

‘little gothics’

***Misty* and the ‘Strange Stories’ of British Girls’ Comics**

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Abstract

This article uses a critical framework that draws on the Gothic carnival, children’s Gothic, and female Gothic to analyse the understudied spooky stories of British comics. It begins by surveying the emergence of short-form horror in American and British comics from the 1950s onwards, which evolved into a particular type of girls’ weekly tale: the ‘Strange Story.’ It then examines the way that the British mystery title *Misty* (IPC, 1978-80) developed this template in its single stories. This focuses on four key attributes: the directive role of a host character, an oral tone, content that includes two-dimensional characters and an ironic or unexpected plot reversal, and a narrative structure that drives exclusively towards this final point. The article argues that the repetition of this formula and the tales’ short format draw attention to their combination of subversion/conservatism and horror/humour: foregrounding a central paradox of Gothic.

Keywords: girls’ comics; carnival; joke; children’s literature; play

The horror mode and the comics medium have often interdigitated, sometimes spawning globally famous and media-crossing texts such as EC Comics’ *Tales from the Crypt* (1950-55), or the Japanese horror manga *Ringu* (1991). Western comics’ origins in penny dreadfuls and pulp novels also speak to this connection but, despite this, literary and cinematic texts remain the most famous examples of Gothic and horror. These media have often privileged serious themes and lengthy formats, overlooking more light-hearted or short-form instances, as Catherine Spooner notes in a recent study, which considers Gothic children’s texts and merchandise, and pop Gothic films.¹ This article will draw on critical work on the Gothic carnival, Female Gothic, and children’s Gothic to explore the development of the ‘Strange Story’ – a template that arose in British girls’ comics midway through the twentieth century – and its particular manipulations by the notorious girls’ mystery comic *Misty* (IPC, 1978-80).

Timothy Jones’s study of the Gothic carnival argues for an understanding of Gothic as a habitus or historicised practice, which has generated various texts and readings. He characterizes carnivalesque Gothic as ‘wicked playfulness’ or ‘playful enjoyment’, where performance, affect, experience and immediacy dominate over reflection, deconstruction, and the interpretation of tropes and symbols.² Following Bakhtin’s arguments, the Gothic carnival does not disregard taste entirely; instead it adopts ‘a topsy-turvy but still coherent set of aesthetics and values’.³ Jones’ exploration of this sidelined aspect of Gothic analyses writers such as H. P. Lovecraft, Edgar Allan Poe, Ray Bradbury, and Stephen King, arguing for a direct line of descent based on their use of the carnivalesque. While this somewhat decontextualizes their writing, his focus on format (pulp magazines such as *Weird Tales*, EC

Comics, and King's transition from a short story writer to bestselling novelist), suggests that the Gothic carnival has an affinity with the short-form narrative, and shares 'similarities with the tall tale, or the joke, working towards a horrific "punchline"'.⁴ Jones also draws attention to the hyperbolic style that characterises this subgenre and the tendency of the Gothic carnival to rely on character types or stereotypes in place of fully developed figures. Here the tales themselves become ritual: offered to knowing readers whose acceptance of them depends on recognition of a contract between writer and audience that what will follow is for their immediate pleasure rather than intellectual deconstruction.

Spooner's most recent work also considers short-form and marginalized Gothics: tracing a rise in the presence of pleasurable and celebratory forms of Gothic across media over the past two decades. She names this Post-Millennial Gothic, referencing the operations of postmodernism as it both breaks with and continues the Gothic of the past. As above, Gothic's affective qualities are privileged over the cerebral, and Spooner focuses particularly on the presence of childlike and childish qualities in Gothic, identifying a subgenre that she names the 'whimsical macabre': 'defined principally through its playful, quirky manipulation of Gothic style and imagery'.⁵ She argues that many forms of this (cautionary tales, Tim Burton films, and brands such as Ruby Gloom or Emily the Strange that appeal to young female consumers) have often been excluded from discussions around Gothic in favour of protecting a weighty and serious tradition. Many other scholars have also explored the ways that Gothic scholarship has devalued female tastes, particularly those of younger readers.⁶

Critical work on Gothic and children has generally fallen into two categories: analysing images of children within Gothic or exploring the use of Gothic themes within children's literature. Of the latter, many use gothic tropes and themes to deconstruct children's horror: for example Kimberley Reynolds et al identify images of monstrous possession as relative to puberty;⁷ Sherry Truffin explores the gothic qualities of school settings in American fiction;⁸ and Karen Coats argues that Gothic children's literature expresses 'abstract psychological processes [...] dark fascinations and haunting fears'.⁹ However, there is a strand of work within this that echoes the above move towards reclaiming these lost 'little gothics'. This strand argues that children's Gothic has frequently mistreated and marginalized its own readers and academia has imposed critical readings that do not reflect its multiple and mobile possibilities. For instance, Shryock Hood suggests that children's horror literature gives a clear message of ambivalence towards its child subjects (as perpetual victim) and readers – essentially instructing children that they must grow into adults in order to be included in the social order and to qualify for support.¹⁰ Chloé Germaine Buckley's work uses Rosa Braidotti's critical frame of the nomad-figure to analyse Gothic children's literature, arguing that these texts construct the conceptual personal of the child reader through multiple intertextual intersections.¹¹ Furthermore, Germaine Buckley suggests that Gothic's multiplicity and internal contradictions make it a particularly appropriate intertextual junction: capable of offering multiple possible subject positions.¹²

A body of critical work thus exists that argues for the existence of a more multiple and varied Gothic than has generally been recognized, anchored in affective and celebratory short-form texts or artefacts. British girls' comics are one of these 'little lost gothics': one of many marginalised and trivialised instances of Gothic that have been sidelined by the canonisation of a weighty, serious, media-specific, and often gendered tradition. This article

will shed light on this underexplored genre and develop both Gothic and comics scholarship using the critical framework above alongside detailed quantitative and qualitative data.¹³ Following some background to American and British horror comics, it then analyses these using theories of the short story and of the joke to establish the development of their narrative conventions and the Strange Story template. It then shows how *Misty* developed its own trademark type of short-form story from this: the vicious cautionary tale in which a (not always guilty) protagonist is punished for their misuse of magic. The discussion will explore the ways in which *Misty* directed and trained its readers in how to read these stories, and argue that this comic manipulated the short format, visual aesthetic, and narrative structure of the established girls' comic Strange Story to produce something highly specific and deeply affecting. The analysis demonstrates that the short length of these tales, their dramatic visualisation, directive framing, and highly generic content gives the pleasures of the Gothic carnival. However, their ritualised structure and oscillation between horror and humour also reveal Gothic's ambivalent qualities and its paradoxical combination of subversion and conservatism.¹⁴

Gothic, Horror and American Comics

American horror comics date back to the 1940s, but the most famous examples undoubtedly come from EC Comics. EC produced anthology comics with host characters, investing heavily in memorable, dramatic tales that swiftly cohered around 'the EC formula': a surprise and ironic twist ending, often with an ample helping of gore, bookended by a gleeful host. EC's editor in chief Bill Gaines described their trademark story structure as 'If somebody did something really bad he usually got it [...] the same way he gave it.'¹⁵ Duplicitous business partners would receive poetic justice, husbands intending to bury their wives alive would be interred in their place, and double-crossing criminals would lose their minds in their own lies. The tales were also known for their gory outcomes and notorious grotesque and comedic host characters (the Crypt-Keeper, Vault-Keeper and Old Witch) who framed stories with outrageous and alliterative puns and recast their horrifying events as jokey excess.¹⁶ As the host of 'The Thing from the Grave' concludes: '*Poor Bill!* Now *Jim's* got him for *company*... down there where it's cold and black! Well, they can always hold *grave conversations* together! Heh heh!'¹⁷

EC were part of a boom in American horror comics that dominated the early 1950s but ended dramatically with book burnings, protests, government involvement, and draconian censorship that has shaped the publications and perceptions of the comics industry ever since.¹⁸ Research into EC Comics has most often addressed this reaction or focused on the stories' social and cultural commentary.¹⁹ While Qiana Whitted notes that EC's editors 'were influenced' by the work of prolific and popular American writer of short stories at the turn of the twentieth century O. Henry, the role of the short format in shaping EC's horror has not been explored.²⁰

The EC tone is oral and casual, the story content hinges on an ironic reversal or twist of fate, and the structure is derived entirely from this reversal: the story proceeds as if toward the punchline of a joke (emphasised by the closing commentary of the host, as above). This

combination of tone, content and structure is prefigured by the work of O. Henry. Although O. Henry did not write horror stories, his name has become shorthand for a particular type of tale with a twist ending. Scholarly attention to his work was led by Russian formalist Boris Èjxenbaum, who argued that ‘technique, craftsmanship and literary convention’ are more explicit in the tightly structured format of the short story than in the longer, fluid form of the novel.²¹ In particular, Èjxenbaum focuses on O. Henry’s narrative techniques: identified as ‘dexterity of construction, cleverness of plot situations and denouements, and compactness and swiftness of action’, also drawing attention to their ‘plot dynamism, absence of detailed descriptions, compact language [...] and [...] awareness of any sort of cliché.’²² He applies the arguments of Edgar Allan Poe regarding the way in which all details within a short story must gravitate towards a single ‘central effect’ and claims that in American short-story literature this structural unity takes the form of ‘the anecdote, where elements of parody, irony and a surprise ending are introduced’.²³ Put another way, Èjxenbaum suggests that the short story proceeds from an incongruity or contradiction, with its whole weight gravitating towards the finale, which amalgamates and resolves all that has proceeded.²⁴ This reliance on the ending allows Èjxenbaum to note the similarities between the short story and a joke and he argues that O. Henry pushes this formal generic structure to its furthest extreme.²⁵ The EC tales also stretch these elements to the point of exaggeration while sharing the same reliance on orality, puns, surprise ironic endings, and the construction of a narrative whose events all derive from the anticipated pay-off. For example, in ‘Grounds ... For Horror’ (1952) a bullying and abusive butcher ends up ground to meat in his own shop and the Crypt-Keeper concludes: ‘Heh, heh! Yep, kiddies! That’s the story! Hozir made *mince-meat* out of Artie’s Step-Daddy! [...] Of course, Sam never *intended* to end up so... so *involved* in his work!’²⁶

EC’s gleeful tone and excess of irony and gore also recall the gross-out joke or schoolyard rhyme. Shryock Hood draws attention to the distasteful content of much children’s culture, in particular American schoolyard rhymes (citing ‘Gopher Guts’, ‘Diarrhoea’, and ‘The Worms Crawl In, The Worms Crawl Out’). To these I would also add (from a UK ‘Scouting Resources’ website) examples such as ‘Worms’ (‘Bite their heads off / Suck their juice out / Throw their skins away...’) and ‘He Jumped Without a Parachute from 20,000 Feet.’ These examples operate in a similar way to the EC tales: either through an ironic reversal (‘And he ain’t gonna jump no more’) or by using humour to double down on the gore (‘They scraped him off the tarmac like a lump of strawberry jam’).

EC’s comics legacy was thus to consolidate the highly structured short-form tale with clear stylistic and structural links to the gross-out joke, and introduce overt framing for this in the form of their host characters, who ‘provided instructions as to how [the tales] should be read’.²⁷ These elements inform many subsequent American horror anthology comics (such as Warren Publishing’s *Creepy* and *Eerie*, or DC Comics’ *House of...* anthologies), where a more developed host character frames a stand-alone story of peril. It would also pass to British girls’ comics over the following decades.

British Girls’ Comics and the Strange Story

Comics dominated children’s entertainment in the UK between 1950-1980, producing hundreds of weekly titles with individual circulation figures averaging between 200,000 and one million. The British girls’ comics were generally titled with a female name (*Diana*, *June*,

Tammy, Lindy, Sandie, Jinty), and so each already had an implicit host. However, these were seldom fully realized characters, generally appearing only on the cover or in editorials, features, or the letters page where they enabled the (mostly male) creators to address young readers directly. Critics such as Angela McRobbie and James Chapman view these comics as sites of indoctrination that conveyed messages of socially approved femininity.²⁸ However, other scholars have drawn attention to their diverse content and the active and empowered reading practices they allowed.²⁹

Despite their popularity, these titles have received limited scholarly attention to date, and are often remembered for horses and ballet rather than ghosts and ghouls. But in the 1960s a repeated story format emerged in girls' comics, building on the hard luck stories and supernatural mysteries that had been popular from the start. This was the stand-alone spooky tale with a recurring host character. These hosts addressed readers directly, often framing their tales with a moral, explanation, question or joke, and problematizing diegetic and textual borders through their behaviour and presentation (for example by incorporating drawn story titles into their speech balloons or producing items that appeared in the stories they told).³⁰

The Storyteller was the first of these British hosts, bookending 'The STRANGEST Stories Ever Told' which begin with 'The Haunted Bank' (figure 1). He is an older, patrician character in a bow tie and jacket with a pipe and, although his introductions and conclusions are friendly, they often carry a moralising tone ('Which only goes to show you can have too much of a good thing').³¹ He also frequently ends stories on questions, asking readers 'What do you think?' or 'How about you?'³² Numerous competitors and imitators followed who are predominantly older, male and authoritative; such as the Dracula-esque Man in Black in *Diana* in 1966; Damian Darke, who wears a high collar, ruffled shirt, and raven on his shoulder, in *Spellbound* in 1976; and the skeleton Bones in *Judy* in 1991.³³ All except Bones set a sombre and mysterious tone and generally end on a moral, explanation, or question. Bones by contrast is more in keeping with the EC hosts, frequently concluding with a joke. Gypsy Rose in *Jinty and Lindy* in 1977 is an exception, being younger and female, and her tone and behaviour are also slightly different as she participates in her own tales, acting as a kind of supernatural problem-solver.³⁴

Figure 1: 'The Haunted Bank', *June and School Friend*, 30 January 1965, art by Mike Hubbard, author unknown (London: Amalgamated Press). Reproduced with permission of June and School Friend™ Rebellion Publishing IP Ltd; copyright © Rebellion Publishing IP Ltd, all rights reserved.

These hosted horror tales also share a number of key characteristics of style, content and structure linked to their short form (of 1-3 pages), and so my analysis groups them together under the label Strange Stories. While there are of course exceptions, the majority can be summarised as follows. The reader is addressed directly by the host at the start and invited to share the tale. The story then introduces a protagonist who has some sort of spooky experience that either causes or helps resolve a personal dilemma. The host then closes the tale with an explanation, moral or question. For example, in 'The Girl with X-Ray Eyes'

(1974) the Storyteller introduces Hester who develops the ability to see through walls after meddling in her father's laboratory.³⁵ She is forced to help some crooks with a robbery but manages to get them caught and then reluctantly loses her power again, as the Storyteller concludes 'Hester declared she'd rather still have the power to see when her teacher was coming!' Similarly, in 'Fatal Encounter' (1967) the Man in Black greets us and invites us to 'read on and enjoy the mystery' of two twins separated during the Second World War, who meet decades later on opposing sides of a robbery and tragically shoot each other. He concludes 'So Louis found his long-lost brother Gerald – but it was too late for both of them'.³⁶ In 'Spectre from the Flame', Damian Darke presents Jane, who is saved during a robbery by the spirit of a ghostly judge conjured from a sinister candle. Darke's concluding panel explains that 'The silver candlestick had been the property of Chief Justice Jeffries, notorious as "The Hanging Judge" in the reign of King James II'.³⁷

Like Jones's theory of the Gothic carnival, the framing structure of the tales is aimed at managing the reader's expectations, as the hosts set a particular tone through their words and appearance ('exciting', 'thrill'), give us vital background information, and distance us from the spooky events by placing them in an embedded diegesis. The thrill comes in part from the potential eruption of this world into theirs (and thus ours): for example the Storyteller claims to have met the protagonist of 'She Sang Like a Bird', and both he and the Man in Black end many tales with a key item from the embedded story in their possession (see figure 1).³⁸ The return to the host at the story's end (with a question, explanation, or moral) acts as a coda of sorts – signalling the import of the events and perhaps reevaluating them for the reader, or putting this responsibility overtly on the reader themselves.

In terms of plot structure, the tales often rest on a reversal or ironic twist: Greta of 'She Sang Like a Bird' is given the gift of song but it makes her unhappy and she is relieved when her beautiful voice returns to its usual off-tune croak; Louis of 'Fatal Encounter' has been hunting for his brother but did not expect to encounter him in the course of his work as a detective; and the candlestick the robber uses to light his way in 'Spectre from the Flame' is the cause of his undoing. Character is also of interest as, like the carnival Gothics explored by Jones, the actors in these tales are not well-developed personalities and seldom have any defining feature outside their response to the circumstances of the plot. Jones argues that Gothic carnival characters are 'types rather than more fully developed figures. This slightness is a useful strategy for short narratives – including tales, anthology television shows and comics that do not form part of a continuing series.' He continues that 'Gothics often demand injury or death, and in the short narrative, what does it matter if central characters are scarred, maimed or destroyed? We barely knew them.'³⁹

In many respects then, the EC Comics and the Strange Story cohere around a set of shared elements that include directive framing from a host figure, an oral style of telling, content that includes shallow or two-dimensional characters and an ironic or unexpected plot reversal, and a narrative structure that drives exclusively towards this final point.

Case Study: *Misty*

Misty (IPC, 1978-80) was a girls' weekly mystery comic that told exclusively supernatural and spooky tales. It was published weekly for 101 issues, along with 3 holiday specials and 8 annuals. It is best remembered for its dynamic and dramatic page layouts, horrifying

cautionary tale content, and its host character, Misty herself, who did not introduce individual stories in the weekly comic, but instead welcomed readers to each issue (see figure 2) and answered their

Figure 2: Inside cover from *Misty* #36. Art by Shirley Bellwood, lettering by Jack Cunningham, writer assumed as Malcolm Shaw. Reproduced with permission of Misty™ Rebellion Publishing IP Ltd; copyright © Rebellion Publishing IP Ltd, all rights reserved.

letters on the letters page. Each issue contained an average of six different serial episodes or standalone tales of 4 pages each (longer than the other girls' comics which generally were 3 pages). The change to story length created space for the more dramatic and dynamic visual layouts that *Misty* was known for. Stories often began with one large panel (see figure 3) and included dramatic components such as varied panel shapes (circular, square, rectangular, sharply angled), irregular tiering (where pages depart from easily assigned 'rows' of panels), and different styles of borders (none, bold, jagged, broken, and so forth).⁴⁰ Colour was also used on the front and back covers and the middle centre spread, and often worked into the tales for dramatic value.

Misty's tales can be broken down into three types: serials, comedy series, and single stories. The serials follow a template similar to many girls' comics, albeit with a spooky twist. They are stories of personal growth or self-acceptance, as protagonists find themselves in a strange or mysterious situation (a new school, an alternate world, or chaos caused by a possessed object), or discover a hidden aspect of themselves (reincarnation, visions, telekinesis), which they must either escape or overcome. The comedy series are short slapstick tales (one page or less) about an unlucky witch, whose spells frequently go wrong or backfire. It is the single stories which are the focus of this case study: vicious cautionary tales which often punish a protagonist for a misdeed. For example, shoplifters are changed into shop dummies, teachers haunt cheating pupils, and vandals are trapped in the windows they have smashed.⁴¹ These single stories manipulate the tone, content, and structure of the Strange Story to produce something highly specific and very gothic.

Like the short-form carnival Gothics discussed by Jones, familiarity with the stories' different registers and generic structures is essential for their success. The three types of content that *Misty* offer are quite different, and readers must have been extremely skilled in negotiating the different registers required. Many debates in the letters page evidence this tension, for example arguing over the 'childish' qualities of the comedy series.⁴² Most telling is the letter from 'Jennifer' complaining about the single story 'The Pet Shop' from issue 24, in which two children who allow a mouse to die in their homemade maze are then trapped in a labyrinth by giant apes. As she says: 'Your comic should be banned. I expected the comic to be about witches and spooky but nice stories. But no.'⁴³ This reader was not prepared for the shocking story content, which was not demarked by a specific host in the manner of the other Strange Stories.

As noted above, EC Comics' tales and the Strange Stories rely on directive framing, an oral tone, content that includes shallow or two-dimensional characters and an ironic or unexpected plot reversal, and a structural drive towards the pay-off ending. *Misty* manipulates

some of these expectations to produce its single stories. These do not have individual hosts: only Misty's introduction to the comic-at-large.⁴⁴ As the example in figure 2 shows, Misty's welcomes are reassuring and evocative in tone, often set against a natural background, and draw the reader in by addressing them directly and presenting the comic as an otherworldly location for them to enter and explore. Of ninety-nine greetings only five place the reader in an object grammatical position – we are constantly urged to take actions like 'touch my hand' or 'tread boldly'. The wording uses repeated images of the body, often doubling down on sensory imagery such as 'shiver', and the lexis has a mythical tone: using heavy alliteration, very few contractions, and full modal verbs to create a timeless feel. Readers correctly identified the importance of these welcomes, which set 'the right scary atmosphere to read your stories' and expressed their admiration and appreciation in the letters page.⁴⁵ Rather than the comedic gross-out of the EC hosts, or the morals of the Strange Stories, Misty urges readers to actively engage with her tales, which she offers to both fear and delight. Her framing is thus both directive and strongly oral, carrying a timeless and mythic tone. When she does bookend a tale (in the annuals) she consistently questions its outcome, and her replies to readers on the weekly letters page are also often questioning in nature, for example in response to Jennifer's letter she asks, 'what do other readers think?'⁴⁶

The reticence of her role places the responsibility for negotiating register onto the reader and reinforces the absence that underpins much of the single stories' content. Their protagonists are generally tied to a single personality trait (vanity, greed, rudeness, and so on) that is signalled early on. In 'When the Lights Go Out!' Anne schemes 'I'll go to the draggy party. But [...] I'm going to treat myself to the shop-lifting spree of a lifetime!' In the first panel of 'A Stain on her Character', Alison muses to herself: 'I can't really call this cheating [...] they're only mock exams!' In both cases the reasons why the characters want to shoplift or cheat are never raised. This lack of depth finds an echo in the stories' settings, which often feel uncannily displaced: although many take place in a recognisable urban environment, this is seldom clearly marked with place names or tied to any particular time frame (characters' clothing is wildly varied, for example).

Finally, the ironic endings of the *Misty* single stories bring together the uncanny elements of the Strange Story and the gleeful excess of the EC Comics. Both the serials and the single stories feature a number of common motifs such as external magic (a magical item or event); internal power (visions, telekinesis); a wish or promise; or the backfiring of the protagonist's actions.⁴⁷ Of these categories, this last ('Actions Backfire') is the most common feature across all the stories (both serial and single). It is also particularly appropriate to the structure of short-form Gothic discussed above, as it speaks to claims that the plot is simply driving towards the final pay-off. Of the 407 *Misty* single stories, nearly half (188, or 46%) are propelled to their ending by the unintended consequences of an action (such as shoplifting, cheating, or animal cruelty in the examples noted above). A similar proportion of the endings (45% of the single stories) are categorised as either a Shock Twist ending (where an expectation set up in the story is overturned: 87 stories, or 21%), or a Just Desserts pay-off (an EC Comics style outcome of poetic justice: 123 stories, or 30%).⁴⁸ The endings of the single stories are also of interest: over half (238, or 58%) have a negative or ambivalent ending. As with the overall content of *Misty*, this is sometimes but not always tied to the actions of a bad protagonist: 131 (32%) of the single stories have a malevolent lead character.

This means that nearly half of these bad endings are directed at characters that are innocent of any crime (a ratio that is similar for the serial stories). Taken together we can identify a common *Misty* single story type: a one-dimensional protagonist who meets a negative or ambivalent end due to the backfiring of their own actions and a dangerous magical element.

Bearing these numbers in mind, the story ‘Old Collie’s Collection’ is an excellent case study. In this tale, Shirley tries to steal a snow-globe from Old Collie’s antiques shop but becomes magically trapped in one and made part of his collection. Its visual and short-form aspects work together to foreground its gothic qualities as the protagonist’s own greed is magically turned against her. This moral is made overt on the final page, when Old Collie muses: ‘My collection is growing nicely. How small it would be if there were less greedy people in the world...!’ The uncanny nature of the story’s visuals is echoed by its themes, which speak to the ‘feminine carceral’ – where the female body is either imprisoned or is itself experienced as a prison.⁴⁹ Freud places being buried alive as the epitome of the uncanny;⁵⁰ a

Figures 3 and 4. ‘Old Collie’s Collection,’ *Misty* #82. Art by Mario Capaldi, writer unknown. Reproduced with permission of Misty™ Rebellion Publishing IP Ltd; copyright © Rebellion Publishing IP Ltd, all rights reserved.

notion picked up by many Gothic theorists who define ‘live burial’ as a powerful way of representing female experience, particularly, as Wallace argues, of marriage, or what Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick pinpoints as linguistic inequality.⁵¹ Shirley literally becomes an object here: a chattel and possession of an older man. Her fate can thus also be read as abject: the experience of identity disruption and breakdown between subject and object.⁵² Shirley’s enclosure within the ‘huge glass ball’ turns her into an object, silences her voice (the story’s final panel shows her wordless scream) and removes her agency. The use of perspective also extends this experience to the (young, female) reader, who shares her sense of interment (an image that is also used on the cover of this issue), blurring the borders and boundaries of identity still further.

The story structure and content relate clearly to the tone of *Misty*’s introductory welcomes: a journey to a strange new place, with sensory markers (*Misty* asks us to ‘listen’ and notes that we ‘shiver’, while Shirley’s new world is ‘white and silent’, and ‘bitter cold’). Like *Misty*’s opening vernacular, the story also has an old-world feel, emphasised by its story logo of curling antique letters setting the title (see figure 3). It opens with a large dominating panel and a page layout that is intentionally dynamic (the slanted base of the first tier, and the inset circular panel) and the last page also feels particularly flamboyant, as a tilted base reappears here, and colour is used. The blue hues signify the cold of Shirley’s new world, and her appearance signals danger and follows the stereotypical coding of female victims in American horror comics (blonde, red dress). Although the layouts appear more regular and stable as the story continues, this is superficial and in fact the number of anomalous features increases page by page – perhaps echoing the increase in danger. We move from a simple tilted base and inset circular panel on page 1 (figure 3), to the addition of a split tier,

staggered panelling, and various types of panel borders (semi-open, emboldened, overlapping) on page 2, to sharp angles and the transgression of panel borders on page 3, all of which are carried forward onto the final page (figure 4) where a representational border (the snow-globe itself) also appears. In particular, transgression is a repeated visual trope that echoes the story's themes. Objects, characters, and text all break the borders of panels, notably at points where transgressive acts or magical items are the focus (such as Shirley's friends daring her to approach Old Collie, figure 3), her musings on the snow-globes at the top of page 2, and the snow-globe itself (as a dangerous magical item) on the final two pages (figure 4).

The short form of stories like 'Old Collie's Collection' shapes and foregrounds a reliance on twist endings and ironic punishments. However, these 'shock' endings cannot be too surprising to *Misty* readers as the data reveals they occur nearly half the time. Instead, this repeated structure creates the ritual of Jones's Gothic carnival and so tells us something more about how to read the tales. The quantitative data supporting the above analysis suggests that these tales often reconfigure and undermine the identity of their protagonist and reader: creating an abject motion where borders and boundaries are broken down and abandoning us in this ambivalent space. This transgression of borders speaks to the underlying dialectics that characterise Gothic as both subversive/ conservative, horrifying/ humorous, repulsive/ attractive and so forth – qualities that also inform the excessive and ironic story ending. While critics such as Dani Cavallero have most often linked Gothic to exciting and transgressive reading experiences (Roland Barthes' notion of *jouissance*), the *Misty* single stories expose the Gothic potential of the other side of Barthes' argument: the text of *plaisir*, that offers familiar pleasures.⁵³ Their content (which is shocking and transgressive but simultaneously ritualised and familiar) thus combines *jouissance* and *plaisir*, further supporting this view of Gothic as an affective and structural paradox.

Conclusion

This work has argued that the Strange Stories and the *Misty* single stories use their host character, tone, content, and short-form structure to teach their reader how to read them. While the single stories and serialised tales in *Misty* share a similar aesthetic and the same plot motifs, their use of these motifs and their structure and tone is completely different. The repeated structure and tight adherence to generic markers of the *Misty* single stories are exemplary of the Gothic carnival. Jones argues that American carnival Gothics offer an escape from the surrounding cultural reality: they demand a reading practice that is escapist and trance-like, chasing to the story's end point and reading purely for the pleasure of the spectacle and pay off.

With this in mind, and by way of final reflection, we might then ask what these Strange Stories are an escape from; what values and messages do they turn 'topsy turvy'? As noted, the content of girls' comics has often been interpreted as instructional and ideological, and these cautionary tales can easily be read in a similar way (written by men, talking down to girls). However, their excess and glee belie this, and my own research into letters pages, and work from scholars such as Gibson, highlight the empowering and diverse uses that girls made of their reading. Perhaps then these *Misty* tales are more like a parody or subversion of the girls' comics' hard luck tales and good girl narratives. The social nature of the schoolyard

joke finds an echo in the work done by the *Misty* community of readers to navigate their comic: switching registers and experiencing *jouissance* while also gaining *plaisir* through this play. These little lost gothics use their short form and ritualised structure to expose and enact the illusion of subversion: revealing this paradox of Gothic.

Notes on Contributor

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Notes

¹ Catherine Spooner, *Post-Millennial Gothic: Comedy, Romance and the Rise of Happy Gothic* (London: Bloomsbury, 2017).

² Timothy Jones, *The Gothic and the Carnavalesque in American Culture* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2015), p. 13, p. 31.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 8.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 36.

⁵ Spooner, p. 99.

⁶ For example: Hannah Priest, 'What's Wrong with Sparkly Vampires?' (blog post, 2011), *The Gothic Imagination*. <http://www.gothic.stir.ac.uk/guestblog/whats-wrong-with-sparkly-vampires/>, accessed 6 June 2020. Joseph Crawford, *The Twilight of the Gothic* (Wales: University of Wales Press, 2014). Chloé Germaine Buckley, *Twenty-First Century Children's Gothic* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2018). Julia Round, *Gothic for Girls: Misty and British Comics* (Jackson, MS: UP Mississippi, 2019).

⁷ Kimberley Reynolds, Geraldine Brennan and Kevin McCarron (ed.), *Frightening Fiction* (London: Continuum, 2001).

⁸ Sherry R. Truffin, *Schoolhouse Gothic* (Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2008).

⁹ Karen Coats, 'Between Horror, Humour and Hope: Neil Gaiman and the Psychic Work of the Gothic', in Anna Jackson, Karen Coats, and Roderick McGillis (eds.), *The Gothic in Children's Literature: Haunting the Borders* (London: Routledge, 2008), pp. 77–92 (p. 91).

¹⁰ K. Shryock Hood, *Once Upon a Dark and Scary Book: The Messages of Horror Literature for Children* (Jefferson, CA: McFarland, 2018).

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- ¹¹ Rosa Braidotti, *Nomadic Subjects: Embodiment and Sexual Difference in Contemporary Feminist Theory*, 2nd edn (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011); Buckley, p. 11, p. 138, p. 204.
- ¹² *Ibid.*, p. 14-15.
- ¹³ This data includes archival research, creator and reader interviews, and quantitative analysis of page layouts, plot motifs, and underlying themes.
- ¹⁴ Chris Baldick and Robert Mighall, 'Gothic Criticism', in David Punter (ed.), *A New Companion to the Gothic* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2012), pp. 267-287 (p. 285).
- ¹⁵ Digby Diehl, *Tales from the Crypt: The Official Archives* (New York: St Martins Press, 1996)
- ¹⁶ Schoell argues that the blood and guts content increased around 1953. William Schoell, *The Horror Comics: Fiends, Freaks and Fantastic Creatures 1940s-1980s* (Jefferson, CA: McFarland, 2014), p. 29.
- ¹⁷ Al Feldstein and Gardner Fox, 'The Thing from the Grave', *The Crypt of Terror* #22 (New York: EC Comics, 1951).
- ¹⁸ For further information see Martin Barker, *A Haunt of Fears* (Jackson, MS: University of Mississippi Press, 1984); David Hajdu, *The Ten-Cent Plague* (New York: Picador, 2008); Amy Kiste Nyberg, *Seal of Approval* (Jackson, MS: UP of Mississippi, 1998)
- ¹⁹ See for example Jim Trombetta, *The Horror! The Horror!* (New York: Abrams ComicArts, 2010); Terrence R. Wandtke, *The Comics Scare Returns* (Rochester, NY: RIT Press, 2018); Qiana Whitted, *EC Comics: Race, Shock, and Social Protest* (New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 2019).
- ²⁰ Whitted, *EC Comics*, p. 16.
- ²¹ Victor Terras, 'O. Henry and the Theory of the Short Story by B. M. Eichenbaum; I. R. Titunik Review', *The Slavic and East European Journal*, 14:1 (1970), pp. 75-76 (p. 76).
- ²² Boris Eichenbaum, *O. Henry and the Theory of the Short Story*, trans. I. R. Titunik (Ann Arbor: Department of Slavic Languages and Literatures, The University of Michigan, 1968), p. 3, p. 25.
- ²³ *Ibid.*, p. 6; Gregory M. Eramian, 'Review of B. M. Eichenbaum, O. Henry and the Theory of the Short Story', *Canadian-American Slavic Studies* 5:2, pp. 274-275 (p. 274).
- ²⁴ Charles E. May, Short Story Month 2015 – O. Henry, 'The Cop and the Anthem' (blog post), <http://may-on-the-short-story.blogspot.com/search/label/O.%20Henry>, accessed 19 July 2020.
- ²⁵ *Ibid.*
- ²⁶ Al Feldstein and Jack Davis, 'Grounds ... For Horror', *Tales from the Crypt* #29, (New York: EC Comics, 1952).
- ²⁷ Jones, p. 124.
- ²⁸ James Chapman, *British Comics: A Cultural History* (London: Reaktion Books, 2011). Angela McRobbie, 'Just like a Jackie story', in Angela McRobbie and Trisha McCabe (ed.), *Feminism for Girls: An Adventure Story*, (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1981).
- ²⁹ Martin Barker, *Comics: Ideology, Power and the Critics* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1989); Mel Gibson, *Remembered Reading* (Leuven, Belgium: Leuven University Press, 2015).
- ³⁰ See Julia Round, 'Horror Hosts in British Comics', in Clive Bloom (ed.), *The Palgrave Handbook of Contemporary Gothic* (London: Palgrave, 2020), pp.623-642 for more extensive discussion of the role and function of these hosts.
- ³¹ 'She Sang Like a Bird', *June and Pixie Holiday Special 1974*. Please note that British comics of this period are unpaginated
- ³² 'The Garland', *June and Pixie Holiday Special 1973*; 'Three Cheers for Chum!', *June and Pixie*, 18 May 1974.
- ³³ Man in Black introduced in *Diana* #197, 26 November 1966; Damian Darke introduced in *Spellbound* #1, 25 September 1976; Bones introduced in *Judy* #1632, 20 April 1991.
- ³⁴ Introduced in *Jinty and Lindy*, 29 January 1977.
- ³⁵ 'The Girl with X-Ray Eyes', *June and Pixie*, 8 June 1974.
- ³⁶ 'Fatal Encounter', *Diana* #227, 24 June 1967.
- ³⁷ 'Spectre from the Flame', *Spellbound* #1. Interestingly, the first Storyteller tale (figure 1) also concerned the ghostly spirit of a 'Hanging Judge'.
- ³⁸ For example 'The Haunted Ballroom', *June and School Friend*, 6 March 1965.
- ³⁹ Jones, p. 49.
- ⁴⁰ This discussion uses data from a random sample of ten issues in which these key features were tagged. My thanks to Bournemouth University's Narrative Culture and Community Research Centre for funding this project and to Dr Paul Fisher Davies for conducting the tagging and analysis.
- ⁴¹ 'When the Lights Go Out', *Misty* #18; 'A Stain on Her Character', *Misty* #72; 'Crystal Clear', *Misty* #99.
- ⁴² See *Misty* #79, #89-91.
- ⁴³ *Misty* #34.

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- ⁴⁴ Misty occasionally bookends a story in the annuals: reprints from other comics where her panels replace those of the Storyteller.
- ⁴⁵ *Misty* #84.
- ⁴⁶ *Misty* #36.
- ⁴⁷ More detailed annotations on the complete corpus of 443 (serial and single) *Misty* stories are available at www.juliaround.com/misty.
- ⁴⁸ There is some crossover between the two categories (29 stories contain both), but they are exclusive. For example, the ending of 'The Pet Shop' is both poetic justice and an unexpected twist; but in 'The Thing from the Deep' (Annual 1985) Karen is saved by a monster that had seemed to be stalking her: a surprise twist ending, but without any poetic justice.
- ⁴⁹ Carol Margaret Davison, 'Monstrous Regiments of Women and Brides of Frankenstein: Gendered Body Politics in Scottish Female Gothic Fiction', in Diana Wallace and Andrew Smith (ed.), *The Female Gothic: New Directions* (London: Palgrave Macmillan 2009), pp. 196-214.
- ⁵⁰ Diana Wallace, "'The Haunting Idea': Female Gothic Metaphors and Feminist Theory", in *The Female Gothic: New Directions*, pp. 26-41, n. 10.
- ⁵¹ Wallace, 'The Haunting Idea'; Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *The Coherence of Gothic Conventions* (London: Methuen, 1986). See also Avril Horner and Sue Zlosnik, 'Skin Chairs and other Domestic Horrors: Barbara Comyns and the Female Gothic Tradition', *Gothic Studies* 6:1 (2004), pp. 90-102; and Kate Ferguson Ellis, 'Can You Forgive Her? The Gothic Heroine and her Critics', in *A New Companion to the Gothic*, pp. 457-468.
- ⁵² Kristeva, Julia, *Powers of Horror* (New York: Columbia UP, 1982).
- ⁵³ Dani Cavallero, *The Gothic Vision: Three Centuries of Horror, Terror and Fear* (London: Continuum, 2002), p. 123; Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text* (1973), trans. Richard Miller, <https://emberilmu.files.wordpress.com/2011/08/roland-barthes-the-pleasure-of-the-text.pdf>, accessed 15 July 2018.