

Intro – *Misty*, gothic tropes and archetypes, and how its treatment of these ideas can be argued as a gothic for girls

### **SLIDE: GOTHIC**

Before trying to analyse *Misty* as a Gothic text it seems important to try and define Gothic itself. But straight away there are difficulties here, as Gothic is constantly changing to suit its time. Even if we leave aside the original Goths and the architectural movement, and just look at the literary tradition of the past 270odd years, how can novels as far apart as Sir Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* (1764) (considered the first Gothic novel) and Doctor Who Tom Baker's *The Boy Who Kicked Pigs* (1999) be reconciled under a single label? One is a supernatural melodrama in a medieval vein, whose hysterical and hyperbolic characters uncover an ancient curse; the other is a blackly humorous parody of a children's tale that ends in a motorway pileup and visceral violence. In historical, philosophical, formal, generic and cultural terms they are far apart, but both nonetheless fall under the label of 'Gothic'.

Gothic motifs and themes, too, have changed as the literary genre developed: Fred Botting (\*) identifies a turn from external to internal, where the object of terror is no longer cast out or banished (like *Dracula*) but instead identified within ourselves (like many modern vampires). While haunted landscapes remain, the urban and suburban now sit in counterpoint to the ancient castle. Characters and archetypes have also changed: vampires become sympathetic heroes, and over the past hundred years we have seen the zombie change from a living slave to a cannibalistic corpse, and then back again, to an infected living person.

As well as changing style and motifs, the cultural position of Gothic has also dramatically shifted to the commodified and mainstream (Botting 2001; Spooner 2007). For example, the final part of the *Twilight* movie franchise achieved the eighth-highest opening in box office history in 2012 (*Guardian* 19.11.2012) and stores such as Hot Topic and Blue Banana have brought gothic style to the global high street.

### **SLIDE: MISTY**

The high street of late 1970s Britain is where young readers would have first encountered the comic book *Misty*. Published by IPC between 1978-1980, this girls comic would run for 101 issues before merging with *Tammy*. It was devised by Pat Mills, who claims it as 'my attempt to use my *2000AD* approach, big visuals, on a girls' comic', but *Misty* also drew heavily from the previous generation and surrounding girls comics for its dynamic layouts and tortured protagonists. It also owed much to DC Thomson's *Spellbound*, released in 1976 and which ran for just 69 issues. *Misty* was a 32-page anthology comic, printing a

selection of one-shot stories (generally four pages long) and serials that stretched over 10 or so issues in four-page instalments. It also contained an inside cover welcome from Misty herself, a smattering of prose stories and 'true ghost stories' sent in by readers, a 'Write to Misty' letters page, a horoscope section called 'Star Days', a regular comedy cartoon strip called Miss T about a hapless witch, and a handful of half-page adverts. It described itself as a 'mystery story paper for girls' but with the tagline 'stories not to be read at night' and a strong strand of horror and punishment it is most remembered for scaring the holy hell out of its young readers – including yours truly.

Collings (2012) describes '*Misty* as 'more than a comic, it was a potential 'life ruiner'' and gives the anecdotal example of Dawn (aged around 8) and her sister, who were given a *Misty* annual each by their 'cherubic grandmother' one Christmas – which I hope will give you an idea of what it was like:

Dawn's sister's story was about a girl who got trapped in a mirror and the story ended with her stuck for eternity in the mirror and her friends walked past as she tried to cry for help but to no avail. The final frame showed her screaming in silence and sheer terror. Meanwhile, Dawn was reading a lovely story about a boy and girl whose grandmother (who curiously had more than a passing cartoon resemblance to Dawn's own grandmother) had been killed by an alien/monster and replaced with an alien/monster in the guise of their grandmother. The children only found out their grandmother was actually a monster/alien (after much suspicion) when they took a photograph of her and she was totally invisible. This resulted in Dawn then assuming that her grandmother had given her this annual as some sort of subliminal message and was trying to tell Dawn that she was really a monster/alien. Dawn and her sister then swapped annuals [and] which made each other worse, resulting in them both crying on their bunk beds and then being told off for reading the annuals when they should have been in bed. This has left an indelible mark on both Dawn and her sister.

I love this anecdote for summarising a fairly standard scenario of children and horror, where imaginations run riot! The two stories she describes are also pretty representative of the content of *Misty* – they are based on uncanny themes where things are not what they seem, and have off-beat or unhappy endings for the protagonists. As well as content like this, *Misty* also has a gothic aesthetic, from its vampy host and associated motifs (bats, full moon) to its typography and subject matter. O'Shea (\*) points out that '*Misty*'s run coincides with the rise and fall of the original Gothic Punk movement in the UK' with the genre of 'Goth music' being coined a year after the first issue hit the news-stands

(with the release of Bauhaus's 'Bela Lugosi's Dead'). But how do Misty's stories stand up to a Gothic reading?

### **SLIDE: FEAR**

Some would name Gothic a literature of fear, and they would be in good company – H.P. Lovecraft opens his discussion of *Supernatural Horror in Literature* by claiming that 'The oldest and strongest emotion of mankind is fear, and the oldest and strongest kind fear of the unknown' (Lovecraft 1967\*: 41) and that this is the basis for 'the weirdly horrible tale' as a literary form. Seymour Gross defines gothic literature as a 'literature where fear is the motivating and sustaining emotion' (Gross 1989: 1). David Punter names Gothic *The Literature of Terror* in the title to his 1980 study of 'gothic fictions'. There is little doubt that *Misty* is so well-remembered due to its ability to cause fear – Mel Gibson's book *Remembered Reading* contains a number of anecdotes from readers, and we've already heard from Collings (2012).

But fear is subjective (what scares one may not scare another) and thus vague by its very nature. For this reason gothic writers and critics since Ann Radcliffe have tried to draw divisions between its different forms, such as terror (reliant upon suggestion and unseen) and horror (where all is shown). Donna Heiland suggests that we should not look for fear exclusively in ourselves or the reading experience, but for signs of its textual presence, for example in the scenarios or characters offered. In the first half of this talk I will therefore consider *Misty's* use of gothic textual features such as established archetypes, themes and motifs, and aesthetic. I will relate these observations to critical theory on Gothic and in the second half take this a step further and use my findings to argue that *Misty* in fact creates and exploits a new subgenre: Girls' Gothic.

### **SLIDE: ARCHETYPES**

Gothic's folkloric roots have given rise to some of the most famous icons of any literary genre, but a content analysis of *Misty* produces some interesting results. I surveyed the comic's entire run of stories against the average number of stories per issue to see how many times these gothic archetypes explicitly appear. There are limitations to this method, as there are other stories where 'the dead' are mentioned in more general terms, which I have not included. However it does give a sense of the weighting given to **named gothic archetypes** in *Misty's* content – and reveals that they appear less than we might expect.

[talk through results] – discounting prose from totals – ghosts dominate, then followed by witches and vampires. But overall the Undead make up a surprisingly small amount of *Misty's* content – just 22 percent. Ghosts are a very wide category that can take many forms and so I'm going to focus on witches,

werewolves and vampires over these next slides, as more clearly established figure with a well-defined generic purpose – and see how they are treated.

### **SLIDE: WITCHES**

**innocent victims or helpful forces**

**justified (if somewhat extreme!) avengers**

**malevolent antagonists**

**protagonists discover their own witch powers:**

Of all the archetypes, witches are by far the most prominent, and appear explicitly in twenty-one of the stories printed in *Misty* (it should however be noted that this relatively low number does not include the stories that deal with a magical item or anonymous curse).<sup>1</sup> When they do appear, witches can be placed into one of these four categories. In six instances they are innocent victims or helpful forces, as in ‘The Queen’s Hair’ (#43), where cruel Queen Elida has no hair and is given a hairband by old crone that will make her hair grow if she wears it for 24 hours, no more, and it works but she forgets and hair grows out of control. Five of the tales have witches meting out justified (if somewhat extreme!) revenge, such as ‘Mrs Cassidy’s Cat’ (#50) where Jilly chases her neighbour’s cat and is shocked when one day it turns on her as a giant but then discovers it’s even worse than that and she has been shrunk by her neighbour. In seven of the tales witches are malevolent antagonists: for example in ‘If Only...’ (#51) poverty stricken Lois wants to swap lives with rich kora, visits witch ‘I will help you because you’re a girl after my own black heart’ (7) and the swap is made but then it turns out kora is dying that’s why she is spoiled, and Lois ends up trapped in her dying body. Finally, there are three stories in which protagonists discover their own witch powers: ‘A Picture of Horror’ (#59) where Zoe discovers her mum was a witch, curses school bullies and traps them in pages of a horror comic (two of these three tales also fall into the categories of revenge (#14; #59) and one into the category of witch as innocent victim (#21). This very brief list demonstrates that in over half the stories witching is either given some justification or the witches themselves are unfairly victimised. In addition, although the visual stereotype of an aged crone dominates in the stories where the witch turns out to be good, across the other tales they range from babies to old ladies. So the focus is on destabilising the archetype either visually or functionally.

### **SLIDE: WEREWOLVES**

Werewolves are another Gothic archetype that get limited attention in *Misty*, featuring in just six tales (this does not include the serial ‘Wolf Girl’ in which Lona is raised by wolves and adopts their habits). Of these, werewolves are generally stereotypical antagonists, but ‘Poor Jenny’ (#17) is more interesting.

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<sup>1</sup> (see chapter \* for a fuller discussion of story types).

Jenny has no memory of her life, but strong memories of being hunted and so she fears she is a werewolf. She ultimately dismisses this fear as the moon is out – but then the story’s twist reveals that she is actually a wolf who turns into a girl at this time. Her dreams and confusion are emphasised through repeated imagery of eyes and animal features, and her final transformation takes place through a repeated image of her running and leaping forward: using the De Luca effect across the full width of the page from left to right. This simple inversion lifts the tale to a new level of pathos as we are left with the mute and silhouetted image of ‘Jenny’ behind the bars of her cage and a nameplate.

### **SLIDE: SUBVERSION**

Finally, vampires – whose appearances total just half a percent of Misty’s total content. And in nearly half of these instances the threat of the myth is subverted or undermined in some way. For example, Laird Cameron in the one-shot story ‘Ratcatcher’ (#27): who is a visually stereotypical vampire (black clothes, long cloak, and black hair in a widow’s peak with arched eyebrows and goatee beard) but happy to transform into a bat and help deal with the mice infestation at Doris’s family’ home (‘the mice were delicious... delicious!’). Inversion and twist endings are also used also subvert the myth, as often protagonists under threat are revealed to be the real vampire – or something worse (‘Forest of Fear’, #89; ‘Dark Secrets, Dark Night’, #13). Even a vampiric ventriloquist dummy features! (‘The Devil’s Dummy, #69).

Overall, Gothic archetypes are just a small portion of Misty’s content, and often inverted or treated knowingly. Rather than generic monsters or clichéd horrors, human flaws are instead the driving force behind majority of the terror in *Misty*. The comic’s use of other Gothic motifs emphasises this, and I will now look at some of these, including the Uncanny, The Double, and the Mask.

### **SLIDE: UNCANNY,**

Helen Wheatley points out that Gothic texts often have ‘an obsession with motifs of the uncanny’ (2006: 2). This is Sigmund Freud’s ‘das unheimlich’, which refers to the simultaneous sense of familiarity and dread that characterises many of *Misty*’s tales. The comic book in fact explicitly codes its content as ‘uncanny’ on more than one instance: two of the inside-cover introductions from Misty herself refer to the ‘uncanny tales’ within. A great example is Pat Mills and Maria Barrera’s one-shot ‘Roots’, from the very first issue. In this, protagonist Jill goes to stay in the village of Evergreen with her granddad for the summer, but soon notices uncanny elements. Her 81-year old Granddad carries her ‘heavy’ cases ‘as though they were light as a feather’; Miss Carter, despite being aged at least 100, goes ‘whizzing up that hill’ on her push bike; and nobody seems to have died for over 50 years. When Jill wakes and sees a figure standing out in the rain at night she initially explains this away as a scarecrow (an uncanny image in itself as it

mimics the human form) but the next night their numbers increase and she recognises them as various townsfolk. She confronts her grandfather who explains to her that they all have roots (see Fig 1). The final reveal makes excellent use of the medium (taking place after a page turn, and with shadowing and composition both emphasising Jill's shocked reaction, as well as the broken panel border and use of perspective to emphasise his 'growing' leg. In fact it was considered so shocking that Mills (\*) has explained that he was forced to add a final 'reassuring' panel (embedded in the corner of this one) in which Jill's shock and reaction is mitigated and she decides to stay. This is somewhat clumsily positioned although an attempt has been made to link it with the original composition by following the line of the grandfather's body.

### **SLIDE: DOUBLES AS PROTAGONISTS**

In his essay 'The Uncanny' (1919) Freud explores the double as the ultimate uncanny symbol: it represents the oscillation between narcissism/death; familiar/strange; and self/other. Otto Rank's study of *Der Doppelgänger* then claims the double similarly and argues that it is a literary concept as much as it is anthropological and psychological, for example by defining the book as the repressed double of the author.

It's a common gothic motif that provides a dualistic worldview and can work to subvert norms in early gothic work such as Walpole or Radcliffe. Later Gothic texts then develop the motif to break down the barrier between self and other, as in Shelley's *Frankenstein* where Victor names his creature 'my own vampire, my own spirit let loose from the grave' (p78), and the subsequent reworking of our vampires into ourselves by writers such as Anne Rice. Sage (1988) argues that the double represents the internal conscience or secret self. This duality of the human spirit can be read as a response to the human subject in crisis (Townshend) that rises in nineteenth century literature and then moves into psychoanalysis.

The double is a contradictory idea: it replicates and preserves the self but also consumes and replaces it as a signifier of death. Examples such as Stevenson's *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (\*) or Wilde's *Portrait of Dorian Gray* (\*) or contemporary works such as Chuck Palahniuk's *Fight Club* (\*) make the dichotomy overt and use it as a plot basis, but Gothic consistently explores visual, metaphorical and structural doubling.

### **SLIDE: DOUBLES AS ANTAGONISTS**

Doubles in *Misty* are often antagonists and threats. In 'Mirror Mirror on the Wall...' (#61) Sally's reflection comes alive and tries to grab her so they can change places (her dog Toby has already fought with his mirror reflection and been killed) (fig \*). The page layout throughout this story is a mass of sharp

angles and transgression – limbs extend over panel borders, characters are hurled into the air with curling motion lines leading the eye, and the vertical and horizontal gridding is entirely angular. The sound effect ('CRASH') and Sally's reflection use the same shattered effect and the positioning also allows this image to double in function: existing both as the dramatic event it is and also as Sally's retrospective memory of it. Sally's final words sustain the presence of her double in her present and invite the reader to share her worry that '...she's still there and waiting!' in every mirror that they pass.

### **SLIDE: DOUBLES AND SHADOWS**

In 'Shadow of a Doubt...' (#58) Mary hears whispers coming from their barn at night and recognises them as belonging to her friends, neighbours and even family, who are 'talking about k-killing... and some kind of revolution'. She locks herself in her room but in a dramatic panel of light and dark is confronted by her shadow, who reveals that it is they who have been plotting ('We are shadows... thousands of us... millions... and soon we shall rise up!') The plot literalises the shadow self of repression and the layouts of these pages emphasise the point through their gridding: angular lines dominate three of the four pages, with only the third (where Mary finally thinks she has a handle on the problem and that the whole village is plotting) returning to stable 90 degree angles.

Mary herself is doubled in a number of panels (showing her listening at the barn door) but it is the appearance of her shadow that uses duplication most dramatically (see fig. \*) The story's final angular panel is the most distorted of all – as befits its threatening ending. Jose Ariza's art here allows Mary's wide eyes and flicked up curls to dominate the panels she is in and it is even used to lead the reader's eye through the first three pages. There are multiple panels where Mary gazes directly at us, further doubling identity as the reader mirrors her horrified stare and confusion.

In both of these examples the double brings explicit death (Sally's dog Toby and the threats Mary overhears), and multiple other supporting examples give the same message. Some protagonists such as Naomi in 'The Guardian Lynxes' (#11) and Gayle in 'Day of the Dragon' (#10-#19) have historical doubles whose fate is tied to theirs, and these scenarios again combine narcissism and death (for example Gayle's desire for the 'beautiful mirror' that shows scenes of her past double's romantic tragedy). Classic gothic doubles such as Jekyll and Hyde are rewritten in stories such as 'The Shop at Crooked Corner' (#14), and even entire worlds are doubled in 'The Sentinels' (by Malcolm Shaw and Mario Capaldi, #1-#12), where an alternate reality in which the Nazis won WW2 'makes my world with all its faults look good' (#9).

### **SLIDE: MASKS**

Catherine Spooner (2013) argues that masks, veils and disguises in Gothic texts are not just props or plot devices but also represent a generic concern with surfaces. They can also enable transgression by being carnivalesque or performative, or allowing for self-transformation. Masks both reveal and conceal, and evoke doubleness in this way: 'their horror frequently lies in its collapse; in the loss of control of the mask or the disguise, so that it estranges the bearer from his/her "original" identity' (422). In 'Mask of Fear' (#39) Sue borrows a mask from her Uncle's creepy collection and wins first prize at the Hallowe'en party she attends – but when she tries to remove it she only finds another underneath... 'and another... and another... and another...' She loses control over her identity and is unable to return to her previous self.

Motifs of doubles, Others and masks are thus used to explore the limits of identity and the divisions within the self, and the visual elements and page layouts of *Misty* also emphasise this.

### **GOTHIC AESTHETIC: surface and transgression**

Catherine Spooner (2004), speaking of Goth fashion, emphasises the tension between surface and depth (ripped fabric, fishnet, layers, PVC). Stephen Farber's (1972) analysis of 'The New American Gothic' in cinema also notes a similar tension between horrific content and over-ripe expressionism, which Wheatley summarises as 'a tension between a glossy surface and degraded interior' (2006: 9). Farber also refers to 'arresting distortions in mood and cinematic technique' (1972: 95), and Punter (speaking now of poetry) also defines Gothic as 'a distorted recollection' (Punter 2016: 213). *Misty's* dramatic page layouts have their basis in the traditions of girls comics, but also draw attention to surface over depth, where acute angles and circular panels disrupt Groensteen's grid.

Both the style and substance of *Misty* also deals with transgression. When panel borders are present, they are frequently broken by character limbs, just as the content also focuses strongly on rule-breaking. Critics such as Hogle, Bruhm and Heiland have all stressed the centrality of transgression and rule-breaking in Gothic, saying: 'Gothic fiction at its core is about transgressions of all sorts: across national boundaries, social boundaries, sexual boundaries, the boundaries of one's own identity.' (Heiland 2004: 3).

We might also look to Gothic cinema for visual cues here. In 'The New American Gothic' (1972): one of the first discussions of cinematic gothic,<sup>2</sup> Stephen Farber claims that gothic cinema has a distinctive '**baroque and self-conscious**

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<sup>2</sup> One of the films considered by Farber is *Hush Hush Sweet Charlotte*, which of course lends its title to the *Misty* serial.



**expressionism**’ that relies upon ‘arresting distortions in mood and cinematic technique’ (1972: 95) alongside elements such as: black costumes and settings, ‘weird’ lighting and camera angles to unsettle the audience, exaggerated shadows, and large asymmetrical settings and shot compositions (Wheatley 2006: 9).

Many of the previous images have shown high-contrast black and white lighting, weird angles and acute angled borders that are broken or transgressed, creating large asymmetrical page layouts that equate to Farber’s shot compositions.

**SLIDE: black double page spread**

Here’s a stellar example from Jose Ariza (ethereal art but still aesthetic dominated by gothic tropes) – **black setting, acute borders, asymmetrical page.**

**SLIDE: GROTESQUE**

Another strong visual indicator of Gothic is the Grotesque. This term originates from oddly shaped ornaments found within Roman dwellings, or grottoes, during the first century. From a literary standpoint, it implies a mutation that transforms normal features and/or behaviors into extremes that are meant to be frightening and/or disturbingly comic (Cornwell 273)

Page layout and position are used throughout *Misty* to achieve the grotesque in a number of stories, which can be dissected using Groensteen’s ideas about the space of the page. He emphasises that certain points on the page are privileged locations, naming the first and last panels, and considers panels within the space of the page in terms of their size, shape and position. In ‘The Pig People’ (#95) Lorina wants to be beautiful and smart like Pearl and admires her amulet, which has come from an ancient cult (The Worshippers of the Pig) so she steals it. Initially everything goes right for her (‘She found she was making the scene at the local disco’) but then her wishes start to backfire (for example when she wishes to get out of gym the building burns down) so she resolves to return the amulet after making one final wish to be beautiful. When she wakes up the next day she has been transformed – but with the features of a pig! The tale ends here, and uses both colour and the comics medium well to shock us with its final image, as Lorina is drawn with her back to us until the final panel. It’s a strategy that is used similarly in ‘Mirror...Mirror’ (#37, fig \*), where Linda’s shattered face is hidden from us until the very last panel. Not only that but it is emphasised through the panel’s area (taking up nearly a quarter of the page), its form or shape (as the angled top edge of the panel leads the reader’s eye to her face), and its site (the privileged position of the final panel) (Groensteen \*). In ‘Dead Man’s Eyes’ (#79) Glenda is cursed with a gift of prophecy and the last third of the page is taken up with her skull-like face against a black background.

Melodrama also features in many of these reveals, via the protagonists' verbalised horror ('Oh No – No!') and the reaction of an onlooker, such as Linda's mother who has fainted on the bathroom floor (#37), and the reflected image of Glenda's screaming friends (#79).

### **GOTHIC DRIVES: THE PAST, NOSTALGIA, TRANSGRESSION, SOCIAL**

In defining Gothic, the past also seems key to many theorists. Richard Davenport-Hines stresses 'the strength of backward-looking thoughts' (1998: C3) and Maggie Kilgour (1995: 4) names Gothic 'A Frankenstein's monster, assembled out of the bits and pieces of the past.' While the past is a vital component of many *Misty* stories, particularly its serials (for example the ancient societies that feature in 'The Cult of the Cat', 'A Leap Through Time' and 'Day of the Dragon') it is generally juxtaposed against the present day and most tales take place in a recognisable urban environment. It's not always strongly marked as 1970s Britain but 'the city' connotes London and the characters wear contemporary clothing. However, O'Shea (2015) points out that *Misty* also commissioned 'a significant number of stories which took place in the more distant past, usually, though not exclusively (and again, rather like many of Hammer's horror films) at some point after the turn of the Nineteenth Century, though up until the first decades of the Twentieth.' A more thorough review of the comic's content reveals some fifty-four one-shot stories set in a past time and four serials (28 eps). This equates to approximately 12% of the comic's content that is overtly situated either in a specified historical period, or in an alterity with notable historical features (such as princesses, lords, slaves, peasants and so forth). Many are marked with particular dates or events such as the Jack the Ripper murders (#54); the London plague (#59; #92); or the destruction of Pompeii (#80). In general, these historical protagonists are maids or orphans and beggars: the downtrodden and victimised heroes common to *Misty* and other girls comics. For example, 'Miranda' (#12) is a beggar girl accused of witchcraft and sentenced to be burnt at the stake, however she is cut free when a downpour commences with the promise that she will be burnt when it stops – which hasn't happened in the sixty years that have passed since (so maybe explains the British Summertime).

### **SLIDE: NOSTALGIA**

The total also rises significantly if stories such as *Nine Lives of Nicola* or *Cult of the Cat*, which are set in the present day with flashbacks to places like Ancient Egypt are included. And so the look towards the past also characterises many of the contemporary stories, where it's often treated with a heavy dose of nostalgia and discourse of loss. For example, in the prose story 'Green Fizz' (Holiday Special 1979), Harriet narrates the tale of how she discovers that her Gran is a witch and that her corner shop has been providing the village with a drink that

makes people contented and happy. Her Gran explains: 'But the supermarket has put a stop to all hopes of that [...] It's taken my trade, dear' and that 'the milk of human kindness' is no longer able to get to everyone. Progress is seen as a threat, and is used similarly in 'Curse of the Roman Sword' (Holiday Special 1979) where a series of events (a proposed supermarket and new road) threaten Moira's village. 'The Story of Little Wytching' (#72), another prose story, also comments on the changes in village life: 'Years ago, the craft shop sold little hand-made peg doll witches on broomsticks, lovingly made by the local gypsies. Now they were all mass-produced in Hong Kong or Taiwan.' Again, the emphasis is on big corporations and globalisation as a threat to happiness and tradition. When progress is conceptualised in *Misty* it is as a bad thing and there is **only one story in the entire run** of the comic where it is a force for good: 'The Collector' (#68) where a haunted postbox that has been trapping people inside is torn down for town redevelopment and a new post office, releasing them all. Narrative address is again used for impact here and to drag the reader into the story, as it is told in second-person ('You stand at the corner of a country lane, friendless and forgotten...')

#### **SLIDE: SOCIAL COMMENT**

Gothic has long been a means of social commentary of this type (consider for example *Frankenstein* as a warning against new technology or reaction against the Enlightenment, or *Dracula* as a veiled metaphor for the transmission of syphilis); and horror films take a similar approach. Both offer perils rooted in social anxieties and monsters that are redefined for each cultural moment. *Misty's* stories, then, can be read as articulating specific British fears of the 1970s. Turney (2010: 264) argues that these include **economic decline**; **environmentalism**, the **threat of potential social disarray**, and an increasing **concern about world energy resources**. She also flags up the atmosphere of hidden decadence in her chapter title 'Sex in the Sitting Room' and this climate of rising taboo and uncertainty juxtaposed with a desire for conservatism and reassurance is a very gothic tension. Classic Gothic stories offer the excitement of transgressive characters and scenarios, but also mete out severe punishment for such offences, just like many of the *Misty* stories.

#### **SLIDE: ENVIRONMENTALISM**

Exploring some key areas from Turner's quote in turn, environmental concerns and the threat to resources are key themes underlying a number of *Misty* stories, and include pollution, desertion, and the neglect or destruction of nature. For example 'Looking for Something Special' (#73) also draws attention to deserted seashores and neglected nature through its lead character of an anonymous girl found on the beach who ultimately returns to a pile of sand. Lots of stories follow this pattern and emphasise the link between people and the land through narration, focalisation and aesthetic.

### **SLIDE: ANIMAL RIGHTS**

Environmental themes also engage with animal rights – a movement that was sparked by an article in *The Sunday Times* by Brigid Brophy (1965) and then founded in the UK in the early 1970s by the ‘Oxford Group’. Today no longer a fringe movement, it is a global campaign, however traces of its early rise in Britain can be seen in a number of *Misty* stories. As well as characterised or sympathetic animals (for example in the serial *Wolf Girl*), a number of tales also have an explicit message about a variety of related issues, including hunting, animal capture, cruelty and testing, and vegetarianism and veganism. These themes are neatly slotted into the usual *Misty* narrative devices and story types, such as magical items and prophetic dreams. An additional strategy is the replacement of animals with human protagonists as victims of hunting, testing or food, along with parodies of or objections to the associated rhetoric. For example, characters find themselves trapped in laboratory-style tests, or about to be eaten by carnivorous aliens. One of the most dramatic of these stories (and which sparked objections from *Misty* fans on the letters page) is the punishment of Vivien and Steve, who allow a mouse to die of exhaustion in their homemade maze, and are then locked in a maze themselves by the giant ape owners of the shop they got it from (#24). By including animals as pets as well as food and test subjects, *Misty* raises the issue at a domestic level, and makes it relevant to its child readership.

### **SLIDE: economic decline**

Social issues are also raised, and again progress is often demonised: for example ‘The Cats of Carey Street’ is a serial about Jackie’s gran being run out of the street she grew up on. The urban environment is often depicted as a tough and threatening place, especially for the lower classes: in ‘Whistle and I’ll Come’ victim protagonist Toni walks endless rain-sodden streets after running away from her abusive father. This story covers a variety of social issues including domestic abuse, alcoholism, organised crime, truancy, stealing, and homelessness; and also features a wider ethnic range of characters than many of the other tales. Alcoholism is also the main motivation for Sandie in the serial ‘Winner Loses All!’ as her Dad persistently loses his job due to his drinking, and financial worries form the backdrop to a number of other tales.

### **SLIDE: threat of potential social disarray**

By including social concerns like these, *Misty* also comments on the changing society of 1970s Britain, where youth culture has often been a cause of concern or caused a ‘moral panic’. Stanley Cohen coined this term in the 1970s and his argument emphasises the role of the media and use of the visual in creating a moral panic, pointing out that ‘The public image of these folk devils [mods and rockers] was invariably tied up to a number of highly visual scenarios associated

with their appearance' (e.g. the fights on Brighton beach). (1980: 20). Marsh and Melville (2011) also emphasise that moral panics are not a new concept, citing the craze of 'garotting' (an especially violent form of mugging) in Victorian London via the pages of *Punch*, and suggest that the reaction is common to delinquent aspects of any society's youth culture or working class (for example the more recent panic over 'hoodies' where again it is associated with a strong visual marker).

*Misty's* young delinquents are similarly marked: from their working class speech to trashy clothing and lack of respect, such as gang leader Norma in *Moonchild*, who fights, bullies, smokes and disrespects her mother: 'See you, mum. Don't nick any of me fags on your way out.' (#11) Pat Mills writes her as an unrelentingly malicious character (giving her my all-time favourite line: 'Rosemary deserves to be hurt for being so weird' (#7)) and John Armstrong's artwork emphasises her hardness through severe black hair. Whether Norma is lounging with her feet up in a record shop, knocking Anne unconscious in a hockey game, or creating havoc in the kitchen she is a force of chaos and unrelenting malice. Of course she is punished for this and ends up in a fire that her own cigarette has started.

### **SLIDE: DELINQUENT PROTAGONISTS**

Delinquency is another strand of social comment clearly seen in *Misty* and many of its tales punish characters for such behaviour. Interestingly though, wayward protagonists often end up far worse off than the stories' antagonists. Stealing, mugging, vandalism and bullying all feature and the moral is spelt out in direct address: 'You won't bully strange old women in the street, will you, girls? Who knows what kind of gardens they might have?' (#41)

These moral lessons are slotted neatly into established *Misty* story types – dishonest protagonists either steal from the wrong person (generally a witch or alien) or take a magical item that backfires drastically on them. Many of the above tales trap the thief with the item they have taken (#18, #39, #55, #55, #75), give them the exact opposite of what they desired (#52, #73, #76), or switch their body or place with their victim (#3, #32, #58, #78, #79). There is often a strong sense of poetic justice, for example as art thieves are made over into cubist nightmares (#75) or shoplifters transformed into shop dummies (#18). The endings can be very harsh – pickpocket Jilly is 'burned alive' in 'Mrs Grundy's Guest House' (#86). While the above are strong examples of particular types of delinquency it is worth noting that a lot of additional *Misty* stories react to a protagonist breaking rules of some sort.

### **SLIDE: GIRLHOOD AND GOTHIC**

So after considering all of these different angles, I've arrived at the following conclusions:

- Archetypes (witches, vampires, werewolves) feature less than might be expected and are often subverted
- Gothic motifs (doubles, others, masks) are used to interrogate and destabilise identity
- Gothic aesthetic (surface, transgression, the grotesque) is distorted and exploited by the surface and space of the page
- Gothic themes (transgression, the uncanny, society) are made relevant for a younger audience (transgression becomes delinquency; animal cruelty relates to pets) and are tied to dominant concerns of the era

The last point seemed of particular interest to me, and so in the final section of this talk I'd like to draw attention to the ways in which *Misty's* use of the gothic twists its themes into metaphors for the experiences of a teenage audience. As well as explicit messages about delinquency and girlhood concerns such as friendship, bullying and so forth, Gothic motifs of transformation and concerns about control and falsity are reconfigured into metaphors for negotiating puberty and femininity. Various issues are raised by this, including loneliness, self-acceptance, self-discovery, identity, female injustice and inequality, narrative openness. These will be considered against definitions of the Domestic Gothic and the Female Gothic, as I argue that *Misty* doesn't quite fit either of these models but instead articulates a 'Girls Gothic'.

**SLIDE: outsider**

For example Lona in 'Wolf-Girl' (#65-#80) has been raised by wolves and struggles to deal with her reintegration into society and her foster family. She finds herself howling at moon when she feels alone and sad, and when she loses her temper and growls as she attacks some bullies she despairs at being so 'scared of all these new feelings and emotions boiling up inside me' (#66). Her animal 'instinct' and behaviour is overtly positioned as teenage angst, for example as she muses 'I love my parents so much, but sometimes I feel I'm growing further apart from them each day' (#66). Although her foster parents are loving they can't relate to her problems, and when Lona shares her fears with them she is told 'It's just teenage blues. Most kids go through a time of feeling unsettled. It passes!' (#67) Here the parent/child dichotomy of 'you just don't understand' is literalised as her parents brush off her fears.

Things get worse when Lona runs away and joins the wolf pack she has released from the zoo as she then finds 'I -I don't fit in with them...and I'm out of place at home with my parents. I'm just a misfit!' (#74) The freedom Lona expects is not forthcoming in the wild and she feels completely isolated: 'The wolves have gone - the humans are scared of me. I-I'm completely alone!' (#77) The final two

panels of this issue represent her opposing lives visually as she first kneels upright in the rain and then collapses forward: her inverted pose and dark hair forming a vertically mirrored image.

The story is based around Lona's repeated struggles against the lack of control she has over her behaviour and her feelings of not fitting in anywhere (emphasised further by her name which phonically suggests 'loner'). However despite temptations, such as when she finds a human baby and takes it in with the pack (although fearing that 'I-I'm nothing but a misfit, not knowing where I belong. The baby might grow up feeling the same way.' (#79)), she ultimately breaks the cycle and returns the wolves to their cage at the zoo and the baby to civilisation. Her final (somewhat ambivalent) thought is that 'They think I've betrayed them, bringing them back here! But it's better to be a well-cared-for prisoner than a hunted victim without a leader' (#80) as she strides down the high street carrying the baby she has found. She has successfully negotiated the mother role thrust upon her, while acknowledging the limitations of such a 'trap'.

#### **SLIDE: self-acceptance**

Many of Misty's serials have protagonists struggling to accept some aspect of themselves. In 'The Cult of the Cat' Nicola initially struggles against her destiny as the chosen one ('No, no, go away. Keep out of my head. I hate your gods and your cats.' (#7)) but ultimately accepts her new identity as 'a very special person, the chosen of Bast' (#12). In 'The Secret World of Sally Maxwell' Sally struggles to understand her telepathic powers, but at the close of the tale accepts these, saying 'I've come to terms with it' and 'I think that's as normal as I can ever hope to be...but it'll do!' (#60). In 'The Loving Cup' Lucy's 'other within' revealed when we are told she is the reincarnation of Lucrezia Borgia but she is ultimately saved from the loss of control she has been experiencing when she is smashed (#82)

Sometimes this hidden or embarrassing part is externalised completely as a ghost or spirit that must be helped or appeased: for example in 'Paint it Black' Maggie is ultimately able to get justice for Amy's spirit (#18); and in 'The Ghost of Golightly Towers' Amanda returns home after she has helped Sir Giles (#94). Another good example of this is 'Hush, Hush, Sweet Rachel', where Lisa is infantilised by Rachel's manifestations and finds these deeply embarrassing. But at the close of the tale she has grown beyond them: in its penultimate panel Lisa breaks the fourth wall to address us directly and explain 'It was Mrs Prendergast who brought back all the memories of my previous life... Now she's gone... Poor Rachel can be at peace and I can be free...' The final silent panel shows an image of Rachel surrounded by a black oval of shadow against a background, also gazing straight at us (#52), having been silenced and expelled.

In 'The Four Faces of Eve' Eve agonises 'I'm a freak, a monster!' (#29) and later asks herself 'what sort of life can I expect... alone and just a creation of that monster Marshall's?' (#31) But when she finally opens up and tells her unbelievable story to the circus folk, not only do they believe her but show her the way of out of her situation, as Carol advises: 'Three girls died [...] you owe it to them to live a full happy life, don't you see?' (#31) This revelation is positioned in the centre of the story's final page, in a circular panel that gives it emphasis through its form and site (Groensteen) and the page design here offers a slight resemblance to a keyhole, perhaps indicating that Eve has finally unlocked the answer and escaped her dark past. Carol's father also protects her from the police by telling them that only his two daughters are inside, and when Eve thanks him for lying, responds 'I wasn't lying. I've got two daughters now'.

Voyages of self-discovery that end in happy homes characterise many of the other longer tales such as 'Moonchild', 'Whistle and I'll Come', 'The Salamander Girl', and 'Don't Look Twice'. But even if the protagonists are not given new places, their journey enables them to change and be happier with their old place, as in 'A Leap Through Time' (#36) or 'Winner Loses All'.

*Misty* serials often explore themes in which protagonists act outside their own control, whether under the control of an external agency such as a ghost, or an internal one such as animal instinct. They also provide a space for uncertainties about family figures and authority to be explored. Ultimately they function as *bildungsroman* tales of self-growth: about accepting one's own self and finding one's own place in the world, whether this is a journey to a new safe space, or towards an acceptance and appreciation of the old one.

### **SLIDE: feminism: rewritings**

The search for 'a room of one's own' and the problematic depiction of authority can also be read as manifestations of feminism, and *Misty's* tales also interrogate patriarchal tradition in a number of ways. These include exposing female injustice or inequality; celebrating female power and outwitting antagonists; rewriting traditional tales; and questioning limited readings or singular solutions.

Sitting alongside its tales of dire punishments for those who transgress the rules are a number of tales in which female injustice and unfair blame are exposed. Notably, these are predominantly prose stories. In 'Don't cry for me Angelina' (*Summer Special* 1978) angry protagonist Angelina makes a mysterious friend called Selene on the beach which has a positive effect on her. When she falls into the sea and is saved by her foster mum, she is told that that Selene was the name of the local sea witch who probably got the blame for smugglers' activities.



Other *Misty* tales celebrate female power by showing brave girls outwitting evil. Kitty outwits 'The Evil Djinn' (#65) by wishing she never met her, and in 'The Not So Genial Genie' (#45) an unnamed protagonist convinces another threatening genie to demonstrate his power (by taunting him: 'All I've seen so far is a big puff of smoke. And it ponged so much you should be ashamed!'). He then turns himself into a fly, which she then swats. The trick of turning oneself into a bug that can be crushed (or a mouse caught by a cat) is an old one in fairytales. As such, they share something in common with oral folktales such as the earliest versions of Red Riding Hood ('The Story of Grandmother', Paul Delarue \*\*), in which the girl tricks the wolf and makes her own escape, before it was rewritten by Charles Perrault (1697) into a cautionary tale for young ladies that does not end so well.

The tale of Red Riding Hood is retold in 'Forest of Fear' (#89) where Red (in this instance named Heidi) turns out to be the monster. It's darkly shadowed until the final page, which uses bright primary colours, and makes the reader work to recognise that Heidi is the monster as she turns to reveal fangs in the final panel. Mist acknowledges in a later letters page that 'my stories do sometimes take old tales and tell them in a different creepier way' – in this instance by making the girl the predator rather than victim.

Even the little witch Miss T, usually the subject of her own backfiring spell and described in her own tagline as 'Dopey but Dee-lightful', outdoes 'bighead' Zappo the Great Magician after he tells her 'Witches are no match for Zappo's magic' (#83). In response to his pulling a rabbit from his hat, she pulls a rabbit from her hat that in turn is holding a tiny Miss T holding a rabbit...! The ever-decreasing repetition denies notions of linearity and Misty's refusal to end stories categorically is the final feminist trait that its narrative offers.

### **SLIDE: Openness**

Questions are often raised by these tales and not always answered, and Misty's stories often draw attention to the question of authenticity in a gendered and subversive manner, as for example in 'The Sea Maid' (Holiday Special 1979). Misty never bookends a tale in the 101 weekly issues, but in the Holiday Specials (and subsequently in *Tammy* after the two titles merged) she often takes on this role. However, her function every time is to raise questions rather than provide clear answers, as here, where she casts doubt on the legends Ann has been told about the Sea Witch, 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!' She does similarly in other tales such as 'The Green Children' (Holiday Special 1980) and 'The Roman Road', in each

instance going against established legend and defending the reputation of female figures.

In all of these instances *Misty's* function is to open up endings, not close them. Fiske's (1987) analysis of gendered television narrative identifies the feminine form in this way (as found in serials, soap opera and so forth) and in counterpoint to the male series format, where episodic elements are clearly closed.

### **SLIDE: female GOTHIC**

These dominant traits can be used to explore gendered definitions of the female and domestic Gothic. The term 'Female Gothic' was coined by Ellen Moers (1976) and 'as one in which "woman is examined with a woman's eye, woman as girl, as sister, as mother, as self," and, more precisely, in which women "give *visual* form to the fear of self" (Heiland 1985: 109, 107), i.e. in which they produce images that in some way represent themselves.' (Heiland 2004: 58). Juliann Fleenor also argues for female gothic as being about 'conflict with the all-powerful devouring mother' (where mother can be an analogy for the double, twin, sister and so forth) (1983: 16). This narrative focus on women's selves (in whatever role) becomes more significant than the gender of the author for later critics. **In exploring female identities, the female gothic appears both as conservative and as a form of protest.** *Misty* does just this: it enacts an exploration and awareness of identity and offers us resilient protagonists who can outwit evil – alongside extreme punishments for those who break the rules.

The Domestic Gothic also has relevance here, and Mary Ann Doane (1987) finds gothic influences in the 'paranoid woman's films' of the 1940s, where the home becomes an 'uncanny space' that is invaded by husbands and fathers after the end of WW2. Helen Wheatley also uses the emergence of gothic and horror on television in the 1950s to discuss the subversive potential of the domestic gothic.

The notion of uncanny space is one I'd like to consider a bit more closely by looking at the character of *Misty* herself and the comic as a whole. It goes to great lengths to situate itself as an otherworldly place that nonetheless shares space with the everyday world, doubling its settings and creating the Uncanny. I'm indebted here to Paul Fisher Davies who has been conducting a linguistic analysis of *Misty* as part of a short research project supported by funding from the Centre for the Study of Journalism, Culture and Community at Bournemouth University.

### **SLIDE: Uncanny**

As well as the uncanny and doubled story content I've already identified, one of the most important components of *Misty* is the character herself. We only get

glimpses of her in each issue, the most dominant of which is the poetic greeting she offers on the inside cover. This sets the tone for the issue and can be analysed fruitfully in terms of the language and imagery used. These introductions adopted a mystical tone and often challenged the reader or urged them to take action in some way. Issue #36 shown here contains an exemplary address.

The alliteration of key words such as 'suspense' 'strange', 'shivering' and 'shadows' sets the thematic tone for the contents and help frame the issue as something to be explored and overcome. The greeting also contains a strong sense of place (the 'Willows of Wistfulness' and the 'Pool of Life') and drags the reader into this new mysterious location, asking them to 'settle down' and 'listen' (which in this instance sits a little oddly against 'turn down the lights', blurring a sense of place between self and other) and creating the uncanny space characteristic of the Domestic Gothic.

The Otherness of place is further enhanced through Misty's references to a number of distinct locations within her realm. These include the Cavern of Dreams (#7, #19, #24, #29, #30, #91); the Pool of Life (#3, #5, #16, #36, #62, #82); the Stones of Sanctuary (#42), and the Doorway to the Dawn (#21). They're demarked by their use of capitalisation and often used to blur her world and ours by including images of real places, such as Stonehenge (#42) which becomes the 'Stones of Sanctuary', or the Durdle Door rocks in Dorset, which become the 'Doorway to the Dawn' (#38). These doublings of place seem very gothic and stress the metaphorical and uncanny nature of her realm.

In Misty's introductions there is a strong sense of embodiment (here we have both 'heart' and 'hand') and Misty herself is a reassuring, guiding presence (as she says, 'I am here'). She addresses the reader on their level ('Your friend, Misty') and can even be read as supplicative (as she 'present[s]' us with stories for our 'delight'). The reader is being questioned ('Is that your heart beating?', 'Why do you shiver?') and challenged ('Touch my hand and tread boldly').

Extending this analysis to the corpus as a whole is illuminating.<sup>3</sup> The reader is constantly being urged to do something and the comic is presented as an **elsewhere location** for them to journey to and explore. 'Can' and 'dare' feature prominently, and 'you' dominates in the phrasing. Thus there are ongoing linguistic attempts to link Misty with the reader and to present her as a guide or companion. On two occasions she greets us as 'my sisters of the mist' (#29, #39) and once as her 'children' (#84). Analysing verbs like 'dare' and 'will' across the

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<sup>3</sup> I am indebted to Paul Fisher Davies for the quantitative data provided here using Voyant tools.

entire corpus identifies clear Gothic metaphors such as the body and the journey. As well as being dared to read the comic's contents, the reader is challenged to 'be my companion', to 'brave the midnight way' (#69), and to 'tread boldly' (#36, #51), 'softly' (#42), 'warily' (#54, #57) or 'fearlessly' (#79). The comic is defined as an otherworldly location as we are invited to 'journey' with Misty (#88, #98), to 'quest' (#14) or to 'venture' along 'misty ways' (#37, #93), 'unknown paths' or 'untrodden ways' (#40), and so forth. These metaphors are in addition to simple invitations to 'come with me' or 'follow me'. Verbs such as 'step' and 'walk' also feature prominently and are used to give a sense of Otherness of place: for example, 'Step into another world with me' (#70). 'Step into the unknown with...' is also a common cover strapline (used on the covers of 8 issues). This obviously supports the reframing of Gothic tropes as journeys of self-discovery that I've already identified.

*Misty's* anonymous contemporary settings, uncanny doubled spaces, 'everygirl' protagonists and social and homely concerns fall into the domestic gothic. However, in doing so it does not just seek to terrify but also offers its girl readers ways to navigate the powerlessness and expectations placed upon them.

#### **SLIDE: conclusion**

To attempt to define Gothic is to try and encapsulate a movement across media, culture and time: taking in, at the very least, architecture, literature, music, cinema, fashion and television. Lenora Ledwon thus proposes many Gothics (1993) and I'm forced to agree. While *Misty* contains elements of the Domestic Gothic, it ranges far and wide in setting and era. Like the Female Gothic it explores gendered identities, and is both conservative and transgressive by combining Manichaeian morals with uncertain outcomes and fantastic scenarios. However, in its stories transformation often becomes explicitly linked to puberty; authenticity is framed as parental doubt; and Gothic others and doubles become infantile personality traits or secrets to be hidden or conquered through journeys of self-acceptance. Although established archetypes appear they are seldom the main focus and figures such as the witch take on a variety of plot functions and cannot be clearly delineated as evil or good. *Misty* provides clear moral guidance and inflicts grotesque and abject punishments on those who break the rules. But it also uses its stories to interrogate issues of control, authority, and self-value and offers a strongly subversive strand that celebrates female power and openness. It thus offers – and perhaps even incarnates – a 'Gothic for Girls'.