

THE POISONED INHERITANCE: PATRIARCHAL VIOLENCE, INCEST, AND FEMALE MADNESS IN WILKIE COLLINS'S THE HAUNTED HOTEL



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Abstract:

This article reassesses the position and guilt of Countess Naronia in Wilkie Collins's *The Haunted Hotel* (1878), arguing that innate evil does not cause her initial villainy and subsequent madness but is rather the product of patriarchal violence and abuse. Drawing from trauma theory, feminist gothic criticism, and Foucaultian biopower, the article posits the Venetian palace as an externalization of Naronia's traumatized psyche and conceives of Baron Rivar as a patriarchal sovereign exercising scientific control over his sister's body. The article argues that Naronia's incestuous abuse functions as a psychological poisoning and mirrors the literal poisoning she had survived in childhood. The final episode of her brain fever represents an identity collapse following the death of her puppeteer. Under this lens, *The Haunted Hotel* emerges as a Gothic critique of the Victorian family as an institution of male violence.

key words: feminism; Gothic; incest; *The Haunted Hotel*; trauma; Wilkie Collins

Introduction:

The most complex literary figures are arguably misunderstood, antagonists. It is a simple, easy task - tempting too - to do a surface-level reading of their characters, hastily condemn their misdeeds, and then place them once and for all in a rugged box branded evil. Countess Naronia in Wilkie Collins's 1878 novel *The Haunted Hotel* is a fine specimen of this type of individual. She is depicted after all as a

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mysterious foreigner, a known adventuress in Europe, a dangerous femme fatale in England, a siren more than capable of stealing another woman's man and then stealing the said man's life. Such attributes hardly qualify her for the prize of the woman of the year. Nevertheless, a shallow reading of her life, of her deeds and trajectory leaves the reader so unsatisfied, and gives the whole plot an ambiguous and incomplete feel. The reason is simple. Being a reflection of life itself, literary figures are just as complex. Moreover, while it is easier to read the headlines and the large print, reading between the lines is often far more satisfying, enlightening, and fulfilling. Accordingly, such is the purpose of this article, namely to challenge oversimplified readings of the tale, to look at the textual evidence of Naron's victimhood, and to reorder the features of her monstrosity as a symptom of a social malady rather than the cause of evil.

This article argues, therefore, that Countess Naron is a complex, tragic figure rather than a two-dimensional antagonist. Both her criminality and her madness are the direct result of sustained patriarchal oppression. The trauma she sustained can be studied via the analysis of two key events and separate eras of her life. The first is a childhood poisoning orchestrated by her kin. The second stretches over the full length of her adulthood and takes the shape of a prolonged, psychologically coercive incestuous bond with her brother. As such, the novel assumes the shape of a Gothic critique of the family unit and of the filial structure as an institution of male power and patriarchal violence. With such a task on hand, the article employs an interdisciplinary methodology, integrating feminist literary criticism, trauma theory, and Gothic studies to reassess Naron's role in *The Haunted Hotel*.

Drawing on Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's analysis of female confinement, Judith Herman's framework of complex trauma, and Michel Foucault's concept of Biopower, this analysis reads in the Venetian palace or the haunted hotel an externalization of Naron's traumatized psyche and of Baron Rivar's patriarchal sovereignty over his sister's body and mind. This method combines close reading of Collins's text with sustained theoretical engagement to construct a narrative that foregrounds the systematic violence underlying Naron's apparent villainy.

1. The Architecture of Female Trauma

1.1. The Haunted House of Patriarchy

Ever since the dawn of Gothic fiction, its settings have always involved their dwellers with imposing haunted structures that varied from the early intimidating castles of Ann Radcliffe with their secret passages, trap doors, and torture chambers to the more affordable but no less terrible manor houses, villas, and hotel rooms of the late-Victorian awakening of the genre. In all such structures, however, the architecture itself served to enforce the bonds of patriarchy oppressing women of all ages, classes, and walks of life. In Le Fanu's *Uncle Silas*, for instance, the dark and almost deserted mansion of the Ruthyn family is haunted by the vampiric figure of Uncle Silas, who strives after the inheritance of his only niece, and who does not shrink from the gloomy prospect of killing her when his initial plan of marrying her to his son fails. The mansion, in their case, oppresses rather than shelters the young woman, surrounded by both its walls and the rule of its patriarch. Even in the case of a less innocent and vulnerable victim, gothic architecture is almost always a tool of patriarchy to control and mediate the female agency. In *The Room in the Dragon Volant* by the same author, the Countess of St. Alyre is of a type entirely different from that of the helpless and friendless Maud Ruthyn. Nonetheless, she too is confined to a haunted castle behind the walls of which she, herself, works evil deeds propelled by her much older husband. In all her independence and superficial display of power, she is never seen outside in the open without the company of either her husband or one of his minions. At the end of the story, it is difficult to decide whether her life choices would have differed had she not been constantly confined to dwell behind the walls of her husband's property and inevitably bound to his influence.

The same question finds more ready though still less obvious answers in the case of Countess Naron in Collins's *The Haunted Hotel*. In her narrative, at least, the thread leads clearly towards a traumatic past and a discernible oppression that could not have ended otherwise. Nevertheless, even her story involves the Gothic architecture of the time as a symbol of her entrapped existence under the rule of a patriarch. In her case, the pressure comes from two different poles, acting in a pretty similar way. First, there is her brother Baron Rivar, who attaches himself so closely to her that even after her marriage with Lord Montbarry, he permanently resides with them. If we consider the household structure to be a metaphor of her psyche, then the latter would prove to be overwhelmed under the barrenness of such a location and the multiple

pulls now from this quarter and now from the other. The palace itself is crowded with men, while she is the only woman left in their midst. Her husband monopolizes the upper realm to pursue his studies in scornful seclusion while her brother occupies the underground to experiment with chemistry. Even her leisure time is spent in the company of another man, namely her courier, Mr. Ferrari. Much like Snow white, her position in the household conveys the dominant attitude towards women. The latter's "realm of domesticity is a miniaturized kingdom in which the best of women is not only like a dwarf but like a dwarf's servant" (Gilbert and Gubar 40). Similarly, the countess, as a young wife, occupies a temporary palace engaged by her husband for a few months as though the marriage itself is a mere temporary caprice, distant from home and kept secret and obscure from both friends and relatives. The lack of servants compels the countess to exert herself physically, yet quite pointlessly, since the meals are brought from a restaurant. Thus, all that is nourishing is beyond her control and independent of her will or capacity, unlike the sour lemonade she is asked to make for her ill husband. She is banished from the domesticity of nourishing and relegated to the spot of a necessary yet sour companionship, similar to the beverage she provides. Similarly, the closed doors from both upper and lower realms excludes her from intellectual endeavors and companionship, and lowers her value by throwing her to the company of the only other person on the premises - a lower class servant - with whom she is on familiar terms, suggesting their equivalence in the eyes and esteem of the two patriarchs of the house - the husband and the brother.

1.2. The Trauma of the Unspeakable Past

Such discrimination, however, is not the first nor most significant element of pressure on the psyche of the marginalized countess. When she makes her first appearance at Dr. Wybrow's office, Narona speaks briefly of a childhood encounter with death. Troubled about her paleness, the medical man enquires if his interlocutrice is okay, to which she answers, "The pallor of my complexion is nothing...In my early life I had a narrow escape from death by poisoning. I have never had a complexion since--and my skin is so delicate, I cannot paint without producing a hideous rash. But that is of no importance." (Collins 13). Thus ends the brief allusion to a childhood encounter with death that is never mentioned again in the novel but which cannot be without its significance.

For one thing, *The Haunted Hotel* is a brief work that does not have much space for irrelevant detail. Moreover, being an author of several detective and Gothic novels, Collins is not known for inconsequential wanderings in fiction. What he writes is always of some importance to one aspect or another of his books. Therefore, if that one detail about Naron's background had so far escaped the notice of most scholars, it is not because it has no weight in the plot; however, it is simply because it is so very well hidden and inconspicuous, like the little dirty secret it was meant to be in her life narrative.

At times, the toil of the literary scholar and the critic is no different from the work of detectives, as we are left with bits of information, hints of plausible happenings that we are supposed to bring together in an attempt to understand and explain certain aspects of the work at hand. Thus, what follows is not mere speculation about what could have been in the lives of *The Haunted Hotel's* characters, but rather a logical deduction arrived at by assembling all those tiny pieces and putting them together in the order they are more likely to form if united. Naron's visit to the doctor in the first place with a plea for help in regard to her mental health and sanity betrays a cognitive dissonance between the European adventuress she is reputed to be and the internally conflicted woman she truly is. In the physician's presence, she is desperate and almost erratic, seeking affirmation of her own sanity when the conflict inside her mind becomes more significant than the social image she tries to preserve. When combined with the earlier intelligence about surviving a poisoning in childhood, all these signs point to an obvious traumatic experience that had left its mark on her psyche. According to the American psychiatrist Judith Lewis Herman, "early life trauma affects the 'emotional brain,' the right brain, which develops rapidly in the first years of life and whose functions form the basis of human sociability" (257). This explanation elucidates Naron's behavior in relation to her brother Baron Riva. The latter is arguably the closest person to her heart, so much so that she had lost her reason gradually after his death and eventually passed while convinced that he was very much alive and in need of her financial support, just as he did when alive.

When it is a matter of the siblings' relationship, there are a plethora of disturbing facts and little details that betray the gray cornerstone on which their union rests. There is even the shadow of a sexual liaison that made the countess's maid resign from her position. Speaking of this matter, the courier Ferrari writes to his wife saying, "I have seen other

things besides, which--well! which don't increase my respect for my lady and the Baron. The maid says she means to give warning to leave. She is a respectable British female, and doesn't take things quite so easily as I do" (Collins 44). Looking at the power structure between the Baron and his sister, we can easily deduce that he has the upper hand in their relationship, which he steers whichever direction he desires. Riva is depicted as a manipulative genius who, among many things, had orchestrated his sister's marriage to the English Lord to settle his own debts. His power over her together with his cunning craftiness transpire in the ultimatum he had given her the first time they had met Lord Montbarry: "Take your choice, between marrying my Lord's income, in the interest of my grand discovery-- or leave me to sell myself and my title to the first rich woman of low degree who is ready to buy me" (178). To such an artful demand, Naron's response denounces the unhealthy attachment she had formed towards the Baron.

"Where is the true woman, she exclaims, who wants time to consummate the sacrifice of herself, when the man to whom she is devoted demands it? She does not want five minutes-- she does not want five seconds--she holds out her hand to him, and she says, Sacrifice me on the altar of your glory! Take as stepping-stones on the way to your triumph, my love, my liberty, and my life!" (178).

This response exceeds by far the ordinary affection of the most devoted of sisters, and points instead to the desperate need for trust that often accompanies the first stage of trauma recovery. "...One can conceptualize the task of the first stage of recovery as rebuilding a secure base. Once this relational foundation is established, the numerous psychological scars that afflict survivors of childhood trauma can then be addressed" (Herman 267). Apart from the aforementioned attachment to Riva, Naron functions more or less as a normal individual at first sight, but further inspection reveals that she is of a cold and opportunistic disposition, languid and uninterested in anything that is not her brother or his well-being. This pattern can be attributed then to the early compensatory bond she had developed with Riva after her poisoning in childhood, and which must have persisted into her more mature years.

So far, the manipulative brother is only using the traumatic affection of his sister to supervise her life and steer it in directions that would benefit him personally. However, let us take another step further back into their past to try to deduce how the poisoning had come to happen in the first place. The Baron is a scientist who specializes in chemistry. He is also an idler who does nothing for a living. Furthermore, he is an addicted

gambler who plays to fund his research, and only manages to get himself deeper and deeper into debt. We only mention these facets of his personality to set the setting and atmosphere of who he truly is and what sort of moral compass is in control of his impulses. Against this background, it is only admissible that in his younger years, Rivar had dabbled with chemistry just as he did in adulthood. Such a persistent devotion to knowledge in the field could have only surged from a discovery of the science in the early years of education to which boys of his station had access. Accordingly, isn't it possible that the young version of the Baron was responsible for the poisoning of his sister at the time, especially when he is at home with such a concept as suggested by his exchange with Naronia when the death of Montbarry became a necessity to them? The suggestion to administer poison to the estranged husband came forth, but Rivar turned it down. The countess asked if he was concerned about a possible examination of the body after death. However, Rivar shook his head, asserting that "he can set any post-mortem examination at defiance" (Collins 182). Such was the level of his expertise with the gruesome art built from so many trials, including one in which Naronia herself was involved. "Report whispered that his so-called sister had narrowly escaped being implicated in a famous trial for poisoning at Vienna" (22). Moreover, at the end of her life, when mania took hold of her mind following the death of her brother, the countess relates in her semi-fictional play how poison at the hands of the Baron had been the end of her husband. "Down in the vaults, the Baron stands by the corpse of the poisoned lord, preparing the strong chemical acids which are to reduce it to a heap of ashes" (194). All such details point at Rivar as the first suspect and only culprit of his own sister's poisoning back when she was a child. His criminal endeavours must have begun at the time, together with whatever abuse had followed, including the possible grooming and sexual initiation, which culminated in the incestuous bond that is abhorrent to anyone looking at their union from behind a close lens, such as the late Lord Montbarry, the indignant maid, and the dead courier.

1.3. Fraternal Biopower:

The Baron's control of his sister is much more than an individual act of patriarchal tyranny, however. It is instead a meticulously curated system rooted in Michel Foucault's concept of biopower, introduced and explained in his lengthy work *The History of Sexuality*. The first element in such a sophisticated structure of power and control is knowledge. For

all her grandeur as a countess before marriage and a lady (as Lord Montbarry's wife) after matrimony, Naronia enjoys nothing of her brother's mastery of science or her husband's proficiency in other studies. She is the castaway of both their studious environments. Moreover, while her husband shuns her because he suspects her infidelity, her brother does the same to maintain the imbalance between them. As long as she is ignorant of his art, she is at his mercy not unlike the victims of his craft, of whom she had once been a member. Somehow, the patriarchal regime of the day facilitated Rivar's design to keep his sister at a disadvantage since women of all classes were faced with only one of two options. In case they were poor and issued from families that could not afford formal education, girls were simply left in ignorance and later sent to work as peasants, maids, servants..etc. In the opposite scenario, and if their families could spare the expense of formal education, as was probably the case with Naronia's people, the training in question often included ornamental arts and decorative skills, such as the ability to speak one or two foreign languages, dancing, singing, and playing an instrument. In a word, without even trying, society had made it possible for the Baron to establish a pillar of biopower against his own sister in the guise of ignorance in relation to natural and experimental sciences. The depth of such a disadvantage can be seen in her plea to the doctor at the start of the novel when she had to reach out for yet another male to ascertain her own sanity.

At the same time, Rivar is a microcosm of the biopolitics of his day and age. His early attempt on his sister's life embodies the efficient systems of control that characterise what Foucault calls "anatomo-politics" and which regulate, among other things, one's "level of health, life expectancy and longevity, with all the conditions that can cause these to vary" (Foucault 139). His expertise in chemistry allows him to define the level of health of his sister and, by extension, that of her husband as well. Not only that, but he also controls their life expectancy and longevity via poison and psychological manipulation. It is because of him that Naronia has an unnatural pale complexion, which his psychological conditioning made her regard as unimportant. Again, it is because of him that her husband's health was not allowed to flourish even after the illness had lifted, and consequently, it is he also who is at the bottom of his sister's premature widowhood. This exertion of anatomo-politics is made possible by the Baron's training and knowledge, a field that is beyond the

reach of women and therefore held as supreme and unavoidable by its victims, notably by Naronà.

Beyond control, regulation sits as an even more important facet of the Baron's design for his sister's life and the deployment of her sexuality. Following on from the previous conclusion that he must have been at the bottom of her childhood poisoning, Rìvar is necessarily responsible for the grooming of his sister. Thus, his regulation of her life follows the four major 19th-century factors of sexualization introduced by Foucault as "the sexualization of children, the hysterization of women, the specification of the perverted, and the regulation of populations" (114). The first strategy is evident in the previous argument about poisoning and sexual exploitation. The second, namely the hysterization of women, is visible in the frail psychological make of the countess, who, although she had agreed to be an accomplice of her husband's murder, had also collapsed under the pressure of such an act under the influence of Agnes's (his former betrothed) apparent innocence and purity. This state was wrenched by force from Naronà by the anatomo-politics exertion of her brother. Thus, the countess is not 'hysterical' when she faints at the mere sight of the younger woman but is instead pushed to the limits of her psychological endurance by having the responsibility of a murder thrust in secrecy upon her. What the world sees in Agnes and herself is the contrast between "the angel in the house" and a continental adventuress. Such is the identity given her by Rìvar's life choices. What society does not see or consider, however, is the contrast of naivety and innocence found in Agnes and the burden forced upon the countess and prompting her to lie and be an accessory to murder while maintaining a perfectly sane social façade.

The third and fourth strategies go hand in hand. As Naronà's mentor and tutor in everything, including intimacy, the Baron has utter control over what is regarded as perverse or pure in her psyche. For that reason, his love is of the utmost importance to her because such a relationship is branded as pure by his own teachings and training. For him, she is willing to marry, lie, steal, and eventually kill. What is regarded by her as perverse is entirely under his control and is accordingly the idea of relegating him to another woman for money or other needs. Thus, when he gives her the ultimatum mentioned in a previous section, he does so knowing very well that her answer would favor him, and that she would rather make the sacrifice herself than give him up in marriage to another. At the same time, this state of affairs allows the Baron to control the

population of his own family. Soon after the marriage, he becomes a third party at the Lord's household, sparing no display of his unnatural intimacy with the countess that even the maid and courier notice. This display is by no means an error of judgment on the Baron's behalf. Otherwise, it would seem as an inadequate and inconsistent element of his personality so far. Instead, his openness about his bond with Narona was destined to produce the effect it made on her husband, namely, suspicion and disgust. The unavoidable consequence of seeing such an unnatural relationship where none of the kind ought to have existed was that Lord Montbarry isolated himself from his wife and shunned her society almost entirely. This had been the ultimate goal of the Baron who wanted to be in control of his family's population. To him, Lord Montbarry was a phase and a stepping stone in his career. He meant for his sister to marry him for money alone and therefore had done all he could to sever the intimacy between her and her husband immediately after he was sure of the alliance. In this manner, he alone could enjoy intimacy with her. Furthermore, by digging such a chasm between her and her husband, he ensured that no unwanted heir would come out of the union since the sexual relation was severed by sowing doubt and disgust in his brother-in-law's heart.

2. The Fall of the House of Parricide

The absence of any direct textual confirmation of Rivar's guilt in relation to the childhood poisoning of his sister does not exempt him from the deed. If anything, all his crimes go by unnoticed and unpunished in any legal sense, which only corroborates that his talent - a talent of which he was so supremely confident - had carried him off over the danger zone of legal accountability. Furthermore, if he got away with the murder of Lord Montbarry and the alleged poisoning in Europe, there are more reasons than otherwise to believe that he had been at the bottom of Narona's own poisoning early on in life, which is an obvious case of attempted parricide, no matter what his reasons and ultimate design could have been at the time.

Parricide plays an important role in Gothic fiction, almost as significant as that of the architectural symbolism mentioned earlier. After all, while houses, manors, and castles stand as the symbolic representation of both the mental state and the conditions of oppression in the lives of the female characters in such works, parricide is often the ultimate handy tool of that oppression and the leading cause of mental and physical repression. So many are the available works at hand to illustrate it,

including, among others, Edgar Alan Poe's 1839 short story *The Fall of the House of Usher*. Much like *The Haunted Hotel*, the story's main characters are siblings who share a bond that is more intimate than it should be. Roderick and Madeline Usher are twins and mirror images of the same filial essence. They too partake of the filial degeneracy which destroys them by bringing them too close for comfort. The dynamic between them is, at first view, different from that which Naron and Riva share, but the analysis of one only helps to understand the state and correlation of the other.

2.1. The Primary Victim

In *The Fall of the House of Usher*, the primary victim of the soricide is Madeline, even if Roderick soon follows her to the grave when her ghost surges to collect the price of her entombment. Her death comes first as the decision of her brother to kill the sinful part of himself and put an end to the torments of incest. This situation might seem so different from the sequence of events in *The Haunted Hotel*, in which the apparent victim of Riva is Lord Montbarry. However, would the Baron have been able to reach the lord without the Countess? In a way, the true instigator of the crime is Naron, who allies herself with Montbarry and paves the way to a close relationship between him and her brother - an amiable relationship in which the latter would not be suspected should anything happen to his brother-in-law. It is with her consent and plotting that the murder is made possible and carried on, and through her silence that her brother cashes out the insurance money after Montbarry's demise, with which they sail to the United States. The frailty of Naron's psychological endurance, especially in the society of Agnes and Dr. Wybrow, bears witness to the fact that something within her is being slowly and constantly wrecked by the events orchestrated by her brother. Having survived poisoning in childhood, Naron might not have altogether survived. The parricide in her case is subtle, gradual, and continual. It targets her identity, which explains her hysterical fear of Agnes whenever she is confronted with what she could have been had her brother not intervened with her evolution. Instead, he had destroyed her identity and replaced the pieces to suit his design and put it to his service. The outcome is a woman who would kill and die for him in equal parts and who floundered and sank into madness when the center of her existence passed away.

2.2. The Nature of the Crime:

Roderick entombs his sister alive. His decisions and neglect put an end to her life, but so does the Baron in a way, for although he does not bury his sister in a literal manner, he does so both spiritually and socially. Narona has no more say in her life than Madeline does. One is confined to the darkness of a tomb, the other to the gloom of a loveless marriage. The palace, which was later rebuilt as a hotel, plays the same role as a tomb. Between its walls, Narona's actual innocence and purity are wrenched from her so much that she cannot escape the place even after leaving it. When he murdered his brother-in-law, the Baron also killed a considerable part of his sister and condemned her to live in the shadows of that tomb. By her own admission, the countess seems to be aware of his claustrophobic limitation of her freedom and life when she addresses Agnes, saying, "You have still to bring me to the day of discovery, and to the punishment that is my doom. We shall meet again--here in England, or there in Venice where my husband died-- and meet for the last time" (Collins 80). Thus, even when the parricide and exploitation are masqueraded as love, the outcome is quite similar in that Narona, too, had been buried alive in the tomb of a forced marriage that ended in death and a loss of innocence and reason.

2.3. The Incestuous Dynamic:

Given the conservative norms of the era in which both tales were published, neither bond was pronounced openly incestuous, leaving the matter to the reader's private understanding and subsequent interpretation. Nevertheless, it is almost impossible to read either work without reaching that same conclusion for both pairs. The core dynamics of each relationship seem at first different since it is Roderick who lives closer to the light with his sister in the background as a ghost of his own desires both in life and in death. In contrast, the countess takes center stage in her own life with her brother following in the wake of her marriage. However, a closer examination and a perusal of some of the already mentioned facts prove that Rivar stays intentionally in the shadows just as Roderick keeps his sister intentionally hidden. For the latter, this is more discreet and careful. He wants Madeline to remain a shadowy figure in their house. To keep her hidden is to keep his own illicit desires safe from the scrutiny of the world. Narona is under the spotlight of the fashionable London society and not hidden like Madeline, simply because such is the design of her brother. Turning her into a femme fatale allows him to fly under the radar and keep his criminal career safe from the scrutiny and idle curiosity of his peers. We

see this at the beginning of the plot when the countess is the talk of the club, whereas the Baron is hardly mentioned. That is the image Rivar wishes to paint for the benefit of the onlookers. At home, however, it is he who directs the acts of his sister like a puppeteer. She marries when he wants her to, and she helps him murder her husband when he commands it, not to mention the insurance money, which he cashes out and sails with to America. Thus, though the design differs, the system is the same: the brother is in control of the incestuous bond.

2.4. Motivation:

The motivation of a crime is sometimes all the proof needed to convict a murderer in the absence of more incriminating signs. Rodrick and Rivar might differ in so many aspects of their personalities and life experiences. Although the former is refined and knowledgeable, the latter is a genius in his trade. Rodrick is a chronic recluse, whereas the Baron is a perfect rendering of the man of the world. However, their exploitation of their respective sisters overcame all such differences and took similar roots in their possible motivations. The reader of *The Fall of the House of Usher* cannot overlook the self-loathing of Rodrick and his subsequent desire to kill by ending the life of his own sister, the sexual degeneracy he cannot control in himself. A young Rivar might have experienced the same urge on which he would have acted on by poisoning his own sister to get rid of the sexual temptation she represented to him. The only difference is that Naronah had survived, and by the later developments in her life had succumbed, as well as her brother, to the sexual appeal of such a bond. What follows is a shift in motivation. Now that the forbidden had come to happen, the Baron's new motivation was to exploit that illicit union in order to secure two fundamental conditions. The first, to keep his sister for himself by the formerly mentioned display of intimate relations. The other, to secure through her and with her help, the financial ease that is often the result of the deployment of sexuality. After all, marriages are unions between not only people but also titles, capital, and land. Rivar's exploitation of Naronah is complete in that he benefits from her assets as a woman and a sister.

2.5. The Woman's Role:

The initial comparison between Naronah and Madeline might seem absurd. After all, one is as much a recluse as her brother, while the other is reputed to be a bold continental adventuress. In truth, the two women share one element besides their exploitation, and that is their powerlessness. In Madeline's case, the utter lack of agency is apparent

since her own life is wrenched from her without being able to do anything to save herself. In Naron's case, however, the same situation is masqueraded as the conditions of a woman of the world, very much her own mistress, when in truth she is nothing but a puppet in Rivar's hands. Whether accidentally or not, she had been poisoned by him in childhood. That she had survived the attempt is also ambiguous in that we do not know if she did by sheer luck or by the will of her brother and poisoner. In either case, she was not in control of the circumstances leading to her own safety or threatening to lead her to the grave. Similarly, her life in Europe was orchestrated by the Baron, who used her charms to ensnare well-to-do peers and deplete them of money, something he carried on to perfection with her husband, a man she married only because her brother had manipulated her into the union. Even after marriage, Rivar was still the master of another's wife, dictating the state of their marital life and eventually putting an end to it altogether.

Given all these points, and thanks to the analogy with the characters of *The Fall of the House of Usher*, the agency of Rivar in his sister's poisoning and her sexual exploitation becomes almost factual since it is present within the story albeit in silent but obvious hints, ready to be found and read between the lines and interpreted consequently in the only way possible.

3. Coercive Incest and Psychological Poisoning

3.1. A Poisoned Inheritance:

The thought of poison is often associated with female agency. After all, it is the evil queen who poisons Snow White so artfully with an irresistible red apple: a childhood tale reshaped for the benefit of every new generation, told over and over again around the fireplace, in storybooks, in cartoons, and even in movies. Moreover, what is the poisoned apple if not an echo of the original sin in the Christian doctrine? The latter makes no secret of accusing Eve of tempting Adam with the apple she had received from the devil, which led to her own fall and that of her partner. Thus, in a mythological tableau, it is always the woman's hands that manipulate the poison, be it actual and made of matter or spiritual and made of thought. The most obvious literary example of the latter sort would be the female temptation in Shakespeare's *Macbeth*. The titular character of the play had his mind poisoned on two accounts by female influence. The first instance is when the three ghostly witches appear bearing the prophecy of his rule. They are the first aegis of his illicit climb towards the throne. The second and arguably stronger patron of his

criminal design is Lady Macbeth, his own wife, who contaminates his mind thoroughly so that no other alternative is left but to commit the prophesied regicide. That is the manner in which poisoning is intrinsically associated with women and female perverse desires or criminal tendencies.

The truth of the matter is entirely different, however. A brief perusal of the history of toxins and poisons since their creation and entrance into medical and pharmaceutical use would prove that the sphere itself is essentially male-oriented. In the beginning of their industrial and medical use, the forbidden and dangerous substances were contrived by men like Rivar, men who studied and perfected the art, and then entrusted it to the care of other men, such as apothecaries and pharmacists. The woman came last in that long line of production and consumption, and often fell victim to miscommunication and lack of knowledge, and expertise. Take the case of Sara Macallan in Wilkie Collins' 1875 novel *The Law and the Lady*, for instance. The woman dies of suicide by arsenic, but the latter poison had not been purchased for that particular end. Dissatisfied with her loveless marriage and her husband's evident partiality for another woman of fairer complexion, Sara acquired a considerable amount of the same toxin to take in small doses in order to improve her skin tone. Such a detrimental practice was not even an isolated fictional case but a widely spread habit among women of the Victorian era who struggled, on the one hand, with the stressful expectations of a society that favored fairer skin tones, and on the other with the unavoidable ignorance about such substances and their actual and nefarious outcomes.

Narona might not have been as ignorant of the actual influence of poison when she, herself, had been its victim, but she was as innocent of its use in a criminal manner as was any other woman in the novel. Nevertheless, in society's eyes, it is her name and reputation that take the blow of her husband's death and even that of the alluded-to poisoning in Europe. Even though it is Rivar who stands behind such murderous attempts, his own reputation takes no toll and suffers no alteration. Such is the ultimate inheritance of Narona: a poisoned legacy that began with an attempt at her life in childhood and ended with a deterioration into madness followed by death. Between the two landmarks, a loss of personal agency marked the most significant part of her adult life. The course that her existence had thus taken suggests that her survival was not arbitrary or coincidental. The Baron might have killed her if he truly wished it, but

did he really wish it? It is very doubtful, considering the subsequent turn of their coexistence.

In a 2017 book entitled *The Right to Maim*, American academic and author Jasbir Puar delves into the concept of causing harm as a tool of biopower. Among the examples she gives, she mentions the case of the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) who, “have shown a demonstrable pattern over decades of sparing life, of shooting to maim rather than to kill. This is ostensibly a humanitarian practice, leaving many civilians ‘permanently disabled’ in an occupied territory of destroyed hospitals, rationed medical supplies, and scarce resources” (11). At first glance, the reader might wonder what the relationship could be between Rivar and the occupation forces in Palestine. The answer is none. The actual correlation we are looking for is the mobilization of biopower, the intelligent and yet cruel control of the very conditions and circumstances of life to subdue and control the living. Maiming Palestinians in an occupied state that lacks infrastructure and medical care and is all but starved is the easiest way to subdue the population, to reduce it to helplessness. The same is valid for Naron, who was maimed by her own brother to keep her at his mercy on an emotional as well as a physical level.

To begin with, there is her pallor to consider. As a woman, the countess was known for her extraordinary beauty. However, between girlhood and full maturity, there were years of struggle during which Naron could have been miserable over the unearthly whiteness of her skin and the rash she got from trying to alleviate it with cosmetic products. During these years, the Baron’s emotional support could have been the reason behind their strong attachment and subsequent incest. That is one very plausible reading of Rivar’s right to maim, which he holds over his sister in different ways. Another would be the psychological attacks he had launched on her husband shortly after their marriage. By convincing Lord Montbarry that his wife was unfaithful, he took complete control of the conditions and circumstances of their marriage. By doing so, he also condemned the union and placed the countess in a difficult position, the only way out of which was his own murderous design. Having doubted the fidelity of his wife, Lord Montbarry withheld himself from her, and alongside his affection, he also withheld his money. The disastrous situation would have ended in a complete social ruin for Naron if her husband had decided to divorce and disinherit her. The only other alternative, accordingly, was the one engineered and put in motion by

Rivar. In this manner, Naroná takes the shape of his lifelong project. His attempt on her life loses both the experimental and accidental possibilities it might have had. The poisoning was destined to fail because Rivar wanted it to fail and wanted his sister to survive, at least bodily, at the expense of a tottering psyche that was then completely at his beck and call.

3.2. Beyond Consensual Deviance:

We have so far established beyond the shadow of doubt the existence of an incestuous bond between Countess Naroná and her brother Baron Rivar. The arguments and data thus accumulated indicate a power imbalance that had put the countess at a disadvantage and implicated her against her will in such an illicit union and subsequently thrust her onto a criminal career that ended with the murder of her husband. The present section aims to dissolve any lingering doubt regarding the complicity of Naroná in the formerly mentioned designs and prove that the sexual deviance in her relationship with Rivar was not consensual. For this purpose, we will draw from Professor Mary Jean Corbett's 2008 book *Family Likeness* to contextualize incest historically, analyze the power dynamics between Naroná and Rivar, and finally compare to canonical Victorian texts in which filial boundaries were contested.

According to Corbett, there were no criminal penalties for incest in England between 1857 and 1908, which covers the years in which *The Haunted Hotel* was written and during which its story was set. The reason for that was the moral prejudice that justified the social and political hegemony of the 'white' middle class, who thought that people outside their class and racial groups were morally inferior and unable to restrain their animal impulses. Accordingly, incest was depicted as a savage practice rather than a violation of nature (6). From there, we can only imagine how things went on. If the marginalized social groups were regarded as inferior, quarantined, and restricted, there was no reason why they should not act as savagely as they were advertised to be. Consequently, incest spread wide among the ranks of lower-class families who lacked education as well as guidance. However, the phenomenon did not end at the threshold of poverty and ignorance. Like any other vice, incest climbed the social ladder towards the individuals who were curious and reckless enough to pick up at its bed. One good literary example would be the ambiguous union between Catherine and Heathcliff in Emily Brontë's 1847 masterpiece *Wuthering Heights*.

There are so many readings of the story, notably of the origin of Heathcliff, that suggest that he and Cathy are actually siblings. The story tells how, "Earnshaw returns with a mysterious dirty child whom his wife 'must e'en take as a gift of God.' He gives a vague and illogical report of finding the homeless and starving child in the Liverpool gutter" (Solomon 82). His explanation is an unlikely one at best, but it is justified in view of his wife's grumbling and objection to the child. If such was her reaction to receiving a mere friendless boy, what would have been her response when confronted with the illegitimate fruit of her husband's secret affair? Thus, it is only admissible that Mr. Earnshaw had lied to preserve the unity and peace at his home when the mother of his illegitimate son died. What corroborates the paternal tie between them is the fact that "Heathcliff soon becomes Earnshaw's favorite, more cherished than his own children, an unnatural occurrence surely- unless this is a natural child," whereas, "Hindley, for his part, sees Heathcliff as a usurper of his parent's affections" (Solomon 82). If Heathcliff is thus the son of Mr. Earnshaw, he is then Catherine's brother and lover all at the same time. Moreover, if the father had chosen to rear the boy as a stranger in his own home, he must have at least considered the possibility that two children might grow fond of one another and unite themselves when older. The only conclusion that could be reached here is that incest was not that objectionable to the father or to the son and daughter, for that matter. After growing up and understanding the world, Catherine and Heathcliff must have at least had a suspicion about the matter, especially since they had similar dark hair and eyes. That is to say that at the time of the story, incest was a rampant vice, only silent because ignored and kept secret by the efforts of those it served, like Rivar.

The next point we should take into consideration is the power dynamics between Naron and Rivar, which can determine once and for all whether the union was born of misguided perversity or coerced into being through manipulation and power structure. In her 2004 book *Novel Relations*, American scholar Ruth Perry explains that "it was a mixed blessing for women to exchange whatever power and status they had in their families of origin for the power and status of women in conjugal families" (2). Ruth asks such questions as to whom one should belong. To their family of origin or their contractual family? The answer in Naron's case is Rivar. Although married to another man, her brother lives in the same house and enjoys her company so much more than does her husband. Not to forget that the marriage itself was orchestrated by the Baron, who

looked after its minutest details and controlled alone such matters as the life insurance he forced on Montbarry as a condition for the union. If such is the case, does Naron's status shift at all within the confines of an incestuous bond? The answer is yes. Between the helpless, poisoned child and the secret mistress of the Baron, the latter status provides much more safety and mimics filial affection, even if perverse. We should never forget that Naron has survived childhood poisoning, which must have been a very traumatic experience that made her feel very vulnerable. The shift brought about when her brother became much more than her brother meant that, in exchange for romantic and sexual services, she should be safe from any further attempts on her life. The logic behind it is very simple, actually. It was the brother who had poisoned her in childhood. By becoming her incestuous lover, the brother figure dies, and with it dies the constant pressure and fear. In its stead, the persona of a lover and a savior emerges, hence the irrational attachment towards Rvar even after his death. Accordingly, even if the countess had, of her own accord, embarked on an incestuous venture with her brother, no part of it can be said to have been entirely consensual. As a survivor of trauma, the countess, with her already fractured psychological build, had merely exchanged the brutalized position of the sister for that of the protected lover. She exchanged the violent brother for a capricious lover. The incestuous bond preserved her life and the fragility of her psyche alike.

3.3. The Ultimate Patriarchal Transgression:

Having said much about the relationship of Naron and the Baron, let us move to the latter in relation to his society and whether his motivations were borne of personal perversity alone or whether it was the fruit of a tattering and morally decadent social structure. First, we should observe the role of culture and its pull in the paving of such deviant practices as incest. In most cases, if not all, of illicit filial sexual relations, the relationship itself is not consensual. Accordingly, there is always an oppressor and an oppressed, an exploiter and an exploited. It follows logically that the oppressor and the sexual opportunist are in a position of power in relation to the victim (emotional and/or psychological, financial, legal/penal, or simply physical). The majority of non-consensual incest victims are children and women, as suggested by a study conducted in a university hospital in Turkey by Dr. Ali Yildirim. et al:

“The study sample consisted of 43 incest cases (36 females and 7 males) with an age range from 4 to 40 years. Two-thirds of the victims were under 18 years old. All perpetrators were males. Father-daughter incest (34.9%) was found to be most common incest type, followed by brother- sister incest (14%). We found that 75% of the perpetrators were family members and relatives with consanguinity, while 25% of them were not consanguineous but were people that the victim felt allegiance to” (694)

The data shown in the excerpt is just as valid for the Victorian age and the turn of the century as it is for our contemporary society, for although we are studying the phenomenon in a completely different era, incest practices were in full bloom then, just as now, if not worse. In a previous section, we explained the moral justification and social mechanisms that allowed it to bloom and propagate unchecked. Since then, the practices had somewhat diminished but never really went away, as suggested by the statistical data. The first thing to note is the proportion of male victims against that of women, namely 7 males to 36 females in a sample of 40 individuals. The number of assaulted women is about five times that of men, which corroborates the theory positing that such instances of sexual violence are made possible by the efficiency of a patriarchal regime that subjugates women and puts them at the mercy of their male guardians. Fathers and brothers, as indicated by the statistics, are the individuals most likely to abuse their sisters and daughters sexually. That is relatable in the case of Rivar, who abuses his authority on multiple levels. First, he drags his sister all over Europe and uses her physical appeals to ensnare potential victims at the gambling table. Then, he marries her to an English Lord, destroys her reputation in the latter's opinion, and forces her to be an accessory to his murder. All of this is achieved thanks to the patriarchal norms that allowed him to put his own conditions on Naroná's marriage, as he would not hear of her union before a sum of ten thousand pounds was settled on her in case her husband died before her (Collins 26). Now, the penal code and the laws of the day allowed the brother to control that much of his sister's life. The patriarchal regime made control so easy and even inherent in the social construct. The same regime gave Rivar so much power over his sister, not only emotionally and psychologically, as we found out earlier. It was literally in his jurisdiction to refuse the marriage and to put his own conditions on it. Such entitlement creates a great rift in the power structure, making Naroná and women in general mere subjects to men

and even objects at their disposal. The outcome is not the physical exploitation of illicit sexual relations alone, but, as we will see in the next section, a total warping of cognitive capacities and the inability to form healthy relationships.

3.4. The Madness of Liberation:

Collins's literary style in *The Haunted Hotel* distances itself from the moralising tone of some of his contemporaries. Unlike Dickens and Gaskell, for instance, his writing has very little preaching entwined with his plots, leaving that space instead for the shock value of his genre of choice. Sensational fiction, as indicated by its name, was all about sensations and controversy. The implied incest is an example of that; Montbarry's poor choice of wife when the perfect "Angel of the House" was already in his position is another. In this manner, the very end of his antagonists is not designed to sow the seed of this moral lesson or the other but is rather fashioned in the garments of the genre itself. Accordingly, nothing is moralizing in Rivar's death. One would have thought that succumbing to fever in a Western city they happened to visit would not do justice to a murderer and a sex offender, but the plot itself is not about justice. It is rather shockingly similar to real life, a setting in which justice and morals are not necessarily the dominating drives. Similarly, Naron's tattered psychological and cognitive capacities are not to be read as the curse of her life choices or the moral ending of a fallen woman. They represent the logical conclusion of the Baron's death instead.

We have so far determined that Rivar had been the central figure of her life, representing in paradoxical terms the destroyer of her peace and the salvation of her fears. He is at once the poisoner, the exploiter, the sexual offender, but also the savior, the leader, and the lover. His death, accordingly, causes as much harm in her psyche as his life had wrought during their years together. This response is not the isolated fictional case of Naron alone but is known to occur in former victims of sexual abuse when the abuser's life finally comes to an end. Such are the findings of Julie Millar's Thesis from Chester University Clinical Counselling Program entitled *An exploration of the impact of the death of a child sexual abuser on the grief process of adult survivors who are counsellors*. The study focuses on adult survivors, some of whom are counselors fully cognizant of their former abuse, which is significant in Naron's case, at least during adulthood, when she became aware of the nature of her relationship with Rivar. Millar's data indicates that "the

death of the abuser was linked to many more losses, which preceded and followed the death of the abuser...particularly where the abuser was an attachment figure" (31). A case study she supplies is that of Ella, who had been abused by a member of her own family, and who describes how she had been devastated during his funeral and how she had cried like never before. Another case is that of Elizabeth, who was abused by her brother, and yet was left torn apart by his suicide, feeling that she was worth nothing afterwards (Millar 32). What these people and others in the study share with Naronia is the strong attachment they had formed towards their abusers, a force that prevented hate and bitterness from overcoming love and longing. What such a conflicting state entails is the inability to face the abuser with his abuse. Accordingly, like Naronia, the victim ends up with blurred boundaries of guilt and accountability. "For Ella," Millar writes, "her protecting her abuser was part of protecting her image of herself" (40). Notice the wording of the sentence. It is not the image of herself that Ella is protecting, but rather her image of herself. The difference between the two is huge, for when the image of herself is indicative of her persona and social presence, her image of herself is far more crucial since it represents her integrity and conception of herself. For Ella to have a full and intact conception of self, she has to attribute the same state and characteristics to her abuser.

Naronia goes through the same process with Rivar. It is not their social personas that are at stake in her psyche, but rather her private conception of herself, which cannot be whole if that of Rivar is not pristine as well. For that reason, Naronia idealizes and idolizes her brother despite everything she has gone through because of him, including the poisoning, the sexual abuse, the financial exploitation, and the coercion into murder. The only way in which she can perceive herself as whole and fully functional despite all the trauma is to regard Rivar as immaculate and to maintain an unsullied bond with him. Their union would have accordingly gone like that for years if not unhindered by the arbitrary hand of death. When the Baron died of a fever in the States, the relationship that meant so much to his sister was brought to a sudden end. The pristine persona of the savior and lover, which had been in full control of her life and all its aspects, suddenly disappeared, leaving nothingness in its wake. The death of the abuser in her case is not a liberation from abuse, for she had previously done away with the concept of being oppressed in order to save her own image of herself. It was instead a catastrophic collapse of her world and all its constituents. Her

own mind, in a way, was not entirely hers but had belonged in a great part to Rivar. His death caused that brain fever which slowly ate her from within and left her confused regarding reality. Having lost her compass and her very reason to be, she slowly but surely deteriorated until her mind was reduced to a compulsive replay of the events at the hotel. At first sight, this occurrence might appear as a manifestation of guilt concerning the murder of her husband. However, our analysis of Naron and her relationship with the Baron so far points to a more complex explanation. The period she had spent at the palace (turned hotel) with her brother and late husband was the very last era of life she had had with the former. Directly receiving the money from the life insurance, they sailed to America, where Rivar died. In a manner, going back to that memory was prompted by her desire to alter the course of events, to change reality and bring him back to life, which she did symbolically through the semi-fictional play she wrote. Following that, her psyche collapsed so fast that she no longer knew reality from fiction, and in her mind, she had managed to reverse the death of her brother, insisting that she wrote the play because she needed to give the money it brought to Rivar, whom she was convinced was alive and as dependent on her as ever.

Conclusion

In the end, it becomes apparent that *The Haunted Hotel* is a tale of horror that surpasses by far the realm of ghosts and otherworldly apparitions. If anything, the actual haunting of the Venetian hotel, along with its ghastly apparitions of Montbarry's severed head, is hardly significant when compared to the psychological haunting of Naron's psyche. The true horror at the heart of the plot is, accordingly, not that of a supernatural presence occurring after the death of the murdered English Lord, but rather a real and systemic terror born out of patriarchal oppression and violence. It poisons the living body of the countess, it violates her mind, and eventually erases her identity and turns her into a mere puppet in the hands of her brother.

In this capacity, the novel does not depart from the tradition set by its author to make use of sensational fiction to expose the underbelly of the Victorian family. On the contrary it carries out the work begun in other similar publications like *The Woman in White* and *The Law and the Lady*; stories in which the woman, no matter how smart and resilient, is overcome by the power imbalance of a patriarchal regime that forces her

to give up her freedom of thought, her intellect and opinion, and her liberty of action.

The current analysis allows us to perceive the countess as the tragic figure she truly is. Her madness is not a moral judgment for a life of sins and debauchery. Such a reading would be too simple and quite superficial. In short, it would almost seem an insult to the author's ingenuity and the reader's intellect. What Naron's madness really represents in a realistic reading is a devastating endpoint of a lifetime spent as a helpless pawn controlled by poisonous and toxic men. It is she who is the haunted structure, the haunted woman, the haunted unit of an unfair, sexist, and biased society.

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