

The Immortality of Gothic Literature

The many ways in which the contemporary gothic work changes

A Bachelor Thesis English Language and Culture

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Introduction

This thesis discusses the many ways in which Gothic literature has managed to keep the same themes, motives and style over the centuries even as many details within the gothic stories have changed to keep them up to date. Contemporary gothic novels might have different settings, for example, but still hold the same mystery and dangers as their predecessors.

After research on early gothic novels in a module on gothic literature a search for more contemporary work was added and in result a variety of gothic novels was read before making any of the many conclusions in the essay that follows.

The House of Cards was created after the reading and research of gothic novels and is probably inspired by almost all of them. After this research it became clear that to try and limit the gothic story to the size of a short story would be impossible for many reasons (as discussed in the essay) of which the lengthy character of the gothic novel is the most important. In result the story is but the beginning of an unfinished novel and therefore does not include an ending or conclusion at all. Its purpose is to raise questions that might be answered in the pages that follow.

The analyses that follows *The House of Cards* is a commentary that compares the details discussed in the essay to those included in the story of *the House of Cards* and is also the conclusion to this thesis.

The Immortality of Gothic Literature

The many ways in which the contemporary gothic work changes

Over the centuries gothic texts – and later gothic films – have sought to bring terror and shock into the hearts of its audience. Through recognizable mysteries and terrors the gothic novel has branched out into various genres. Even though the term gothic has changed meaning since its very origin, most themes and motives have not. From arguably the first gothic novel *The Castle of Otranto* written by Horace Walpole in 1765, to modern novels as *The Historian* written by Elizabeth Kostova in 2005, characters face the same dangerous buildings, landscapes, journeys, boundaries, choices – moral and immoral - and villains.

“‘Gothic’ has its origins as an architectural term, applied to medieval buildings marked by pointed arches and vaults.”(Weissberg, 8). Gothic literature began in the Romantic period, 1765, with *the Castle of Otranto* and has made use of gothic architecture ever since. Castles, ruins, monasteries and convents with labyrinths, dungeons, trap doors, hidden passages, secret rooms and forbidden wings; Gothic buildings are grand, spacious and capable of holding vast secrets. They have become a perfect playground for ghosts, monsters and unethical behaviour.

The Castle of Otranto takes, as the very title suggests, like many early gothic novels largely place in an actual castle. Characters are led through large hallways and small passages into eerie catacombs. “An awful silence reigned throughout those subterraneous regions, except now and then some blasts of wind that shook the doors she had passed, and which, grating on the rusty hinges, were re-echoed through that long labyrinth of darkness.”(Walpole, 24). In *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, written in response to *The Castle of Otranto*, Ann Radcliffe’s characters wander much the same path.

From the steps, they proceeded through a passage, adjoining the vaults, the walls of which were dropping with unwholesome dews, and the vapours, that crept along the ground, made the torch burn so dimly, that Emily expected every moment to see it extinguished, and Barnardine could scarcely find his way. [...]. As he then rested against a pair of iron gates, that opened from the passage, Emily saw, by uncertain flashes of light, the vaults beyond, and, near her, heaps of earth, that seemed to surround an open grave. (Radcliffe, *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, 345)

In later gothic novels the setting of the stories do not necessarily include these centuries old buildings. As Louise Weston and Josephine Ruggiero wrote in their 1978 article on Modern Gothic “Many current Gothics take place in contemporary settings rather than in a “brooding castle.””(648). These contemporary settings include abandoned warehouses, basements, libraries, theatres or even houses. Anne Rice shelters vampires underneath a public theatre in *Interview with the Vampire*. Louise and Claudia, two of the main characters in her story, are invited to “The Théâtre des Vampires” (Rice, 215). The reader is taken through a crowded lobby, a private box, an auditorium, and towards the stage “the stage was not the stage but a thickly wooded place, the light glittering on the roughened tree trunks and the thick clusters of leaves beneath the arch of darkness above;”(217). Eventually the reader is taken further into the building, down the stairs into “what appeared to be a vast subterranean ballroom, carved, as it were, out of a cellar more ancient than the building overhead.”(227).

Richard Matheson brings the terror even closer to home. In *I am Legend* his character Neville lives in the middle of Los Angeles, in an ordinary house on Cimarron Street. His terror is greatest at night when he is locked up in this safe place but has nowhere else to turn. Matheson’s descriptions of a night at the house effectively turn this normal home into a place of gothic nightmare.

Gothic structures, in turn, are usually surrounded by a gothic, sublime, environment consisting mostly of grand and mysterious landscapes. Gothic landscapes vary from lively valleys and fields rich of sunny flowers to wastelands, steep mountains and dangerous cliffs with storm and thunder. Harmless landscapes turn eerily dangerous once the sun has set. Gothic novels are filled with detailed descriptions of feelings, sounds, and smells which set the mood for their stories. Radcliffe's novel is packed with scenes that describe how the mood of her characters change with the landscape around them.

He and Emily continued sunk in musing silence for some leagues, from which melancholy reverie Emily first awoke, and her young fancy, struck with the grandeur of the objects around, gradually, yielded to delightful impressions. [...]. And now, the way led to the lofty cliffs, from whence the landscape was seen extending in all its magnificence, Emily could not restrain her transport as she looked over the pine forest of the mountains upon the vast plains, that, enriched with woods, towns, blushing vines, and plantations of almonds, palms and olives, stretched along, till their various colours melted in distance into one harmonious hue, that seemed to unite earth with heaven.(Radcliff, 29).

Later novelists such as Rice and Elizabeth Kostova use the same technique of combined scene and mood setting.

We rode slowly through the forest, because the road was rutted and pocked with holes and because it began almost at once to climb uphill. These forests are very deep, dim inside even at hottest noon, with the eerie coolness of a church interior. [...] The height of many of the trees is tremendous and their crowns block the sky. It is like riding among the pillars of a vast cathedral, but a dark one, a haunted cathedral where

one expects glimpses of the Black Madonna or martyred saints in every niche.

(Kostova, 552)

Kostova's description takes the reader right back to the gothic cathedral, but also plays out another reoccurring theme in gothic texts, namely that of light and dark. In his book *Der romantische Grieselroman (the Gothic Novel)* Hendrik van Gorp explains that light and dark, night and day, are often placed in changing sequence to each other to show not only the difference between good and evil or happiness and distress but also between the rational and irrational. It is in the hours of night, and in the faint light or twilight that ghosts and other dark powers are at work, powers that shun the light of day (23). Supernatural events usually take place at night and are not always but often explained or rationalized by daylight. These impressions do not only affect the psyche and emotions of the characters in the story, they also affect their readers.

In early gothic novels these buildings and landscapes were mostly set in faraway lands of which most of its readers had heard, but where they had never been. *The Castle of Otranto* was set in Italy, where the Catholic church reigned with strict hand in medieval times. Richard Marsh's *The Beetle* came from Egypt where gods still lived, and *Dracula*, by Bram Stoker, came from Transylvania Romania, where the people were considered distant and mistrusting. The stories were often set in regions that held a closer bond with superstition than its western readers and were mostly surrounded with mystery and danger. Van Gorp explains that the use of distance in space and time was used to improve the credibility of the texts. Gothic stories were mostly ¹ set in the past and presented to the audience as accounts that could not be verified or proven false. Details of the time and place were added throughout the story but exact dates were either left out or, as was the case in *The Castle of Otranto*, added only in prefaces to give the story some kind of vague reference.

¹ More modern novels are also set in the far future.

To further accomplish a sense of distance it is often the journey from the safety of home towards the dangerous unknown that takes up a big part of gothic novels. In *the Mysteries of Udolpho* Emma travels towards Udolpho with her father. *The Beetle* has left his Egypt to take his revenge on western society, Louise searches the world in a journey for knowledge in *Interview with the Vampire* and the narrator in *the Historian* searches the world for her father and the mysterious Dracula. These journeys and events are often described in texts within the story itself. According to Allen Grove “almost universally Gothic texts are fragmented, interrupted, unreadable, or presented through multiple framings and narrators” Heroes and heroines discover ancient tales or receive letters from characters that have long since left them to be found.

The Historian thrives on distance. A nameless narrator tells the story of a young woman who has come into possession of letter from her disappeared father. The letters in turn show us the story of a young man who has come into possession of letters from his disappeared teacher and friend while the young woman searches for her father. Eventually, these letters show the story of a young man looking for the mystery that is Dracula. All characters leave home in the hopes of finding each other and clearing up the mysteries that surround them.

Characters literally explore the boundaries of the world and by doing so they also cross more personal boundaries as I (D. S. Balk) discussed in a earlier essay *The many ways in which the Gothic interrogates boundaries. Explored in I am legend and Interview with the vampire*. Both Louise and Neville - the main characters in *Interview with the vampire* and *I am Legend* – are surrounded by visible boundaries and therefore confined to their own little world. As happens in earlier Gothic stories Louise travels the world with Claudia in *Interview with the vampire*. Where earlier victims of gothic texts were trapped between actual walls, Louise and Claudia are trapped by the bonds and fears kept by Lestat but also by daylight.

Because they cannot travel during the day his world is confined to the night. The night brings with it restrictions that keep Louise from enjoying his immortal life.

‘I wanted those waters to be blue. And they were not. They were the nighttime waters, and how I suffered then, straining to remember the seas that a young man’s untutored senses had taken for granted, that an undisciplined memory had let slip away for eternity. The Mediterranean was black, black off the coast of Italy, black off the coast of Greece, black always, [...] ‘Louise, your quest is for darkness only. This sea is not your sea. The myths of men are not your myths. Men’s treasures are not yours’ (Rice, 166).

Neville has to deal with similar problems in *I am Legend*. He has turned his house into a safe haven but cannot leave it during the night because the others, the vampires, are out there waiting for him every night. Neville tries to cover as much ground as he can during the day but he can never go far because his fear of being outside during the night drives him back to his house every day before sundown. The house is therefore not only a safe place but also a restriction that keeps Neville from moving on and perhaps even from noticing the changes that take place in society. The changes that catch up with him in the last chapters of the book.

The Gothic interrogates the boundaries of the self and society as a whole. Characters fight the boundaries ethically, socially, sexually or scientifically. In both *Interview with the vampire* and in *I am legend* the characters become outcasts of society. Both characters become ‘the Other’ in a new world and struggle with this. They are both looking for others, like themselves, without much success. Neville hopes to find other uninfected and Louise searches the world for someone with answers. Neville questions if what he does will ever make a difference. Death seems to become an attractive alternative to the lonely days. “The thought dredged up again the endless enigma of why he went on. [...] He’d never even

approached suicide. Why? There seemed no answer” (Matheson, 89). Suicide is unethical according to Neville’s lost society. Yet he questions this himself. Death would mean peace and freedom and even he hasn’t considered it before. Though he claims not to know why, the reader knows that suicide is considered wrong. Especially in a Christian society.

In these texts the Gothic seems to question the entire idea of society and its rules and laws. Ethics seem only applicable when the majority of people abide by them. Neville believes he is doing the right thing but a new society is rising up around him that holds different principles. Neville gets a chance to become part of this new society but his fear of change keeps him from doing so. He becomes a threat to the new society and this eventually leads to his death. Louise knows he is a threat to society but because he refuses to let go of their ethics he manages to survive. Though Lestat sees this as Louise’s weakness, Armand seems to celebrate this. Both texts are filled with moral decisions made by individuals but definitely guided by the morals of something bigger.

Sexuality is another recurring theme in Gothic texts. Sexual longing, rape, forbidden love, passion, forced marriages, incest, necrophilia and unconventional love seem to be the norm in Gothic novels (Van Gorp, 17). Even though early gothic novels were already considered to be groundbreaking in their time regarding the sexual threat their victims often suffered, the addition of immortal villains to the genre allowed later writers to explore further. Early gothic relationships were threatening but mortal; Walpole’s *Manfred* is set on marrying Isabella his late son’s intended wife even though she is much younger and he is still married to Hippolita. Radcliffe’s *Montoni* tries to force Emily to marry Morano even though she is in love with someone else. Bram Stoker added an immortal villain who added a new intensity to sexuality. After centuries of immoral behaviour by men *Dracula* allows gothic women to strike back. Jonathan is attacked by three vampire women who try to seduce him and harm his

well-being and sanity. Though first a victim, Lucy becomes strong and a sexual predator once she is turned into a vampire.

Lucy's eyes in form and color, but Lucy's eyes unclean and full of hell fire, instead of the pure, gentle orbs we knew. At that moment the remnant of my love passed into hate and loathing. Had she then to be killed, I could have done it with savage delight. As she looked, her eyes blazed with unholy light, and the face became wreathed with a voluptuous smile. [...]

She still advanced, however, and with a languorous, voluptuous grace, said, "Come to me, Arthur. Leave these others and come to me. My arms are hungry for you. Come, and we can rest together. Come, my husband, come!" (Stoker, 240)

Since *Dracula*, vampires are associated with lust and sin. Modern gothic texts seem to use them to explore the boundaries that surround sexuality. Both Neville and Louise give their thoughts about sexuality in one way or the other. Neville, a widowed man, seems to struggle the most with his cravings. The vampires seem to have lost their prudishness and especially the women seem to know no shame at all when they try to lure him out of the house. They behave and dress so that Neville, who tries very hard not to see them, finds himself in inner conflict. "And the women... Did he have to start thinking about *them* again?"(Matheson, 16).

A shudder ran through him. Every night it was the same. He'd be reading and listening to music. Then he'd start about soundproofing the house, then he'd think about the women. Deep in his body, the knotting heat began again, and he pressed his lips together until they were white.[...]All right, it was a natural drive, but there was no outlet for it anymore. They'd forced celibacy on him; he'd have to live with it. You have a mind don't you? He asked himself. Well, use it! (13)

An even better example of the Gothic toying with the boundaries of sexuality is Rice's work. In her work the vampires seem to lose the general consensus that straight couples are the norm. A straight vampire seems to be an anomaly in her work. Especially in *Interview with the vampire* the male vampires all have male companions. Lestat chooses Louise to become a vampire. Armand wants Louise to accompany him through eternity. Even the female child vampire Claudia, whose relationship with the grown men Louise and Lestat beg some questions on its own chooses a female as her companion. All vampires seem to be involved in a same sex relationship. The act of drinking blood, the exchange of bodily fluids, seems to have a sexual connotation of its own. Yet none of the vampires in either text are actually described as having sex in any part of the story. Neville tells us about the alluring vampire women but never acts on his feelings. Louise tells his interviewer that the drinking of blood, the killing, is the ultimate experience for a vampire.

“The sucking mesmerized me; the warm struggling of the man was soothing to the tension of my hands; and there came the beating of the drum again, which was the drumbeat of his heart—only this time it beat in perfect rhythm with the drumbeat of my own heart, the two resounding in every fiber of my being, until the beat began to grow slower and slower, so that each was a soft rumble that threatened to go on without end.”(Rice, 34-35)

Anne Rice keeps to Louise' word in *Interview with the vampire*; Even though her vampires sleep close together in coffins they ultimately never exchange more than blood.

Scientifically the gothic explores boundaries set by religion and superstition. Where the first novels do not explain supernatural occurrence later novels, such as *Dracula*, the *Historian*, Richard Matheson's *I am Legend* and Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, try. Emily, in the *Mysteries of Udolpho*, uses rational thinking and investigation to explain the supernatural

she comes across. The narrators in *The Historian* all put a great amount of effort into the research that they believe will take them to the truth about their missing friends and Dracula. In *Interview with the Vampire*, Louise's confrontation with religion starts when he is still human and his brother tells him he has had visions of St. Dominic and the Virgin Mary. Louise does not believe him. It is only after Louise is confronted with the supernatural, when he is turned into a vampire, that he starts doubting his first judgment. He asks Lestat if God and the Devil exist but Lestat gives him no useful answer. Lestat thinks vampires are godlike creatures because they possess the power to take and grant life as no other. Louise then travels the world to find answers. When he meets Armand, an ancient vampire, and learns that even Armand cannot help him with the answers Louise comes to his own conclusion. To him the taking of an innocent human life is the worst evil possible. Therefore he believes vampires to be devils. Christianity proves to be of no help in his quest. Even though he thinks himself to be evil because of the horrible crimes commits to survive he never finds proof that he is actually evil in the eyes of god. Rice takes a dangerous leap here when her character seems to lose his faith in good. When the interviewer asks him about crucifixes Louise says:

'nonsense, my friend, sheer nonsense. I can look on anything I like. And I rather like looking in crucifixes in particular.' 'And what about the rumor about keyholes? That you can...become steam and go through them.' [...] 'The story about stakes through the heart,' said the boy, his cheeks coloring slightly. 'The same,' said the vampire. 'Bull-shit,' he said, carefully articulating both syllables, so that the boy smiled. 'No magical power whatsoever'(Rice, 27)

With this passage Rice eliminates most of the superstition that surrounds vampires but not all. Her vampires do indeed sleep in coffins as superstition subscribes. Whereas Matheson's Neville believes this is something the vampires do just because they think it is necessary. It is never proven to be necessary and when he finds a man using a freezer as coffin he reacts

amused ; “When he saw the man lying there in this enameled coffin, he had to laugh; it seemed such a funny place to hide”(Matheson, 21). Rice’s vampires seem to be above religion and above superstition while Matheson’s vampires embrace it.

In *I am Legend*, Neville finds that the vampires seem to be allergic to garlic and affected by religious crosses as in the legends. He discovers the effect of the cross to be nothing but a superstition when he finds that vampires who had other religions in their human life have nothing to fear from the Christian cross but more from their own religious symbols. The vampires seem to believe themselves to be evil no matter what religion they have come from and therefore their religious symbols strike fear into their undead hearts. Unlike Louise’s statement, stakes do seem to put an end to Matheson’s vampires. “Driving slowly to Sears, he tried to forget by wondering why it was that only wooden stakes should work”(20).

Since superstition and religion do not seem to help the main characters in the texts they move on to a different step in reason. Research becomes important in both texts and thus gives the writers an opportunity to test the frontiers of science in gothic texts. Neville tries to find his answers in science even though he tells the reader that science has failed before. “And, before science had caught up with the legend, the legend had swallowed science and everything”(23). He first uses everything that legends have taught him to use. Stakes, garlic, mirrors, crosses they all seem to keep the vampires at a distance and help him eliminate them. However, he begins to wonder what it is about these objects that makes them work. He spends a great amount of time going through science books in the hopes of finding not only new information but also a cure. Something Louise never discusses. Neville looks upon vampirism as a disease whereas Louise sees it as a curse. Neville finds actual scientific explanations for why garlic keeps the vampires away and for why he can kill them with stakes. In the last chapter when Neville is confronted with Ruth’s new society - the new vampires - he realizes that the disease is evolving. According to Ruth the vampires are well on their way to

discovering a medicine that allows them to live in daylight. It's a clear example of how science has changed thoughts about the supernatural.

The use of supernatural in Gothic stories started in the *Castle of Otranto*, or as some might argue even earlier in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. In both texts the protagonist is aided by a ghost. A recurring theme in many Gothic novels. However, the supernatural is not always embodied by an actual spirit or being. In *The Mysteries of Udolpho* Radcliffe shows that an actual supernatural power is not a necessity for a gothic novel. In her novel the supernatural is merely suggested by the main character herself. She believes the castle to be haunted by a ghost. However, throughout the story it becomes clear to the reader that there are more natural explanations to the events she witnessed. Sounds and images she had thought to be created by something supernatural in one of the rooms for example are explained in one of the story's final chapters:

At the mention of this, Emily trembled, and looked anxiously, remembering the spectacle she had herself witnessed there with Dorothee.

'I confess, madam, my heart did fail me, at that instant,' continued Ludovico, 'but a return of the noise drew my attention from the bed, and I then distinctly heard a sound, like that of a key, turning in a lock, but what surprised me more was, that I saw no door where the sound seemed to come from. In the next moment, however, the arras near the bed was slowly lifted, and a person appeared behind it, entering from a small door in the wall. (Radcliffe, *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, 631)

There was no ghost, merely a person entering through an undiscovered door.

In later gothic novels the supernatural becomes less obscure. Fleeting ghosts and sudden beams of divine light are replaced by immortal protagonists or inhuman villains.

Superstition and religion are exploited to place beings like Vampires, Werewolves, Angels, Demons, Witches and monsters like those created by Mary Shelley in *Frankenstein* amongst human beings and create maximum mystery and terror. Anne Rice, for example, has replaced the abstract supernatural forces of the gothic with her touchable inhuman vampires.

“Of course, you must realize that all this time the vampire Lestat was extraordinary. He was no more human to me than a biblical angel.”(Rice, 17).

Gothic characters are often not what they seem at first glance. Protagonists often suffer from mistaken identity. They are orphans, runaways, liars or lied to. There are two main character types in gothic novels, the good and the evil. This distinction between characters seems most obvious in earlier gothic novels like *The Castle of Otranto* or William Beckford’s *Vathek* but becomes less clear in more modern novels like *Interview with the vampire* or its more science fiction-inspired predecessor *I am legend*. Evil is always the villain in persecution of maiden in distress. The villain is often attracted to the pure innocence of his victim and in turn the victim is fascinated by all that is wrong in her persecutor (Van Gorp, 19). Louise is fascinated with Lestat because he is dangerous to him. When Lestat turns Louise into a vampire as well this fascination changes.

“You cannot understand. But before I died, Lestat was absolutely the most overwhelming experience I’d ever had. Your cigarette has become one long cylindrical ash.” ”Oh!” The boy quickly ground the filter into the glass. “You mean that when the gap was closed between you, he lost his ... spell?” he asked, his eyes fixed on the vampire his hands now producing a cigarette and match much more easily than before. “Yes, that’s correct,” said the vampire with obvious pleasure.”(25-26)

The gothic lures its reader into the story by concentrating on the attraction of evil, the reader is pulled into the victim’s fascination with just that which is forbidden or frowned upon. *The Beetle* attracted its victims with promise of riches or shelter, Anne Rice’s vampires are

described nearly angelic in looks. The evildoer of the story is not necessarily ugly or monstrous, even if his actions are. Though their characters are often described as dark and strict looking, they nearly always seem to possess a certain charm. Radcliffe wrote about this subject herself in a dialogue which was later published as “*On the Supernatural in Poetry*” “Terror and Horror are so far opposite, that the first expands the soul, and awakens the faculties to a high degree of life; the other contracts, freezes, and nearly annihilates them...”(Radcliff, *On the Supernatural in Poetry*). Van Gorp adds to this that in the “Novel of Terror” the horrible was avoided by concentrating everything on fear and suspense. (25).

Various characters try to find a balance between good and evil but only have their own conscience to consult. Neville tries to hold on to the ethics of a society that does not exist anymore while Louise clutches ethics that seem not to apply to him anymore. Both characters are forced to reevaluate their thoughts on life and death and right and wrong. As are their readers. None of the characters in either text are clearly good or clearly evil. “Some parts, certainly, are good, others bad, as one might expect; but it is the disunity of the whole, the inability of these various parts to cohere which is the main source of [...] dismay, and thus of the endless persecution to which the monster is subjected throughout the rest of the novel”(Punter, 20).

The Gothic novel still holds a lot of its original motives and themes, not all of them though, not all in the same order and much has been added over the centuries. Modern novels leave room for more background stories, more characters and more romance. The Gothic castle has become less important, the terror of the story having shifted from immediate danger to the mysterious that seems to lurk throughout the story. The use of supernatural occurrence has shifted from ghost and divine intervention to all sorts of supernatural beings; Vampires, Werewolves, Angels, Witches, Demons etc.

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The House of Cards

Tara April could no longer fool herself. With a sigh of defeat she closed the lid of her laptop and sat back on the giant bed. This was all. There was not much she could do anymore. Her feeling, her guts, her instincts... her gift had brought her this far but she seemed to have lost it momentarily. Perhaps it was the atmosphere of Las Vegas, but the more she had stared at the picture the farther she had felt from her target. Even when she had been close to finding her.

Las Vegas, the Strip, was everything Tara had feared it would be. The weather alone was almost too much to handle. The air felt dry and hot all day long. She had burned her light skin in the few hours she had spend outside despite a thick layer of sun-block. The buildings were huge and intimidating because of their bright colours and fake authenticity. The sidewalks were crowded with people and the streets with cars, busses and taxis filled with tourists. It didn't seem to matter what time of day it was either. Tara had tried going out there at night but the air was still hot and because most bars never closed the streets were still filled with people. Tourists but also people she would rather not meet. The Strip was infested with scum off all sorts of bad levels that came out to play at night on clean streets that smelled of sewer.

Perhaps it was exactly this environment that had put her off. This place really didn't feel comfortable. It was build to process hundreds if not thousands of people a day and that seemed to have seeped into everything. Locking herself up in her hotel room wasn't it either. Staying here felt strange even after two days. Whoever had decorated this room had tried to create homey comfort with luxurious details but had failed terribly. To Tara everything felt overdone, the high ceiling made her feel small, and the many mirrors made her feel watched.

She couldn't feel at home here. This visit should be short. The oak closet was still empty, her suitcase still unpacked and shoved underneath the bed. Her laptop lay beside her on the bed, leaving the desk in front of the giant window empty but for an overdone bouquet in colours that didn't match the curtains behind it. The colours were all wrong everywhere. She wondered briefly if every room on every floor was marred with this salmon pink and if the person that had chosen it was some weird scientist trying to prove something.

Tara groaned, frustrated, her hands found a printed copy of the picture she had been staring at moments before. She probably wouldn't be able to sleep tonight. Her psychic ability was something she was training to improve. She was good, but being in a place like this proved to her that she could always do better. She felt guilty for losing whatever connection she had to the seventeen-year-old. She feared for the girl. Especially after what she had seen in New York. Tara had seen dead bodies in her line of work, more than once. But these bodies had been nothing like anything she had ever seen before. They had looked ill, and ghostly pale even when Tara had seen them alive. She would never forget the expression on their faces, shocked by something so horrible that their eyes were dark with fear. It was that man who had taken Mina, Tara was sure of it, he had everything to do with it. Who knew what terrible things he was doing to that girl at that very moment.

'What were you thinking trusting a stranger like that..' The teenager had moved halfway across the world to meet someone she had only met online. Tara had found her in New York about a week ago, three days after her foster parents had found her letter. Through her emails and an account check they had discovered that Mina had taken a plane to New Jersey. The devastated couple had contacted a private detective shortly after and Mick in turn had asked Tara to come along. Tara had worked with him before and she considered him a good friend. This is why she had agreed. Mick had done most of the work, getting them into New York, tracking Mina to a hostel. Tara had informed their employer and had discussed how to

proceed but an unknown man had taken Mina away from the hostel before Tara could do so much as introduce herself. She had not seen the stranger but Mick had managed to catch him on camera.

Tara's hands found the second photo which she brought into view as well. This picture was less clear, it was the one Mick had taken in New York but it was blurry. The man had been talking to Mina and only the side of his face could be seen. He had short cropped dark hair and a fairly light skin and even in the blurry image the features of his face looked sharp, rough. Tara was good with faces and this one she would recognise anywhere. She hoped that others would recognise him as well, but she was sceptical. Even though Mick was out bothering people for information she doubted if they would find him. They had only been here a few days. How would anyone recognize them?

She is back in front of the dark building, staring through the open door into the hallway. She had met him there in the nights before. The wind and rain messed up her hair and soaked her grey nightgown. She wanted to be inside, out of the cold. But that meant going through that door through which she saw him stand as if on guard. Watching her. The light behind him clearly showed his dark brown hair but left most of his features in mysterious shadow. But she is close enough to guess the expression on his face. He had not expected her to be here.

Something about him is different but other than feeling it she has no clue as to what it is. He squints and his eyes turn dark as she gives him a second look. He starts walking forward, moving in on her through the wide hallway. He talks to her but she cannot hear the words. She doesn't know what they are but they must be serious. The man moves slow but seems to become angrier with each step. What is it he is saying? She should turn around and run before he gets to her. This has happened before. Again, without saying another word, the man slams the heavy doors closed in front of her, effectively shutting her out, leaving her in the cold.

It was difficult for Aleksander Halapuu to concentrate on the business of running a hotel. He had no idea which things were important for what and, quite frankly, he didn't care. He had hired managers and businessmen to keep things going and so far they were doing a perfect job without his interference. He had taken over the hotel on a whim, thinking it could only increase his investment. He had not thought about the financial stress it would put on his fortune or the attention it would put on his person. He had been a mysterious wealthy stranger, below anyone's radar, until he had stepped into the spotlights unintentionally. He wasn't very certain what was better, living amongst people or above them. It didn't seem like he had much choice at this point. He was Mr. Halapuu wherever he went in Las Vegas. His safe haven of long was slowly turning into a nightmare binding him to publicity. He would have to move in a few years before people became suspicious.

He had always lived a wealthy life, but never out in the open like this. He had already experienced that getting what he needed was a lot more difficult if everyone was willing to see to your every need. He needed to be careful of who he chose to satisfy his needs with. People talked.

And then there was Mina to worry about now. At this moment she was locked in his spacious apartment on the top levels of the second largest hotel in Las Vegas. But Aleksander knew that he couldn't keep her locked up there for long. He had enjoyed showing her the Strip shortly but at this point taking her into public was an unwise gamble.

The persistent knocking on her door pulled her from her exhausting dreams. Tara fought the urge to dig herself deeper into her pillows and ignore the loud sound. It made her head hurt and annoyingly prevented her from falling asleep again. Her limbs felt heavy as she moved them to sit on the side of her king sized bed. 'What?!' she demanded as her foggy gaze fell on the phone next to her pillow. It took her a few moments to realize what the numbers

meant. 'Shit..' she muttered as she grabbed her phone to double check. Four o'clock in the afternoon, five missed phone calls. She had nearly slept through the entire day. What had happened last night? Her head pounded as it did whenever she had had one too many drinks the night before. But she never drank when she was on a job. Alcohol affected her mind too much and her mind, where her visions and guesses came from, was why she was here in the first place.

With annoyance she realized that whoever was at her door had not given up. Yet another knock.

'Yeah yeah, I'll be right there' she snapped. To her satisfaction the person in the hallway listened to her, the knocking stopped. She picked a pair of jeans and a t-shirt from her unpacked suitcase and put them on as quickly as she could. It was when she pulled the t-shirt over head that she realized her nightgown was already on the floor beside the bed. She had gone to sleep wearing it. When had she taken it off?

She was trying hard to remember what she had done moments before she went to bed while she opened the door. A familiar face greeted her with worry.

'Where have you...have you been sleeping all day?' Mick asked her as he let himself in. Mick was tall and skinny looking with ash-blond hair and an out-of-date moustache that made him look old. His dark hair was cropped short and even though Tara knew him to spend time in the gym it seemed his efforts to toughen up had been useless. He moved awkward when he walked and he was clumsy as hell. It hurt her neck looking up at him. He always made her laugh. At thirty eight he was nine years older than Tara and even though they didn't meet all that often he was the closest thing she had to a friend.

'Yes. Actually' she answered as she watched him sit down on the bed.

‘You’re not ill are you?’ His worried look made her wonder just how horrible she looked. She suddenly realised her hair and make-up had to be a mess since she hadn’t bothered to get rid of the black on her eyes.

‘I just had a late night’ she lied as she quickly stepped into her bathroom to do some damage control. She hadn’t gone to sleep that late. She remembered because she had thought about how lame she actually was going to bed at ten in a town that never slept.

‘I tried contacting you earlier.’ Mick said when she returned a few minutes later. Her hair was tied into a pony-tail and her face was all freshened up and covered in a new layer of make-up.

‘I think I found a lead you should pick up on.’

...

I have good news at last! Your source was right. The man has brought her to Nevada. He doesn’t know we are looking for him just yet. We have talked to numerous people who have seen him gamble in different hotels. With and without the girl.

Mick has spoken to witnesses who have seen both the man and the girl. One of them is a clerk at the Excalibur hotel who has seen them at least four nights on a row. The man let the young lady gamble as much as she liked. The clerk was more interested in the guy’s unbelievable wealth. He did not notice whether the girl was in distress or not.

Mick has also spoken to a woman in the streets, handing out flyers advertising call girls. She recognised the man in Mick’s picture as a regular client. Even though we still have a lot of hotels to go through I think Mina is probably kept somewhere close by and I am positive we will find her.

Tara closed her laptop as soon as she had made sure the email was sent to Thorn, her employer. She had some catching up to do. She still didn't understand why she had not woken up early as she usually did. Sure she overslept if she didn't set her alarm clock. But today she had slept through her alarm and five phone calls. It had thrown her off balance. It was already seven and she left her room for the first time that day.

Tara made her way down to the foyer while she checked her phone for any new messages and changed a few banknotes at the machines into as many coins as she could get for them. The pockets of her tight jeans were filled with them as she made her way through the different casinos. She had read somewhere that the hotels were build like mazes, purposely letting their costumers roam about like lost sheep so they would spend more than they actually wanted to. Tara noticed that it had not been an exaggeration. There were machines, tables and people everywhere. Bars were strategically placed to block the carpets that ran a path from one end of the building to the other with enough twists and turns to be disorientating. Every hall and every casino she passed through sounded the same. People talking, the nervous rhythms of the slot machines, unknown background music and the clinking of glasses at tables and bars. Tara had difficulty keeping track of where she was as she moved through the different buildings. She followed a walkway which brought her to the Excalibur hotel and later a footbridge which brought her to the MGM as she tried to pick up on something that would lead her to Mina. It didn't take long before she stood still, wondering yet again where her feet had taken her.

'Watch it!' Tara had just realised she was back in the Luxor hotel when she heard glass shatter and a man raising his voice to one of the waitresses. Her tray, including drinks and glass were scattered over the granite floor at the nearest bar.

‘I’m sorry sir! I didn’t see you’ the woman was cut short by the stare the man gave her. His eyes were so cold that even Tara froze in place. It was him! The unknown man from Mick’s photo’s was now scanning the crowd that had stopped to stare at the unfortunate waitress. He seemed to be looking for someone, a threat, but turned away seemingly satisfied that there was none. When he moved the crowd of guests and employees parted for him and he disappeared into one of the hallways before Tara could reach him. She hurried after him and found him waiting for the elevator just around the corner.

‘Wait..excuse me! Wait!’ she called as she moved to stand next to him quickly as the door opened.

‘You will have to wait until it returns’ he said as he stepped into the elevator and inserted a key into the control panel. This man was going to one of the private floors.

He was blocking her way into the elevator and didn’t seem intent on letting her in. She had to say something.

‘Is Mina here?’ she asked stupidly.

‘Mina?’ he repeated. She thought there was a hint of shock in his face before he composed himself.

‘I don’t know a Mina. You have mistaken me for someone else’ he answered as he stepped back only far enough to allow the doors to move.

His eyes took her in before the doors closed completely and he was gone.

...

I have even better news than before. I have found the man we believe has taken Mina. His name is Aleksander Halapuu. He owns the Luxor hotel. I don’t understand what his

connection to Mina is or what the reason could be for him bringing her here. When I confronted him about it he denied even knowing her. Mina wasn't with him but I sensed her nearby. Tomorrow Mick will confront Aleksander and ask him about Mina again. With luck we'll be leaving with her tomorrow night.

...

'How is she doing?' Aleksander asked as he stepped into the security office of the ground floor.

Manfred handed him the photo's he had printed from the security footage of the elevators. The woman in the photo held her chin lifted slightly towards the camera, giving them a perfect shot of her small face and serious brown eyes. She did not look amused, but angry even and Aleksander wondered if maybe he should have treated her differently, given her a different answer. Clearly she knew more than he wanted anyone to know.

'She sleeps,' Manfred answered 'perhaps you should let her stay up there tonight...if she is really looking for her' he hinted towards Tara's picture. 'Is she with Andreis?'

'No. Which worries me. I think she has followed us from New York but she has been doing so on someone else's orders.' Aleksander folded the picture and placed the brunette into the front pocket of his shirt. 'I thought they had given up.'

'I don't understand, if Andreis isn't looking for you then who is?'

'I didn't say Andreis isn't looking for me. He found me in New York but I managed to get him off my track. I can't be certain yet, but I think she is working for Thorn.'

‘Thorn?’ Manfred moved closer towards Aleksander as though he was about to tell him some horrible secret but Aleksander raised his arms to stop him, he wanted to go out, not step further into the office.

‘Let’s go for a walk Fred.’ He suggested while he started walking away. He had known Manfred for nearly eighty years now and he trusted him with everything. He would tell him whatever he wanted to know, just not in this room. This story wasn’t meant to be recorded.

...

I will try and contact Aleksander again myself. I might have more luck getting in contact with the man. I feel Mick is hiding something from me though. Is Aleksander truly dangerous? Because I can’t help but think that he knows more about the deaths in our hotel in New York. Here in the hotel we have seen him guarded and I am starting to expect that he knows he is being watched. I am terrified that tomorrow I will pick up on things I don’t want to know. What if Mina is dead already?

...

The feeling of cool air against her face made Tara shiver in her sleep. She pulled the luxurious sheets of the hotel closer to her frame to block out the draft. She nearly dozed off again trying to find remnants of the dreams when she woke. Her heart rate sped up as she realized that there couldn’t be a draft in this room. She had closed all doors and to her knowledge the windows couldn’t even open, they were too high which floor. Was there something moving in the room? She could hardly hear with her own breathing and the pounding of her heart in her ears. A cold fear crept through her body. Was it safe to find out what had woken her or was it better to turn and hide underneath the sheets as she had done when she was a small child? To pretend that she had not heard.

‘Who’s there?’ she tried to sound as brave as she could as she sat up slowly.

At first she saw nothing, but then a shadow in the corner of the room moved slowly closer to her.

‘I believe introductions are unnecessary’ the voice was heavy, held a foreign accent Tara couldn’t place but was clear to understand. She knew instantly that this man was Aleksander Halapuu.

‘What do you want?’ Tara found herself gripping the sheets close to her body as she watched the shadow move closer again. Her eyes left him for a moment to glance at the light underneath the door too far away. Out there was the hallway, two doors down Mick was sound asleep. She wanted to call out for help but if this was who she feared it was then it would not matter anyway. He would be gone before they ever woke. Leaving her dead in her sheets.

‘Give up. Round up your buddies and leave the hotel, the state, the country... never pursue me or mine again’ his voice sounded steady, unemotional and cold.

‘She is just a girl...she has a family who need her back’ Tara tried, sleep was still heavy in her voice. The moment of silence that followed showed Tara that perhaps the man wasn’t made of stone. He tried too hard.

‘She is dead’ the answer took Tara off guard, where had that care gone she thought she’d heard seconds ago?

‘I saw her yesterday,’ she said hesitantly. Witnesses had seen her.

‘That was not her. She is dead to the world, as she should be. She must be dead to you too. I suggest you grab your bags in the morning, or you might follow her.’ She realized now that he

had been crouching, because he got up and blocked what little light came through the curtains. Just when her eyes had started to adjust to the near darkness. She moved back on the bed, further away from him.

‘Did you not learn in New York?’ his words brought the images of the three dead men fresh to her mind. She remembered the gashes, the sheer amount of blood, the stench. She cringed. He had killed the three men Mick had found. Her gaze fell on the door again and she decided to try and make a run for it. Before she could even tense a muscle, however, he had moved towards her and grabbed her arm to stop her escape. When her eyes met his he seemed puzzled. But the emotion was gone as soon as she recognised it.

‘You killed them’ she said in a shaky voice. ‘And you killed her’ she guessed. It would explain why she couldn’t sense the girl or find her at all.

‘I did not!’ he seemed repulsed by the mere idea. Angry that she would think so even when he had suggested so himself only seconds ago.

Tara tried to free her arm as she screamed for him to let go. He had lured a girl to this place, kidnapped her, was probably keeping her here against her will and he spoke of killing so easily that it should frighten her. She had chased evil before. Lead the police to rapists and murderers and they had affected her mind in much a worse way than Aleksander had. They had drawn her into fits of despair and anger. They had made her feel violent and evil and it had taken her a lot of effort to be drawn in by these feelings and act on them. She sensed that Alexander was not evil, yet here he was threatening her very seriously.

She pulled at her wrist again, yelled at him and hoped someone would hear her. He seemed only now to realize that he was holding her.

He let go without a word and stepped away from the bed, watching her with an unsettling calm.

‘I am not playing games Tara’ it surprised her that he knew her name. She rubbed the pain from her wrist and watched him, her fear clear in her eyes.

‘I would rather not act on my threat, but I will do anything to protect Mina’ he added after an unnerving pause.

‘Protect her from what?’ Tara interrupted him. She sensed that whatever was bothering him lay deeper than her search for Mina. He truly feared for the girl’s life.

He did not answer her. ‘Stop contacting me. Leave’ he repeated instead as he stepped back.

‘And take the others with you. Warn them that I will find them if they do not leave us alone’

Tara had no idea what he was talking about. But she nodded instantly, wishing that he would leave. To her relief he did just that. He left her alone on her bed staring at the door that slammed closed behind him fearing he would change his mind and come back to slaughter her as he had the others.

...

I am done! Mick left me his gun. As soon as he is back we will leave. Aleksander broke into my room and threatened me. I called Mick as soon as I could. Mick has told me everything kept from me. Thorn’s suspicions about Aleksander being a vampire are ridiculous. He is dangerous and I agree the evidence is odd. The prostitute’s story is strange. But there could be so many other explanations for it. I should have never come here in the first place. You don’t care about Mina, you’re after a monster that does not exist.

...

Tara stood outside Mick's room waiting for him to answer her knock. The door was locked from the inside and the key he had given her didn't work.

'Mick?' she knocked again and stepped back to wait. Maybe he had fallen asleep after the long night they'd had. He had told her everything he knew about Thorn and everything Thorn knew about Aleksander. They had convinced Mick that Aleksander was a vampire, a creature of the night that fed on other people's blood. A murderer that had lived for centuries and one they had been tracking for the last two decades. Tara had no problem believing Aleksander was dangerous and her own experience with the supernatural had set her mind wide open to all other things that could be out there. But vampires? She didn't believe they existed outside of films. Images of Rutger Hauer as Dracula surrounded by equally pale bloodsucking females passed her mind whenever she thought of them. She thought the very idea of living forever horrid and didn't understand some people's fascination with the immortal creatures. Mick had sounded intrigued and frightened by the idea that Aleksander might be the real deal. Thorn had convinced him that if they could get Aleksander back to their facility they might find out what makes him different from humans. Their research has led them believe that whatever gives him his vampiric immortality might be harvested or recreated. Tara had stared at her friend wide-eyed as she listened to his story. He had known all along that Mina was lured away by Aleksander. He had lied to Tara and he had clearly lost his mind.

Mick still hadn't opened the door. Tara picked her phone from her pocket and rang his number. The tune that emanated from behind the door suggested that Mick had not left the room, or he had forgotten his phone. But Mick seemed attached to his phone. No answer. Tara started to worry. She would have to go back to her room and wait for Mick to find her there again. But their flight was leaving in a few hours and even though the drive to McCarran International Airport would only take about 15 minutes, checking in and going through security would take them at least an hour and a half because their flight was international.

Tara's stomach knotted as she walked back to her room. Why didn't Mick answer his phone?

...

Tara moves slowly through the hallway. Each step echoes against the stone walls with such thunder that she hesitates to move on. She doesn't know where she is, or how she got here. Moments ago she had been..where had she been? She can't remember. The hall is enormous and especially dark. That she can see at all is a miracle she can't explain. To her left are green curtains, drawn closed. The chandelier above her is not lit and somehow she knows that she will not find a light switch to change that.

She needs to find out if she's alone. But she doesn't dare call for an answer. She feels unsafe. She crouches down and takes off her shoes, she abandons the heels to the side quietly as she moves on bare foot. It feels better not to make a sound. Outside she can hear the rain hit unseen windows, but inside she hardly hears anything but her own breathing.

On both sides of the hall the walls are covered with portraits of staring people. They look stern, dignified, but unemotional. Whoever painted them had used only dark colours and had managed to make all of them look scary. When she stops to stare at one of them the female seems to stare right into her soul. She shivers when she realises the woman looks an awful lot like Mina. When she moves further she realises they all possess that same familiarity. It is strange and it unnerves her. She wants to leave the hall as soon as possible.

With her heart stuck in her throat Tara steps up to a wide wooden door. Her hand moves to the doorknob but when she touches it she hesitates to open it. She presses the side of her face against the door in an attempt to hear whatever is behind it. But it's useless, she can't hear a thing.

Slowly she turns the knob and opens the door. It opens to a sitting room she recognizes. Though she doesn't know where from. The decoration and furniture are old fashioned. She doesn't recognize the organic style but it's the same as she has seen in the hall. Again the room is large, it fits the hallway that has led to it. This is not just a house. This is something larger, older.

She jumps when she hears a door slam in the hallway. Her eyes turn on the door immediately as she steps backwards into the room. She suppresses the urge to hide or run. She needs to know where she is and who is with her. She shivers in the sudden draft. Somewhere another door has opened.

'Hello..?' her voice shakes as she tries to control it.

'Who's there?' She hears footsteps. She can't ignore the sound. But who would this person be? And would he be helpful or dangerous? Her gaze falls on a silver vase on a table beside her. She grabs it without giving it a second thought and she holds it above her head. She will not hesitate to defend herself if need be.

'Hello?' a heavy voice surprises her in answer.

Tara nearly drops the vase.

'Tara?' the male voice is a lot closer than she has anticipated. The vase slips from her hands to the stone floor despite her effort and she closes her eyes, too afraid of the result of her clumsiness.

There is no sound. When she opens her eyes she finds herself staring at a white linen shirt, worn by an man she recognizes immediately. She takes two steps back automatically, putting more distance between her and Alexander and to be able to look up at him and actually see his face.

His eyes are dark and shine with anger. His lips are pressed into a thin line and it seems that he is waiting for her explanation with impatience.

‘Tara..’ she confirms dumbstruck.

‘What is going on? Did you take me here? How? Where are we?’

The expression on his face turns from anger to comprehension and then to confusion.

‘You’re still following me.’ he states. ‘ I thought I told you to give up. What do you think to achieve?’

The question confuses Tara. ‘What do you mean? Tell me where we are.’

His expression softens and he seems to realise that she has no idea what he is talking about.

‘We spoke like this before.’ He explains. ‘And you broke through quite a few barriers doing so.’ He sounds impressed even if Tara still doesn’t understand.

Analysis

The House of Cards as a start to a Gothic novel

The House of Cards takes off in Las Vegas, where Tara is attempting feverishly to get into psychic contact with Mina, the person she is hired to find. Though Mina might be just a teenager who ran away, Tara and her employers have reason to believe that she is brought to Las Vegas by a stranger named Aleksander Hallapuu and that he has done this against Mina's will, making her a perfect Gothic victim. Tara despairs that she cannot find Mina as easily as she likes but her findings initially keep her from giving up. Her psychic ability never gets her in contact with the person she intends, but instead she is pulled into an other-worldly dreamlike plane where she comes across Aleksander again. Aleksander tries to block her from contacting him again and threatens her in real life, trying to scare her away from the case. Tara, though attempting to be a heroine, isn't all that brave and is ready to give up on Mina after Aleksander's physical threat. Especially after she discovers that Mick, her partner in this quest, and her friend, keeps important information from her. Information her employer Thorn has failed to share with her as well. Even though Mick has lied to her, her disappointment does not turn into distrust. She and Mick decide to leave Las Vegas, Mina, and Aleksander and they decide to go back to Europe. However, before they leave Tara discovers that something awful has happened to Mick. In this part of the story Tara does not get to leave.

Even though Las Vegas initially doesn't summon images of gothic darkness, the setting is chosen purposely to create a certain distance as discussed in the essay before. Gothic stories were said to be distant to create a certain amount of estrangement. Even as travelling towards exotic and distant locations has become easier in this age compared to Walpole's time not every intended reader has been to Las Vegas.

Las Vegas revolves around the industry of illusion, entertainment and gambling. The Strip lies in a desert valley that traps the smog on hot summer days. The entire city is artificial, it gets its water and architecture from places far away. The hotels on the Strip itself are all but mere illusions of their originals across the world. The Luxor hotel, in which Tara books a room, is an Egyptian pyramid and Egyptian themed throughout. Nevada itself is as exotic as Italy or France must have been to Walpole's contemporary readers.

To further increase a gothic distance between the story and its readers, *The house of Cards* includes multiple motives, themes and styles used in earlier gothic novels. The story is fragmented, cut into different scenes with different protagonists and includes unanswered emails and unexplained dreams. Though most gothic stories considered in the essay before are written in first person perspective *The house of Cards'* main text is written in third person. Only the emails (written in Italics to set them apart from the main text) show Tara's personal voice as she tries to get in contact with the people that hired her. The emails and dreams interrupt the gothic story to give it its irrational and broken form (Grove). It is the start of a potential conflict in reality.

The choice of email correspondence rather than letters was made to modernise the story and an attempt to keep the main character, while on her journey, in contact with the people she left behind. Elizabeth Kostova used the same technique in *The Historian*. Even though Tara's emails are a lot shorter and to the point, the idea is the same. Tara never receives an answer to her emails in an attempt to make the reader wonder about the recipient of these messages.

“When an author draws attention to an omission from a tale of male adventure (either historical or romantic) he or she often draws attention to those voices that have been repressed or silenced by the writer of these precursory literary forms.”(Grove). The same can be said for

this story. The reader never learns why Thorn does not respond to Tara's emails but is guided to understanding because of the information Mick eventually provides Tara with.

The reader also doesn't learn why Aleksander has taken Mina or what has happened to Mike, who had seemed like such a good person in Tara's opinion. In his conversation with Tara Aleksander himself suggests different reasons. First he claims to have killed Mina, then he promises to protect her no matter what. He provides Tara and the reader with little understanding as to why he has killed the men in New York and in this part of the story even Mike's disappearance remains mystery.

Like other gothic texts *The House of Cards* interrogates a set of boundaries. It doesn't break with all boundaries considered in the essay above but it does test a few of them. The story's characters cross visible and invisible borders set out for them. They travel the world from Europe to the United States of America. From New York to Nevada in pursuit of each other. Tara breaks more abstract boundaries when her psychic ability takes her into a dreamlike world which takes her a lot closer to Aleksander than she intended to. The reader might notice this because of the shift from past to present tense in the text. Time and setting are broken when she finds herself inside an old castle-like building inside of Aleksander's dreams instead of the Las Vegas hotel. After discovering this has happened Aleksander confronts Tara about this and tells her to leave. But even after he threatens her Tara's uncontrolled thoughts at night seek out that which she is looking for during the day.

Aleksander seems to live by different rules and ethics than Tara or our contemporary society. Though he is not a vampire, as Thorn and Mike seem to believe, he does seem to possess a longer life than humanly possible. At this point in the story it is not clear whether he is immortal or inhuman but it does become clear that something supernatural is occurring. Something supernatural and perhaps something evil. Aleksander has killed and so far doesn't

seem to regret the action. Ethically he seems to live outside the normal, human, set boundaries. Scientifically the story explores the borders of what is possible. Even with today's increasing interest in the supernatural (there is an obvious increase on the subject in books, tv-series and shows like *Het zesde zintuig*) it is still not clear whether psychic abilities exist and if they do it's even more obscure to what extent.

The supernatural in *the House of Cards* consists of Tara who uses her supernatural gift to find missing people and of the character Aleksander, who is believed to be non-human and is considered to be a vampire. Tara's active power seems to be that she can concentrate on a photo to find the person on it. Even as the reader is told that she has helped the police with this power in the past it is not shown how.

Superstition does not have a large role in this story. Even as Mick is convinced that Aleksander is a vampire who has lived for over a few hundred years the story has yet to show why its readers might believe his (and Thorn's) theory. Mick never discusses any of the vampire folklore with Tara and thus never gives a clear view on what he believes or what his religious views might be. This might not seem relevant to this story at all but has been so to many gothic novels before. The story so far seems only to worry about what is ethically wrong or right and does not concern with religious motives.

Supernatural events in Gothic novels usually take place in the darkness of night. Las Vegas might not seem the perfect setting for such a story because it is a warm and sunny city, but the main part of the story takes place at night and is set inside the complicated mazes of the intertwined hotels and casinos. A popular place for tourists which can be intimidating and disorientating as well. Tara doesn't seem to like Las Vegas at all. She feels uncomfortable in her hotel room and gets lost when trying to find her way in the casino's, during the day.

At night the disorientation continues when her dreams take her somewhere else. During the day she has Mick to discuss her findings with but at night she is alone. In her sleep she wanders the castle halls on her own, looking for someone yet fearing to find someone at the same time.

The characters in *The House of Cards* are all chosen with a purpose. Tara, the heroine of the story, is not considered a victim at the start of the story. In fact, she and her friend Mick are hired to find and rescue the actual victim of the story, Mina. However, when Aleksander discovers Tara and Mick's agenda, Tara is pulled into the role of victim. Aleksander finds her when she is alone and threatens to kill her. Tara's first response is to give up, to flee. Not very heroic after all. It is only because she has no choice that she stays in the hotel.

Mina was a character in Bram Stoker's *Dracula*. Three times Mina was visited and bitten by Dracula and he even fed his blood to her, damning her to become a vampire when she dies. In Stoker's novel *Dracula* is killed and the curse is lifted before it could do Mina any harm. In *the House of Cards* it seems that Mina isn't harmed (yet) either. Mina and her assumed abduction remain a mystery in the house of cards. Her name was chosen because of its literary history in the gothic *Dracula* to give the impression that she is the victim of this story as well but the reader never meets her.

Though both forces of good and of evil are represented in *The House of Cards* it is not quite clear which characters belong to which. Gothic characters are often not what they seem at first glance. Aleksander is assumed to be the evil force of the story because he has brought Mina to Las Vegas, presuming, against her will and because he threatens Tara. However, in his point of view the reader learns that, in turn, there are others that mean him harm. Tara becomes fascinated by Aleksander but is also very frightened by him. Aleksander is a character inspired by later gothic novels like those written by Anne Rice. Even though his

actions are monstrous, he doesn't look the part. Tara's description of him "He had short cropped dark hair and a fairly light skin and even in the blurry image the features of his face looked sharp, rough." does not include hideous details that might suggest he is a monster. Tara does seem to trust Mick fully and yet it becomes clear that he has lied to her. He is not just looking for the missing girl Mina, but he is hired by a company called Thorn to locate Aleksander.

The House of Cards possesses many aspects of earlier gothic novels and has tried to bring them up to date with today's society. Far away Italy has changed to further away Las Vegas, castles have turned into hotels and letters have turned into emails but essentially the story has tried to stay as mysterious and eerie as its predecessors.