

CHAPTER ELEVEN

GOTHIC ENGINEERINGS IN CHILDBREARING MANUALS AND FEMINIST NOVELS: BENJAMIN SPOCK MEETS RENATE DORRESTEIN

ROSEMARIE BUIKEMA
AND ELISABETH WESSELING

This article investigates two Gothic novels by Renate Dorrestein, namely *Unnatural Mothers* and *A Heart of Stone*, paying special attention to the motif of the house, which plays a prominent role in Gothic fiction, and the representation of motherhood. We argue that Dorrestein criticizes enlightened, scientifically based approaches to the raising of children, especially the so-called “fun morality” of Benjamin Spock and Penelope Leach. Dorrestein foregrounds the dark sides of family life, focusing on the problematic sides of the mother-daughter relationship. We argue that Dorrestein’s representation of motherhood is in keeping with Freud’s views on the matter, which is not all that surprising considering that the Gothic novel formed an important source of inspiration for Freud. Dorrestein’s novels give short shrift to Dr. Spock’s domestication of the darker sides of Freud’s thinking.

Psychological and Literary Representations of Family Relations

The wide-spread popularity of childrearing as psychological support constitutes one of many signs indicating that we live in a psychologised culture, i.e. in a culture where fragments of psychological expertise are part of the layman’s everyday thought and activity. The scientification of childrearing is a typically modern, enlightened attempt to rationally control the shaping of young people into autonomous individuals. At the same time, the growth of the individual

within the context of the family has been the *raison d'être* of such fictional genres as the *Bildungsroman*, the family saga and the Gothic novel since the eighteenth century. It may be asked, then, what is the relationship between psychological and literary discourses as regards the representation of family relations. Does the fact that we live in a psychologised culture imply an automatic dominance of the psychological discourse over the literary one, so that literary scholars should concentrate on tracing psychological “influences” in texts of fiction? Does literature function as a sort of counterculture to a dominant scientific discourse? Or does fiction perhaps, by subterranean routes, have a greater cultural impact than would be thought in the first instance, so that a search for literary “influences” in psychological treatises would be equally justifiable? In regard to the heterogeneity of both discourses, there is not much point in looking for general answers to these questions. The psychological expertise disseminated through a vast gamut of media is not a stable, monolithic system of methods and perspectives. Parents are confronted with a great mass of divergent, mutually conflicting pieces of advice in the field of childrearing, both in the course of time and during a certain period. Psychological expertise varies both synchronically and diachronically, as does fiction. It is preferable, then, to investigate the interactions between psychology and literature case by case.

The present article analyses the relationship between psychological and literary representations of family relations in two family novels by Renate Dorrestein: *Unnatural Mothers*¹ and *A Heart of Stone*². We concentrate on a problem common to various literary and psychological representations of family relations: the frequently noticed paucity of representations showing mothers as subjects of desire, imagination, language and agency. Marianne Hirsch in her *The Mother/Daughter Plot*³ has extensively analysed this imagination deficit with a focus on nineteenth- and twentieth-century *Bildungsromane* written by women. According to Hirsch, Victorian novels usually depict motherless heroines. Indeed, the absence of the mother almost seems to be the key to the young heroine's success. If mothers occur at all in the stories by the Brontës, Mary Shelley, George Eliot, Elisabeth Gaskell or Elisabeth Barrett Browning, they are merely obstacles on the daughter's path to self-realisation. A good mother is first and foremost a dead mother, or so it seems. In the modernist works of Virginia Woolf, Colette and Edith Wharton the mother comes to the fore more prominently, but she still represents the obstacle which obstructs the process by which the heroine develops into an individual who acts, thinks and speaks independently. In the postmodernist novels by Margaret Atwood, Marguerite Duras and Christa Wolf, the exploration of the pre-oedipal bond between mother and daughter is alleged to occupy a prominent position, but through her very imprisonment in the pre-oedipal stage, here, too, Hirsch's program for the representation of the mother as subject remains unrealised.

Hirsch demands artefacts depicting mothers as speaking and acting subjects. As long as mothers remain objects of exploration rather than social, psychological and linguistic subjects, the enchantment of traditional images of women cannot be broken.⁴

The position of mothers as subjects in psychological “how-to” literature is questionable as well, as may be argued from Nikolas Rose’s description of psychological expertise as “a particular kind of social authority, characteristically deployed around problems, exercising a certain diagnostic gaze, grounded in a claim to truth, asserting technical efficacy, and avowing humane ethical virtues.”⁵ The final part of this definition is especially relevant to the questions raised in the present article. According to Rose, psychological expertise takes its great persuasive power from its ethical appeal to the values of autonomy and self-realisation so pivotal to modern liberal democracies. Psychological approaches to social practices guide the participants in those practices not so much by inciting them to subjugate their individuality to suprapersonal powers, laws or moral rules, but on the contrary by furnishing them with means of discovering their “true selves.” In other words, they are so greatly successful in inciting individuals to certain actions by dint of representing these actions as means to self-fulfilment. In the case of psychologically oriented childrearing advice, the next question then is whose subjectivity is central here. Do modern, scientific childrearing manuals only propagate the right of the child to personhood, or do experts also appeal to the mother’s desire for self-fulfilment, who functions as the primary recipient of childrearing advice up to this day? In the communication between experts and parents, there is a certain tension between children’s interests on the one hand and those of their primary caretakers (i.e. mothers) on the other.

The post-war childrearing expert *par excellence*, Benjamin Spock, developed an effective strategy for circumventing this tension. His work is characterized by a certain pedagogic morality which at an early date was aptly described as “fun morality.”⁶ Developmental psychologist Elly Singer has summed up this morality as follows: “Everything has to be fun; what is fun is good and what is fun to the child is fun to the mother.”⁷ If only mothers act out whatever occurs to them spontaneously and do not overly mind all sorts of prescriptions and rules (which regulations the author, incidentally, dwells on book-length), all will be well, Dr. Spock emphasizes again and again. One of Dr. Spock’s most influential followers, Penelope Leach, takes this notion even further in the introduction to her *Baby and Child*.⁸ Her approach to the mother-child relationship implicitly presupposes that mothers possess no autonomous ambitions, aspirations and wishes of their own. The desires of mothers and children coincide, hence a potential conflict between “child-centeredness” and “mother-centeredness” is out of the question. This fun morality is even now part

and parcel of the staple representations of childrearing practice and to a high degree dominates glossies on upbringing, if only because it is so convenient for advertising to tie in with this approach. Childrearing means enjoyment, the advertising message goes, and this enjoyment is further enhanced if you buy your child beautiful clothes, design nursery, an ample supply of toys, and so on.

Literary and psychological representations of the mother-child relationship, then, share a specific curtailment of the imagination. According to Hirsch, mothers' autonomous aspirations, if any, are hardly brought up in modern Western *Bildungsromane*, since the mother is only depicted as the object of the growing child's desires. According to the post-war childrearing morality embraced by Spock c.s., such autonomous aspirations do not exist at all. The desires of mothers and children completely tie in with one another by nature, and mothers, with a little help of their experts, are able to find the way back to their natural promptings and impulses. If they obey these, all will be well.

It is our concern to investigate Dorrestein's relation to current cultural representations of mothers and motherhood in *Unnatural Mothers* and *A Heart of Stone*. It is our hypothesis that in these novels Dorrestein turns enlightened, psychologising childrearing literature into the target of her hyperbolic, black fantasy. She openly puts her readers on the track of such an interpretation by, for instance, dropping Dr. Spock's name in *Unnatural Mothers* and by having independently-minded, consciously childless (sic) mother and ambitious scientist Bonnie refer continually and tauntingly to dominant idealized conceptions of the mother-child relationship. These explicit attacks, however, are insignificant pinpricks compared to the way in which Dorrestein mobilizes the literary conventions of the Gothic novel in order to torpedo the roseate idyll of fun morality.⁹

The Gothic Dwelling

I stem from a long and rich tradition of women who wrote so as not to get suffocated by their revolt and who were clever enough to situate the ineffable outside official reality. I share these authors' predilection for caves, castles, and other isolated spots where evil will irrevocably take its course; I am referring to the authors of those diabolic tales which we call Gothic literature.¹⁰

The Gothic novel originated in the course of the eighteenth century and is generally regarded as a revolt of the imagination against the all-embracing rationalism of the Enlightenment. It might also be said that the rejection of the belief in supernatural powers and the abolition of the feudal system and of other mediaeval residuals gave rise to a desire for that very past, dark as it might have been. This desire for what is repressed or forgotten by the dominant culture

takes shape in the Gothic novel. The Gothic in literature always constitutes transgression or excess in one form or another.

In the nineteenth century, there developed a sub-genre within the tradition of Gothic writing, which has been characterized as “homely Gothic.”¹¹ The dominant setting in this type of Gothic is a remote castle or mansion. This locus, which should mark a safe boundary between the inner and the outer world, in homely Gothic does not offer the desired protection. Gothic houses and castles are invariably labyrinthine buildings with all sorts of unsuspected passages and hidden rooms tending towards a state of dilapidation. The dilapidated castle brings to mind a mediaeval, feudal past associated with barbarism, superstition and fear. The house is made uncanny in the Gothic novel in that the fantastic, the magical and the unheard-of insinuate themselves into everyday reality, thus disturbing the established order. The labyrinthine or dilapidated setting suggests disaster and violence because the familiar becomes strange and the strange familiar. Things here are not what they seem, which evokes fear and horror.

It is understandable that an author such as Renate Dorrestein, who has repeatedly mentioned her fascination for the skeleton which is to be found in every cupboard, considers the Gothic novel to be an apt vehicle for trespassing on the boundaries of culturally accepted representations of the family. Thus, the ambivalence of the Gothic dwelling as both refuge and prison, haven and hell, is exploited at great length in Gert Balm’s pharmacy in *Unnatural Mothers* and in the old and remote Van Bommel family villa in *A Heart of Stone*. In the latter novel, the main character, Ellen van Bommel, is tied to her home and even to her bed by an impending miscarriage. She passes the time looking through her childhood photographs, which activate a spate of memories. Both the main character’s childhood memories, to be revealed with the help of the photographs, and the story in which these memories are framed are given the same setting. Significantly, Ellen finds herself in her parental home, which she has bought back from the previous owners. As becomes clear in the course of the novel, she is at the place of the crime with family photo album. The house in *A Heart of Stone* is a typical example of the familiar becoming increasingly strange and frightening. At first, the house embodies a warmth and safety which are no less than idyllic. The house is a complete, self-contained world. The caretakers of this haven, Father and Mother Van Bommel, have no need to leave this house to make a living, for they support their family by means of the Van Bommel Clipping Agency, which clips all messages pertaining to the United States and neatly stores them in folders which may then be ordered against payment by anyone interested. “In short, we had it all, right at our home.”¹² The chaos of the outer world, then, through the Americana reaches as far as the Van Bommel home, but at the gate is transformed by the parents into the paradisiacal harmony of a well-ordered archive allotting its own place to each and every

news item. The subject in which the clipping agency specializes, moreover, carries highly optimistic, cheerful connotations. After all, the United States constituted a shining example to the Netherlands in post-war reconstruction days, the period in which the eldest Van Bommel sibling was born. The US stood for the realisation of progress by means of common sense, a cheerful temper and the right entrepreneurial spirit.

The clippings archive functions as a metaphor for family life in the Van Bommel home, which, like the clipping files, assigns to everybody and to everything their own safe place. The children sleep together in the attic; the clipping agency takes up the two storeys in the middle, together with a side room on the second floor as a look-out for the janitor; the conservatory is the place for the tea light round which the family gather regularly for communal drinks; while the nerve centre of the house, the kitchen, is in the basement. To young Ellen, this place stands for ultimate safety: “As a child it gave me a sense of being protected, sitting half-way under the ground. It was like this that I pictured life in the belly of some big, friendly animal.”¹³ The subterranean kitchen, where family life is being reproduced time and again, clearly forms the spatial equivalent to the womb.

But even in the paradisiacal cosmos of the Van Bommel residence there is a spanner in the works, making itself felt right from the beginning. It bodes ill that the two eldest children feel ousted from this paradise by their mother’s fifth pregnancy, as the reader is given to understand through Ellen’s first memory of her childhood. The eldest sister, Billy (Sybil), seeks refuge in the dank cellar below the kitchen, while her brother, Kester, hides in a tree hut in the garden. In addition, it should cause suspicion that the villa’s interior, conveniently visible though it may seem, is yet not completely open to the eye. Until the very end it remains unclear where the master bedroom (which is also the place where that ominous infant, Ida, sleeps) is located. The Van Bommel parents every morning materialize as though from a void, while the mother gives off a disquieting scent betraying her ebullient sexuality. The black spot from which destruction is to be wreaked upon the entire family evidently apparently cannot be identified on any floor plan. Finally, closer inspection reveals that all is not as it should be with the archive itself. True, the clipping agency is the central factor creating order in the house, but at the same time the archive subverts this self-created order in spreading uncontrollably all throughout the house. Officially, the office is to occupy the two middle storeys of the house, but Ellen reports that the grey filing cases are everywhere, even in the conservatory, while heaps of as yet uncategorized clippings invade all the storeys. As the family’s disintegration increases, the archive dissolves from cosmos into chaos:

I saw the clippings jut out disorderly from their cardboard folders, as if the U.S.

of A.'s entire chaos would fight a way out for itself as soon as my father's grip relaxed even further: serial killers, 42nd Street hookers, corrupt policemen, alcoholics sleeping rough, what have you. "Do keep the folders closed carefully," I said anxiously.¹⁴

In addition, it can hardly be a coincidence that Mrs Van Bommel displays all her fits of madness in the place which functions as a metaphor for her body, the kitchen, where she finally puts her children to death. Ellen and her brother Carlos are survivors from this domestic drama, and according to Ellen's final childhood memory, they withdraw to the basement, which had been her sister's refuge in the first chapter, thus making the story come full circle.

In *Unnatural Mothers*, too, the poetics of space is the most important aspect of the main ingredient to the book. To all intents and purposes, the various characters' biographies are given by their bearings in space. Some characters travel, fly and enjoy the vistas of wide open spaces and of steep mountainsides, whereas others are tied to their homes and can only look inward. Only one character manages to stay on the road to the very end, and that is Bonnie, who does not possess a home. Action is set going when the two main characters, Mr. Zwier and his eleven-year-old daughter, Maryemma, come flying in from Nairobi, subsequently to descend like fallen angels in an inconsequential village in the Dutch region of Twente, where they are to be ensnared by the oppressive atmosphere of home. After the two characters' arrival, the action unfolds over the Christmas season in a pharmacy owned by a man called Gert Balm, a typically Gothic setting charged with multitudinous levels of meaning. This place has an open and a hidden side. At the front of the drugstore is the shop window, which stands both literally and metaphorically for modernity and enlightenment. The merchandise displayed is clearly visible, thanks to the festive lighting, and all the products serve the typically modern endeavour to control our domestic environment as well as our physical embodiment. The shop window is full of polishing stuff, quick-dissolving tablets, cosmetics, slimming products, tooth pastes, shampoos and so on; in short, of all that might possibly help us to counteract the soiling, dissolution and putrefaction of the home and of the body. The fact that this illumination may come undone through the tiniest of agents is immediately made clear from an incident related casually at the beginning of the novel:

Somewhere in that darkness, three weeks ago on a somber December evening, all the fuses had blown when the Sibculo Merchants association turned on their Christmas lights for the first time. Night had descended with a bang over the entire village. In every house, children had screamed in terror. Grouped together in their homes, the villagers almost felt like prehistoric cave dwellers.¹⁵

The pharmacy's layout, too, gives away that modern enlightenment is hardly equal to prehistoric darkness. If you proceed to the back of the shop, you find yourself in a stifling, gloomy residential part. Here Balm's wife, Meijken, a formidably fat woman weighing 250 kilograms, holds sway. Overweight as she is, she is hardly able to move, and no longer leaves the house. Meijken is portrayed in terms of the subhuman and the pre-modern. Seated in her chair, she is in the habit of surrendering to the slumber befitting the semi-darkness of her living-room, "like a hippopotamus in a pool of mud"¹⁶ and her body, protruding as if in a permanent state of pregnancy, reminds one of a prehistoric fertility goddess. The drugstore hides Meijken, as Meijken herself with her walls of fat is the hiding-place for the family's secret. As was the case in the Van Bommel villa, everybody in the pharmacy has his or her proper place. Gert guards the front, regularly descending into the basement during closing hours, where he works on a mysterious project. Occasionally Meijken climbs the stairs to the attic with great effort, for the rest of the time staying in the back of the house, all but completely shut off from the outside world. It later turns out that Gert has rigged up a doll's house, as a surprise for his eleven-year-old niece, Maryemma. The doll's house functions as a miniature version of the other residential locations in this novel, replete with all the ambivalences and contradictions germane to a house in the Gothic novel. The doll's house is a perfect replica of the dream houses presented to us by the ads in women's magazines. The father, the mother and the child together form a harmonious unit. They are in each other's proximity and their facial features mirror one another. In addition, the design of the rooms leaves nothing to be desired. Everything, in a manner of speaking, is exactly as it should be.

As Gert Balm proudly shows his work to his wife, he adds that the doors and windows may be opened and that the entire house can be lit, suggesting a sort of openness. This effect, however, is lost on Meijken. The somewhat forced homely idyll is too similar to her own prison. Nor does the lighting, intended to express that the house has nothing to hide, have its desired effect on Meijken:

She sticks the plug into the outlet. Everywhere the lights switch on. Motionless, as if startled, the doll family sits on the sofa: father, mother, child. Who is doing this to us? Who is making us visible to the outside world? We were just fine in the dark! Is our dirty wash safely inside? They don't have to know everything about us!¹⁷

As Meijken looks at the doll's house in horror, Maryemma, for whom the house was intended in the first place, resorts to a holiday cabin, the only residence her father has been able to lay his hands on in the season's rush. The pathetic scene

of a single lit house in the midst of a completely deserted camping site makes for one more setting expressive of the fact that light is well-night powerless against the dark, the message of Christmas notwithstanding. The tiny snugness of the holiday cabin is strongly reminiscent of Gert Balm's stifling doll's house, and this is in complete agreement with the fact that it is at this place that Maryemma (as we will see later) decides to forego her independent self, eventually to take her place in the repetitive pattern of "giving birth and giving care, giving birth and giving care," which since the original mother, Lucy, appears to have sealed women's fate. It is not without its significance, then, that the name of the holiday cottage is "Sleeping Beauty."

The effect engendered by the numerous mirror-images of spaces as well as events (the so-called *mise-en-abyme*, or Chinese boxes) in *Unnatural Mothers* and *A Heart of Stone* is quite uncanny. The many doublings express the impossibility of escape once one has entered the magic circle of the home; one is confronted by an endless repetition of the self-same, anywhere. The pharmacy, the doll's house and Sleeping Beauty are each other's mirror-images. Women everywhere are getting tied to their homes because of their role as mothers. Contrary to modern belief in progress, Gothic tales show how history repeats itself because the sins of the fathers are visited on the children. One act of revenge engenders another. The spirits of the dead return to haunt the living. Character faults in all their completeness are transferred to the next generation, who in turn succumb to these flaws. All of these elements are to be found in Dorrestein's novels, but with a difference. Here it is not the sins of the fathers but the degeneration of the mothers, which is visited on the children.

The Mother as Subject, Object, and Object

I have a leaning towards the fantastic, the horrible, the violent, and a fascination for brooding atmospheres, psychological imbalance and so-called delusions.¹⁸

Our summary reconnaissance of the function of the house in *Unnatural Mothers* and *A Heart of Stone* has shown that the Gothic scenery not only symbolizes the threat of disaster and violence, but that it is also an embodiment of the power structure generating the action. Generally speaking, some form of a sadomasochistic master-slave relationship is nearly always central in homely Gothic. That is to say that in the world of the Gothic, the protagonists are involved in the interactions between those who exercise power or mete out suffering and those who subject themselves to this power or are the recipients of that suffering. The Gothic house as setting is the condition, not to say the accomplice of maintaining this imbalance of power. Thus, not only is the house the (uncanny) setting, it is also the necessary pre-condition to unleashing the

action.

In *Unnatural Mothers* and *A Heart of Stone*, the conflict of power is almost entirely restricted to parents and children, particularly mothers and daughters. The mothers in *A Heart of Stone* and *Unnatural Mothers* seem to break away from Benjamin Spock's and Penelope Leach's comforting words on all counts. In both these novels, the mother needs to serve a higher interest than her child's. Both books, therefore, revolve round the intrinsic incompatibility of the desires of mothers and children. "Trust yourself: you know more than you think," runs the famous opening sentence of Dr. Spock's *Common Sense Book of Baby and Child Care*, but on reading Dorrestein's novels one gets the impression that mothers had better not overly rely on their intuitions.

In *A Heart of Stone*, bed-ridden Ellen prepares for motherhood by bringing to light the horrible events of her childhood. After the mother has given birth to the youngest child, Ida, her downfall, and as a result her family's downfall, sets in. In Ellen's reconstruction, the idea had struck root in her mother's head that Ida was impure and guilty, imbued with an ancient heritage of diabolic evil. The mother then has to exorcize this evil and she does so with abandon. Like a modern-day Medea, the mother increasingly conforms to the abject role of the murderess claiming to be a saviour. Initially it looks as if only Ida has to be sacrificed. The mother bathes her in water which is much too hot, presses an apple-corer into her infant pudenda and raises her knife in order to butcher her on the kitchen table. Then it occurs to her that sacrificing just Ida is not enough. Only when the entire family dies will they be safeguarded from the infernal flames and will the blessing that befalls martyrs be theirs. The father does not mediate in this maddening symbiosis between mother and daughter, but vainly tries to control the expanding archive, where the mother no longer makes an appearance. He only weakly remonstrates: "There is nothing wrong with Ida except your looming over her all day long like a broody hen."¹⁹ For all this, the father is afraid of the wrath and of the (sexual) rejection on the mother's part. He fears this rejection to such an extent that he, too, takes the vitamin pills which his spouse gives them on that fateful evening, thus allowing himself to be killed together with his children by the mother.

The daughter Ellen miraculously escapes because her mother in the zeal of her ritual murder has forgotten about her existence. She is walking the dog at that moment. In Ellen's case, to be forgotten by the devouring mother is to be saved. Eventually Ellen gets rid of the other tormentors from her youth as well—for Billy and Kester have always accompanied her as alter egos—thus providing the book with a perspective to a happy ending. There is life after the murder. There is even *new* life after the murder. By ridding herself of the secret of her family history and therefore from the ghosts of her brother and sister, Ellen averts having to repeat her mother's fate. The sins of the mother shall not

be visited on yet another generation. At least, we may hope so. For the time being, that auspicious mother-daughter relationship remains an untold story.

It is a well-known fact that in writing *A Heart of Stone* Renate Dorrestein allowed herself to be inspired by a series of child murders which in 1997 shook the Dutch public, because these children were put to death by their own parents. In *Het Geheim van de Schrijver*²⁰ she tells us how she was captivated by an urge to solve the riddle of these child murders. The explicit explanation eventually presented by Dorrestein in *A Heart of Stone*, that the mother acted under the influence of an undiagnosed post-natal depression, has been called a somewhat insipid solution in the criticism, and it is true that it undermines a more subtle and disquieting interpretation, which moreover tallies better with what is being hinted at throughout the book by means of the countless signs referring to the disintegration of the house and therefore of the family, and that is the danger emanating from the mother's active sexuality. This active sexual position goes against received mother images and thus evokes feelings of guilt in Margje van Bommel. These feelings of guilt are then transferred on to the fruits of the sexuality: the children. Subsequently, these little creatures, usually objects of tenderness and the epitome of innocence, in Margje van Bommel's consciousness increasingly degenerate into monsters, in full accordance with Gothic narrative.

The French cultural critic Julia Kristeva in her essay *Powers of Horror* notes:

The writer fascinated by the abject, imagines its logic, projects himself into it, introjects it, and as a consequence perverts language-style and content. But on the other hand, as the sense of abjection is both the abject's judge and accomplice, this is also true of the literature that confronts it. One might thus say that with such a literature there takes place a crossing over of the dichotomous categories of Pure and Impure, Prohibition and Sin, Morality and Immorality.²¹

The abject, in other words, is the uncanny to a superlative degree. If the uncanny can be understood in terms of the return of the repressed, in terms of alienating that which is familiar, the abject is related to taboo, to the unrepresentable. Dorrestein's novel, then, would have been consistently disturbing and fundamentally critical of the culture, had she not tried to domesticate this horror by supplying the story with a psychologising, hence individualizing explanation, leaving many readers with a justified feeling of being somehow cheated of the full version. In virtue of the symbolism of order and chaos built up throughout the book, then, it is more plausible for the abject in the text to be understood as the effect of how a culture is organized, as the horrible derailment of mothers who are unable to conform to the one-

dimensional pattern of “giving birth and giving care, giving birth and giving care.” The mother-daughter stories in *Unnatural Mothers* seem less horrible at first sight, but in fact they are even crueller in that the prospect of a way out is definitely absent here. In *Unnatural Mothers*, too, mothers and daughters are out to take each other’s lives. On a narrative level this means that we never come across the various mothers-and-daughter couples in the same space. The few instances when this does happen, as when Meijken wriggles her way out of the back part of the house and visits her tyrannical mother in the nursing home in order to finally obtain the comfort which she holds herself entitled to, are at once fatal: Meijken crushes the fragile old woman under her weight in a liberating apotheosis of a stifling mother-daughter symbiosis that is indeed breathtaking in the full sense of the word. Bonnie and Maryemma, Meijken and Mother, Bonnie and Mother, they only communicate over the telephone.

In *Unnatural Mothers*, too, we witness events from the point of view of a girl on the brink of physical adulthood. And here, too, this girl has to undergo a cruel rite of passage. One fateful day, Maryemma’s mother, Bonnie, had absconded. In order to allow herself full scope as a biologist, she had left the child in the care of the father, and since that time her contacts with her two relatives have been scant. Just like Ellen, in the best Gothic tradition, is accompanied by the ghosts of Billy and Kester, Maryemma has invented Victor Hugo, an imaginary playmate who receives the care and attention she herself has to do without. Maryemma, however, sacrifices her self-created Victor Hugo to her love for Zwier, once she to her intense alarm surmises that he thinks that one day she will repeat Bonnie’s behaviour—that, she, Maryemma, is also the sort of person who abandons others without further ado. In order to prove that her father can count on her she sends Victor Hugo, her creation, back to where he came from, launching him into outer space forever. In light of the enormous symbolic value assigned in *Unnatural Mothers* to flying in free space versus confinement in a house, this sacrifice is an act of great significance. In Maryemma’s case, too, the transition of girl to woman is marked by the loss of wings and deliverance to the laws of a culture which does not allow her to invent her own story.

The mother-daughter stories both in *Unnatural Mothers* and in *A Heart of Stone* are characterized by the motif that the daughter only survives and in virtue of her escape from the mother-daughter symbiosis. Here, then, we have a variation to the pattern of the mother as obstacle as found in the nineteenth-century *Bildungsroman*, which is at odds with the natural harmony of the aspirations of mothers and children implied by enlightened ideals of childrearing. In *A Heart of Stone*, the mother as a subject of sexual desire is her family’s undoing. In *Unnatural Mothers*, little Maryemma is obliged to relinquish her position as a subject of imagination in order to gain a perspective

of an ensured existence. Bonnie, the only person not to conform to gender-specific societal rules, has to give up on her child because of her intellectual ambitions, and Meijken, who because of her mother has been unable to retain any desire, is the prisoner of her own body, even if that very body has liberated her from the ties with her mother.

In Dorrestein's hyperbolic poetic universe, motherhood is by definition monstrous, for women may only choose between two options, which both lead to perversion. The first option is for women to conform to the symbolic castration which appears to constitute a necessary introduction to motherhood. This deprivation, however, generates such frustration that it will eventually break out in violence, as witness Meijken, who evens the score with her mother, and as witness, perhaps, in the long run Maryemma, who surrenders her lively imagination and willingly nods off until the prince on his white horse will kiss her awake. The second option is for women *not* to conform but to retain their subjectivity, as does Ellen's mother. In that case, consequences are no less horrible or violent. Thus, in Dorrestein's universe there is no way out: motherhood leads to perversion in any case. Therefore, the title *Unnatural Mothers* is a pleonasm.

Gothic Psychoanalysis

Dorrestein's Gothic tales are starkly opposed to the fun morality of modern childrearing manuals. Where Spock and Leach suppose that the child's happiness is implied in the mother's and vice versa, Dorrestein paints a jet-black picture in which mothers and children cannot co-exist at all. In keeping with this, the Gothic return of the repressed, of the culturally suppressed and/or the forgotten which is brought to the surface in Dorrestein's narratives is the abject mother, the mother not thinking or acting in the child's interest, but entertaining her own unmediated and unfathomable desires, urges and wishes. However, it would be too simple a view to claim that Dorrestein's novels are diametrically opposed to psychologising representations of family relations. The pluriformity of present-day psychology makes it possible for one psychological viewpoint to be refuted as another is endorsed. Dorrestein's novels scratch away the layer of varnish applied by Dr. Spock to Freud's work. If Dorrestein sides against a certain psychologising morality of childrearing, her representation of motherhood is completely in line with classic psychoanalysis. Yet this does not mean that she has been "influenced" by psychoanalysis. Psychoanalytical perspectives are, as it were, built into the conventions of the literary genre which Dorrestein questions. Both the Gothic novel and psychoanalysis have explicitly queried the primacy of reason and the malleability of the individual, those important props of enlightened pedagogic ideals. The literary, however,

does not so much owe a debt to science here; from a historical perspective, it is rather the converse which holds true. The major role played by literature in developing fundamental concepts of psychoanalysis has been frequently pointed out. Less attention, however, has been devoted to the specific inspiration which the genre of the Gothic novel lent to Freud's thinking. Within this context, for instance, it may be pointed out that Freud elaborated on his understanding of the uncanny in an essay on E.T.A. Hoffmann's *The Sand Man*, a classic of the German-language Gothic novel or *Schauerroman*. In this essay, Freud relates the fictionally-evoked fear of dark spaces, of blurred distinctions between reality and fantasy and of the return of the same in the motif of the double, to the evocation of repressed, primitive and unrepresentable wishes and fears from childhood. In addition, the inspiration provided by the Gothic novel throws new light on Freud's frequent use of the metaphor of the house to explain the working of the psyche. One of his most often paraphrased pronouncements is the proposition that man is not master in his own house, but is motivated by forces and motives which lie in hiding in basements and attics and may rear their heads suddenly and at inconvenient moments. These daemons, the inhabitants of the basements and attics of the mind, are created in the course of all people's lives under the influence of the repressive processes concomitant with one's conforming and adapting to the norms and values of one's culture.²²

Although we have attempted to unravel Dorrestein's literary and scientific affinities and antagonisms as precisely as possible, when all is said and done it remains a moot point how to interpret her hyperbolic and excessive representations of motherhood. Does Dorrestein criticize a patriarchal culture offering women no scope whatsoever in their qualities of mothers, or does she reproduce mythical, discriminatory stereotypes in her images of abject mothers? A similar question has been raised time and again with respect to psychoanalysis. Does psychoanalysis subversively expose the mechanisms of a patriarchal bourgeois culture or does it rather reinforce these mechanisms?²³ Her reputation of an out-and-out feminist notwithstanding, Dorrestein comes to share in this ambivalence of psychoanalysis. If we are to follow Marianne Hirsch, traditional notions regarding women will not lose their sway before our cultural incapacity to represent maternal subjectivity is reduced. This, however, is not to be obtained from Dorrestein. Insofar as there is a ray of hope in *Unnatural Mothers* or *A Heart of Stone*, this hope must be focused on the daughters, the Ellens and the Maryemmas. Their perspective of agency, however, is one-dimensional. The choice is either for motherhood or for self-realization. Dorrestein does not grant her fictional mothers a pluriform identity. For them all hope is lost. They are either separated from their children or they have died. It is indeed a high price to pay for female agency.

Notes

- ¹ Renate Dorrestein, *Ontaarde Moeders* (Amsterdam: Uitgeverij Contact, 1992). Translated as *Unnatural Mothers*. Seattle: Women in Translation, 1994).
- ² Renate Dorrestein, *Een Hart van Steen* (Amsterdam: Uitgeverij Contact, 1998). Translated as *A Heart of Stone*. New York: Penguin Books, 2002).
- ³ Marianne Hirsch, *The Mother/Daughter Plot: Narrative, Psychoanalysis, Feminism* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1989).
- ⁴ Cf. Rosemarie Buikema, *De Loden Venus: Biografieën van Vijf Beroemde Vrouwen door hun Dochters* (Kampen: Kok Agora, 1995); Elisabeth Wesseling, "Alice Millers Verlangen naar het Ware Zelf: Over de Narratieve Identiteit van Moeders en Kinderen," *K&M: Tijdschrift voor Empirische Filosofie* XXII/4 (1998): 394-417.
- ⁵ Nikolas Rose, "Engineering the Human Soul: Analyzing Psychological Expertise," *Science in Context* 5/2 (1992): 356.
- ⁶ Martha Wolfenstein, "The Emergence of Fun Morality," *Journal of Social Issues* 7 (1951): 15-25.
- ⁷ Elly Singer, *Kinderopvang en de Moeder-Kindrelatie: Pedagogen, Psychologen en Sociale Hervormers over Moeders en Jonge Kinderen* (Deventer: Van Loghum Slaterus, 1989), 189.
- ⁸ Penelope Leach, *Baby en Kind: Het Complete Praktische Handboek voor de Verzorging van uw Kind* (Utrecht: Kosmos, 1990).
- ⁹ We are not the first investigators to place Dorrestein's work in this context. In addition to Dorrestein's placing herself emphatically in the Gothic novel tradition, Dutch novelist Hella Haasse, in an article in the periodical *Bzzlletin* entitled "Bij de 'Gothieke Vertelsels' van Renate Dorrestein" ["On Renate Dorrestein's 'Gothic Tales'"] (1989), has demonstrated this literary cognateness. Haasse, however, does not go on to explain what it means to apply the "Gothic" label to Dorrestein. See also Rosemarie Buikema, "Monsterlijke Liefdes: De Gothic Novel in het Werk van Helga Ruebsamen," *Bzzlletin* 224 (1995): 46-54.
- ¹⁰ Renate Dorrestein, "Daar valt weer iemand, maar mijn pen geeft haar nog net op tijd vleugels," *De Tijd* (20.11.1987): 53.
- ¹¹ Fred Botting, *Gothic* (London: Routledge, 1996), 113.
- ¹² Dorrestein, *A Heart of Stone*, 30.
- ¹³ Dorrestein, *A Heart of Stone*, 44.
- ¹⁴ Dorrestein, *A Heart of Stone*, 134.
- ¹⁵ Dorrestein, *Unnatural Mothers*, 32.
- ¹⁶ Dorrestein, *Unnatural Mothers*, 34.
- ¹⁷ Dorrestein, *Unnatural Mothers*, 147.
- ¹⁸ Dorrestein, "Daar valt weer iemand," 53.
- ¹⁹ Dorrestein, *A Heart of Stone*, 126.
- ²⁰ Renate Dorrestein, *Het Geheim van de Schrijver* (Amsterdam: Uitgeverij Contact, 2000).
- ²¹ Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (New York: Columbia

University Press, 1982), 16.

²² Cf. Anne Williams, *Art of Darkness: a Poetics of Gothic* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995).

²³ Cf. Elisabeth Wesseling, "Mythische Moeders," review of A. Stufkens, ed., *Monsters en Godinnen: Over Moeders. Psychologie & Maatschappij* 88 (1999): 305-308.