Women's timeless fascination with true crime and horror

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Women’s Timeless Fascination With True Crime and Horror

By

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Abstract

This thesis examines society’s interest in gothic literature, horror, and true crime. Beginning with the first gothic works, and ending with modern true crime media, a focus of this exploratory piece will be on women because women have always been, and remain, the primary consumers of the gothic, and of true crime. The question is: Why? To examine the possible reasons, I will be examining the success of original gothic writers, namely, Ann Radcliffe. Other authors who influenced the development of the Gothic genre will influence our modern understanding of these origins. I will examine Poe’s “The Mystery of Marie Roget” to explain how detective fiction encouraged female readership, terrifying society by reminding us that we have more reason to fear one another than supernatural forces. Modern true crime media, being influenced by Poe and early gothic works, will be explored through the lens of the female experience. In order to conceptualize the genre’s popularity among women, this paper will explore modern true crime’s representation in media and pop culture using television and podcast series’ including “See No Evil,” “Serial,” “Macabre London Podcast,” and “My Favorite Murder.” The scope of this paper will focus on my research-based speculation about women’s obsession with true crime, focusing on television programming, books, and other popular present-day true crime media. The goal is to determine why women are inordinately attracted to the true crime genre by exploring the links between original gothic works and present day crime media. Based on the timeline of true crimes development beginning with supernatural literature, the most historically supported reason for women’s interest in the genres is that the genres support the articulation of women’s experience and problematic status as the subordinate sex under a patriarchal society.
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Introduction

Since gothic literature predates the true crime genre, this paper will open with an examination into women’s interest in gothic literature dating back to the first published gothic works by authors like Daniel Defoe (1660-1731) and Ann Radcliffe (1764-1823). Bearing a predominantly female readership in mind, Radcliffe popularized the gothic genre and increased the disparity between male and female readers, reinforcing the understanding that women’s particular fascination with such content is not a modern phenomenon, but a persistent theme across the centuries. With this thesis, the broad goal is to narrow down the possible answers to why this obsession perpetually subsists in people as individuals, but also in culture and media. More narrowly, this will be an essay into why women, specifically, are enraptured by these horrific narratives. By first investigating the roots of true crime in Gothic literature, this paper will establish commonalities between true crime and the Gothic to account for its success among a predominantly female media audience. While there are several theories regarding women’s attraction which are backed up by legitimate studies into women's fascination with violence, the majority of them have fallen short in answering the entire question. Some theories are better historically supported than others. A theory which offers the most probable explanation for why women enjoy these narratives should align with the timeline of true crime’s development, but that does not mean that other theories are wrong or unsubstantiated. A theory which encapsulates the female experience across historical contexts through true crime’s development is that women enjoy the Gothic genre and true crime media because the genres support the articulation of women's experience and problematic status as the subordinate sex under a patriarchal society. Women’s social status is consistently deemed lesser than that of their male counterparts, and this status, which positions women as weak, is the root of the damsel in distress trope. From the first
Gothic novels up to modern true crime narratives, the male is figured as “other.” As the primary perpetrators of violent crimes, men are, more often than not, at the core of violent crimes. Violence against women is almost exclusively carried out by men. By headlining this disparity between the sexes in genres like the Gothic and true crime, women are granted validation in their understanding of their social position. Pioneering pieces like Daniel Defoe’s “A True Relation of the Apparition of One Mrs. Veal” (1706), Ann Radcliffe’s *The Romance of the Forest* (1791), and Edgar Allan Poe’s “The Mystery of Marie Roget” (1842) laid the foundation for modern forms of true crime media by articulating specifically female dilemmas rooted in dominating patriarchal structures. True crime appeals to a primarily female audience because of how the genre communicates the dangers of being a woman. It validates women’s trepidation as the vulnerable sex by figuring the male as “other” and subsequently demonstrating the gender inequity that ceaselessly persists century after century.

The perpetual fascination with the gothic and true crime has permeated the media and entertainment industry for the past few centuries. With the rise of the true crime genre through novels, short stories, and films, true crime has become an indisputably and collectively sanctioned obsession in society. The question is: Why? Why do we transpose nonfiction into entertainment? Perhaps it is because the landscape of true crime as a genre was laid with a foundation preceding nonfiction entertainment. In other words, we may consume true crime as entertainment because the manner in which true crime stories are told is not unlike the manner in which crime fiction is told. Faux crimes were entertaining before the public realized that real crime, too, is entertaining. Defoe, Radcliffe, Poe, and countless other writers influenced the development of nonfiction media entertainment with their tales of terror, ratiocination, and crime.
Authors like Edgar Allan Poe, for example, laid the foundation for modern true crime with the first detective stories. Detective fiction emerged as a genre with “The Murders in the Rue Morgue” (1841). The detective in the story, Monsieur C. Auguste Dupin, is able to answer questions about crimes that no ordinary person could imagine answering. His analytical capabilities were astonishing and impressive to the characters in the story, and extended to the audience of the story, and the mode of detective fiction was born. Part of the fascination, then, might be simply with the faculty of analysis, rather than merely with unspeakable horrors and crime itself, but this phenomenon is not specific to women. Lucy Fitzgerald, Kenyon Laing and Amanda Jacobson host the popular crime podcast “Wine and Crime.” Laing, a former gender-based violence researcher and consultant, reported that women make up eighty-five percent of the podcasts’ audience, which lines up with a 2018 study that found that seventy-three percent of true crime podcast listeners are women (Laing).

Some hypothesize that women consume true crime to avoid becoming victims. The problem with this is that it does not explain why we find pleasure in crime. Why do we watch the Oxygen network and binge the Investigation Discovery channel for entertainment if we are merely looking out for our individual safety? The “pleasure” that women experience when consuming true crime might, then, be produced by the sense of familiarity experienced when we consume true crime. The genre demonstrates how society has reason to fear angry and violent men. It demonstrates that even if a man is not perceived as angry or violent, one never truly knows, and women in particular should especially be wary of this.

The Gothic genre’s interest in ghosts, murder, and sex crimes against women aligns with motifs in modern crime entertainment which acknowledge problems in accepted patriarchal culture. Both genres articulate women’s problematic status as the subordinate sex. In a review of
Female Gothic Histories: Gender, History and the Gothic, by Diana Wallace, Yael Shapira tries to conceptualize women’s fascination with horror and the gothic genre: “Early work on the so-called “Female Gothic” viewed it as a coded articulation of fear, pain, and anger that were specifically female in nature, since they were rooted in the dominant psychic and family structures of a patriarchal society” (Shapira 1). Like the Gothic genre, true crime media also functions as a mode of history for women. The “mode” is the narrative content and method which articulates the general understanding that women traditionally function as the weaker, vulnerable sex both in fiction and in real life, and especially in modern true crime media; explaining at least part of the reason why women are more fascinated by the genre than men. Shapira’s discussion on the female Gothic pins women’s interest in these narratives to women’s status as the subordinate sex, supporting the theory that women are interested in the genres because of an enduring gender dichotomy which places women socially, and physically, beneath men. These stories reveal complicated truths about biological and cultural disparities between men and women. The Gothic genre’s specifically female articulation of fear, pain, and anger was not a unique snapshot of entertainment history. Females’ experience as the inferior sex most strongly accounts for women’s disproportionate interest in both Gothic literature and the true crime genre.
Chapter 1- Origins of Gothic Literature

It would be nearly impossible to articulate a single timeline about the rise of Gothic literature because of its convoluted paths and turns. The term “Gothic” is hybridized with a number of other genres including romance, science fiction, crime, and more. So, with all these dynamic genre identifications churning, how can one possibly draw definitive links from modern true crime to Gothic origins now? For the sake of this thesis, the term “Gothic” will refer to literature on the supernatural or the explained supernatural in fictional contexts which elicit responses of horror, terror, or otherwise uneasiness. Of course, the Gothic genre existed outside of a “female gothic,” too, but for the purposes of this paper, the Gothic genre will hereafter refer to Gothic works which contributed to the mode of history defining the female experience.

Before the gothic was formally a literary genre, there were ghost stories, beginning popularly with Shakespeare, but Daniel Defoe’s1 “A True Relation of the Apparition of One Mrs. Veal” (1706) is among the most famous examples of the “apparition narrative.” English essayist, Joseph Addison (1672-1719) viewed imaginative ghost stories as prerequisite creative feats for poets. He states that a poet's success relies on an understanding of the reader's imagination, an understanding of horror, romance, spirits, demons, and inventions (Miles 104-105). Defoe mines these understandings in this short story that popularized the apparition narrative.

Mrs. Bargrave is sitting in her home one Saturday afternoon when she is suddenly visited by her childhood friend, Mrs. Veal, who she has not seen or heard from for more than two years. Mrs. Veal tells her that she is about to embark on a journey and wishes to first see Mrs. Bargrave to reconcile their friendship. They have a nearly two-hour-long conversation in which they discuss old books from their childhood and Mrs. Veal tells her friend that she will be rewarded in

1 The story was published anonymously and has no confirmed author, but has been attributed to Daniel Defoe.
heaven for her sufferings, and that she will love her forever. She tells these words so eloquently that Mrs. Bargrave weeps and later says that she could not have possibly made the conversation up herself. Mrs. Veal’s final request is that Mrs. Bargrave write to Mr. Veal (her brother) to tell him of their conversation. While Mrs. Bargrave finds this request somewhat odd, considering Mrs. Veal could just tell him herself, she agrees. When Mrs. Bargrave steps out to summon her daughter to say hello, Mrs. Veal says that she must be on her way, and she walks off; watched by Mrs. Bargrave until she is out of sight. After the events in the house, Mrs. Bargrave attempts to seek out Mrs. Veal only to discover that she had died the day before this supposed visit by what others believe is an “apparition” if they believe Mrs. Bargrave at all.

The notion of supernaturalism was an idea that was fairly new during the time in which the short story was circulating in 1706. Supernatural, in this context, refers to the manifestation of an event that cannot be explained by scientific understanding or laws of nature. While Shakespeare had previously introduced the apparition narrative, the story of Mrs. Veal is one that produced reader skepticism because of its boasted honesty. It simulates documentary authenticity in its narrative content and structure in a way that expands upon senseless entertainment-based supernaturalism. The apparition narrative, at this time, was rising in popularity roughly sixty years before the first gothic novel was actually written. To increase the verisimilitude of the story’s claims, the candor and good character of the story’s parties are stressed at every opportunity, and questions about Mrs. Bargrave’s honesty are attributed to her bad husband. The authenticity proposed by Defoe in the story is what contributes to the story’s reception. The idea of ghost stories was not entirely new; Shakespeare had written ghost stories over a hundred years before this point. This, however, was different in that it was not given a definite class of literature. Was it fiction, or was it a work of journalism that the author meant to be taken as the
true story of a ghost appearing to a person? Should people be suspicious of a supernatural realm beyond the scope of what we think is reality?

This new “genre” was met with considerable apprehension. Essayist Joseph Addison wrote for The Spectator journal in the early eighteenth century around the same time that this sort of writing was emerging as a genre. His writing encapsulates societal anxieties about this new class of writing, specifically how it threatened a predominantly male patriarchal literary culture because these literary spaces were centered around the female experience. The theory that women’s status as the subordinate sex contributes to the genre’s popularity among a predominantly female audience is represented in pop culture as early as the eighteenth century.

The following passage comes from The Spectator, No. 12 (1711):

I remember last Winter there were several young Girls of the Neighborhood sitting about the Fire with my Land-lady’s Daughters, and telling stories of Spirits and Apparitions. Upon my opening the Door the young Women broke off their Discourse… they went on without minding me… Indeed they talked so long, that the Imaginations of the whole Assembly were manifestly crazed, and I am sure will be the worse for it as long as they live. (Miles 13)

The female readership of horror and the supernatural was met with suspicion and uncertainty. In the quoted passage above, Joseph Addison discusses how the women’s imaginations were “crazed” and how they told stories that will ultimately wear negatively on their consciousness. The notion that women consume narratives like this to needlessly excite their imaginations is still popular today, and the genre’s popularity is easily dismissed as vacuous. “A True Relation of the Apparition of One Mrs. Veal” likely appealed to a female audience because of the story’s representation of the female main character: Mrs. Bargrave. Mrs. Bargrave is credited as the
honest receiver of this “apparition” after male validation is provided: “This relation is Matter of Fact, and attended with such circumstance as may induce any Reasonable Man to believe it. It was sent by a Gentleman, a Justice of Peace at Maidstone in Kent, and a very Intelligent Person, to his Friend in London” (Miles pp. 6). Even in the tale’s preface, credit is given to the male providers of the story before credit is given to the woman who actually experienced the apparition’s presence; increasing the tale’s boasted honesty and reception by establishing that Mrs. Bargrave’s story was believed by educated, “reasonable” men. While the preface later also demonstrates Mrs. Bargrave’s virtue, the tale is somehow more legitimated by the inclusion of male corroboration. Mrs. Bargrave’s tale begged male attention from a female voice, and, for the most part, the story’s characters listened. Could it be possible that a woman could relate such a tale with complete honesty without being deemed crazy? “She had a Gentleman who came thirty miles to her to hear the Relation; and she had told it to a Room full of people at a time” (Miles 13). “A True Apparition of the Apparition One Mrs. Veal” goes against accepted values of authority by granting authority to a woman. The narrator continuously denounces those who question Mrs. Bargrave’s trustworthiness. Mrs. Veal’s brother, for example, tells the townspeople that Mrs. Bargrave’s dishonesty is a direct result of her bad husband who has crazed her, but the story’s narrator states that “she needs only to present her self, and it will effectually confute that Pretence” (Miles 11). Here, the story discredits male authority, and instead grants integrity to the female protagonist. According to this reading of the story, women’s interest in true crime evidently has something to do with women’s status as the subordinate sex because “A True Relation of the Apparition of One Mrs. Veal” was a tale about the potential reality of an apparition, but the story was also about merit being granted to a female voice.
Women’s fascination with these topics was thus recognized before true crime was even developed as a genre because of the developing genres’ themes of historical and female social status. In *Women's Reading in Britain, 1750–1835: A Dangerous Recreation* (1999), Jacqueline Pearson discusses society’s reception of women’s reading in Britain.

In reviews of novels, unlike other genres, questions of audience came into explicit focus, with novel reading attributed to the young, the ignorant and the idle, and especially the female. A stable and negative association was drawn between women and fiction, and in reviews, novel readers were commonly figured as female rather than the implied reader, the gentleman or the scholar of traditionally sanctioned genres. The anti-novel literature is voluminous and repetitive: the same stereotypes, like the vulnerability of the novel reading girl to seduction, and even the same words, like ‘poison’ and ‘soften’, recur compulsively. (Pearson 196)

This negative association between women and fiction was rooted in the belief that fiction reading was an idle female activity requiring no relation to reality. Educated men had no use for such superfluous literary exercises. The belief was that women enjoyed the genre because of its voyeurism, but these fiction tales were not exactly innocuous. The stereotype which Pearson discusses regarding the supposed vulnerability of novel reading women translates as women’s actual vulnerability being the weaker sex under the accepted patriarchy. Women’s reading of the genre, unbeknownst to men, was motivated by the oppressive facets of the patriarchy which were articulated by this new class of literature. Female readership of the genre invigorated widespread recognition of a number of social dilemmas related to patriarchal culture. In Ann Radcliffe’s *The Romance of the Forest* (1791), for example, the female protagonist, Adeline, continuously suffers at the hands of men in power, and her toils begin even before the novel does, as she is held
captive by a male stranger: “[He was] rather forcibly dragging along a beautiful girl who appeared to be about eighteen. Her features were bathed in tears, and she seemed to suffer the utmost distress” (Radcliffe 5). The media representation of the stereotypical “damsel in distress” echoed realities of women under the control of men. Pearson continues:

... arguments about the novel were really about larger issues, unregulated social forces, and the erosion of established hierarchies of value and authority, displaced onto a more manageable canvas, and that relocating these arguments onto the novel disguised a culture-specific issue as one allegedly of timeless universality and female sexuality.

(Pearson 196)

These “established hierarchies of value and authority” that Pearson is referencing are the presence and continued perpetuation of accepted patriarchal culture. This patriarchy is discussed within the realm of female readership of the gothic because it threatened the established “male” literary culture. In response to this threat, critics deemed novel reading a childish, idle, ignorant, and, therefore, female activity (because, you know, if women are reading it, then it must be idle and ignorant). These early assessments of Gothic literature align with Rachel Monroe’s experience at Crimecon in 2019 where she criticized males’ comments about women’s true crime consumption: “I asked him if he had a theory to explain why the CrimeCon audience was so overwhelmingly female. ‘I mean, no offense for the stereotype, but I think you all like the drama’” (Monroe 6)). Pearson, however, posits that the literature women were enthralled with was so popular because it went against the grain of several societal complications including values of authority, female sexuality, and accepted stereotypes. In *The Romance of the Forest*, Radcliffe details the objectification of Adeline’s character as she is controlled and deceived by the various male figures in the story. Eventually, Adeline’s defiance and resistance wins against
the authority of the domineering male figures. She refuses to be a mistress or a wife and does not comply with the deceptive male characters holding power over her. Instead, she plots her escape, and the novel ends with the male antagonist poisoning himself. The Gothic tale ultimately exposes the fraudulence of sanctioned patriarchal authority and unmasks the terrors of male cruelty, preferring the exhibition of human barbarism over supernatural horrors just as the modern true crime narrative problematizes women’s position as the substandard sex.

*The Romance of the Forest*, however, was not the first Gothic novel. The first officially designated “Gothic” novel written by Horace Walpole, *The Castle of Otranto* (1764), while influential, was not what popularized the gothic genre. The novel seemed to be more about the supernatural, or the fantastic, as opposed to being a novel that pioneered a new genre. The novel may have alleged authenticity in its preface and Walpole did illuminate women’s plight under patriarchal society, but the narrative itself lacks realistic explanation:

Hippolita! Replied a hollow voice: camest thou to this castle to seek Hippolita?- And then the figure, turning slowly round, discovered to Frederic the fleshless jaws and empty sockets of a skeleton, wrapt in a hermit’s cowl. Angels of grace, protect me! Cried Frederic recoiling. Deserve their protection, said the spectre. Frederic, falling on his knees, adjured the phantom to take pity on him. (Walpole 98)

In the fantastic mode, wild, shocking, and ludicrous combinations of events are executed without pause. I find it difficult to link *The Castle of Otranto* to modern true crime because, in plot and character development, the novel more closely resembles a Shakespearean play than even the earliest true crime novel, *In Cold Blood* (1966):

As significant as Horace Walpole’s originating gestures in *The Castle of Otranto* (1764) undoubtedly were, it was Ann Radcliffe (1764-1823), more than any other writer, who
consolidated, enriched, and developed the Gothic mode during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. For many, in fact, her name was synonymous with the ‘first wave’ of Gothic writing in its entirety. (Hughes 542)

While Radcliffe’s work, too, is repeatedly compared to Shakespeare’s, her ability to facilitate readers’ responses of terror and fear was beyond the supernatural principles of Shakespeare or Walpole. Radcliffe developed this mode of the Gothic by pioneering a new direction for the genre; a direction that could more closely be associated with reality. This is not to say that Horace Walpole was irrelevant by any means to the Gothic movement, but a focus on Ann Radcliffe will become justified in connection to the Gothic as it later transitions to detective fiction. In “The Encyclopedia of the Gothic,” experts in Gothic studies trace relevant transformations in the genre: “Using the device of a narrative transcribed in an ancient manuscript, Radcliffe reveals her indebtedness to such earlier Gothic writers as Horace Walpole” (Hughes 544). In her first successful novel, The Romance of the Forest, she quotes Walpole and Shakespeare, underscoring their influence on her own ideas.

Are these woods
More free from peril than the envious court? -Shakespeare (Radcliffe 42)

How these antique towers and vacant courts
Chill the suspended soul! -Horace Walpole (Radcliffe 20)

Radcliffe, too, used elements of the supernatural (i.e. ghost stories) that bolstered the same fiction devices used by Walpole and Shakespeare. Her use of such plot devices, though, can be distinguished from earlier writers because of one important feature. This feature would come to be known as the “explained supernatural” (Hughes 544). Radcliffe uses elements of
supernaturalism in her text, but she turns the narrative by eventually giving ghostly activity a rational, material explanation.

Radcliffe’s intentions in using the “explained supernatural” were to terrify rather than horrify. The distinction between the two is slight, but to horrify in the context of this literature is to shock, while to terrify would be to scare; thereby instigating a sense of genuine fear as opposed to mere surprise. In *Monster, She Wrote: the Women Who Pioneered Horror & Speculative Fiction*, Lisa Kroger illustrates the function of Radcliffe’s fiction: “Ghosts are spooky, but the true threat was one she saw in the real world: men who were willing to abuse women in order to gain wealth. Patriarchy and greed… Her particular (and incredibly popular) take on the female Gothic focused on the abuses of women suffered at the hands of men, especially through traditional institutions like marriage” (Kroger 2019). Radcliffe offered fiction with real world implications that women could identify with. Her literature, along with that of her countless imitators, popularized the explained supernatural in literature while appealing to a specifically female audience. By offering rational, material explanation, Radcliffe’s Gothic illustrations embodied a sense of realism which would lead to later authors’ use of reason, analysis and logic to appeal to readers.

Gothic literature and true crime narratives reinforce the importance of analysis, critical thinking, ratiocination, and the dissolution of possibilities that leaves readers to speculate. With the “explained supernatural,” Radcliffe pioneered a new class of writing that successfully accomplished these genre characteristics in fiction, laying a storytelling framework which would later translate to detective fiction and true crime narratives.
Ann Radcliffe’s *The Romance of the Forest* (1791) was her first major success. Unlike Walpole or Shakespeare, Radcliffe gives the Gothic genre a stronger relation to reality, which is precisely why “A True Relation of the Apparition of One Mrs. Veal” more directly precedes Radcliffe’s fiction than *The Castle of Otranto*. She asks readers to analyze and interpret the text by leaving questions unanswered that instigate investigative thought before a rational truth is realized. Her “explained supernatural” framed Poe’s detective fiction later discussed in chapter three. One example in *The Romance of the Forest* of this “explained” supernatural is shortly after La Motte’s son, Louis, successfully seeks out his mother and father in the abbey in the woods. He assures his parents that the abbey is a safe sanctuary from persecutors of his father because of the locals’ impression that the sanctuary was corrupted with spirits. The La Motte’s and Adeline had not considered this thoroughly upon procuring suitable living within the structure because of their dire need for stable housing. La Motte, however, had been made aware of a possible murder in the home, but did not respond to the spectacle with shock, superstitious thoughts, or otherwise sudden outburst, as a reader might expect in *The Castle of Otranto*, for instance. Instead, the following scene unfolds:

> Upon the ground within it, stood a large chest, which he went forward to examine, and lifting the lid, he saw the remains of a human skeleton. Horror struck upon his heart, and he involuntarily stepped back. During a pause of some moments, his first emotions subsided. That thrilling curiosity which objects of terror often excite in the human mind impelled him to take a second view of this dismal spectacle. La Motte stood motionless as he gazed: the object before him seemed to confirm the report that some person had been formerly murdered in the abbey. At length, he closed the chest. (Radcliffe 66)
If this had been a scene unfolding in a Shakespearean play, or a Walpole novel, a reader might expect something of a more fantastical outcome in a scene wherein a character is uncovering skeletal remains, but, to Radcliffe, the horror resides in the wonder of speculation and in explainable, yet unrealized facts, as opposed to the animation of the supernatural. Radcliffe’s use of the phrase “thrilling curiosity” embodies what people generally experience when presented with horror. Specifically, people feel a sense of thrilling curiosity when presented with the unknown. The unknown “other” in this case is death. Uncovering the corpse elicits a sense of uncanniness in La Motte that Radcliffe is able to facilitate without dramatic spectacle or frenzy. “Uncanny” in the sense of the Gothic genre and even modern true crime media refers to something that is psychologically familiar in a mysterious way and often makes an individual experience unease or astonishment. This scene can be contrasted with the aforementioned scene from The Castle of Otranto which details a different skeleton appearing to a person. Walpole’s skeleton delivers ominous threats, and is referred to as a “spectre” or a “phantom” (Walpole 98). Radcliffe’s skeleton scene, however, comes and goes without much consequence. The scene precedes Radcliffe’s logical explanation of the unnerving atmosphere in the abbey. Louis remarks on the notability of the abbey: “‘Besides,’ resumed Louis, ‘this abbey is protected by a supernatural power, and none of the country people dare approach it” (Radcliffe 83). Peter, the La Motte’s servant, adds to Louis’ statement: “‘Please you, my young master,’ said Peter, who was waiting in the room, ‘we were frightened enough the first night we came here, and I myself, God forgive me! Thought the place was inhabited by devils, but they were only owls, and such like, after all’” (Radcliffe 83). Louis goes on to explain his recent findings; that a person had experienced the misfortune of being locked away in a room within the abbey before unfairly meeting his death, and that the specter of the person was always watching over the ruins. No
explanation or background for this specter is provided, but Radcliffe comes through the text here to employ her new idea; that the supernatural is explainable, rational, and, thus, not supernatural at all. The belief in such supernatural occurrences lies in superstition, fear, and even boredom. Here, Louis provides such explanation:

... to make the story more wonderful, for the marvelous is the delight of the vulgar, they added, that there was a certain part of the ruin, from whence no person, that had ever dared to explore it, had ever returned. Thus, people who have few objects of real interest to engage their thoughts conjure up for themselves imaginary ones. (Radcliffe 84)

Louis’ explanation seems to echo the sentiments of Joseph Addison discussed in the previous chapter. Addison had observed women’s relentless fascination with imaginary fancies and faux tales of apparitions, declaring that they conjured up imaginary stories for entertainment which would ultimately wear negatively on their consciences. Radcliffe’s Gothic, however, suspends the belief that women are senselessly entertained by imaginary fantasies out of boredom because Radcliffe’s fiction did not need imaginary fantasies to adjure female readership. Radcliffe emphasizes the challenges women inherently face because of their vulnerable status. The Gothic terrors invoked by that reality through the “explained supernatural” is enough to challenge patriarchal structures because Radcliffe invoked terror using realistic characters with tangible realities; realities that functioned as more than fiction in their authenticity. In Horace Walpole’s *The Castle of Otranto*, there are no genuine questions about the corporal validity of the supernatural spectacles. Radcliffe, however, acknowledges the possibility of the spectacles and simultaneously denounces them as fantastical and fictional without derailing her textual theme of the gothic. Rather, she maintains the gothic genre in other ways. For Radcliffe, the true gothic terrors did not lie in the ominous, eerie supernatural, but terror could instead be perceptible
through real human action, and through speculation. She asks readers and her characters to ponder supernatural possibilities without imposing supernaturalism in the text. Instead, she explains away unrealistic possibilities; preferring outcomes which may terrify, but simultaneously justify, her haunting scenes.

A moment in *The Romance of the Forest* which illustrates this web of gothic terrors interwoven with the logical dissolution between the supernatural possibilities and reality unfolds in chapter five. Louis is pursuing his father in the woods:

In advancing, he perceived the ruins of a small building, which, from the traces that remained, appeared to have been a tomb… He remained with his eyes fixed on the spot, and presently saw a figure arise under the arch of the sepulchre. It started, as if on perceiving him, and immediately disappeared. Louis, though unused to fear, felt at that moment an uneasy sensation, but it almost immediately struck him that it was La Motte himself. (Radcliffe 89)

This scene conveys the impression of some supernatural presence. What would typically follow is the character’s fear, and thus readers’ fear for the character. However, Radcliffe writes that Louis rationalizes this differently; he rationalizes that he must have simply seen his father out in the woods. When he returns to the abbey, however, he sees his mother, father, and Adeline, all present, and suddenly his rationale for what he saw in the woods is unexplainable. Radcliffe inserts these subtle notes of fear successfully without the interruption of hysteria caused by the fantastic supernatural within her narrative.

In addition to paving the way for detective fiction and subsequent tales of true crimes, the “explained supernatural” also offered audiences semblance of specifically female social dilemmas. *The Romance of the Forest*, as its title implies, is surrounded by an air of love.
Adeline falls in love with Theodore Peyron; a friend of Louis La Motte, but Louis himself is bewitched by Adeline’s beauty and soft demeanor. Adeline treats Louis’ advances with common civility as opposed to returning his affections (“... his look and manner seemed to express the tenderest interest… her feeble smiles only added a peculiar softness to her air” (Radcliffe 136)). Meanwhile, Phillipe, the marquis and owner of the abbey, is after Adeline as well, feigning affection for her to Pierre while actually planning to kill her to collect the money she is meant to inherit.

When examining only this general plot summary of character relationships, it can be easy to overlook the gothic elements of the book, especially since the novel ends with a somewhat fairy-tale-like perception. However, Radcliffe’s use of romance in the novel does more than bring about a senseless air of love. It invigorates female audience fascination by emphasizing a specifically female dilemma. Not only does the “explained supernatural” underline women’s plight, but, through Adeline, the novel also challenges the social structures which perpetuate women’s subordinate position. Adeline’s trials and tribulations as the valued symbol of womanly beauty in the text undoubtedly appeal to a female audience because Adeline’s experience as the weak damsel translated to real life expectations of female sexuality and belonging. This new and realistic form of the Gothic represented ways in which the social order could, and must, be questioned. Through Adeline’s refusal to submit to gender hierarchies, Radcliffe suspends the belief that women ought to surrender some part of their autonomy to patriarchal structures. This provocative suspension of normal categories of belonging is what implored women to read novels like The Romance of the Forest. Radcliffe’s “explained supernatural” thus also functioned as a microcosm for the female experience. The real terrors were not in phantoms and spectres. Terror was overt in the accepted social order and Radcliffe acknowledged the dangers of
patriarchal hierarchies of value and authority. This reality did more to terrify readers than stillborn surprises and exorbitantly shocking scenes. By figuring the male as “other” and demonstrating the dangers of a patriarchal desire for money and sex based on greed, Radcliffe inspired a new literary tradition that can now be coupled in conversation with modern true crime media tropes.

Adeline is ultimately rescued and she and Theodore are able to finally go on in happiness. This happy ending is only realized, however, by the preceding suspense, dread, and anxious psychological terrain of the novel. Everything is given reason and explanation. This is in opposition to what was previously expected from a Gothic novel because authors like Walpole, for example, would instead employ the shock value of theatrical displays of horror to convey anxieties within the text (e.g. a literal giant helmet falling from the sky and killing a person, as this described scene unfolds in *The Castle of Otranto*). When Adeline is made aware of Pierre’s conspiracy to deliver her to the Marquis in exchange for his freedom from creditors and persecutors, Adeline ponders the following: “To discover depravity in those whom we have loved, is one of the most exquisite tortures to a virtuous mind, and the conviction is often rejected before it is finally admitted” (Radcliffe 141). The characters’ realities are palpable, explainable, and rational. Through Adeline’s subordinate status, the genre reflects on patriarchal hierarchies and the otherness of human cruelty, and in her refusal to submit to her assumed status, Adeline goes against the social order.

The realities proposed by Shakespeare and Walpole were intangible in their supernaturalism and subsequent unexplainable violations of basic laws of nature. This is what distinguishes Radcliffe’s writing from its antecedents. Radcliffe’s predecessors did not exploit the true psychology of human nature in their gothic writings with real world expectations. She
did not directly assert that there was a supernatural realm to be feared or expected. While her narratives certainly suggest supernatural possibilities, they do not boast definitive authenticity of ghostly appearances. While Shakespeare, too, certainly wrote tales depicting violence against women, Radcliffe’s “explained supernatural” facilitates a sense of reality that mirrored, and challenged, women’s social position by demonstrating the inquitous nature of patriarchal structures. For the first time in Gothic literary history, the psychology of human malice is explored without the fantastic mode or apparitions. Radcliffe adopted her predecessors concepts of fear and anticipation, but provided realistic context by emphasizing the reality of human cruelty and weakness; specifically highlighting male cruelty and subsequent female weakness. Radcliffe’s fiction demonstrates how people have more reason to fear one another than supernatural forces.

While the “explained supernatural” was a Gothic approach credited to Radcliffe, something that Radcliffe undoubtedly did share with Shakespeare, Defoe, and Walpole was the concept of “otherness.” Using logic and reasoning as the backbone of the redesigned Gothic, Radcliffe figured the male as “other.” Literary representation of inequality between the sexes did not begin with the Gothic or with Radcliffe, but this new version of the gothic excluded the outlandish, wondrous, and seemingly impulsive inclinations of previous gothic works. Radcliffe pioneered a genre that increased female readership and she is unquestionably at the heart of the first wave of female Gothic authors (Kroger). Because of its ratiocination of terror and formidable representation of women, this distinguishing style of gothic writing is what paved the way for the production and exploitation of true crime media. Before true crime, though, gothic authors like Radcliffe influenced the development of another new genre; detective fiction.
Chapter 3- Detective Fiction

Radcliffe’s terrifying phenomena would mark a turning point in fictional literary history. To this day, writers are influenced by her sensibility of terrifying prose. A notable author who was greatly influenced by Radcliffe was Edgar Allan Poe. The macabre stories of Poe’s psychologically haunted characters have contributed to the canon as works of early American Gothic fiction. Poe is widely and indisputably recognized as the father of detective fiction.

Radcliffe established a literary landscape that challenged values of patriarchal authority that encouraged women to speculate and question their social positions. Poe’s stories, too, ask audiences to examine cultural norms and question societal truths about hierarchies of authority. Part of what may be the appeal of true crime has to do with the same questions. Maybe we consume true crime, not because we are bored with the ordinary, prosaic motions of every day, but because it forces us to ask critical questions concerning humanity. Perhaps it is these questions that led Poe to write the first work of detective fiction ever written: “The Murders in the Rue Morgue” (1841) which introduced the fictional detective, C. Auguste Dupin.

Poe presented Dupin as an ingenious, independent, reclusive figure who only left his chambers at night to observe his surroundings privately and undetected by others. These first detective fiction stories pioneered nearly every convention of the modern mystery tale. Poe engineered the whole package- the maverick sleuth, the traditionally conventional sidekick, the unlikely villain, the false clue, and the wrongfully accused suspect. Detective fiction stands as a literary milestone along the timeline of true crime’s development.

Opening with a lengthy explanation of the importance of analytical thinking, the story’s narrator introduces Dupin as he reads newspaper accounts of a double murder on a fictional Parisian street that baffled police and investigators. Poe consistently stresses the importance of
analytical thinking. “The analytical power should not be confounded with simple ingenuity; for while the analyst is necessarily ingenious, the ingenious man is often remarkably incapable of analysis” (Poe 1841). The popularity of this new genre may be attributed to his focus on logical reasoning just as Radcliffe’s characters focused on logic over the fantastic. Poe posits that people enjoy the faculty of analysis, not only for the sake of discovery and justice, but for the utilization of investigative thought. “As the strong man exults in his physical ability, delighting in such exercises as call his muscles into action, so glories the analyst in that moral activity which disentangles” (Poe 1841). Poe goes on to describe how even the most minute and trivial occupations of thought bring pleasure to the analyst. Dupin’s debut in the world of literature is in the first ever tale of detective fiction, a tale that expanded on Radcliffe’s logic and analysis with ratiocination and deductive reasoning, guiding readers through Detective Dupin’s hypotheses, examinations and conclusions. According to the newspaper accounts, a banker is falsely accused of murdering a mother-daughter pair before Dupin concludes, based on evidence and analysis, that not only was the banker innocent, but that the murders could not have been committed by any human at all. He surmises that only an “Ourang-Outang” could have had the strength to murder the women and violate the bodies in the way that they were found. Readers are able to revel in the procedures of the brilliant detective, living vicariously through the protagonist’s impressive ingenuity and proficiency in analysis.

While the story was fictional, the text had an air of credibility because of the murder’s presentation through newspaper accounts: “The following paragraphs arrested our attention. ‘EXTRAORDINARY MURDERS. — This morning, about three o’clock, the inhabitants of the Quarter St. Roch were aroused from sleep by a succession of terrific shrieks’” (Poe 1841). Poe continues quoting the “newspaper” for several pages, detailing every bit of police investigation
and witness accounts before Dupin and the narrator are able to make conclusions based on their own investigative inquiries. In detailing the events as though they actually happened via newspaper reports, Poe grants the fictional tale a sense of authenticity. This introductory style of storytelling echoes Defoe’s narrative style in “A True Relation of the Apparition of One Mrs. Veal,” but Defoe introduces the tale as if it were received from individuals via a credible letter. The trustworthiness granted to the relation of events in both tales is what ultimately ushers in the popularity of the detective fiction genre. The advancement of this genre and the way it is presented would become an essential event along the timeline of true crimes’ development.

In the sequel to “The Murders in the Rue Morgue,” Poe took Dupin’s powers of deductive reasoning and ratiocination to new heights. In pursuing an idea that would sell, Poe decided to take the true crime case of Mary Rogers in New York to write another story of detective fiction which would use the true crime’s details and Dupin’s brilliant analytical processes to “solve” the mystery. Poe took a true crime, and transposed the tale onto a fictional plane, aligning details of the faux crime to the true crime exactly. While the real crime remains unsolved to this day, Poe used his fictional detective and fictional details to conjure up real possibilities and theories about the murder. He placed the New York case in Paris, and the mystery of the Mary Rogers murder case became “The Mystery of Marie Roget” (1842).

At age sixteen, Mary Rogers of New York took a position as a shop-girl behind a cigar counter in “Anderson’s Tobacco Emporium.” In 1838, her attractiveness came to the attention of the owner, John Anderson, who offered her the position with the idea that her fascinating manners and looks would draw in customers, and encourage patrons to linger. Her presence did, indeed, draw in much business, and the shop soon came to be recognized as something of a “literary salon” (Stashower pp. 17). Washington Irving, James Fenimore Cooper, and many
aspiring poets began to frequent the shop; at least one of whom even wrote poetry about Rogers. When Mary’s half-brother came into some money and learned of Mary’s notoriety in the tobacco shop, he resolved to earn her keep to get her out of the shop, and provided both Mary and his mother with funds to move into a boarding house on Nassau Street. Mary promptly seized the opportunity to cease employment behind the tobacco counter and, instead, became the attraction of several admirers near her new home. She became engaged to one Daniel Payne; a cork cutter who Mary’s mother deemed an unsuitable match for her daughter. On July 5, 1841, Mary told Payne that she would be visiting some family members. Three days later, however, floating in the Hudson River in Hoboken, New Jersey, police found her corpse (Stashower pp. 29). The murder remains unsolved.

In “The Mystery of Marie Roget” (1842), Poe details the exact circumstances surrounding the real-life death of Mary Rogers in an attempt to explore parts of the case that had not been widely considered. Using fiction, Poe studied the riveting facets of the case, pinpointed flaws in official investigative inquiries, and offered his own conclusions through Detective Dupin. Convinced that the story would excite public attention, Poe used Dupin’s analytic processes to sift through the known information about the real New York case and provide possible solutions to the fictional Parisian mystery. The result of “The Mystery of Marie Roget” was a unique form of synthesis. Life, art, fact and fiction converged and for the first time, entertainment was blended with a real murder.

“The Mystery of Marie Roget” was written under the notion that Dupin’s unique ratiocination was possible through information written in newspaper reports. Using newspaper reports proved effective in elucidating a text that could function as more than fiction. By basing a fictional story on a real case, Poe took an essential step in the direction toward the modern true
crime narrative. Like “A True Relation of the Apparition of One Mrs. Veal” (1706), “The Mystery of Marie Roget” simulates documentary authenticity; once again raising the question: Is the story fictional or is it a work of journalism? In reality, Poe’s story was fictional, but its borrowed elements from a real-life crime transposed fact into fiction in a way that expanded upon the rationality of Radcliffe’s fiction by giving it substantive, authentic context.

“The Mystery of Marie Roget” fits along the development timeline of the modern true crime narrative, and grapples with social issues that are specific to women. Mary Rogers was the epitome of womanhood to the people of New York City during the time that the real-life story was circulating in the media. She had a “dark smile” and men would “bask in her presence” (Stashower 4). Poe could have used any murder investigation in his detective fiction, but this one was sensationalized because of the context of the life of Mary Rogers. Her status as the object of men’s affections represented the reality of women all over the city. “The New York Morning Herald expressed an earnest desire that ‘something should be done instantly to remedy the great evil consequent upon very beautiful girls being placed in cigar and confectionery stores’” (Stashower 4). Mary Rogers’ death brought the fears of this newspaper passage to reality. The crime brought attention to women’s plight: It is dangerous to be a woman, alone, and it is especially dangerous to be the object of men’s affections.

As Radcliffe figured the male as “other,” so, too, did Poe in the tale, “The Mystery of Marie Roget.” By contending with social problems that confronted men’s status as the superior sex, Poe’s story acknowledged the inevitable vulnerability of women everywhere; appealing to a female audience who knew this to be true already, but rarely heard it acknowledged. Poe highlights Mary Rogers’ innocence and weakness by detailing the bruises about the neck of her body, the torn dress indicating her sexual assault, and the knots used to tie her that could have
only been tied by a sailor, and not a lady. Her subordinate position represented that of every woman, and this reality seemed to be becoming an increasingly popular subject of interest in mainstream media. The horrific visuals which Poe generously expounds contributes to the tale’s popularity in its continuum of the Gothic’s depictions of violence, but also in the way it problematizes women’s position. Why were women so victimized and what could be done to remedy the corruption caused by gender hierarchies? Poe’s publication challenged gender hierarchies and thus appealed to women by using real horrors to demonstrate how patriarchal structures ultimately fail society.

Mary Rogers’ murder brought attention to women’s predicament, but it also demonstrated how women’s predicament becomes much more significant when the population of individuals in an area is great. The birth of the modern city, while productive for industrial progress and monetary success, was also demonstrative of the human tendency toward violence and crime. Mary Rogers’ case, along with the cases of innumerable criminal acts being carried out in cities, became representative of urban life. Poe’s tales coincided with the beginnings of the modern city, and his fiction narrates the fears and expectations of life within these spaces. Between “The Murders in the Rue Morgue” and “The Mystery of Marie Roget,” Poe’s popular fiction contributed to society’s newfound understanding of spaces wherein large populations permitted an increase in crime. Subsequently, these spaces that crime inhabited became especially known for brutality and disorder. Newspapers latched onto Mary Rogers’ story as a means to question humanity and morality. The Herald declared the following sentiments regarding her murder: “New York is disgraced and dishonored in the eyes of the civilized world, unless one great, one big, one strong moral movement be made to reform and reinvigorate the administration of criminal justice, and to protect the lives and property of its inhabitants from public violence and
public robbery. Who will make the first move in this truly great moral reform?” (Stashower 5). Poe’s Marie Roget, compounded with society-wide calls to action, challenged what is still a persistent, uneven gender dichotomy. True crime incited action for public and moral reform within cities. Poe’s fictional microcosms of real city life conveyed an understanding that violence in these spaces was inevitable, and for women in particular, the dangers of urban life were even more perceptible. The birth of the detective narrative is thus inherently connected to the rise of city living, and the circulation of such narratives brought about a desire for reform. As aforesaid, Poe’s stories ask readers to interrogate and examine the soundness of societal truths. In the fiction narrative, the new “truth” of humanity’s sensibilities lies in the character of the city. The city’s characteristics consisted of densely populated communities and buildings, shops and recreational facilities galore, and, above all, violence. Violence against women in particular was even more conspicuous. The more people there are, the more perceptible the hierarchies of authority are, and the more attention is given to the inherent injustice of gender hierarchies. The motifs of Poe’s detective fiction correspond with motifs in modern true crime narratives which force us to ask critical questions regarding society.

To present the fictionalized version of Rogers’ story, Poe brought the analytical Detective Auguste C. Dupin back onto the page from his previous work of detective fiction. The faculty of analysis, however, is something that seems to appeal to men and women alike, and by coupling intricate ratiocination with ongoing social issues, Poe inadvertently created a media demand for stories that accomplished both. What he did not know was that, centuries later, there would be hundreds of thousands of outlets for the circulation of crime stories engineered using the same principle components of his pioneering genre.
Poe was inspired to write these stories of ratiocination in part because of the automaton phenomenon known as the “Turk” or the “Automaton Chess Player.” The inner workings of the machine were said to outsmart the best of human chess players and defy explanation. While Poe worked for the *Southern Literary Messenger*, he sought to determine whether the machine was a hoax or a legitimate piece of evidence for humanity’s ingenuity.

Poe was determined to clear his mind of any preconceptions about how the device might work, and Dupin, Poe’s detective, would take much the same approach to the problem of Mary Rogers... ‘Maelzel’s Chess-Player’ offers a clear template for the deductive thinking that Poe would shortly use to great effect: a careful elaboration of the background of the case, a step-by-step recitation of the known facts, and a cunning conclusion based on an imaginative leap. (Stashower 63)

The chess playing machine’s elaborate mechanisms and people’s interest in these mechanisms told Poe what people were interested in: Analysis. The question of humanity’s motives, capabilities, and rationale is unquestionably at the heart of Poe’s work. The invention of detective fiction invigorated people’s interest in such human psychological questions by emphasizing the importance of analysis and critical thinking. These same questions of human sensibilities were employed by Radcliffe when she introduced the explained supernatural. Radcliffe established a non-supernatural form of Gothic fiction that depicted human beings, rendered monstrous by their passions and obsessions, as the ultimate source of terror (Bailey 2010).

Influenced by Shakespeare, Defoe, and Walpole, Radcliffe’s lasting legacy on the Gothic genre galvanized the route towards the analytical processes of Poe. Poe, in turn, invigorated public fascination with these analytical processes by using real horrors to create fiction which
would later lead to a style of crime storytelling that mimicked detective fiction style narratives, but used real crime to gain audiences attention. The pioneering narrative styles that developed out of the Gothic era became the genesis for the entire modern true crime genre.
Chapter 4- Interrogating Women’s Fascination with Modern True Crime

The established timeline between Gothic literature and modern true crime underscores elements between the two narrative styles that are consistent. It also demonstrates, from Defoe to Poe to modern true crime, how the genre has developed by replicating narrative components that have proved popular with audiences. The themes of terror, sexual violence, anger, and social positioning of the sexes across the timeline leading up to modern true crime are particularly interesting to women. By shining a light into the darkest corners of humanity, true crime both informs and questions society. This is undoubtedly a reason for its popularity and success as a genre even if we trace it back to original gothic literature. The genre’s continually increasing popularity over the centuries has led to innumerable outlets for the exploitation of true crime media. The unobstructed availability of information regarding true crime and the prevalence of true crime media culture has created a nation of crime pseudo-experts. The average individual is made to feel complicit in solving mysteries. Criminalistic practices and forensic techniques are brought into the home, domesticating true crime, making it commonplace, and making it another form of entertainment that is just as real, or unreal, as other forms of entertainment.

Whatever the reason for true crime’s continuous rise in popularity, its popularity has bred a society that understands violent crime and how the justice system responds. In 1988, the first true crime documentary series, *Unsolved Mysteries*, was released. Making use of a reenactment format, the show invited the average person to contribute to fighting crime by encouraging call-in tips. The show represented a departure from the true crime trope of narrating solved cases, and instead maintained focus on a “mystery” formula of narration. While the nonfiction genre, by nature, presents interpretations of reality, and not reality itself, the show was aimed at journalistic authority in its interpretations. “[*Unsolved Mysteries*] allows the viewer to participate
in the crime, experiencing the horror and fear the victim felt, while then presenting the capture and punishment of the perpetrator as the only satisfying conclusion to such a tragedy” (Murley pp. 119). Later television programs would adopt this style of narration and, in a mimicry of reality, many of them would figure the male as “other” and women as the preyed upon victims. From a young age, women are warned against the dangers of being alone, being in the dark, and walking among strangers in public. Locking windows and doors is especially important to remember. Out of necessity, women have reason to be wary of the dangers of random, violent men. The true crime narratives that circulate are not specific to female victims, but the disparity between female victims and male victims is staggering, and certainly has something to do with female anxieties and anticipation of violence. Women accounted for roughly 70% of serial killers’ victims between 1985 and 2010, and many of the crimes were sexually motivated (Hargrove 2010).

Women’s desire for tales of death and brutality was explored by two media audience researchers and academics in 2018: Kelli Boling and Kevin Hull. They conducted a study to determine the motivations and gender implications of true crime podcast listeners. The statistics and motivations they came up with in 2018 align with the known understanding that women are the primary consumers of true crime media. “The true crime podcast audience is predominantly female (73%)” (Boling pp. 99). This is especially interesting when considering that 56% of all podcast consumers are actually male (Boling pp. 94). What attracts women in particular to these perverse pleasures? While the larger part of humankind agrees that there is something captivating by horror and violence, the larger part of humanity who is committing these acts consists of men; not women. So, why do women consume it more than men if they are outnumbered in terms of violent acts committed? Does the matter of men committing the most violent acts influence
women’s consumption of true crime media? Historically speaking, men are consistently the primary perpetrators of such acts so this question applies, not only to modern forms of crime media entertainment, but also to early forms of horror and violent entertainment including the gothic genre and early detective fiction. Women’s preoccupation with horror is both endemic and paradoxical.

The 2014 crime television show, *See No Evil*, uses testimony from police, witnesses, and families to dramatically reconstruct crimes in a reenactment format to detail how real crimes are solved. The niche of the series is to present the primary eyewitness of each crime as camera footage, and producers use real CCTV footage to detail the events of the crime before a perpetrator is realized. Even in the introduction to the docu-series, the cinematic display of female vulnerability is emphasized as a lone female walks alone down an alleyway in a red coat; tailed by a suspicious looking man before her body is splayed out on screen pre-episode (Huguet 2015). It is as though the producers of the show prologue each episode by first acknowledging female vulnerability as a primary reason for violent crimes against women. As Radcliffe taught readers with her character, Adeline, it is dangerous to be a woman, alone. It is no wonder that women are able to position themselves in these narratives. In the first episode of the first season of *See No Evil*, investigators interview people who could be likely suspects in the missing persons case of 18 year old Kelsey Smith. Kelsey left her home around 7:00 on the evening of June 2, 2007 to take a quick trip to her local Target to purchase an anniversary present for her boyfriend, but never returned. When the family finds her vehicle in a Kansas mall parking lot opposite the Target where she was supposed to have been, they phone for the police. In cases of missing or murdered persons, investigators begin by combing through the individual’s last movements, but they also look into who was close to the person to determine if they had
something to do with it. Kelsey’s boyfriend is looked into by investigators who thoroughly
cross-examine him, but to no avail. He, along with everyone close to Kelsey is cleared of having
any involvement or knowledge in her disappearance. The classic “boyfriend did it” narrative
does not work. Thus, investigators are forced to look into other leads. A narrative like that,
however, is far more terrifying because it introduces an alarming possibility: Women do not need
to be victims of those immediately around them to become targets for violence. All they need to
do is exist.

As with Radcliffe’s Adeline and Poe’s Marie Roget, Kelsey was preyed upon for being a
woman, alone. Killers predominantly target women because women are the most vulnerable and
often physically weaker than men. What is most terrifying about narratives that reveal these
truths is that people like Kelsey do not need to do anything other than exist to become a victim of
a violent crime. This may be true for men, too, but with statistics that prove women are the
primary targets of violence, it seems sensible that women are more invested in these popular
narratives detailing themes of fear and specifically female anxieties. Viewing these stories as a
form of entertainment only exacerbates that reality and validates women’s fears. Even in the
introductory clip of each See No Evil episode, the susceptibility to violence of women
everywhere is depicted in a display of female vulnerability.

Television shows like this are representative of a form of media pioneered by Edgar Allan
Poe with detective fiction. By coupling the ratiocination of detective work with ongoing social
issues, See No Evil perpetuates a media demand that focuses on the grotesqueness of male
cruelty because the dramatization of that cruelty on screen unfortunately imitates reality. What
the CCTV footage shows is Kelsey leaving the Target store, placing her items in the passenger
seat of her car, and, in a flash, a man rushes her from behind and, fifteen seconds later, her car is
seen leaving the lot (Huguet 2015). Even in broad daylight in a seemingly harmless public setting, Kelsey is vulnerable because she is a woman, alone. Her attacker, Edwin Hall, later states that he followed her around the store at a distance to make sure she was alone before staking out in the parking lot waiting for her to return to her vehicle. He said she was cute and had “nice legs” (Huguet 2015). Kelsey’s story was an international sensation and even appeared in the popular true crime television series, America’s Most Wanted before her body was discovered just four days after her disappearance. The police department investigating the case received thousands of call-in tips regarding the suspect’s identity as he was featured in the released camera footage from Target. With this case, the public eye was once again poised against an ongoing social theme: Women’s subjection to violence. As with the 1841 murder investigation of Mary Rogers, the Kelsey Smith investigation incited action. In Rogers’ case, the question was: What can be done to remedy the use of women as objects of affection behind cigar counters? In other words, what can be done to counteract women’s vulnerability? The Communications Act of 1934 was amended, because of Smith’s death, to allow cell phone providers to disclose location information regarding any subscriber who is suspected to be at risk of death or serious physical harm (Library of Congress 2016). Smith’s remains would have been located faster had this law been in effect already. Because of previous privacy policies, Verizon took four days before reluctantly giving Smith’s cell phone records to investigators. While the act was objectively a good response to such a tragedy, it does not even begin to remedy women’s trepidation as the vulnerable sex. In the case of Mary Rogers, too, the ineptitude of law enforcement was brought to light. New York City’s population of 320,000 was policed by only fifty one officers (Lankevich 1998). The circulation of true crime narratives invigorates desire
for progress. Yet, unfortunately, the social dichotomy between men as superior, and women as inferior, has yet to be rectified.

Women’s interest in these narratives is undoubtedly influenced by a desire to reverse the long standing cultural acceptance of patriarchal authority. Even merely in the introductory clip of *See No Evil*, women’s vulnerability is highlighted, but what is most interesting is the environment shown in the clip. The lone woman is clearly in a city and is forced to run down an alley in an attempt to escape her attacker. As Edgar Allan Poe featured the modern city as a treacherous space, so, too, does modern true crime. Urban spaces in particular are tied to the conventional detective story, and these spaces are inherently associated with crime and violence. Each piece of pioneering media leading up to the modern true crime narrative is somehow able to underscore the modern narratives’ themes of fear, sex, violence, cities, and vulnerability.

In 1762, one such event perpetuated these themes during a time when Gothic literature was still increasing in popularity. The city environment seemed to explicitly be the host of such disorderly happenings. The contrivance of a man by the name of Mr. William Kent led to the exploitation of a property supposed to be haunted by the ghost of his late wife, Elizabeth. The full story, which was then sensationalized, is riddled with sex, debts, and a possible murder. To briefly summarize the tale, Kent had been born one son by Elizabeth, but unfortunately she had died in childbirth. Her sister, Frances, had stayed in the home with Kent and the newborn to assist in keeping house and taking care of the child, but she and Kent soon developed a relationship that went beyond their platonic cohabitation. A series of events transpired between the couple as they separated, and had been denied marriage due to canon law, but eventually, they sought lodgings together in a house on Cock Lane in Smithfield, London (Lenora 2015). Kent was able to strike a deal with Richard Parsons— the owner of the house— and Frances
(Fanny) and Kent lived there under the guise of existing as husband and wife. Fanny became pregnant and Parsons’ twelve-year-old daughter, Elizabeth, stayed with Fanny while Kent was out of town on business. Elizabeth and Fanny slept in the same bed and the two reported to others that they heard strange noises including knocking and scratching. Mrs. Parsons attributed these sounds to a cobbler who lived next door. However, even when the cobbler was not working, the noises persisted. The residents of Cock Lane began to wonder if supernatural turmoil was at play in the Parsons home. The running theory was that Elizabeth had returned from the dead to haunt her faithless husband. When Frances was late in her pregnancy, she was taken with an illness that was officially deemed to be a case of smallpox. Before she had passed away from the illness in January of 1762, there were already “sightings” of Elizabeth’s ghost (Lenora 2015). Because of the continued supposed “hauntings” of the residence, it was believed that Kent had murdered Fanny, too, with arsenic poisoning. Fanny had also left most of her assets to Kent, much to her family’s dismay. Between Kent’s finances, sexual transgressions, and supposed supernatural affiliations, the story of the Cock Lane Ghost excited media attention and attracted innumerable spectators. Suspicions of Kent’s possible misdeeds stirred about. Tales with themes of male deceit, seduction, terror, and death, were just as popular three hundred years ago as they are today. Edgar Allan Poe, too, furnished his tales with the same constituents in his detective fiction that would inspire modern true crime narratives.

Although the publications *See No Evil* and “The Mystery of Marie Roget” are centuries apart, they both perpetuate these same themes that satiate a media demand for tales demonstrative of women’s enduring social position. The origins of women’s vulnerability lie in the beginning of humankind, and the modern city only exacerbates that vulnerability. One of the “newspaper articles” from Poe’s detective fiction tale details the last sighting of Marie Roget,
“Mademoiselle Roget left her mother’s house on Sunday morning… From that hour, nobody is proven to have seen her… On Wednesday noon, at twelve, a female body was discovered afloat on the shore of the Barriere du Roue” (Poe 1842). Based on her body’s level of decomposition, it was presumed that the murder must have taken place shortly after Marie left her mother’s home, but the article goes on to say, “It is folly to suppose that the murder could have been consummated soon enough to have enabled her murderers to throw the body in the river before midnight. Those who are guilty of such horrid crimes choose darkness rather than light’” (Poe 1842). Just as the murder of Mary Rogers was assumed to have been committed at night, so, too, does the television series See No Evil perpetuate the dangers of being a woman, alone, in the cover of darkness, in a vast city. The dangers of the city, as an element of fiction, mimics reality; preparing readers- particularly women- to inhabit and navigate such spaces with the utmost caution.

In a previous chapter on the origins of modern true crime narratives beginning with the rise of the apparition narrative, Joseph Addison was quoted as being concerned with women’s interest in narratives that would needlessly excite their worst imaginations. Women’s reading of these pioneering narratives, however, was motivated by the oppressive facets of patriarchism. One of the ways in which women are able to incite change is by promoting and circulating these narratives which detail the terrors women face on a daily basis. Whether or not any given woman is faced with violence as a result of merely existing, nearly all women recognize their own vulnerable status and subsequent oppression. Despite historic change (i.e. new laws and regulations aimed at preventing or solving cases of violence and crime), a psychic cultural memory has been imprinted on women century after century, and this memory continues to motivate behavior and beliefs. It also motivates interest in true crime because narratives exposing
the harmful, and yet accepted, patriarchal ideologies, allow for women to feel both validated and motivated in their plight to obtain social equality.

A popular Instagram account, “Girls Against Oppression,” recently made a post about responses that men give to rejection to display the realities that women face as objects of men’s desire. As we know from Radcliffe and Poe, it is dangerous to be the object of men’s affections, and that reality is still painfully perceptible today. Women do not need to be victims of physical violence to understand that they are constantly at risk of random violence. The viral Instagram post is a thread of eight different photos and videos in an attempt to raise awareness about the cruelty of men’s entitlement to women’s bodies. The first video in the thread was taken by a woman alone in a Walmart parking lot at night. As one of the most regularly used outdoor spaces in modern society, the parking lot, too, is an urban space that women are taught to be wary of. The case of Kelsey Smith, for example, unfortunately serves as evidence of the dangers of a seemingly safe environment, even in broad daylight. Poe, by introducing urban spaces as a new character in fiction, established the dangers of environments like this. Two centuries later, however, the precariousness of these specific territories is still distinguishable and familiar. A man asks the lone woman a slew of questions for over a minute such as “Do you have a boyfriend?,” “Are you single?,” “Can I have your Instagram?,” “Twitter?,” “Can I see your dog?,” and “Can I have your phone number?” (GAO 2021). In response to every single one of the man’s advances, the woman replies with “I’m good, you can go.” The man will not leave her alone and with each harassing question, he gets audibly more angry with the woman’s lack of interest in him. As the woman is simply trying to go about her business and get her groceries into her car, the man asks “Is this your car?” before screaming “F*** your car!” and slamming a shopping cart into it; leaving behind a massive dent and several scratches. The woman remains calm
throughout the exchange, as she is probably trying to keep the situation peaceful, but mutters “I hate being a girl” before the footage is cut (GAO 2021). In another video of the same post, a woman is walking around her ransacked apartment showing her home in complete disarray; displaying broken mirrors, broken glass, liquids spewed all around, and the like. The apartment looks like someone went through it with a baseball bat, smashing everything in sight. She is describing the events of the evening leading up to the mess. She and her roommate had been at a bar and met a couple of people who they decided to invite over to their home for a night cap. One of the men made sexual advances to her friend and the friend declined to engage. In response, the woman recording the mess had told the man that he needed to stop because he did not have consent. The man became “very angry” and began to quickly move through the apartment, breaking multiple glass vases, mirrors, decorations, and even went into their fridge to pour milk all over their kitchen (GAO 2021). The rest of the Instagram thread consists of headlines of true reports of women being victimized as a result of them rejecting mens’ advances: “Woman stabbed to death for rejecting romantic advances, 13-year-old sister injured,” “A woman ignored a man’s catcalls— so he chased her down and killed her: prosecutor’s say,” “Girl, 18 is punched unconscious after telling man ‘I’m sorry, I’m not interested’” (GAO 2021). Comments on the post remark on the terrifying sense of familiarity that each thread piece bears for women. It is no wonder that these stories revealing the reality of women’s unfortunate status are most popular among female audiences. The men in these narratives unfortunately represent the fact that there is still a widespread acceptance of patriarchal privilege. This lasting societal imprint is what attracts women to narratives which detail the terrifying and timeless phenomenon as women consistently push for change.
As the true crime genre dawned on the twenty-first century, a new form of media was emerging; the podcast. True crime podcasts combine the best elements of television with the best elements of journalism. Research, presentation, and dialogue are imperative for a successful podcast, and when it comes to crime reporting, the dawning of the new century utilizes this new form to critique the previously boasted goodness of our criminal justice system. The most significant of these podcasts is hosted by Sarah Koenig of *This American Life*. Her 2014 podcast, “Serial” is one of the most downloaded podcasts of all time. According to Apple, Serial was the fastest podcast ever to reach five million downloads (Boling 2018). The contribution of this new media only raises more questions about the cultural phenomenon of women’s timeless fascination with crime. Seventy-three percent of true crime podcast listeners are women (Laing). We advocate against domestic violence and child abuse and an innumerable amount of other examples of human depravity, but simultaneously read, listen, and watch injustices unfold; thoroughly entertained in our trepidation. So, what makes modern true crime so popular?

In the first season of “Serial,” Sarah Koenig reviewed thousands of documents, police interrogations, and testimonies related to the 1999 murder investigation of high school senior, Hae Min Lee from Baltimore County, Maryland. Lee’s ex-boyfriend, Adnan Syed is charged and convicted based almost entirely on the testimony of one witness. Koenig dedicated over a year to researching this case in an attempt to discover what really happened to Lee. Because of the scant forensic evidence, possible prejudices and sketchy accounts of what happened, many believe that Lee did not receive justice, and the wrong person might be in prison. Syed’s conviction was based largely on testimony from another classmate who stated that Syed was bitter towards Lee for breaking up with him. Like countless other true crime narratives with a female victim, the trope of the scorned ex-lover is applied to Lee’s case as the motive for murder. Those who
testified against Syed said he was violently angry and jealous that Lee had become romantically involved with someone else.

Whether or not Syed committed the murder, what remains clear is that society indeed admits the dangers of jealous, violent men enough to believe that any man is capable of committing violence unto others due to mere resentment. Even without concrete evidence to prove that Syed killed Lee, the trope is believable enough for a conviction and a life sentence. The horrifically common theme that men in particular can be driven to murder without any sense of rationality or reason is why women do not take walks alone without carrying pepper spray, a knife, a whistle, or anything else that may help in the event of an unexpected attacker. Women in particular are taught to be prepared for the unexpected because a simple five minute walk alone could have heinous consequences.

Part of what seems to make true crime so enticing is the “dark” nature of narratives which deal with topics that terrify and stun us. The popularity of Poe’s psychologically haunted characters and even the sensation surrounding earlier supernatural forms of the Gothic tell us so. “Macabre London” is a podcast by Nikki Druce which airs episodes about topics and criminal cases which make listeners uneasy, yet simultaneously entertained. Their website inquires: “Are you darkly inclined? Do you love a gory story? Well, you’ve come to the right place” (Druce 2021). This introductory inquiry could be the heading of any true crime or Gothic tale. The narrator of the podcast, Nikki Druce, partnered up with members of another macabre podcast, “I Think My Fridge is Haunted.” Their podcast, too, is advertised as “A very creepy podcast for very creepy people… A collection of stories and facts about the odd, the macabre, and the morbid” (Druce 2021).
Sabina Nessa’s five minute walk through the park led to her untimely death, and “Macabre London” responds by airing the episode, “What Sabina Nessa’s Murder Taught Us About Male Violence.” Twenty-eight year old Sabina Nessa was a primary school teacher in Lewisham, Southeast London. On the evening of September 17, 2021, she had plans to meet a friend at a local bar. Getting to the bar required a short five minute walk through a public park. Although she did not show up to the bar, it was not until the next day that a dog walker found her body under a pile of dead leaves in the park. Surrounding the park are blocks of apartment buildings, shops, bars, and a large train station. The podcasters, who also live in the area of the incident, discuss how the area is new, steadily developing, and supposedly safe. As we know from the story of “The Cock Lane Ghost,” “The Mystery of Marie Roget” and See No Evil, however, women in urban spaces are inherently unsafe. They go on to discuss the man who is charged with the murder based on CCTV footage of people entering and exiting the park’s perimeter. Sabina Nessa was violently beaten to death with a long, blunt object by a random delivery driver who saw her body as an opportunity for violence.

All proceeds from the podcast are donated directly to a charity which provides education to boys and men in the hopes of eradicating violence. Many podcasts and other true crime media platforms use proceeds to donate to similar foundations with the hopes of doing more than merely entertaining audiences with stories of violence and terror. The popularity of modern true crime media thus supports the establishment of a more desirable social order which extinguishes archaic patriarchal culture. The true crime genre and its ever growing popularity has the potential to aid in this intention. Nikki Druce acknowledges the importance of such media when it comes to cases of missing and murdered women: “We need the media. We need the coverage” (Druce 2021).
The three women also briefly discuss why women feel the need to listen to, and talk about these cases. Narratives about men’s violence towards women are not described as “shocking.” Druce says it's “cathartic,” and if that catharsis is the result of women’s ability to position themselves in these narratives, then it makes sense that their interest has something to do with the one thing all women have in common: Vulnerability to men. In the aforementioned Instagram post, a man vandalized a woman’s car because she rejected his advances, but if the situation had escalated further than vandalism, would anyone at all be shocked, or would it be a story that sounds painfully familiar?

Violence against women, however, is clearly not the only aspect which ties modern true crime to Gothic literature. As aforesaid based on analysis of the genres in chapter two, a common theme between modern true crime and Gothic literature is the figuring of men as “other.” Radcliffe demonstrated, with the “explained supernatural,” that women have reason to be wary of conniving men. The Marquis’ greed in The Romance of the Forest is not dissimilar from modern true crime cases demonstrative of men’s desire for sex and money. Radcliffe’s logical narrative style galvanized the route for modern investigative narratives which parallel these themes of desire and greed. Investigative journalist, Delia D’Ambra, hosts the true crime podcast, “Park Predators.” She details crimes that happen in the cover of vast national parks. Her first episode details the horrific murder trail left by drifter Gary Michael Hilton between 2007 and 2008. Hilton is known to have killed at least four people, but at least four more are highly suspected. D’Ambra first details his murder of Meredith Emerson because this is the investigation that ultimately led to his capture. Similarly to Poe’s analysis delivered through the ingenious Detective Dupin, D’Ambra delineates the investigative processes of all law enforcement agencies involved in the investigation of Hilton’s crimes in Florida, North Carolina,
and Georgia. Law enforcement agencies in all three states shared evidence amongst themselves and even with the FBI, since Hilton operated in national parks. As Poe detailed the horrific physical evidence on the body of Marie Roget suggesting her sexual assault and confirming her as a victim of a violent homicide, so, too, does modern true crime delve into all the gory details. Hilton leads investigators to the decapitated remains of Emerson in exchange for a life sentence as opposed to the death penalty, and in his interrogation, he told police that any time he needed money, he knew someone was going to die (D’Ambra 2020). He would hold his victims captive long enough to get their ATM pin numbers, and then disguise himself and withdraw hundreds of dollars, promising the victim that they would be released eventually. He evaded police for years, but his four and a half hour long confession with police after Emerson’s murder solidifies his guilt and sends chills through both detectives and listeners as he explains his reasoning for the murders. As if his remorseless and cavalier attitude about his crimes weren’t eerie enough, he laughs and says he did what he did “for money and for sex” (D’Ambra 2020). He remains unapologetic and admits that he is a “lonely psychopath.” Money and sex, as demonstrated by Radcliffe and suggested by the Cock Lane Ghost story, are appropriate motives for murder. Men’s interest in money and sex is undoubtedly integral to women’s understanding of civilization, and it is this patriarchal greediness which attracts women to the perverse pleasures invoked through true crime media coverage.

“My Favorite Murder,” a true crime comedy podcast, offers insights into why women may be fascinated by true crime. Karen Kilgariff and Georgia Hardstark are not professional researchers on the topic of true crime. They owe the popularity of “My Favorite Murder” to its conversational tone and normalization of women’s interest in crime. Kilgariff opens the first episode: “Lets cuddle up and talk about murder… I thought I was just so weird and perverted for
loving this topic so much,” Karen begins, and Georgia continues, “And you can’t tell anyone because they’ll think you’re psychotic and into murder, which you’re not, you’re just fascinated” (Kilgariff 2016). The phenomenon of women’s interest in topics of terror and violence was explored by writers as early as Joseph Addison in the 1700s, but in these early stages of the developing modern true crime narrative, women’s reading of these topics was deemed a superfluous exercise. It was dangerous for women to “cuddle up and talk about murder,” but even in these early instances of female readership, the threat to patriarchal culture was palpable.

Were women’s imaginations truly “crazed,” as Addison explained, or were women simply interested in narratives that elucidated their problematic status in contrast to men’s dominance? Was the story of the Cock Lane Ghost popular because people were seeing ghosts, or was it popular because of the turbulent and questionable nature of Kent’s romantic relations and deceased spouses? The topic is not popular among women because women are voyeuristic or vapid and in need of entertainment, but because of our desire for justice, an innate interest in analysis, and, according to Killgariff, female anxieties surrounding being the subordinate sex. In the first episode of “My Favorite Murder,” Kilgariff and Hardstark validate the theory that women’s interest in crime is rooted in a centuries-long sanctioned patriarchal culture. From pioneering Gothic literature to detective fiction to modern true crime, the trail of women’s interest in these narratives can be traced back to this theory.

As aforesaid, Joseph Addison (1672-1719) was quoted in The Spectator journal commenting on a group of young women’s discourse concerning apparitions and spirits of the imagination. Addison says they are “crazed” and that they “love to terrify one another” (Miles pp. 15). He goes on to discuss how women are more apt to startle and have vivid imaginations. Another way to read his interpretation of these women, however, is that women, even before true
crime or detective fiction emerged as a genre, were enraptured by horror. To terrify was to entertain. Their fascination with horror and terror is not a modern phenomenon, but a persistent theme. Ann Radcliffe’s stories of terror, along with other major female horror writers of the time (i.e. Jane Austen and Emily Bronte, among others), paved the way for future forms of the genre and increased female readership in a time when women were not all commonly literate as they are today. Pioneering authors such as Radcliffe and Poe are part of the reason why literacy and horror alike have evolved into what we recognize today as modern true crime in the form of novels, television, films, and podcasts. With the true crime genre, women conceptualize their status and experiences of violence and trauma through stories that emulate these experiences. Women’s sense of catharsis undoubtedly contributes to their disproportionate interest in these narratives because the genre acknowledges the all too familiar dangers of patriarchism. Through circulation and subsequent education about tales of true crime, sexual hierarchical positions may eventually be remodeled.
Conclusion

The popularity of the modern true crime genre as we know it may be attributed to conventions and principles established in literature as early as Shakespeare. Shakespeare influenced Gothic authors like Daniel Defoe who wrote tales about apparitions and spirits, and in 1706, one of the first widely circulated pieces on the apparition narrative gained traction and was deemed “supernatural.” It boasted the authenticity of the manifestation of an event that could not be explained by scientific understanding or laws of nature, and its supposed credibility is what distinguished it from earlier works. “A True Relation of the Apparition of One Mrs. Veal,” by Daniel Defoe, offered a new contextual framework to the previously established supernatural narrative by claiming that the events within the pamphlet were entirely true. The proposed legitimacy of the story’s contents was what distinguished Defoe from Shakespeare and forced readers to ask: Is this fiction or journalism? At the time, a journalist, Joseph Addison was writing about how this new genre would certainly be harmful for women because it became clear that the genre specifically appealed to a female audience. He determined that the genre would do nothing but needlessly excite the imaginations of bored women, but failed to pin down the true cause of women’s interest in the genre. Women were not interested in the budding genre because they were fascinated by supernatural possibilities so much as they were interested in how the genre seemed to confront societal issues. Defoe’s tale granted integrity to the protagonist, Mrs. Bargrave, and the men in the story believed and accepted her tale. The men who did not believe her were dishonored, and their doubts went ignored. The possibility that a woman could beg male attention while simultaneously discrediting patriarchal authority was provocative and unorthodox, and women loved it.
From this story forward, a negative association between women and fiction was established. However, the stereotype of the fiction loving girl becoming vulnerable to seduction and corruption translated to women’s actual vulnerability as the subordinate sex under sanctioned patriarchal rule. Women were not reading the gothic genre because they sought voyeurism or because they were bored. The new genre brought social inequities to light by challenging norms and invigorating female fascination with familiar themes of sexual violence, murder, vulnerability, and fear. Such themes were most present and popular in urban spaces. Evidence for the dangers of such environments brings widespread popularity to the Gothic genre as early as the story of the Cock Lane Ghost in 1762, and became even more conspicuous with the rise of detective fiction.

These themes were especially palpable in Ann Radcliffe’s novel, *The Romance of the Forest* (1791). Her character, Adeline, is constantly at men’s will. With the exception of her eventual lover, each of these men have ill intentions as she constantly suffers at the hands of those holding power over her. Although she is the damsel in distress, Adeline refuses to be a mistress, a wife, or a murder victim. By escaping before meeting her demise and by receiving apologetic validation from the man attempting to kill her, Adeline overcomes her fate. As the object of men’s affection in the tale, Adeline could have easily been the victim of violence and deceit. Instead, she is able to quell patriarchal privilege and unveil the barbaric nature of social inequalities that place violent men on pedestals. Radcliffe was able to perpetuate these social themes while still maintaining elements of the supernatural. Defoe gave the supernatural genre a closer relation to reality by imposing a sense of authenticity onto the text, but Radcliffe took this one step further and established the “explained supernatural.” By giving supernatural occurrences material explanation, Radcliffe was able to institute a non-supernatural form of the
Gothic that still hinted at supernatural possibilities. With the explained supernatural, Radcliffe imposed a sense of uncanniness onto the text which satiated Gothic readers’ desire for transient anxiety and anticipation. As the Gothic developed later into true crime, though, this sense of familiarity within narratives depicting horrific realities would prove even more terrifying because the narratives of true crime mimic reality precisely. In fiction, Radcliffe could only simulate realistic possibilities. Adeline’s reality as the helpless damsel was more terrifying than horrific spectacles and displays of supernatural occurrences, and her role in this tale using the “explained supernatural” challenged patriarchal structures. Radcliffe preferred to emblazon her text with the horrors that people—specifically, men—are able to impose on others. The real terror was not in spirits, apparitions, and shockingly unexplainable events that could only be designated as the ghostly supernatural. The real terror was in traditional patriarchal institutions and men who were willing to abuse others to attain greater power, wealth and status. Today, modern true crime narratives unfortunately emulate the same principle criminal components which coincide with Gothic literary sentiments. Gary Michael Hilton’s chilling statement that he did what he did simply for “money and sex” echoes the terrors of Radcliffe’s fictional narrative written centuries ago, informing society that not much has changed about these narratives because not much has changed about humanity itself. The Gothic genre and true crime alike are representative of the darkest corners of society, and the genres correspond, not just because of their common themes, but because of what those themes will forever represent: Humanity itself.

Having drawn influence from Radcliffe’s terrifying prose, Edgar Allan Poe took his macabre storytelling to new heights with the development of detective fiction. The controversial literary landscape burgeoning out of Gothic literature brought Poe’s tale, “The Mystery of Marie Roget” closer to reality than previous works of fiction had been able to because it did not merely
boast authenticity. It genuinely was a tale about the unsolved murder of a young woman, but the entire tale was transposed onto a fictional plane when Poe took the New York case of Mary Rogers, and brought it to the streets of Paris with the character, Marie Roget. With this tale, Poe demonstrated not only the dangers of being a woman, alone, but the narrative also alluded to the dangers of inhabiting urban spaces. The birth of the modern city was synonymous, even from its onset, with violence and the inevitability of danger. By blending entertainment with a real murder, Poe took a fundamental step in the direction towards the modern true crime narrative, and in proper true crime fashion, “The Mystery of Marie Roget” contended with social issues specific to women. Mary Rogers’ status as the object of men’s affections was what essentially made the actual murder investigation so sensational. There were innumerable theories about which man could have played a role in her slaying because there were a number of men captivated by her. As we know, it is dangerous to be desired by men, and it is particularly dangerous to be desired by men, and be alone. Her weakness and position as a lone female in distress along with the details of her torn dress and bruises indicating her sexual assault represented the fears of women all over the city. Women had no reason to fear spirits or supernatural occurrences. True terror was overt in the social order and female anxieties about social hierarchies and male violence were not only being communicated in newspapers anymore. Because of pioneering authors like Radcliffe, Poe, and countless others, the dangers of merely existing as a woman in a man’s world were being popularized in the mainstream entertainment industry, too.

As the decades since Poe have passed, these themes of hierarchical conflicts have only grown more popular in both crime fiction, and in modern true crime media. Today, the circulation of true crime media has established a culture of crime entertainment that has
continued to figure the male as “other” and women as the weak, subordinate sex. While modern true crime media platforms share stories about all crimes and not just crimes against women, women’s interest in crime media continues to grow. The audience disparity within the genre that began with Defoe remains consistent. Women are the primary consumers of the genre across the centuries-long timeline, and yet the sentiments expressed by Addison concerning his dislike of women’s reading of the genre three centuries ago are still familiar today. It is all too common for women’s interest in the genre to be dismissed as vacuous despite the obvious social problems and disparities that true crime contends with. Modern true crime media platforms actively push for motions to establish a better society that educates both men and women about crime and violence. Women, out of necessity, are wary of violent men, and it is not because the true crime tales we hear are dispensable or causeless, but because the genre repeatedly confirms that women’s position is not equal to that of men’s.” Even excluding the elements of violence and terror, the Gothic genre and modern true crime media coverage share the same elements of investigation, analysis, sex, money, deceit, and greed.

In women particularly, the appeal of these common elements is especially tenacious. The purpose of this paper was to identify potential reasons for why this appeal is so unyielding. Based on the timeline established in this paper tracking the development of the genre, women enjoy the Gothic genre and true crime media because the genres support the articulation of women's experience and problematic status as the subordinate sex under a patriarchal society. The culture of horror entertainment is one that has remained throughout all forms of media from literature to television to podcasts. History is used to inform the present, and based on history, there is one theme of humanity that has consistently dichotomized the sexes, and that is the culture of a persistently male-dominated population. Gothic literature gave rise to the first circles
of female readership because the literature’s components engaged with fears and expectations women have about their precarious status as the lesser, weaker, more vulnerable sex. To conceptualize women’s everlasting obsession with depictions of violence and horror, a timeline of true crime’s development is necessary and offers the most effective elucidation for why that obsession persists. While we have come a long way in terms of women’s rights and social standing since the release of the first Gothic novels, based on history, women’s problematic status as the inferior sex is not a theme likely to disappear entirely. Domestic psychic and familial structures of patriarchal culture are timeless, and these themes stretch across genres from Gothic literature to modern true crime. The repeated conventions involving female fear and suffering constitute a literary tradition that has passed unwaveringly through the centuries. Gothic publications and true crime genres thus function as a mode of history for women because of their contents. The codes of murder, sexual violence, abduction, vulnerability, fear, pain, and anger are historically specific to women.

These codes are what ties the genres of the Gothic and true crime together. They share these specific genre elements across the timeline of true crimes development even before pioneering literary traditions like the “explained supernatural” or detective fiction existed. As early as The Cock Lane Ghost (1762), themes of seduction, infidelity, murder, and mystery were wildly popular. While there was no proof linking Kent to the suspected murders of his wives, interest is drummed up from the story’s provocative prospects. Fictional literary traditions like Radcliffe’s pioneering “explained supernatural” may be absent from modern true crime, but this narrative component has only transformed into other popular narration styles of logical dissolution. With detective fiction, Poe adopted the narrative component from Radcliffe, and it is now perceptible in modern true crime in the way that the genre articulates investigative analysis.
The murder of Mary Rogers, and the subsequent publication of Poe’s “The Mystery of Marie Roget” (1842) proved that ratiocination in itself was popular with audiences. Radcliffe’s “explained supernatural” may not be an element in modern true crime, but it directly preceded the conventions of the modern mystery narrative while sharing aforementioned themes that resonated with women specifically, sustaining the Gothic and true crime genres’ popularity through the centuries. Genre elements in modern true crime that dovetail pioneering Gothic elements define a mode of history for women rooted in patriarchal structures. What has hopefully become apparent through the delineation of true crime’s timeline is that violence against women is not the only connecting factor between Gothic literature and modern true crime. To directly compare a modern true crime case with early Gothic literature, *The Romance of the Forest* can be compared with the Kelsey Smith episode of *See No Evil*. Both clearly articulate the dangers of being a woman, alone, but, more than that, the narratives demonstrate how the storytelling style of logical deduction itself is timeless and popular. Page by page in *The Romance of the Forest*, readers are able to perceive the threat of real human action more than anything, and Radcliffe divulges characters’ intentions through a mystery style of storytelling. The terrifying malice perceptible through people, and not spirits, is unveiled as the mystery progresses before the ill intentions of the Marquis are realized. The processes of ratiocination and analysis are broken down similarly in the modern true crime narrative. The producers of *See No Evil*, for example, slowly, and chronologically, walk viewers through detective processes and conclusions before a perpetrator is realized.

Something that the earliest Gothic works and the modern true crime genre share is a sense of skepticism. Just as Addison looked down upon women’s reading and discussion of horror, so, too, do modern men often express disdain for the true crime genre’s popularity.
Addison thought women who consumed the genre were “crazed” (Hughes). Now, women are presumed to enjoy the genre by men because they “like all the drama” (Monroe 6). While there are a number of possibilities that could explain women’s interest in the genre, what remains clear is that men, broadly speaking, do not share the same widespread interest. Based on the chronology of true crime’s development, though, the common elements between the apparition narrative, Gothic literature, detective fiction, and modern true crime, illustrate that women have more reason to be interested in the genres than men. Women’s timeless and enduring social position under patriarchal structures is undoubtedly at the heart of the genres’ popularity.

“Men are afraid that women will laugh at them. Women are afraid that men will kill them”

- Margaret Atwood
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