Female “madness” as the driving force behind the monstrous in the *Insidious* film series

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This article offers a feminist reading of the *Insidious* film series through identifying the links between the monstrous and the female characters in the narrative. In reading the monstrous as the product of the anxious heroine, I draw upon Barbara Creed’s understanding of the “abject” and classify it as that which strives to destabilize the system of traditional gender roles confining female protagonists. I also maintain that the home in the films is presented as the primary site of horror because it is in fact the location of heroines’ imprisonment; of their false attachment, as the home in our society is principally a place concealing patriarchal power relations. By drawing upon Jane Ussher’s research on disorders I underscore anxiety in women as a social construct and a reasonable response to their repressive lives in patriarchal society. The anxiety of female protagonists is the result both of being overburdened with domestic/maternal duties and their inability to attain self-fulfilment. I propose the reading of the monstrous in the films as the combination of two strategies of resistance Ussher claims are central to battling this socially constructed/contracted “madness”. Firstly, it represents the rejection of idealized femininity. Secondly, it is a product of engagement in creativity, through which the heroine voices her distress. By thoroughly analyzing the experiences of female characters—a mother of three (Renai), two single mothers (Lorraine, Michelle) and a teenage girl (Quinn)—I not only trace the emergence of the monstrous to the climax of their anxiety but show that the demons with whom they share numerous similarities, are in fact disrupting the traditional family, punishing or forcing male protagonists to accept a share of domestic and parental duties, and thus improving the status of female characters.

Introduction

Some of the most influential feminist studies of horror films established strong links between the monstrous and the women in film by relying on a psychoanalytic framework set by Laura Mulvey in her essay “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” (1975), which draws upon Lacanian...
conceptions of visual fetishism and identifies women as objects of the male spectator’s (and protagonist’s) gaze, evoking anxiety of castration. My own analysis, rather than concentrating on viewers’ motives and the psychological effects of films, offers a somewhat alternative reading of the link between the monster and the female protagonist, and is as such primarily focused on the intra-filmic elements.

Linda Williams, who modifies Mulvey’s schema, points out that, contrary to mainstream cinema, women in horror films also possess “the gaze”, as the first to see and know the monster. Furthermore, she claims that these two objects of cinematic spectacle—the woman and the monster—have a similar status within patriarchal structures of seeing. Although the monster may threaten the woman, their bodies are viewed in the same manner; both are constituted as exhibitionist-objects, both are perceived as freakish, representing the threat of castration in the eyes of the traumatized male (Williams 1996. 20-21). I maintain that the female protagonists and the monsters in the *Insidious* films not only have a similar status but that the monster may be read as the very product of the anxious female protagonist, serving as a tool for gender roles destabilization which entrap her. In so doing, I rely on Barbara Creed’s second category of the “abject”. Creed, who claims that the horror film frequently depicts “monstrous women” threatening to castrate men (1996, 36), bases her theory on Julia Kristeva’s concept of “abjection”, that which “disturbs identity, system, order. ... does not respect borders, positions, rules” (Kristeva, 1982: 4). Creed asserts that the horror film illustrates the work of abjection at least in three ways. Firstly, it depicts *images of abjection* (corpse, bodily wastes). Secondly, it is concerned with *borders*: that which threatens to cross the "border" and destabilize the symbolic order is abject. Thirdly, it often illustrates the *maternal figure as abject*, as the monstrous-feminine (Creed 1996 40, 41). Relying on Kristeva’s theory, Creed sees the origins of this monstrous-feminine in the pre-Oedipal mother–infant relation, which is marked by conflict because the child struggles to separate from its mother, to create boundaries and its own identity but the mother is reluctant to release it. Additionally, as a site both of sexual desire and bodily impurities (breast milk, flowing menstrual blood), the maternal body both attracts and repels the infant, and is in such manner much like the monster which simultaneously entices and disgusts. In order for the child to ultimately take its place in the symbolic order and create borders between itself and the mother, the threat has to be eliminated, the abject purified, which is in fact, as Creed claims, the “ideological project of the popular horror film” (1996, 46). I argue that instead of depicting maternal figures as
reluctant to release the child, the *Insidious* films deal with female protagonists (Renai, Lorraine, Michelle, Quinn), who fall into a different category of the abject. Overburdened with domestic and parental duties, they are the ones subtly struggling to break free from the gendered bonds of motherhood. This, however, implies a threat to the traditional system of gender roles and so it is at this precise border, which separates those who take up their proper gender roles from those who do not, that the monstrous/abject is produced and the link between the monster and the female protagonist strengthened. Each film shows the monstrous eventually subdued, abject purified and order restored. The borders, however, have shifted: the male protagonists are shown to become more invested in parenting, assuming a portion of domestic obligations, and thus lightening the burden of the female characters.

**Starting point: The home**

That it is confinement to traditional gender roles and lack of self-fulfilment which cause female protagonists’ anxiety and ultimately the emergence of the monstrous is also suggested by the fact that the primary site of horror in the *Insidious* films is the home. The home, as defined by humanistic geographers such as Yi-Fu Tuan and David Seamon, is a specific psychological setup. It is an iconic “place” (which Tuan differentiates from an abstract and undifferentiated “space”) endowed with values; a place into which meaning has been invested, a “familiar haven”, “where the sick and the injured can recover under solicitous care”; it is an intimate place of attachment and rootedness (Tuan 2001, 6, 73, 128, 137, 144; 1991, 684-696; Seamon 1979, 78-85). Feminist geographers such as Gillian Rose, on the other hand, warn that male geographers have disregarded women’s experience in such definitions as the home in our society is foremost a place concealing patriarchal power relations (1993, 53). The home is the location of the family, the fundamental instrument and the foundation unit of the patriarchal society, its primary contribution being the socialization of children into prescribed gender roles (Millett 1970, 33). By subtly asserting patriarchal control and encouraging its members to conform to social norms, the family unit produces obedient wives/mothers who charge their daughters with the same responsibility of making and maintaining the home they have been burdened with, thereby automatically perpetuating the inferior status of women. In other words, woman’s attachment to the home is both literal and artificial. Literal – since she is virtually an object attached to the house, enrooted into its very foundation. Artificial – because it is not she who endows the home...
with values. Instead, these values are to a great extent already invested into the home for her by the patriarchal system. In this regard, rather than representing a place of authentic belonging, stability and security, the traditional home is for her often a location of conscious or subconscious instability, insecurity, chaos and disorientation. Furthermore, if where we live and where we come from, as well as how we define our own spaces and experience them, is important in constructing identities (Rendell 2003, 107), then women’s literal and artificial attachment to the home affects their identity in a rather intricate way. I argue that the Insidious trilogy provides a horror version of how this false attachment to the home along with its domestic and motherhood duties may affect women. The films suggest that the true emotions of female characters are articulated through the monstrous, as each presents a demon struggling to escape confinement and enter the world of the living, thus also suggesting that the home for the heroines is not the place of safety and stability, but a haunting ground gradually driving them insane. The home is after all the location where their potential identities have been buried to preserve the patriarchal system. Indeed, all of the films depict women who are over-socialized into traditional female roles. They are either angelic women who exhibit non-assertive behaviour, servility and low self-esteem (Renai, Lorraine), or are being forced to internalize these characteristics (Quinn). Whichever the case, their inability to achieve self-fulfilment is more than evident.

Second stop: Anxiety and depression

The similarities between the monster and the female protagonist become more discernible if we take into account that women who suffer from anxiety are by society considered to be mentally ill, or in other words, abnormal. Lead by questions such as why is it that women have occupied a unique place in the annals of insanity for centuries, why they outnumber men in diagnoses of “madness”, from the “hysteria” of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, to “neurotic” and mood disorders in the twentieth and twenty-first (depression, anorexia, borderline personality disorder, etc.), the psychologist Jane Ussher having conducted a large-scale analysis concludes that these “disorders” are in fact “exemplars of the pathologisation of women’s reasonable response to restricted and repressive lives” in patriarchal society (2011, 11). In such manner, the “symptoms” of hysteria in a young middle class woman are revealed as a response to seclusion from the world, courtship prior to marriage followed by monotony of housekeeping, childrearing and self-
sacrifice (Brand 2007, n.p.). For the urban working class woman it was the life of drudgery, being paid at subsistence levels, with no support from family that had caused her to become “hysteric” (Slavney 1990, 34). Today, the most common diagnosis applied to women’s distress is depression (Ussher 2011, 11), in itself the result of chronic strain they experience daily (Susan Nolen-Hoeksema et al. 1999, 1068). Women are burdened with the majority of domestic duties and are expected to perform them dogmatically (see Feeney 2002; Meleis and Lindgren 2002). Particularly when it comes to children, women do seventy per cent of the unpaid caring and housework, even if they are working full time (see Western et al. 2007). Ussher emphasizes that these factors when combined with “women’s lower social status, their unequal power and status in relationships, as well as greater lifetime prevalence of sexual and physical assault” lead to “feelings of chronic lack of control, low self-mastery and learned helplessness, and as a consequence, depression” (2011, 35). Indeed, gender inequalities in society, leading to the discrimination of women in many aspects of their lives are found to be a significant source of their depression (see Barko 2000, Klonoff at al. 2000, Dambrun 2007, Belle and Doucet 2003). In this view, depression as well as other similar diagnostic categories such as anxiety are foremost social constructions, “fictions framed as facts, used to regulate and control those deemed deficient, dangerous, or merely different from the norm” (Ussher 2011, 47). They are also gendered constructions reflecting beliefs about madness and sanity in a particular culture at a particular point in time, which serve to pathologise and regulate women’s behaviour (Ussher 2011, 4). This is why I draw upon Ussher’s use of the term “madness” rather than “mental illness” – it emphasizes that the state which occurs within the individual is not “a manifestation of a behavioural, psychological, or biological dysfunction” (Caplan and Cosgrove 2004, xx), but is culturally induced and deeply involved with the politics of dominant ideology. “Madness” can thereby be regarded as a spectre preying on all women (Ussher 2011, 3, 6).

There are, however, strategies of resistance which can be utilized in battling this “madness”. I argue that the monstrous as presented in the *Insidious* films is a combination of two such strategies. Ussher claims that rejecting idealized femininity, the mantle of the “good woman”, and allowing oneself to focus on the needs of their own is central to women’s recovery (Ussher 2011, 193). The monster, as the articulation of the female protagonist’s anxiety, serves as the exact opposite of the non-assertive, servile angelic “good woman” and yearns to fulfil its need for freedom even at the cost of taking a life. The other resistance strategy is
engagement in creativity, which not only provides insight into the complexity of women’s pain and situates “madness” within the context of their lives, but also functions as a catharsis and represents “a means of escape, of making sense of the world, and of reframing madness outside of the boundaries of pathology” (Ussher 2011, 207, 211, 212). In the Insidious films, the demon can be considered a creation, a type of media through which the heroine voices her distress and which allows insight into her state of mind. Having internalized patriarchal preferences when it comes to versions of femininity and knowing which ones are deemed abnormal, it is no wonder that the female protagonist envisions herself—this alternative self which has personal needs—as the monster. In short, the monstrous has a crucial role in underlining the female protagonists’ “madness” as born of deep discontent in response to the context of their lives.

The emergence of the monster

The first half of James Wan’s Insidious (2010) focuses on Renai (Rose Byrne), the wife of Josh Lambert (Patrick Wilson) and the mother of three: sons Dalton (Ty Simpkins) and Foster (Andrew Astor), and baby Cali. Having moved to a new house, the responsibility of making a pleasant home while simultaneously caring for the children falls on Renai’s shoulders. An early scene depicting Renai shows her on the phone with a billing department while serving breakfast to her children, all of whom are deafeningly loud and require attention, suggesting this is a situation she is expected to manage daily. The whistling kettle in the background indicates the pressure building up within her. Renai’s presence in the kitchen is contrasted with Josh brushing his teeth in the calming silence of the bathroom and observing himself in the mirror long enough to notice the one grey hair that keeps growing back. The difference in the amount of free time is more than obvious. Renai who is presumed to have more free time, is revealed as having far less than her formally-working husband. When Josh enters the kitchen, Renai, still on the phone, is also there to fix his tie. However, when she asks him for help, he lets her down: “‘Are you going to take the boys to school?’ ‘I can’t today’ ‘Are you going to pick them up?’ ‘I can’t, I got a PTA meeting, I totally forgot.’ ‘Why didn’t you tell me?’” (Wan 2010).

Renai’s unfulfilment is indicated by the titles of the books she places on a shelf at the beginning of the film and later finds mysteriously knocked down: The Power of Focus for Women: How to Live the Life You Really
Want and How to write and compose as a guide to better self-esteem (self-healing through music). At the very beginning of the film, we also see Renai going through old photographs of herself while everyone is asleep, as if in mourning for the time when life was still promising. Dalton, who soon joins her, is unable to recognize his mother in the photos and concludes that she now must be “really old” (Wan 2010). Since Renai is only thirty-six, the viewer is left with the assumption that it must have been her lifestyle that made the difference between her past and present self; that made her look, in Dalton’s opinion, unrecognizably advanced in age. Indeed, Renai seems constantly exhausted throughout the film and is primarily invested in caring for her children, while Josh, as seen above, has enough time to invest into his appearance and appears to be untroubled. It is him who uses wrinkle cream around the eyes, while Renai wearily climbs into bed, anxious at not having done any (self-fulfilling) work: “I tried to do some work today but Cali woke up after half an hour and she wouldn't go back down. I just didn't get anything done. I just want things to be different in this house. I just had such a bad day. I'm scared nothing's going to change” (Wan 2010). The viewer is left with the assumption that by moving to a new house Renai wanted to change her life so as to include self-realization through composing. It soon becomes clear that the previous house was not what prevented her from getting her work done, rather the firm system of traditional gender roles and male-centeredness of their family was and continues to be the main issue. The first half of the film is formally focused on Renai and it becomes evident that all of her efforts are invested into making a more pleasant home for Josh and the children. When he arrives home in the evening, the home is ready to embrace him, boxes are unpacked, dinner prepared and his son runs to greet him at the door. The emphasis on looking after Josh is also revealed when Renai tells him that all of her songs are in fact about him.

Apart from photographs serving as a reminder of the time when she was yet unmarried and when greater self-realization was a true possibility, there is yet another significant and reoccurring leitmotif concerning the passing of time – the ticking of the pendulum clock. The ticking, echoing dominantly throughout the house in numerous scenes, metaphorically speaks not only of Josh’s absence, but also of the time Renai invested/invests into the household, time she spent/spends in monotony of domesticity and childrearing, devoid of self-fulfilling engagement. The lyrics of the melancholic piano song she is in the process of composing imply the same lack of self-realization and speak of the resigned state she is in: “Yeah, I’m looking west, always been looking that way! I’m gonna
get it all happening! Just can't do it today. ... I'm gonna be somebody. I just can't be her today!” (Wan 2010). Significant is also the fact that as soon as Renai begins composing, she is interrupted by the crying baby. Since composing—as a type of engagement in creativity—represents a strategy of resistance to anxiety, a means of escape (Ussher 2011, 211-212), its constant interruption by children may suggest that Renai’s inability to achieve self-fulfilment indeed has its roots in maternal duties, permeating the walls of the home and leaving her with no personal time, nor a room of her own to retreat to.

The gradual intensification of Renai’s anxiety depicted above occurs simultaneously with the emergence of the monstrous. That Renai is the source of bizarre happenings is also suggested by the fact that she is indirectly accountable for Dalton falling into a coma which will allow astral souls, including a particularly sinister demon, to use his body as a passage into the real world. When Renai gets lured into the attic by strange sounds, and attempts to climb the ladder to reach the light pull string, she accidently breaks one of the ladder rungs. Later, while exploring the house, Dalton climbs the same ladder but falls off due to the broken rung and hits his head on the floor. After Renai and Josh rush in to pick him up, Renai finally finds the box of sheet music she has been searching for since the beginning of the film lying not far from where Dalton had fallen. The fact that the box was not there a few hours before suggests that Dalton’s presence was obstructing her from composing in the same manner as Cali’s crying. Although Dalton sits up from his fall screaming, the next morning he is found in a coma. Since he will not be disturbing her anymore due to entering comatose state, it appears to be no wonder that her composing material reappears, as if implying that Renai may finally proceed with self-realization.

Renai is also the first to hear and see the monstrous presence. The second time she attempts to compose music, she hears insidious whispers coming through the baby monitor, telling her there is nothing she can do. This voice is followed by another, louder one, maliciously saying: “I want it. Give me it! Give me it! I want it! NOW!” (Wan 2010). This second voice, ending its chant with a loud demand which utterly frightens Renai, is not coming through the baby monitor, but seems to be in the same room with her. It is thus implied that she could be its source, especially if the utterances are read as the contradiction to the first voice denying her agency: as a demand for self-fulfilment and freedom from maternal and domestic duties. It is also the dream that Renai has when sleeping alone due to the intensification of her anxiety that first provides a glimpse of
the master demon’s lair. Moreover, her dream can serve as a metaphor for the physical birth of the monstrous. Its presence was up to that point only indicated by misplaced objects, sounds and voices, but following Renai’s dream the demons often haunt their home in the embodied form. The dream itself is a series of flashing images: of a womb-like hallway (later revealed as the entrance into the leading’s demon’s lair), of the Lamberts’ home, and finally of bloody palm prints appearing on the window of the room Renai sleeps in. The last image particularly implies imprisonment inside the house, as well as the desire of someone to break free from it. It is at that point that Renai wakes up screaming in terror and soon sights a monstrous figure prowling the house.

The similarity of Renai’s position in the domestic sphere with that of the entities overtaking Dalton’s body is even more suggestive, for the demons too are trapped in time and space; in a realm the psychic medium Elise Reinier (Lin Shaye) calls the Further:

The Further is a world far beyond our own, yet it’s all around us, a place without time as we know it. It’s a dark realm filled with the tortured souls of the dead, a place not meant for the living. That’s where Dalton is. And the problem is that with his astral body gone, he’s just left us with a physical body, an empty vessel. And there are entities that know this ... They’re all trying to get inside his physical body simply because they... they crave life; the chance to live again. (Wan 2010)

The traditional home can for a woman have similar connotations as a place not of stability and security, but of anxiety and darkness, where she may feel lost and taunted by her own unrealized desires. It is a world all around us, but invisible to many, where women can feel trapped, left to crave a chance to live their life fully. As a tradition stretching across centuries, it is a timeless place as well. The leading demon in the film will later be shown sharpening its claws in a lair particularly reminiscent of a Victorian girl’s room. Surrounded by dolls, puppets on strings, masks and a makeup table, it too is trapped in what seems to be a traditional female surrounding – the original site of horror.

The key to the entities’ liberation lies in controlling the body of an astral projector (Dalton), who has the ability to travel to different places in astral form. For an overburdened mother, to have her children under control and suspend their activity could represent a sort of freedom as well. Having this in mind, we could claim that Dalton’s comatose state
should allow not only the demons to finally live, but his mother as well. However, although Dalton’s coma brings about a certain peace in the house, Renai’s obligations become doubled and more complex. She not only has to feed and wash him, but to apply medicine, insert/clean medical tubes and monitor him. Renai’s desperation at the situation is discernible in her conversation with the nurse explaining her: “I feel like the universe is just trying to see how far I’ll bend before I break” (Wan 2010). The fact that she indirectly caused Dalton’s condition may additionally be read as a metaphor: as a cry for help desiring Josh to become more involved in parental duties. He does exactly the opposite by being frequently absent, pretending to work long hours and leaving Renai to struggle with the situation at home on her own. In Josh’s absence her anxiety intensifies as the presence of the demons grows more powerful.

Her pleas directed at Josh clearly resonate with deep distress: “I’m scared of this house. There’s something wrong with this place. I’m not imagining it, I can feel it. It’s like a sickness. ... I can’t be in there alone anymore. I need you. But you’re never here. ... Please. I want to leave this house. I can’t spend another night here. Please. Please help me!” (Wan 2010).

The monstrous of _Insidious: Chapter 2_ (2013) although haunting the Lamberts once again, has its roots in Josh’s past and can be connected to another overburdened female character—his mother, Lorraine (Barbara Hershey). In the very opening scene of the film, set twenty-five years before _Insidious_, Lorraine greets Elise apologetically at the door: “I’m sorry it’s so late. My day job kind of makes raising my son a night job” (Wan 2013). Being a single parent and a fulltime nurse implies complete devotion to others—either her son or her patients—which ultimately leaves her with no time to focus on herself. The name of the hospital she works at “Our Lady of the Angels” is in itself symbolic as it celebrates the ideal woman Virgin Mary, whose main purpose/role is to be an everlasting mother and caretaker. However, it is when parenting and work interweave, more precisely when Josh visits Lorraine at the hospital and disobeys her during their visit to patient Parker Crane, that the monster first appears.

Most of the plot in the present of _Insidious: Chapter 2_ is set in Lorraine’s house, where the Lamberts are staying temporarily. Particularly significant is the scene in which Lorraine, while taking medication to calm down, observes herself in the mirror and notices a ghastly woman in white standing at the door. By encircling both women, the image in the mirror suggests that the two identities might be the product of a single mind. Indeed, the fates of the two women are similar. The woman in
white, Michelle Parker, as the viewers will gradually discover, was also a single mother to an only son. Although we never find out whom either of them was married to, Michelle’s madness upon which the protagonists spy upon in a latter scene, is enough to suggest not only that she had been traumatized by her husband, but also that Lorraine might have experienced the same. Unlike Lorraine though, the other woman articulated her anger and trauma in multiple ways, first of which is the punishment of her son Parker – the visible legacy of her husband. More precisely, Michelle forced Parker to discard the identity his father gave him and accept the one she had designed. We witness her slapping the boy and shoving into his face the drawing he signed as Parker, screaming: “Parker is not your name!! That is the name your father gave you! Your name is Marilyn. Do you understand? Repeat after me: ‘My name is Marilyn.’ Say it!!” (Wan 2013). By making him accept the female name, dress as a girl and wear feminine wigs, Michelle not only overthrows the authority of the father and acts as the head of the household, but also erases male presence from her home. It is no wonder then that following such figurative castration Parker attempts to castrate himself literally. By forcing him to internalize the female identity, Michelle makes him experience the life she too had to accept as a girl under patriarchy. Her mad chant as she attempts to strangle Josh implies what that life was all about: “Little girls need to learn to be good” (Wan 2013).

Another outlet for Michelle’s trauma is evident in that she instructed her son to commit numerous murders. In this regard, the disguise he wears when killing—a black wedding dress—is profoundly meaningful, symbolizing his mother’s desire of revenge for the experiences she endured following her entrance into marriage. When Carl, the psychic medium, asks during one of his séances what is it that she wants, a simple answer is given: Kill. The reason she chose murder to articulate her trauma may lie in that to kill is to possess the ultimate control, especially so for those who had been victimized and rendered powerless. It means to hold complete dominance over others; to deny subjectivity onto others. When Carl asks Michelle who she is, she identifies as the Mother of Death, which he interprets as the mother of Parker Crane. Such an interpretation, which identifies women solely by relating them to their male family members, is undoubtedly traditional. In this case, however, the Mother of Death is not the passive object but the controlling subject. Her oxymoronic title by itself represents the subversion of female roles. In patriarchal society women are reduced to and primarily seen as mothers and caretakers, as the ones who nurture and give life. Michelle, however, gives not life, but death. By controlling her son, who will possess Josh,
she works towards disrupting the home of the Lamberts. When Parker discovers that his (Josh’s) body is deteriorating, the female voice echoes in his head: “‘Your dead soul is killing his living skin.’ ‘I wanna live. I wanna live!’ ‘Only if you kill them.’” Michelle’s words imply that freedom will be achieved only when the traditional family is destroyed (Wan 2013).

*Insidious: Chapter 3* (2015), set a few years before the first *Insidious* film, provides yet another example of a woman whose experience within patriarchal space can be identified as the reason for the emergence of the monstrous. Quinn Branner (Stefanie Scott) is depicted as an intelligent and ambitious teenage girl, aspiring to enrol into a theatre school and ultimately fulfil her life’s dream by becoming a professional actress. While in desperate need of her parents’ support to succeed, her mother’s death (Ele Keats) the year before and the lack of support from her father, Sean (Dermot Mulroney) means this support is limited; her father does not understand or truly know her. On the few occasions he talks to her it is about house chores. It soon becomes evident that ever since her mother died Quinn has been burdened with duties of maintaining the household and parenting her brother Alex (Tate Berney). The scene showing Sean barging into her room and interrupting her audition practice is particularly significant: “‘Quinn!’ ‘Jesus, you scared me.’ ‘I need to rely on you to get him up and going. He’s lying around like a corpse.’ ‘No, I did.’ ‘No, I need you to get him ready for school.’ ‘Dad, I have to learn my lines. When am I going to do that?’ ‘I need your help here, I am drowning. He’s running late. You could have done this anytime. You’re being selfish.’ ‘Yeah, I’m being really selfish for worrying about my future?’ ‘Just help me out.’” (Whannell 2015).

Quinn fails at the audition for the theatre school, which leaves her angry, deeply disappointed and hateful towards her father. Instead of leaving home to receive education, achieving self-fulfilment and creating a future for herself, she will be forced to remain in the domestic sphere. In this regard, Quinn’s fate is strangely reminiscent of the story about Shakespeare’s sister, Judith, a fictional character Virginia Woolf invented in her essay *A Room of One’s Own* to illustrate how a woman with Shakespeare’s gifts would have been denied the opportunities to develop them, simply because of her sex. Woolf describes Judith as extraordinarily gifted, imaginative and as agog to see the world as William, but was, unlike him, never sent to school. Instead, when she picked up a book to read, “her parents came in and told her to mend the stockings or mind the stew and not moon about with books and papers” (Woolf 1977, 53).
In short, Judith is denied her dream and regardless of attempting to realize herself remains trapped within normative gender roles, eventually committing suicide. Quinn’s situation is remarkably similar, as she complains to her friend: “That school is all I wanted. And my dad wants me here raising my brother” (Whannell 2015). Just as Woolf speculated would happened to Judith, Quinn is interrupted in practicing her lines by Sean telling her to take care of her brother. It is no coincidence that the poster of Shakespeare’s *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* displayed on the wall of her room to motivate her – suddenly becomes blurry as the camera focuses on Sean. Since it is the domestic duties Sean delegates to her that ultimately cause Quinn to fail the audition, we could claim that she is denied enrolment into theatre school precisely because she is a woman who has limiting gender roles ascribed to her, similar to Woolf’s Judith. Even the car accident Quinn barely survives (after walking out into the middle of the street, lured by an apparition, later linked to her own identity) resembles an attempted suicide. Quinn’s story, however, does not end here. Rather, an alternative narrative is introduced – the narrative of the monstrous, which will bring the anxiety of confinement onto a whole different level but will also subtly work towards undermining social norms which cause it.

The accident leaves Quinn with both her legs broken and thus trapped not only at home, but within her own body as well. While spatial fixity can serve as a metaphor for women’s confinement in the domestic sphere, physical immobility may be seen as symbolizing the image of female body in patriarchal society. Although, Sean for the first time relieves Quinn of domestic duties and is in fact himself waiting on her, it is more than apparent that he still does not know or understand her. For example, when Quinn tells him she’s a vegetarian, he is puzzled about when she became one, and when she asks him if any of the letters from schools arrived, he tells her not to worry about it and that she now has an excuse to do her favourite thing in the world: sleep. Quinn’s head shake and eye-roll suggest her disappointment: her favourite thing is acting. By viewing his daughter through patriarchal lenses which link women primarily with passivity, he limits her identity and adds to her overall feeling of entrapment. It is no wonder then that in such trifold confinement the monstrous, which had until then been only dormant, observing Quinn from the distance, is literally closing in on her.

While Quinn is resting in her bed and talking to her friend online, the laptop screen suddenly freezes and the demon appears behind the curtain. He ultimately throws her off the bed, causing an injury to her
neck and as she lies paralysed on the floor we witness yet another symbolic scene. The monster pulls the curtains together, closes the door and finally puts down the laptop lid, completely darkening the room. By disconnecting her from the outside world on various levels, the monster isolates her further and drives her deeper into anxiety. Although Quinn is temporarily saved by Sean’s unexpected arrival, there are numerous other scenes emphasizing her struggle with feelings of entrapment. For example, in astral world Quinn is shown attempting to escape the building she lives in, but as she nervously calls for the elevator, the monster grabs her wheelchair handles from behind and takes her back into the apartment where she watches another self crawling on the floor with no limbs, eyes, or mouth. The metaphors are clear: she cannot leave her home, shape no destiny of her own, see no personal future, nor speak against her oppressor. The fact that she does not seem mutilated but looks like she had been born that way, suggests that her immobility was made to look natural, the same way women’s lack of power in patriarchal society was/is.

However, when the monster overtakes her body completely, it enables her to articulate her festering anxiety at last. She strikes her father down, then breaks out of her casts by violently smashing her legs against the bed base. After removing her cervical collar she fixes her gaze up on him, grabs the scalpel lying nearby and utters the long suppressed words: “You’re a useless fucking father. Your wife had to die to get away from you. And now I’d rather be dead too, but I’m going to keep you alive to watch you suffer. I’ll be waiting in the dark when the pain finally kills you” (Whannell 2015). The line between the woman and the monster becomes entirely blurred as the viewer wonders whether it is the demon who speaks through Quinn or Quinn who finally speaks with the aid of the demon. It is worth mentioning that the monster is also physically suggestive of Quinn’s state insomuch as it wears a breathing mask, which evokes the feeling of suffocation and struggle to breathe under pressure.

As Quinn attempts to slit her own throat, Sean finally reacts and jumps up to prevent her. While she is being held down, a third eye is revealed inside of her throat. The third eye is generally a mystical concept referring to an invisible eye which provides perception beyond ordinary sight (Cavendish 1994, 2606). Because it is considered a gateway through which individuals are able to view their inner self as well as the entire world outside with deeper understanding, it symbolizes a state of enlightenment (McKenna 2015, 1-3). In this view, Quinn reached the higher level of consciousness by gradually becoming aware of what
strains a grown woman in patriarchal society must endure, as well as of the power men truly hold over her. While the primary two eyes function as sensory organs which feed the mind with false images served by dominant ideology, the third eye opens up another dimension of perception beyond the dualities of life and hence allows her to see the truth. Just as the Hindu god Shiva, deemed to be the possessor of all knowledge, destroys evil and ignorance when having his third eye opened, so does Quinn literally aim to obliterate those who invent and perpetuate misconceptions about women.

**Last stop: Exit the “madness”**

“Madness need not be all breakdown. It may also be break through. It is potentially liberation and renewal as well as enslavement and existential death” (Laing 1969, 47).

The assumption that the monster represents the articulation of anxiety experienced by the female protagonist, who is struggling to live in accordance with patriarchal norms, is upheld not only by the numerous similarities between the two, but also by the fact that the monster ultimately causes changes in the family that improve the status of the female protagonists. Namely, by disrupting the traditional family home and transforming it into a h(a)unting ground, the monster forces male characters to alter their own personalities as well as definitions of parenting. It is only after the monstrous emerges and drives the female protagonists into madness that the male protagonists accept a share of domestic and parental obligations and/or attempt to understand their life.

In *Insidious* Josh is the last person to acknowledge the monster’s presence. Calling himself “the voice of reason”, he refuses to accept Elise’s theory on astral projection as well as his mother’s testimony that she herself had seen the demon. The fact that it is three women who all acknowledge the monster before Josh does, suggests they share similar experiences due to their sex/gender which enables such recognition. More significantly, the horrific situation cannot be resolved without Josh’s participation, since he is the only one, apart from his son, who has the ability to astral project. In this view astral projection can be read simply as an ability to traverse spaces – something traditionally ascribed to men and forbidden to women.

It is not until Josh sees Dalton’s drawings of the demon Elise had described that he accepts her guidance. The experience within the Further
is of utmost importance, for Josh is forced to endure the same apprehensive atmosphere of confinement that the demons and his wife had been trapped within. The following scenes show their house inhabited by darkness and numerous prowling female apparitions. In the hallway, Josh sees a ghastly bride climbing the staircase furnished with antique portraits of respectable looking women, a scene suggesting she is to be yet another in the line of mothers/wives. Following the sounds of her cries, Josh finds her wailing in the corner of an empty room but is diverted by a giggling child and loses her again. Downstairs Josh comes upon what seems to be an ideal traditional family, standing completely still—except for the blinking—as if posing for a portrait. The stillness seems to denote the everlasting tradition of patriarchal family and its gender roles, since the mother is ironing with a smile, the father reading newspapers whistling joyfully and their teenage daughter idly sitting adorned in a white dress underlining her angelic innocence and the awaiting of marriage. However, the perfect family portrait is soon redone to show the second daughter holding a shotgun and observing her dead victims with a mad smile. She too is an example of the monster reacting against normative life, her aim to eradicate tradition by eliminating those who perform, enforce and perpetuate it, even if it means killing her own family.

It is only after Josh has witnessed this, as if in realization of what might come to pass if tradition is not altered, that he manages to find the door into the prime demon’s chamber in the attic, which is exactly where everything started with Renai breaking the ladder rung and indirectly causing Dalton’s coma. After Elise announces in the real world that he has made contact with the monster and found Dalton, Lorraine tells her to wake him up, but Elise simply answers: “I can’t. He needs to find us” [my italics] (Wan 2010). Differently put, Josh needs to make an effort to reach them, he has to open his mind and listen to Renai who is calling out for him in more ways than one: “Josh, come back, come back to us! Please Josh, please, come back to us, please! Follow my voice” (Wan 2010). Josh’s search and successful recovery of Dalton can thus be read as a metaphor for the father becoming more invested in parenting, for assuming a part of domestic obligations and mending his relationship with the mother, who will no longer be forced to bear the entire burden herself. However, the final scene of Insidious, showing Josh killing Elise possessed by the “bride in black”, who had in fact haunted him since his childhood years, indicates a deeper problem explored in Insidious: Chapter 2.
In *Insidious: Chapter 2* the patriarchal family is broadened to include Dalton, who has the ability to astral project like his father and is thus more likely to resemble him in personality and actions as well. Nonetheless, when he sees Josh strangling Renai, he hits him with a baseball bat, and works together with his mother to prevent him from reaching them. It is also Dalton who offers to find his real father in the Further: “Mommy, mommy, I can go into the dark place and find daddy, if I go to sleep. ... I can find him. I promise I’ll find him. I promise. I will” (Wan 2013). Dalton manages to literally reconnect his parents by bringing a tin can telephone to Josh through which they can hear Renai calling and guiding them back home. In this way, by helping his parents bridge the darkness between, Dalton too becomes more involved in familial matters and hence represents not an offspring of patriarchy, but of a more liberating future in which domestic burden is shared. It is also symbolic that after this experience and back in the real world, both the father and the son decide to give up their ability to astral project, that is, they choose not to be absent from their home: “We’re ready. Ready to forget once and for all. ... This is the only world we want to be in” (Wan 2013). As they close their eyes, with Lorraine and Renai sitting by their sides, Josh and Dalton are redeemed and liberated of the monstrous as the light fills their minds signifying the newly attained consciousness.

*Insidious: Chapter 3* also speaks of the father’s transformation, but this time the distress call had been sent out by his daughter, whom he himself had entrapped in traditional female roles and deprived of her future, as already explained above. Quinn requires Sean’s support, understanding and change in views to escape the stereotypical female destiny as well as the clutches of the demon. Throughout the film it is evident that the demon appears only in Sean’s absence, suggesting it is lack of his attention on various levels that paves the way for its arrival. Many are the situations in which Quinn, attacked by the monster, desperately calls for her father. Likewise, it is always his entrance that, at least temporarily, banishes the demon. After acknowledging the danger his daughter is in, Sean turns to Elise for help, who enters the Further serving as a link between Quinn and him. Sean’s contribution to the salvation of his daughter is, however, of essential importance: “‘What’s happening? Is she dying?’ ‘Just hold on to her.’ ‘Is she?!’ ‘Yes.’ ‘No. No! Bring her back! Bring her back! You said you could bring her back!’ ‘You need to help me.’” [my italics] (Wan 2015). It is at that moment that Quinn for the first time holds his father’s complete attention. This gives Elise enough time to get additional help from two other women. The voice of the deceased neighbour Grace directs Elise to find Lilith’s hidden letter to
Quinn, with which she ultimately manages to reach Lilith, who then
whispers into her daughter’s ears in the astral world. Empowered, Quinn
finally opens her glued eyes, gazes back into the monster’s eyes and pulls
off his breathing mask, ultimately destroying it. Her first word as she
comes back into the real world—“Dad”—and Sean’s embracing arms are
enough to signify reconciliation. In this regard, the presence of the
monstrous allowed for a different ending from that of Shakespeare’s sister
Judith. By urging Sean into focusing on his daughter, it induced him to
change his patriarchal attitudes, releasing Quinn from her Judith-like fate.

Conclusion

The changes in relation to male protagonists caused by the monstrous
seem to reveal a purpose of its emergence, for it represents a horrific
articulation of anxiety experienced by female characters suffering from
various types of entrapment. Strains of motherhood; of single parenting;
possibly of victimization; of inheriting domestic and caretaking positions
in the home at the dawn of adulthood, all of which lead to absolute lack of
self-fulfilment, are underlined as stressors inviting severe anxiety in
female characters and ultimately the rise of the monstrous. Thus, this
paper underlines that it is the context of women’s lives that generates
female “madness”.

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