

Misty: Gothic for Girls in British Comics

Anthology comic for girls

Published weekly by Fleetway between 1978 and 1980, 101 issues.

Return to horror in comics at this time - *Scream* (John Wagner, Alan Grant) and also in children's market, *Spellbound* (DCT), and *Misty* explicitly aimed at a younger audience and featured work by many writers and artists who dominated the British comics market, such as Pat Mills, Malcolm Shaw, John Armstrong...

Mills conceived *Misty*, consulting editor 'my plan was to use my 2000AD approach on a girls' comic: big visuals and longer, more sophisticated stories with the emphasis on the supernatural and horror. My role models were *Carrie* and *Audrey Rose*, suitably modified for a younger audience.' (Mills 2012)

Mills has described *Misty* as 'the female 2000AD' and this association has dominated critical attention. 2000AD also published by IPC, beginning 1977

Although *Misty* doesn't use explicit violence, it's an unsettling piece of work. Going to look at the ways in which *Misty* adapts horror tropes from British and American comics for its younger, female audience, giving it a particularly subversive edge.

SLIDE: FEMALE CHARS

Girls comics were a boom industry

by end of 1950s at least 50 diff titles in UK

And more emerge in 1960s and 1970s

Number declines by late 1970s and it was the fate of most of these titles to be merged into each other as the market dwindled.

James Chapman (2011: 111) argues that the 1950s girls' comics were attempts both to create a new market and also construct a "socially approved model of adolescent femininity." Other critics such as Valerie Walkerdine, Angela McRobbie, Mary Cadogan and Patricia Craig have argued that these comics can be read as tools of oppression, in which female protagonists are positioned as victims and girlhood is constructed in accordance with femininity and passivity.

However Mel Gibson and Martin Barker offer alternative readings that critique the idea of a singular ideology being put across by this range of titles. Gibson redefines these 'victim heroines' as 'survivors' and identifies their different attitudes and personalities, while noting that 'important feminine qualities' such as humility and 'not showing off' (2010: 127) underpin narratives such as *The Four Marys* (a long-running serial in *Bunty*, set at a girls' boarding school and follows a group of friends (all called Mary) from very different social backgrounds (two middle class, one working class scholarship girl, and one aristocratic)). *Misty* also contains explorations of different types of girlhood, for example in its story *The Four Faces of Eve*, a pastiche of *Frankenstein* where protagonist Eve Marshall is trying to unravel her true identity, but she seems to be the bits and pieces of a collection of dead women.

Subversive titles if we read characters as winners and 'survivors' not 'victims' and in offering tales of peril, but Misty gives this a darker more supernatural turn

SLIDE: MISTY THEMES

Will Brooker, author of *Batman Unmasked* and an expert on popular culture summarises Misty as follows: "Pacts with the devil, schoolgirl sacrifice, the ghosts of hanged girls, sinister cults, evil scientists experimenting on the innocent and terrifying parallel worlds where the Nazis won the Second World War."

Sentinels, begins #1, heroine transported to a parallel dimension where the Nazis won the war and Britain is occupied

enchanted and magical items - box of paints in "Paint It Black" (begins issue #1), a mirror in "Day of the Dragon" (begins issue #10, 1978), a ring in "Moodstone" (#1);

magic powers ("Moonchild" [begins issue #1] which shares many qualities with Stephen King's *Carrie*, 1974).

Faustian bargains are made ("The Love and the Laughter," #10) or wishes granted ("The Dummy," #4, 1978), often with horrifying consequences that are narrowly avoided—or not, if the protagonist deserves it! For example, Zoe successfully banishes school bullies to the pages of a horror comic in "A Picture of Horror" (#57, 1979) while in the same issue jealous Anna's attempt to use a gypsy curse on her sister backfires and she becomes its recipient in "Two Left Feet."

As well as a dark and spooky twist had a strong moral message. Although protagonists are female they are not always heroines - girls who are selfish or dishonest get their comeuppance.

SLIDE: 2000AD

Misty's nationality, its link with Pat Mills and its visual style have meant that the association with 2000AD has dominated the limited critical attention paid to this comic to date. As you can see here, both titles share a focus on innovative and irregular page layouts that dynamically punctuate the action and lead the eye, e.g. on the second page the broken fence that crosses the border of the second panel (top right) leads the reader's eye to the third panel and the angular shapes separate the chaos of Sandy's fall from her horse from the reassertion of order as other riders appear in the bottom row of panels.

Along with this, however, Misty also draws tropes from previous generation of American horror comics: the pre-Code titles of the 1950s, from publishers such as Ace, Atlas and, of course, EC.

SLIDE: PRE-CODE HORROR

Jim Trombetta - list of EC characteristics which I have summarised here as follows. characterised by 'density of language, stories narrated by host, and complex interior flashbacks narrated by characters' (HH, 148). Shock endings (in the words of editor in

chief bill Gaines, EC's villains all-too-often 'got it how they gave it', as do many of Misty's), and O.Henry reversals - endings that involve an ironic twist of fate, eg Big game hunters who end up heads on someone else's wall; wives conniving to kill their husbands end up trapped in a similar way; even such a story where a man walking his dog is attacked, which ends violently with the reveal he is a 'seeing eye man for a retired blind werewolf' (HH104)

SLIDE: DJINN

In Misty brave girls can outwit evil, eg this story, a twist on the monkey's paw, where kitty saves a genie from choking and is rewarded with three wishes, but the wealth etc she wishes for is gained via horrid accidents to her family. She uses her final wish to undo this by wishing she had never met the Djinn. Kitty is a survivor not a victim!

However, stories are not always this reassuring, and the stakes are high, for example

SLIDE: GIRL WHO STOLE THE STARS

Where Dana finds a piece of meteor than grants her wishes – but realises just in time that each wish she makes is putting out one of stars in the sky – and that the sun is a star...

Tendency in both tales for 'quick fix' devices like wishes to be dangerous and heroines need to be clever and brave (sacrificing their desires) to come out on top.

SLIDE: GHOULUNATICS

Another thing supporting this type of subversive feminist reading of Misty is the use of the host figure, which is another device it shares with the American horror comics .

The most famous comic book hosts are EC's Ghoulunatics, who were cult personalities. They bookended tales and by doing this provided much-needed reassurance for the reader by keeping them outside the story: their joking summaries and terrible puns add an ironic distance from the stories' events, potentially shielding young readers.

For example, this is the first appearance of the vault keeper, who introduces the story, addressing us as 'dear reader', and wraps up by summarising its events at the end:

'Fred went *completely mad* from the shock, dear reader! *You can understand!* Grave-robbing is a nerve-racking business! And this was the straw that broke the camel's back! They have him in a padded cell now... one that he won't be able to dig his way out of!...'

SLIDE: SEA MAID/HOST

Like the EC comics, Misty also had a host figure (Misty herself), and the example here is one of the rare occasions where she bookends a story. Misty opens this tale by narrating 'Anne Goodwin and her mother had been invited to spend a few weeks with friends who lived on the rocky Cornish coast'. The friends tell Anne the myth of

the Sea Maid, a Siren who tricks sailors into crashing their boats on the nearby Wreck Island. Anne hears voices one night and rescues two twin girls from the Island, only then to be told by the girl's mother that she couldn't have heard them cry for help as both are dumb. The final panel then has Misty wrap up the tale, asking 'Did Anne hear anything on that night? Anne is convinced that she did, just as she is sure that the stories of the Sea Maid 'luring sailors to their doom' are all wrong. Perhaps the voice was the Sea Maid's way of proving her innocence by saving two lives!'

Here Misty serves a similar function to the EC hosts - offering explanations and reassurance, but with a feminist twist, as Misty is concerned here with defending the reputation of the Sea Maid.

She is also less definite than the EC hosts (raising questions and stating 'perhaps'), and addresses the reader on their level, rather than with the more humorous yet patriarchal tone found in the EC comics who called their readers boys and girls, or boils and ghouls

Also, this is one of just a very small number of stories where misty performs this bookending function (handful in 101 issues). More usually, she only appears on the inside cover and letters pages (drawn by cover artist Shirley Bellwood) and does not introduce individual stories).

Typical introduction would read 'Come with me through the land of mists and mysteries where every story has more shivers than an English winter. Fear not and tread boldly with your friend of the mists, Misty'
Reader addressed directly, almost as an equal, and it was almost always signed 'Your friend, Misty.'

Some however were slightly less reassuring:

'As the mists part once more I stand in the shadow of the willow waiting to take you into my world of whispers and watchers from beyond. Tread warily...
Misty'

So in these comics a similar tool is being used - the host figure - but in a slightly different way, and the result is again quite subversive by being less reassuring and definite.

SLIDE: SPOOKY SUE

So although similar roles, both the host and content of Misty were generally less reassuring and authoritative than the Ghoulunatics and their like.

Misty's stories often ended on a distinctly disturbing note, for example Happy Birthday Spooky Sue, narrated by Jenny, who is invited to her classmate Sue's bday party. Of the thirteen classmates invited she is the only one who has ever been nice to Sue. The others make mean comments and say they are going to just vanish after the food - and then suddenly they each begin to disappear, in a puff of smoke, as Sue

blows out the candles on candles on her cake. The story ends with Jenny being given her own candle and told 'it will stay alight forever', but this is somewhat overshadowed by the final picture, which shows her fear as she leaves the house, desperately shielding the little flame that is now tied to her life.

Stories in *Misty* often end on a disturbing note.

SLIDE: SHADOW

Another good example is 'Shadow of a Doubt' (*Misty* #58) ... farmgirl Mary hears whispers at night coming from their barn, and recognises the voices as people in their village, who seem to be plotting to kill everyone and take over the town... she tells her father who tells her not to be so silly, and then the next night she hears his voice among them saying that that Mary suspects and that they must do something about it... as she is running away upstairs her shadow turns to her and reveals that the voices she has heard actually belong to all these people's shadows, including her own...

Story ends without any comforting conclusion: 'Mary tries to warn everyone but they all laugh it off... she's scared of her own shadow, they say... one day they'll learn just how true that is.' (look at that last panel!)

SLIDE: DIRECT ADDRESS IN COVERS

Misty also challenged its readers with its "Nightmares" section and, although it seldom used direct address except on the inside cover, frequently dragged them into the story visually. For example, the cover of issue #21 drawn from the embodied perspective of a creature, with "our" long-nailed hands and hairy arms extended – just like the covers of these 1950s horror comic covers from various companies, which place the reader in the subversive position of monster, or Other.

SLIDE: EMBEDDED STORIES

Misty also frequently uses embedded stories and complex flashbacks in a similar manner to the American horror comics, for example in "The Dummy" (#4), which uses hidden layers of story and exploits the stylized artistic style of the comics medium.

Protagonist Rhoda wants her father (a ventriloquist) to love her as much as his dolls, and makes a wish on a rabbit's foot given to her by Beattie, who plays a fairy in his act. Beattie's initial appearance uses the stylization of the medium to mislead the reader into thinking she is a real fairy godmother (appearing behind Rhoda in a mirror) before this is debunked in the subsequent panel. Next a false ending (situated at the end of the penultimate page) tricks readers into thinking the protagonist Rhoda has been transformed into a ventriloquist's dummy as a consequence of her wish. Repeated panels are used to show the transformation of Rhoda into a doll. Happily, the final page then debunks this again by revealing it to be a nightmare shared by Rhoda and her father, as a consequence of which he changes his ways.

(This story also has the rare presence of a “host” stand-in: Bertie, a ventriloquist’s dummy from the tale. Bertie introduces the story by addressing the reader directly from outside the main diegesis (breaking the fourth wall to look directly at us and introducing himself and the story with “Hello, Boys and Girls...”) however he then features in the tale itself and reappears in the final panel, again breaking the fourth wall to wink at us from within the main story.)

SLIDE: VAMPIRES

Direct address, a trick ending and the addition of an extra layer of fiction are strategies that also appeared frequently in pre-code horror. For example the story *vampires don’t make me laugh!* – the first and last pages of which are shown here. Like the *Misty* story, we have a narrative introduction from a narrator/character within the story – the curator – who breaks the fourth wall to look directly at us and introduce himself and his tale. (HH, 254) (*The Clutching Hand* #1, 1954). He then breaks the fourth wall again in the final panel – although in a slightly more menacing way than Bertie the dummy’s wink.

Also colourama from black cat (‘you are driving...’) brainbats of venus (‘pete Crenshaw, revealed to already be a zombie at the end)

SLIDE: CIRCULAR STORIES EXAMINATION NERVES

“Examination Nerves” (*Misty* #47, 1978) is a circular four- page story in which protagonist Sheila wakes from a nightmare (which she puts down to stress about her German O Level exam), then gains a job as an au pair in Germany, only to end up being accused of murder in a scene taken straight from her nightmare.

The story begins with Sheila experiencing a nightmare in which a foreign official is interrogating her (“Where were you when it happened? You know what happened, don’t you? You are lying, if you say you don’t!”) with a dominating title panel that takes up nearly half the page (forming a background to the others)

The story then shows Sheila passing her exam, getting a job in Germany, and undergoing a long journey in which she struggles to get to her employer’s house. Upon finally finding it seemingly deserted, she falls asleep in a chair and then wakes to be told that there has been a murder (we see a body being carried out).

The story then closes with a similar panel to its beginning, in which a German official leans over her asking the same questions, with his face again repeated twice in a ghostly manner, with positioning that mirrors that of the first panel, allowing the layout to reinforce the circular nature of the story, which ends without further exposition or explanation.

The cover of *Misty* #47 promotes this story, showing two overlapping images of Sheila (asleep and awake) and the tagline “Nightmares sometimes come true!” As a whole, the story has a nightmarish quality: it is told entirely through angular panels that create a claustrophobic sense of terror, and Sheila’s struggle to find the house

she is working in (walking up long winding pathways and not knowing which fork to take) enhances this. Again, it ends on a decidedly unreassuring note.

SLIDE: EC CYCLE OF HORROR

In this EC horror story, gangster Greg shoots his partner Fingers after a mugging so he can keep the loot for himself. Leaving the body in a motel room, Greg goes elsewhere to find a room for the night, but every door he opens takes him back to the same motel room. A repeated image of Fingers' feet being eaten by rats is used, drawn from diff angles in advancing stages of decay, to create the same nightmarish, circular effect as the *Misty* tale.

Both rely on a return to a rearticulated image and end on an unreassuring note – the key difference being that we feel no sympathy for bad guy Greg, whereas Sheila's fate is emotionally upsetting.

SLIDE: CONCLUSION

Many shared narrative elements between *Misty* and American horror comics, in terms of both form and content:

- Ironic twists of fate
- Uncanny items or events
- Non-heroic protagonists but justice is not always served
- Host and ironic narrative comment that is not necessarily reassuring
- Direct address in both word and image that often places reader in a subversive position
- Trick ending
- Layered/embedded stories

There is a tension in both comics here between moralistic content and subversive storytelling strategies. This is increased in *Misty* as stories often end without jokes or reassurance from an authoritative host, and good characters can come to a bad end. This may be due to the more subversive potential of its female genre and readership. It certainly makes the comic a supreme example of gothic terror.