

**M/C Journal, Vol. 17, No. 4 (2014) - 'gothic'****What's Hidden in Gravity Falls: Strange Creatures and the Gothic Intertext**<http://journal.media-culture.org.au/index.php/mcjournal/article/view/859>

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Discussing the interaction between representation and narrative structures, Anthony Mandal argues that the Gothic has always been "an intrinsically intertextual genre" (Mandal 350). From its inception, the intertextuality of the Gothic has taken many and varied incarnations, from simple references and allusions between texts—dates, locations, characters, and "creatures"—to intricate and evocative uses of style and plot organisation. And even though it would be unwise to reduce the Gothic "text" to a simple master narrative, one cannot deny that, in the midst of re-elaborations and re-interpretations, interconnections and interpolations also appear, a collective gathering of ideas and writing practices that construct what is known as "the Gothic intertext" (Mishra 235). As far as storytelling, characterisation, and symbolism are concerned, the Gothic finds strength in its ability to develop as well as negate expectation, re-moulding the culturally known and the aesthetically acceptable in order to present its audience with a multi-faceted and multi-layered narrative.

Although the Gothic has traditionally found fertile ground in literary works—a connection that is now a legacy as much as an origin—other contemporary media, such as animation, have offered the Gothic a privileged chance for growth and adaptation. An evocative example of the mergence between the Gothic mode and the animated medium is Alex Hirsch's *Gravity Falls*. This visual text provides an example of the reach of the Gothic within popular culture, where intersecting hideous creatures and interconnected narrative structures, although simple and "for children" on the surface, reveal the presence of a dense and intertextual Gothic network. Those interlacings are, of course, never disconnected from the wider cultural framework, and clearly occupy an important part in unravelling the insidious aspects of human nature, from the difficulties of finding "oneself" to the loneliness of the everyday.

*Gravity Falls* is an animated television series created by Alex Hirsch. It premiered on the Disney Channel in the United States on 15 June 2012. Now scheduled for its second season of running, *Gravity Falls* follows the adventures of 12-year-old twin siblings Dipper and Mabel Pines while on their summer vacation in the small town of Gravity Falls, Oregon. The choice of "twins" as main characters reveals, even at such an embryonic level, a connection to Gothicised structures, as the mode itself, as Vijay Mishra suggests, finds an affinity with doublings and "specular identifications" that "confuse the norm" (63). The presence of twins makes the double nature of character, traditionally a metaphorical and implicit idea in the Gothic, a very obvious and explicit one. Dipper and Mabel are staying with their eccentric and money-grabbing Great Uncle Stan—often referred to as "Grunkle Stan"—who runs the local curiosity shop known as the Mystery Shack. It becomes very obvious from the very beginning that an air of mystery truly surrounds the Shack, which quickly lives up to its name, and the eponymous town. In an aptly Gothic manner, things are definitely not what they seem and the twins are caught in odd plots, eerily occurrences, and haunted/haunting experiences on a daily basis. The instigator for the twins' interest in the odd manifestations is the finding of a mysterious journal, a manual the relays detailed descriptions of the creatures that inhabit the forest in the town of Gravity Falls. The author of the journal remains unknown, and is commonly known only as "3", an unexplained number that marks the cover of the book itself.

Although the connection between the Gothic and animation may be obscure, it is in fact possible to identify many common and intersecting elements—aesthetically, narratively, and conceptually—that highlight the two as being intrinsically connected. The successful relation that the Gothic holds with animation is based in the mode's fundamental predilection for not only subversion, excess and the exploration of the realm of the "imagination", but also humour and self-reflexivity. These aspects are shared with animation which, as a medium, is ideally placed for exploring and presenting the imaginative and the bizarre, while pushing the boundaries of the known and the proper. Julia Round suggests that the Gothic "has long been identified as containing a dual sense of play and fear" (7). The playfulness and destabilisation that are proper to the mode find a fertile territory in animation in view of not only its many genres, but also its style and usually sensational subject matter. This discourse becomes particularly relevant if one takes into consideration matters of audienceship, or, at least, receivership. Although not historically intended for younger viewers, the animation has evolved into a profoundly children-orientated medium. From cinema to television, animated features and series are the domain of children of various ages. Big production houses such as Disney and Warner Bros have capitalised on the potential of the medium, and established its place in broadcasting slots for young viewers.

Not unlike comics—which is, in a way, its ancestral medium—animation is such a malleable and contextual form that it requires a far-reaching and inclusive approach, one that is often interdisciplinary in scope; within this, where the multi-faceted nature of the Gothic opens up the way for seeing animated narratives as the highly socio-historical mediums they are. And not unlike comics, animation shares a common ground with the Gothic in requiring a vast scope of analysis, one that is intrinsically based on the conceptual connections between "texts". Round has also aptly argued that, like comics, animated series lend themselves to malleable and mouldable re-elaboration: "from the cultural to the aesthetic, the structural to the thematic", graphic media always reflect the impact of "intertextual and historical references" (8). Animation's ability to convey, connect, and revolutionise ideas is, therefore, well-matched to the aesthetic and conceptual idiosyncrasies of Gothic tropes.

Dipper and Mabel's vacation in the town of Gravity Falls is characterised by the appearance of numerous super- and preter-natural creatures. The list of "monsters" encountered by the twins is long and growing, from gnomes, goblins, mermaids and zombies, to ghosts, clones, and a wide and colourful variety of demons. And although, at first glance, this list would appear to be a simple and simplistic grouping of bizarre and creatively assembled creatures, it is made quickly apparent that these "monsters" are all inspired, often very directly, by "existing"—or, at least, well-known—Gothic creatures, and their respective contexts of development. Indeed, the links to the Gothic in contemporary popular culture are unavoidable. The creatures in *Gravity Falls* are presented with subtle

references to Gothic literature and cinema, from John Carpenter's *Halloween* (1978) and Joe Dante's *Gremlins* (1984), to Stephen King's *The Shining* (1977) and *Needful Things* (1991). Borrowing from these texts, the creatures in the series all have strange names that rely on play-on-words and re-inventions, and the rubric twists that they undertake are part of a system of both homage and conceptual interdependency. One can find, for instance, "Manotaurs"—creatures that are half-bull and half-man, and that value "manliness" in their society above all else—and the "Gremlobin" – a gigantic monster somewhere in between, we are told, a "gremlin" and a "goblin", whose eyes can show "your worst nightmares". But the range extends to other bizarre "creatures" that are clearly very spooky, such as the "Summerween Trickster"—a large, shadowy, purple/orange monster with a "jack-o'-melon" mask – the living "mailbox"—a sentient and omniscient object—and the truly haunting Bill Cipher—a mind demon that can be summoned through an incantation and enter a person's subconscious.

The connection to the Gothic in popular culture is instrumental for the construction of the Gothic intertext in *Gravity Falls*. In episode One, "Tourist Trapped" (1.01), Mabel is kidnapped by a tribe of gnomes, who are set on making her their queen. The gnomes are incongruous creatures: on the one hand, they are vengeful and spiteful, recalling the horror monsters found in movies such as the questionable *Blood Gnome* (2004). On the other, however, they wear red pointy hats and white beards, and their friendly smiles recall the harmless appearance of actual garden gnomes. When the gnomes grow upset, they throw up rainbows; this strange fact destroys their potential as a Gothic horror icon, and makes them accessible and amusing. This subversion of iconography takes place with a number of other "creatures" in *Gravity Falls*, with the Summerween Trickster—subverting the "terror" of Halloween—being another fitting example. When the gnomes are attempting to woo Mabel, they do not appear to her in their real form: they camouflage themselves into a teenage boy— one who is moody, brooding, and mysterious—and become Mabel's boyfriend; the "boy's" interest in her, however, is so intense, that Dipper suspects him to be a member of "The Undead", a category of monster that is closely described in 3's journal: due to their "pale skin" and "bad attitudes", they are often mistaken for "teenagers". Clues to Dipper's doubts include the teenage boy's hand "falling off" while he is hugging Mabel, a clear sign—it would seem—that the boy is obviously a decaying, zombie corpse. The intertextual connection to several horror visual narratives where limbs "fall off" the undead and the monstrous is clear here, with apt film examples being *Dawn of the Dead* (1978), *The Fly* (1986), horror comedy *Army of Darkness* (1992), and, more recently, television's *The Walking Dead* (2010?). The references to well-known horror films are scattered throughout the series, and comprise the majority of the lampooned cultural context in which the creatures appear.

In spite of Dipper's suspicions, the situation is revealed to have a rather different outcome. When the boyfriend tells Mabel he has a big secret to reveal, her mind wanders into another direction, choosing a different type of undead, as she expectantly thinks: "Please be a vampire...please be a vampire". It is not difficult to spot the conceptual connection here to narratives such as Stephenie Meyer's *Twilight* saga (2005-2008), both in its literary and cinematic variations, where brooding and mysterious teenage boys find ideal incarnations as the undead creature. The romanticised nature of teenage fictional narratives such as the *Twilight* saga is also mirrored in Mabel's distinctive love-centred interest in the potential vampire, revealing an intertextual and highly contextual association to seeing the creature as part of an amorous relationship, as opposed to a blood-thirsty murderer. Mabel's dreams of vampiric love are unfortunately shattered when the boyfriend is revealed to be several gnomes carefully assembled to operate a human-like body, rather than one immortal lover.

Irrespective of its desire to parody the Gothic, however, *Gravity Falls* still maintains unavoidable links to the notion of terror. Clear evidence of this is to be found in the fact that all "creatures" in the series present a level of anthropomorphism about them, and this is interpreted by the characters—and the viewers—as one of their scariest aspects. Leigh Blackmore suggests that a special brand of terror can be found in "anthropomorphic beings" that are in fact not human (Blackmore 95). Most of the creatures in the series are humanoid in shape, and can speak like humans. From gnomes to mermaids, mailboxes and demons, the creatures act as humans, but they are in fact something "other", something that only recalls the human itself. This idea of being "almost human", but "not quite", is disturbing in itself, and connects the presentation of the creatures to the Gothic via the notion of the uncanny: "a crisis of the natural, touching upon everything that one might have thought was 'part of nature' [...] human nature, the nature of reality and the world" (Royle 1). The uncanny nature of the creatures in *Gravity Falls* is maintained through their profound inhumanity, and their simultaneous links to human ways of acting, speaking, and even thinking. Indeed, most of the creatures are presented as petty, bitter, and childish, and often seen as greedy and sulking. In a way, the creatures lampoon some of the most intrinsic qualities of the human species, what separates us from animals. The supernatural creatures operate here as a critique of the humans themselves, exposing, as the Gothic often does, the most disturbing parts of humanity. The creatures are presented initially as scary, recalling—albeit very briefly— notions of terror and horror, but that façade is quickly destroyed as their "real nature" is exposed. They are de-terrorised by not only making them common, but also ridiculing their habits and de-constructing their thinly-veiled Gothic personas. The creatures in *Gravity Falls* are a subversion of the subversion, a re-thinking of the Gothic through parody that allows their conceptual, and culturally relevant, function to be rapidly exposed.

The impact of the Gothic intertext in *Gravity Falls* is not only visible in its representational forms—its monsters and "creatures"—but also extends to its structural organisation. Jerrold Hogle has argued that, although they maintain a heterogeneous construction of texts and contexts, there are certain qualities applicable to "Gothic texts": an antiquated space (often decaying); a concealed secret from the historical past; a physical or psychological haunting; and an oscillation between "reality" and the "supernatural" (3). Although Hogle's pinpointing of what he calls the "Gothic matrix" (3) is mainly focused on the literary world, a broader and more wide-reaching understanding of the Gothic text allows these qualities to be clearly identifiable in other narrative mediums, such as an animated series. Indeed, *Gravity Falls* presents the main elements of the "Gothic matrix": the Mystery Shack is an old and isolated place, physically crumbling and in constant state of disrepair; it is made clear that the Shack harbours many secrets ? filled as it is with hidden passageways and underground vaults ? connected to the shady past of Grunkle Stan and its unresolved connections to mysticism and magic; there are plenty of hauntings to be found in the series: from physical ones—in the form of demons and ghosts—to psychological ones, condensed in

Dipper and Mabel's difficulties with their approaching puberties and "growing up"; finally, the line between reality and supernatural is constantly challenged by the appearance of multiple creatures that are clearly not of this world, and even though several characters doubt their existence within the story, their very presence challenges the stability of the boundaries between real and unreal.

On the surface, the series is presented as a standard linear narrative, where the linear journey of each 20-minute episode culminates with the resolution of the main "haunting", and the usual destruction or appeasing of the "creature". And while the series' use of cliff-hangers is, in true television style, a common presence, they also expose and recall the unresolved nature of the narrative. Indeed, the story's structure in *Gravity Falls* is reliant on narrative undertellings and off-shoots that often lie underneath the logical "line" of the plot. Sub-plots reign supreme, and multiple motives for the characters' actions are introduced but not expanded upon, leaving the series impregnated with an aura of uncertainty and chaos. The focus of the storytelling is also denied; one moment, it appears to be Dipper's desire to discover the "secrets" of the forest; the other, it is Grunkle Stan's long-time battle with his arch-nemesis Gideon over the ownership of the Shack. This plot confusion in *Gravity Falls* continues to expose its narrative debt to the Gothic intertext, since "structural multiplicity", as Round suggests, is "a defining feature of the Gothic" (19). The series' narrative structure is based on numerous multiplicities, an open denial of linear journeys that is dependant, paradoxically, on the illusion of resolution.

The most evocative example of *Gravity Falls*' denial of clear-cut structures is arguably to be found in the narrative underlayers added by 3's monster manual. It is obvious from the beginning that 3's stay in the town of Gravity Falls was riddled with strange experiences, and that his sojourn intersected, at one point or the other, with the lives and secrets of Grunkle Stan and his enemies. It is also made clear that 3's journal is not a solitary presence in the narrative, but is in fact only one in a triad of mystical books—these books, it is suggested, have great power once put together, but the resolution to this mystery is yet to be revealed. As Grunkle Stan and Gideon fight (secretly) over the possession of the three books, it is openly suggested that several uncovered stories haunt the main narrative in the series and, unknown Dipper and Mabel, are responsible for many of the strange occurrences during their stay at the Shack. Jean-Jacques Lecercle has long argued that one of the defining characteristics of the Gothic, and its intertextual structure, is the presence of "embedded narratives" (72). In *Gravity Falls*, the use of 3's manual as not only an initiator of the plot, but also as a continuous performative link to the "haunted" past, uncovers the series' re-elaboration of the traditional structure of Gothic narratives.

As a paratextual presence in the story—one that is, however, often responsible for the development of the main narrative—3's manual draws attention to the importance of constructing layered stories in order to create the structures of terror, and subsequent horror, that are essential to the Gothic itself. Although it often provides Dipper with information for solving the mysteries of the Shack, and subduing the supernatural creatures that overtake it, 3's manual is, in reality, a very disruptive presence in the story. It creates confusion as it begins storytelling without concluding it, and opens the way to narrative pathways that are never fully explored. This is of course in keeping with the traditional narrative structures of the Gothic mode, where ancient books and stories—belonging to "antiquity"—are used as a catalyst for the present narrative to take place, but are also strangely displaced from it. This notion recalls Victor Sage's suggestion that, in Gothic narratives, ancient books and stories paradoxically "disrupt" the main narrative, starting a separate dialogue with a storytelling structure that is inevitably unexplored and left unanswered (86). Canonical examples such as Ann Radcliffe's *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794) and Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* (1847) inevitably come to mind here, but also more recent cinematic examples such as the *Evil Dead* franchise (1978?), where ancient books and old storytellers uncover hoary secrets that instigate, as well as obscure, the main narrative. In *Gravity Falls*, the interaction with 3's manual is inherently performative, and continuously intertextual, but it is also deeply confusing, adding to the feeling of strangeness and mystery that is the conceptual basis for the series itself.

The intertextual connections that drive the narrative in *Gravity Falls* construct lampooned versions of both the traditional concepts of Gothic horror and Gothic terror. Hogle has suggested that Gothic terror is apparent in the construction of suspense, achieved through an exploration of psychological hauntings, human nature and its un/limitations, and that which is kept out sight, the expected "hidden secrets" (3). Gothic horror, on the other hand, is characterised by the consequences of these occurrences; the physical manifestation of the "haunting", so to speak, is achieved through the presentation of something repulsive and horrific, the monstrous in its various incarnations (Hogle 3). In *Gravity Falls*, the connection to the traditional Gothic intertext is made clear through both elicitations of "terror", and subsequent manifestations of "horror". Indeed, the "hidden secrets" of the Shack, and to some extent, the fears and insecurities of the characters, are mediated through the appearance of horrific machinery and creatures. The Shack always conceals something hidden, a magical element of sort that is kept secret by intricate passageways. The shadowy nature of the building – evoking the psychological hauntings of Gothic terror – inevitably causes the appearance of something physically disturbing, finding its apogee in a Gothic horror experience.

A clear example of this can be found in the episode "Double Dipper" (1.07). Desperate to impress his co-worker and secret love-interest Wendy, and "haunted" by his lack of self-worth, Dipper roams the rooms of the Shack and discovers a very old and enchanted photocopier machine; the machine copies "people", making clones of the original. The "clones" themselves are a manifestation of horror, a presence that breaks the boundaries of propriety, and worries its viewers in view of its very existence. The cloning copy machine is strongly intertextual as it not only provides conceptual links to numerous cinematic and literary examples where a "haunted machine" threatens to destroy humanity—in examples such as Stephen King's *Christine* (1983)—but also evokes the threat of "doubles", another powerfully Gothic conduit (Royle). As it is often the case in *Gravity Falls*, Dipper loses control of the situation, and the dozens of clones he unwittingly created take over his life and threaten to annihilate him. Dipper must destroy the "horror"—the clones—and confront the "terror"—his haunting insecurities and personal secrets—in order to restore the original balance. This intertextual dynamic validates Hogle's contention that, in Gothic narratives, both the physical and the psychological "hauntings" rise from view "within the antiquated space" and "manifest unresolved conflicts that can no longer be successfully buried from view" (Hogle 2).

The "hidden secrets" of *Gravity Falls*, and their manifestations through both Gothic horror and terror, are clearly connected to explorations of human nature and deeply existentialist crises that are put forward through humour and parody. These range from Grunkle Stan's inability to commit to a relationship—and his feeling that life is slipping away in his old age—to the twins' constant insecurities about pre-teen amorous encounters. Not to mention the knowledge that, in reality, Dipper and Mabel were "abandoned" by their mother in the care of Stan, as she had other plans for the summer. As Round has argued, the Gothic's most significant development seems to have been the "transvaluation of moral issues", as notions of "monsters have become less clear cut" (18). The series' successful engagement with the wider "monstrous" intertext, and its connection to moral issues and "hidden" preoccupations, uncovers the ability of the Gothic, as Catherine Spooner puts it, to act as "commodity", no longer a marginalised cultural presence, but a fully purchasable item in consumer-capitalist systems (Spooner 2007). The evocations of both horror and terror in *Gravity Falls* are, naturally, unavoidably diluted, a homage as much as a direct encounter. The use of the monstrous and the haunted in the series is domesticated, made accessible so that it can be presented to a younger and more commercial audience. The profound interlacings with the Gothic intertext remain, however, unchanged, as the series reconciles its subversive, uncanny elements with the inevitably conventional, Disney-fied context in which it is placed.

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