuality, both “especially dangerous because they could so easily escape detection” (126), and Stephanie Coontz takes this paranoia a step further by claiming that bachelors, those men who rejected traditional family roles, were characterized as deviant or even pathological (33). Children were warned to “beware of communists who might masquerade as friendly neighbors,” and clues could often be found in the books and music that were owned.

Enter Benny Gold. “Unlike the other men,” the narrator says, Benny Gold does not have a job but seems “to come and go as he pleased,” and thus epitomizes the “other” of 1955 suburbia: “Bachelor and intellectual, sailor and Jew […]. Of course the fathers hated him” (30-31). His nontraditional presence is threatening to the fathers, even more so because the mothers imagine him in their “delicate gentile daydreams” (30) and because the children flock to him for his endless instruction. He has a bust of Socrates and listens to jazz. And so when Inspector Mink arrives at the end of the novel to

investigate the death of Joy Harbison, it is difficult to determine which evidence is more incriminating—the girl's underwear found in Gold's cabinet or his bust of Socrates. But the narrator's grandmother is just as quick to blame Joy's parents, who have likewise rejected the traditional patriarchal order. Both of Joy's parents are doctors ("one plain, the other an astro-physician" [59]) and are rarely home. The grandmother exclaims, "Halter top and shorts! Exposed midriff! […] What could the child's mother have been thinking?" (25). The grandmother has bought into the cultural belief that anything other than the traditional family is deviant and will naturally lead to sexual problems and violence. Even Joy's red shorts, red playsuit, and red tam-o'-shanter, connote danger during this period of the Red Scare.

And yet the novel is concerned just as deeply with the problems that lurk in the privacy and depths of the more traditional homes. It is the narrator's mother, after all, who is found by Joy's nanny "drinking her solitary drinks from a bag-wrapped bottle" (59) in the nearby park. The narrator's father travels regularly to Atlantic City, where he presumably succumbs to his desires for women like Nora Devine, who gazes at him from billboards. The narrator spends her time with the strange Benny Gold or reading Gothic tales like "The Monkey's Paw" and *Wuthering Heights*, and it is not clear, as she says, whether she suffers from a disease resulting from her parents' incompatible genes or from a nineteenth-century disease.

Peter Filene notes that during the Fifties, "[w]omen were supposed to enjoy domesticity as their career" (161), and yet, the narrator's mother is, in addition to drinking, constantly burning food, and the description of her kitchen reads like that of Gothic ruins. On the bottom shelf of the cupboard are the winter cereals, "their surfaces dusty, their contents undoubtedly infested with bugs" (67). On top of the fridge are "hollow garlic heads, the dying violets," and on Joy's arm, which has been in the pantry, is "a caramel-colored cockroach about two inches long" (68). The walls of the kitchen even contain razors, one of which cuts Joys hand. But Davis's exploration of a mother's discontents reach far beyond one woman's kitchen. By layering and interweaving the 1950s suburban narrative with those of Edwina Moss and a dollhouse mother, Davis suggests a deep-rooted connectedness between women of the Fifties and women of the Victorian era. And Davis suggests that, for all our progress, the repression of women continues in the realm of literature.

The mother in the dollhouse, a character created by the narrator's young mind as a reflection of her own mother, is unsatisfied. We are told, ironically, that she "has a variety of options: she can smoke or drink or watch television" (95), and her life sounds like that of the 1950s mother quoted by Coontz, whose life consists of "'booze, bowling, bridge, and boredom'" (37). One is invited to associate a real woman with the doll's situation: "It's very sad for the mother to be who she is, propped against the sink" (95). Like the narrator's mother and like Edwina Moss, the dollhouse mother has an ailing daughter she feels unable to care for. All three have a dog as well as a servant named Henny. And yet, as the narrative concedes, despite these parallels, there are differences and disconnects that are difficult to explain. A self-conscious narrative interruption acknowledges that "when you superimpose houses on one another,

dollhouse on semidetached, semidetached on cottage, gaps and cracks appear, places where the walls and doors and windowpanes and closets fail to line up" (71). This complex blurring of boundaries reflects the project of the Gothic as well as the fears of the Cold War era. Despite attempts to clearly distinguish good from evil, past from present, neighbor from enemy, the boundaries between the binaries are often unclear, and this can lead to paranoia. The reader certainly feels unsettled when the absent dollhouse husband, who is cheating in Atlantic City, suddenly becomes the narrator's father. Likewise when one moment the first-person narrative voice is a woman recalling her 1950s childhood, and the next, a Victorian woman losing her mind. Or when the narrator addresses "you," and it is not always clear whether she means the reader or herself or another character, even one in a distant time and place.

The narrative of Edwina Moss ushers us directly into the realm of female Gothic madness. She introduces herself as "that most solitary and haunted of creatures, not unlike yourself, willing to forsake family and friends, to ruin my health, to conceal myself for all eternity in an ever-deepening cave of cooking implements" (12), thus revealing both an imbalanced psyche and an obsession with the kitchen. Her cottage—now in ruins—is located not far from the 1950s-narrator's home, near where Joy Harbison was found after the hurricane. She is an expert in cooking and domestic management, having written a book called, *Blancmange*. She describes herself as unable to protect her starving daughter because of her own "darkly melancholic nature," her "heightened imagination," and her ability to "dwell in the realm of imagined pleasures or disasters" (163). Her entire first-person narrative is one sentence—it begins mid-sentence on page 12 with "…for I was a girl not quite as other girls are," and the section ends with ellipses. Her next section likewise begins and ends with ellipses, and she dominates the last chapter of the novel, from pages 162 to 179, with a single sentence that finally ends, "YOUR HOUSE IS ON FIRE!" A number of things are at work here, but what is most pertinent here is Davis's subversion of the female Gothic plot.

Anne Williams argues that there are, in fact, two Gothic traditions—one male and one female. One major difference, Williams claims, is in narrative technique. She says that "Male Gothic derives its most powerful effects from the dramatic irony created by multiple points of view," whereas the female Gothic "generates suspense through the limitations imposed by the chosen point of view" (102). As we have seen, in *Hell*, the points of view are both multiple and limited. Not only are there two first-person narrations, but a number of close third-person perspectives of the father following his stroke, of the dollhouse mother, of Napoleon's chef, and even of Edwina Moss (as distinct from her first-person narrative). But multiple perspectives are not often used for dramatic irony in this novel, nor do they do much to expand our understanding of the plot. So Davis's structure, written with full access to the conventions of the Gothic (as well as their implications), subverts both the male and female Gothic forms.

Another way Davis subverts both the male and female Gothic is in her treatment of the ending. Again, according to Williams, the Male Gothic has "a tragic plot" whereas the Female Gothic "demands a happy ending [that] celebrates the marriage of mind and nature" (103). Davis clearly has the works of both Brontë sisters on her mind in *Hell*.

As we know, the narrator reads Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights*, and she quotes from it regularly as she tries to process the events of her own life. Likewise, the turning point of Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* takes place when Bertha Mason (the infamous mad woman in the attic) burns down the house. But both Brontë novels end, in the female tradition, with the restoration of order and with marriage, or the promise thereof. Davis subverts this tradition by having, not the deranged wife in the attic set fire to the house, but the well-known domestic expert almost gleefully announce that it is on fire. Also, her novel ends not with marriage, but with the fire. There is no restoration of order. And yet, Williams distinguishes between the male plot in which the protagonist "fails and dies" and the female ending in which the heroine experiences "a rebirth […] a new identity" (in marriage). Again, it is not clear how Davis would have us read her ending. Is this a traditional male plot given over to Edwina Moss? Has she failed and died? Or is the fire—rather than marriage—somehow the key to a rebirth for her? Because of its conventional ending, which reasserts the primacy of the patriarchy, the Female Gothic is often viewed as a conservative genre. Thus Davis enters the Female Gothic tradition, which has long been a way for women and their stories to enter literary history, but she changes the ending, thereby undoing the return to the stable patriarchy.

With full access to the work of literary and historical critics, Davis is able to manipulate the conventions and clichés to her own purposes. But what are her purposes in all of these employments and subversions of conventions of the Gothic as well as of Fifties plots? I have argued that the Gothic genre has long been concerned with the same issue that arose in the years following World War II: the stability of Western culture. In addition to the problem of a woman's place in society, Davis also has on her mind is the problem of a woman's place in literature. The problem with literature about the Fifties is highlighted by the following quote from Alan Brinkley:

> Writers such as John Cheever, Norman Mailer, John Updike, Saul Bellow, J.D. Salinger, and Walker Percy wrote novels that centered around lonely, frustrated, white, middle-class, male protagonists struggling to find some way to bring meaning and fulfillment to empty, rootless, unsatisfying lives. (71)

Brinkley acknowledges the "striking" fact that, although women were the "most frustrated group within the middle class," he has no comparable list of women writers.[7] Davis is well aware that not only are women rarely considered the creators of great literature, they are even less often the subject of what is considered great literature. Especially when they are teenagers. In the midst of describing an evening when Joy

[7] Even *Mrs. Bridge*, a novel about the dissatisfaction at the root of a woman's middle-class domesticity, was written by a man, and was generally dismissed as being for the popular rather than literary market. Likewise, *The Hours*, a contemporary novel featuring Laura Brown, a 1950s suburban housewife (in one of the novel's three narrative threads), was also written by a man.

Harbison spends the night at her house, the narrator interrupts with an observation and even an appeal to the reader:

> Two adolescent girls on a hot summer night—hardly the material of great literature, which tends to endow all male experience […] with universal radiance. Faithless sons, wars and typhoons, fields of blood, greed and knives: our literature's full of such stories. And yet suppose for an instant that it wasn't the complacent father but his bored daughter who was the Prime Mover […]. Mightn't we then permit a single summer in the lives of two bored girls to represent an essential stage in the history of the universe? (65)

In writing *Hell*, Davis gives the lives of two bored girls a place in a literary novel. But her novel does not follow the plot, "available […] since *Jane Eyre*" (Williams 102), which ends happily in marriage. Instead, they are given a place in an intricately composed narrative that both employs and subverts Gothic conventions, that relies on Fifties' myths of appearances and recently exposed realities, and that links them historically with women of the past—and that links Davis to women writers of the past.

Anne Williams points out that Gothic narratives have long been excluded from discussions about the rise of the novel. Williams claims that despite occasional references to the Gothic, critics such as Ian Watt, Wayne Booth, and F. R. Leavis "accepted the assumption that great fiction is Realistic fiction" (1), and further have "regard[ed] Gothic as an outmoded embarrassment" (2). Certainly this latter may be true if, as Williams claims, the contemporary Gothic merely consists of "bodice rippers" and Stephen King novels (see endnote 6). This makes Davis's decision to rely on Gothic conventions all the more striking. She takes a genre that both subverts and upholds the status quo, complicates its traditional plot and ending, layers it with narratives of different households, and in doing so provides a complex look at the interior darkness of domestic life and the at the assumptions of a predominantly male literary tradition. As Teresa Goddu argues, in addition to challenging national myths, "the gothic challenges the critical narratives of American *literary* history" (10, italics mine). Davis has looked at the histories of literature and society and concluded that, "Something has been, is, and always will be wrong in the house" (14). But this does not mean the house will always stand. As Davis cleverly says early in the book:

> Of course every house in the world, no matter how well-built, will eventually catch fire, blow up, wash away, get knocked down to make way for something new. No matter how durable a house, it isn't immortal. […] This is why houses are haunted […]. (24)

The vast intelligence, humor, and complexity of *Hell* will haunt the house of fiction—as long as it still stands.

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Fair warning: Reading this collection of scary haunted house stories in the dark or by yourself is likely to keep you up all night. Or, at the very least, send a chill down your spineâ€"even if you consider yourself the bravest of the brave. Oh, is that a challenge?Â That same year, the house was sold and transformed into a boarding house, where reports of hauntings began. According to Destination America, witnesses have experienced burning sensations and slamming doors. Today, the Lemp Mansion is a restaurant and inn that also holds events. The story of Bluebeard is central to gothic romance, haunting the halls of all those spooky houses that loom large in the popular imagination. Bluebeard reappears, for example, in Jane Eyre, which makes specific reference to the tale in creating its aura of eerie domestic wrongness: â€œI, by drift of groping, found the outlet from the attic, and proceeded to descend the narrow garret staircase,â€ Charlotte Bronte wrote in Janeâ€™s voice.Â Instead, they enact a specific drama, the â€œSomething Is Wrong In This Houseâ€ morality play. Their defining characteristic is the heroineâ€™s sense that something is dreadfully off; their prevailing mood is one of anxiety and dread.Â Distance is essential in fiction. The fairy tale Bluebeard is happening somewhere over there, in the vague and mysterious East. Davison offers a socio-historically contextualised, generically detailed overview of the haunted plantation house featured in Southern Gothic literature since the early nineteenth century. Discussing...Â The slave in the swamp: Disrupting the plantation narrative. New York/London: Routledge.Google Scholar. Curtis, B. (2008). Dark places: The haunted house in film. London: Reaktion Books.Google Scholar. Faulkner, W. (1964 [1936]).