

Amy and Her Friend: Exploring Gothicism in *The Curse of the Cat People*

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In addition to being a time of joy and wonder, childhood can also be frightening. Given all the angst and confusion that accompanies our growth and development—such as conflicts with parents and peers, or changes within our own bodies—it makes sense that children are often fascinated by Gothicism, which gives physical shape to their oscillating emotions, sometimes through its presentation of the sublime and other times through its presentation of traditional gothic imagery such as castles and monsters and crumbling ruins. Many children channel their fear of the unknown into a fascination with ghosts and goblins and haunted houses. Such gothic elements can prove instrumental in helping children to gain a sense of their own identities and develop a deeper understanding of the world around them.

Put simply, gothic elements have the potential to reveal hidden truths about life that children must learn and understand if they hope to mature. Author Rick Yancey—whose *Monstrumology* series explores such issues—emphasizes the connection with horror that all children share when he explains that “fear is a human thing. It’s practically the first emotion we have. It’s merciful, in a sense, that we cannot remember the utter horror of being ejected from our mothers’ wombs into a cold, brutally bright world so alien to anything we’ve experienced.”¹ Our lives begin with one traumatic event and are punctuated with many others at various ages and stages. Thus, given the important role that fear plays in helping children to grow up and explore their boundaries, it’s not surprising that Gothicism has always been a key subgenre of children’s literature and in children’s films.

A children’s film that is laden with gothic imagery can provide strong visual aids that give tangible shape to a child’s emotional trauma, aiding those children in navigating through their own anxieties and conflicts, which are often fueled by their insatiable curiosity, which itself stems from a burgeoning sense of autonomy that tempts children to take extra chances as they become more confident and daring and set out to explore their ever-growing world. By watching gothic films, children can often identify with characters’ plights, question motives or reasons, and reflect on the different ways in which a film’s themes seem to resonate deeply within the daily structure of their own lives. They can learn what frightens them and what they find fascinating; they can learn what they lack and also what they covet.

Val Lewton's 1944 *The Curse of the Cat People* demonstrates the ways in which film and Gothicism can combine to create an enriching psychological experience for children. Though Robert Wise and Gunther von Fritsch directed the film, it was Lewton who oversaw and produced *The Curse of the Cat People*, and his creative input is evident in every frame.² While the film is not overly violent or terrifying—in fact, its mood is more reflective of a gothic fairy tale than an outright horror film—it does show that childhood is scary and confusing, but it does so in a romantic and tender way that produces genuine emotions while supplying important lessons not only for children, but also for adults.

While *The Curse of the Cat People* was originally marketed as an adult horror film, and not advertised to children, it is certainly a precursor to recent children's films like *ParaNorman* and *Frankenweenie*. Nowadays, the film is appropriate for children to view. Its gothic elements generate a surreal atmosphere that a younger audience can appreciate given their overactive imaginations. And since Gothicism often focuses on heightened emotions, it makes sense that children, who regularly grapple with their own heightened emotions, might find interest in such a genre. In fact, the film's gothic elements tend to mirror many of the same issues that children must endure and contemplate on a daily basis, such as conversing with imaginary friends, arguing with parents or siblings, and understanding the consequences of both good and bad choices. In this way, the film allows children and adults to watch the film together and then to have a meaningful conversation about its rich themes and ideas.

The Curse of the Cat People introduces its fairy tale atmosphere immediately by opening with an establishing shot of schoolchildren singing in the woods as they accompany their teacher on a nature walk, the branches swaying above their heads in the bright sunlight as they stroll along a wide trail. Everyone smiles and laughs as they approach a quaint wooden bridge and begin to walk over it, whereupon the teacher stops halfway across to gather the schoolchildren in a small circle. She then kneels down in front of them and says, "It may seem just a little valley with a little stream running through it, but, no, there are songs and stories and lovely legends about this one blessed spot. It's Sleepy Hollow."

Those familiar with American folklore will recognize Sleepy Hollow as the spooky setting for the legendary confrontation between Ichabod Crane and the Headless Horseman. Thus, the beginning of *The Curse of the Cat People*—which establishes its setting as a pastoral village ripe with famous legends and tales, and even includes a shot of a black cat sitting in a tree—evokes both a gothic and a fairy tale atmosphere. Historically, the two are not as different as they would at first seem, especially when one considers that, as Marshall Brown puts it, "It is not the final triumph of good or evil, explanation or irrationality, free will or fate that makes a gothic atmosphere, but the lingering uncertainties along the way."³ In much the same way, a fairy tale concerns

itself with the process of the journey rather than with the final victory. For it is while struggling to stay on the path, while battling those “lingering uncertainties,” that the fairy tale hero is forced to make choices on his or her own, to grow and mature when faced with the darkness that represents the unknown. And fairy tales are known and remembered just as much for all of their grotesque and unpleasant moments as they are for those moments in which a prince wins the heart of a princess, or in which the smallest, weakest character outwits a giant and thereby saves the kingdom.

The Curse of the Cat People presents its heroine, Amy Reed, as a lonely kindergartener who struggles to make friends because of her penchant for daydreaming, a point that is highlighted at the beginning of the film when the girls sit on the grass to play a game with their teacher and Amy stares up into the sky, distracted. After one of the girls says, “She’s dreaming again,” Amy jumps up and begins to follow a butterfly, which prompts another girl to say, “We never have any fun with Amy. She spoils everything.” These actions—Amy’s obliviousness to reality and how the others around her react to it—will become a recurring pattern through the film as Amy spends a great deal of time wandering through various settings in a state of childhood innocence. She is detached from not only friends, but also from her parents, especially her father who reprimands her because he believes she is too imaginative and whimsical, not rooted enough in the real world.

As Amy watches the butterfly sit atop a flower, she smiles and whispers to it. “Oh, my beautiful,” she says. “You’re my friend. Come play with me.” Then, when one of the boys tries to catch it for her—during which he crushes and kills it—Amy slaps him across the cheek. The next scene finds Amy in trouble with both the teacher and her parents. While the adults talk about Amy behind closed doors, she sits in the hallway all by herself. The composition of the shot enhances her loneliness because the camera is pulled back to show Amy sitting in a chair that is much too big for her. In fact, her feet cannot even touch the floor. She glances around the empty room as if unsure what she should do, and she is placed in the bottom left side of the screen, making her appear small and insignificant, and thereby emphasizing her powerlessness and confusion.

While Amy waits outside, her father, Oliver, expresses concern over his daughter’s daydreaming, telling the teacher that Amy has “too many fancies and too few friends.” His apprehensions certainly mirror those of many parents who understand the importance of children using their imaginations but are unsure when to encourage it and when to restrict it. This problem is echoed further when the teacher tells Oliver, “Part of the blame ... may be with you. Perhaps you’re overanxious, watch her too closely, worry too much. The child’s bound to feel it.” This scene is vital to the narrative because it sets up a power struggle between Amy and Oliver that will serve as the main crux of the film, posing questions that deal with childhood depression and parental authority, as well as how fantasy and reality influence our unconscious desires.

Gothic stories and fairy tales are famous for including romantic elements, which arise from powerful feelings of love and often revolve around power struggles. These feelings prove contradictory in that they generate hope and affection among the characters, but they also generate tension when obstacles are then placed in a character's path and the possibility of securing that love is jeopardized. *The Curse of the Cat People* contains many relationships built around love, but the three most important are Amy and her father; Amy and Julia Farren; and Amy and the ghost of Irina. Each one of these relationships contributes to the film's gothic atmosphere and provides Amy with emotional conflicts that she must overcome. The film suggests that Amy's self-imposed isolation is a result of her father's inability to nurture her imagination, and that if she hopes to become more extroverted and to establish friendships with the other schoolchildren, then her father must validate the importance of fantasy in her life. Doing so will not only allow Amy to mature, but it will allow her father to understand that all children see the world around them as magical, and to do so is an essential part of childhood because it fosters a desire for knowledge that will lead a child through her formative years.

Amy clashes again with her father when no one shows up to her birthday party because instead of mailing the invitations she put them inside an old tree. When she shows Oliver what she's done, he frowns and says, "But I told you about that so long ago. You couldn't have been more than three when I told you that tree was a magic mailbox." Amy's response is to tell her father that she didn't forget, which seems quite obvious, for how could any child ignore the thrill of having such an enchanting tree in her very own backyard? Any child who watches *The Curse of the Cat People* will likely sympathize with Amy because children believe, almost without question, anything their parents tell them. And if children do ask questions, then those questions are not usually rooted in mistrust and disbelief, but in a desire to learn.

Oliver then sits down so he is eye-level with Amy and says, "Mother and Daddy keep telling you over and over again, but you go right on dreaming, and then things like this happen." His sternness and attempt to steer Amy away from her vibrant imagination may puzzle child viewers. This is the same man who, while waiting for the other children to arrive at the birthday party, was playing with a toy, which prompted his wife to tell him, "That's for the children to play with." And later, when Amy is blowing out her candles, her father seems to encourage the use of her imagination when he says, "Amy, make a wish. Wish real hard and blow out the candles, and your wish will come true." Amy tells her father that wishes don't come true, and then she seeks an explanation as to how the wish about the tree being a magic mailbox is different from a birthday wish, a thought likely shared by any child watching the film who can see quite clearly how Oliver vacillates between limiting the use of Amy's imagination one moment and then promoting it the next.

For children, the question arises as to whether Amy can be blamed for her overactive imagination when it seems that her father has been stimulating it. How can a parent expect a child to differentiate between fantasy and reality when there is no clear delineation between what is and is not acceptable? In fact, when Amy questions why the birthday wish is different from the magic mailbox wish, Oliver becomes flustered and shrugs off the question by telling her, “Well, this is different.” Even children will recognize that this vague answer is simply evasion on the part of Oliver, and if Amy is unable to receive clear and specific responses from her parents, then how can she be expected to control her imagination in ways that both allow her to be fun and creative, yet also satisfy her parent’s demands for her to grow up?

The birthday scene at the table is especially poignant because for the majority of the scene the only two people in the shot are Amy and her father, thus reinforcing the idea that Amy’s conflict is with her father and not with her mother. And after Amy makes her wish, she directs her comments at Oliver, looking right at him when she says, “You know what I wish, Daddy? I wished I could be a good girl...I could make this sort of a wish come true. I’ll be just like Daddy wants me to be: play with the other children, not sit around by myself, tell the truth.” Amy’s continual use of the word “Daddy” reiterates her fractured relationship with Oliver, but her wish also reveals that she can tell the difference between fantasy and reality; she understands this is not a wish requiring magic spells and potions, but one in which its success is contingent upon her behavior and upon her following the expectations that her father has laid out for her. Though Amy is only a kindergartener, she is the only person at the table who seems to understand the absurdity in her father’s desire that she make a birthday wish after he has just lectured her on dreaming too much.

It’s precisely this touching birthday wish—a subconscious desire to shed her loneliness and to make friends—that propels Amy into the next part of the story. She tries to befriend three girls, but they run away from her. Their chase leads Amy to a large crumbling house occupied by Julia Farren and her daughter, Barbara. There is no mistaking the gothic atmosphere that emanates from this house, as evidenced by the three girls who each say in rapid succession, “The old house...It’s haunted...There’s a witch in it.” A black iron gate encircles the property and trails of ivy creep along the front of the house, which is shot from a low angle so as to appear more dominating and threatening.

The Farren house seems to exist in its own world, its gloominess surrounded by sunlit streets and happy children playing together beside white picket fences—in much the same way that Amy seems to exist in her own lonely world. For a child, the Farren house certainly qualifies as a version of the sublime. True, the sublime is typically linked with mountains and oceans, as it refers to any natural landscape that stirs conflicted feelings in its viewer, such as joy and wonder and terror and awe. But it’s important to

remember that, as Donna Heiland points out, the sublime is “an experience that involves a confrontation between a perceiving subject and an overwhelming powerful object, the confusion of boundaries between subject and object, and finally a transcendent or totalizing vision that results from the confusion of blurring those boundaries”⁴ The sublime fascinates because it suggests ideas and thoughts that lie beyond human comprehension. Associated with grandeur and magnificence, it evokes excessive emotions, much like those often expressed by children who have not yet learned to think rationally.

While the sublime does not often function as a didactic entity—providing instructions and moral lessons like a parent or a teacher—it does seem to do so when placed within the context of either children’s literature or children’s films. Children often have difficulty explaining their thoughts, and they frequently act on their passions and excitements, sometimes in an impulsive manner. Children and the sublime both evoke a great deal of feelings, and “in gothic productions imagination and emotional effects exceed reason,” thus the sublime functions as a catalyst for contemplating one’s doubts and anxieties, and for provoking important issues that need to be discussed.⁵ In *The Curse of the Cat People*, the sublime entertains children while presenting them with philosophical questions about the many unknowns and uncertainties that exist in the world, and it helps them to consider how best to approach those unknowns and uncertainties so they can become more confident and self-aware in an adult world. In an effort to give meaning to passions and excitements, children will often ask questions and explore unfamiliar landscapes that may not seem scary and intimidating to adults, but that tend to induce fear and curiosity in children, such as the Farren house.

As Amy stares up at the house, a ghostly voice calls down to her from an open window. “Little girl, come into the garden.” Amy walks into the courtyard, marching past stone statues and overrun weeds, and watches as the person in the window—whom we will learn is the elderly Julia Farren—tosses out a white handkerchief with a ring tied to the end of it. Amy secures the ring, but suddenly Barbara Farren—Julia’s adult daughter—snatches the handkerchief out of the child’s hand and glares down at Amy with a mixture of surprise and jealousy. Immediately after Barbara walks back into the house, the same ghostly voice calls down again and instructs Amy to, “Go away, little girl, go away!” This entire scene, much like the one that precedes it at the birthday part, shows adults who act crazier and more nonsensical than Amy. Yet amidst all the creepiness that’s inherent in her visit to the Farren house, there is also a sense of happiness because Amy has received a special gift after just having been shunned by the three girls with whom she wanted to play.

Upon arriving home, Amy shows her ring to the servant, Edward, who says, “Most surely that was a nice lady to give a ring to a little girl.” Suddenly a location that might have seemed scary and intimidating to children becomes less so because an adult

has now connected the person in the window—and by extension the Farren house itself—with positive traits, thus making the location more endearing to children. As the scene continues, Edward looks at the ring and tells Amy, “I wouldn’t be a bit surprised if it were a true wishing ring...If it’s a real mourning ring like we have in Jamaica, all you’ve got to do is turn it on your finger, close your eyes, and make a wish.” His comments raise the issue, yet again, of why Amy should be berated and punished for daydreaming, and for believing in magic, when her feelings and attitudes are being encouraged by the people around her.

Children who watch *The Curse of the Cat People* will not miss the irony in these exchanges between Amy and the adults, for how can Oliver impress upon his daughter the need to wish for one thing, but not another? He tells her, “When you’re a good girl and play with the other children, and don’t go moping or dreaming by yourself, your Daddy wants to do everything he can to make you happy,” but then he becomes angry when she tells him about the strange voice she heard at the Farren house, which he believes to be a fabricated story. Finally, he finishes his lecture by suggesting that the use of her imagination is akin to lying. While these conflicts might not seem as thrilling and intense as those of other gothic novels and films, it should be noted that, when applied to children, gothic fears are often that “of adult neglect or hatred, loss of home and support.”⁶ Considering these childhood apprehensions—including her parents arguing over whether the father is jumping to conclusions and being unfair, or whether the mother is spoiling the child—it’s not surprising that Amy does not understand Oliver’s expectations and thus retreats further into her own dreams.

Amy’s withdrawal from reality reaches its apex when she uses the ring to wish for a friend. Lo and behold, her wish comes true as the ghost of Irina appears; Irina was Oliver’s first wife who featured so prominently in *Cat People* and who died at the conclusion of that film. From a gothic standpoint, Irina supplies the supernatural element in *The Curse of the Cat People*, providing for children a concrete image to the abstract idea of loneliness that Amy is experiencing. Irina’s presence in the film is not meant to be spooky or menacing, but to be kind and loving; she is the playmate that Amy has wanted for a long time, and when she first steps onto the screen she is wearing a long, flowing white gown that shimmers with sequins. Indeed, she looks like an angel, and if one considers the film as a gothic fairytale, then surely Irina functions as a fairy godmother to Amy and is the one person who allows her to embrace her innocence and to act like a child. Together, Irina and Amy toss a ball to each other and play house, and Irina even buttons up the child’s sweater when the weather grows colder. Appearing in the middle of a garden, with leaves spilling all around her, Irina seems to be a natural part of Sleepy Hollow’s landscape and folklore, projecting the kind of warmth and caring that Amy yearns to have at home with her own parents.

Given that the ring is an extension of Amy's imagination, it makes sense that her parents want her to return it to the Farren house. And it is there—once again enveloped in that sublime atmosphere with all of its dark shadows and odd angles—that the film introduces its viewers to yet another classic element of Gothicism, the doppelganger. In simple terms, the doppelganger is the double of a living person, sometimes a ghost and often a harbinger of bad luck. In *The Curse of the Cat People*, Barbara Farren functions as a doppelganger of Amy. Just like Amy is experiencing conflicts with Oliver, so is Barbara undergoing her own struggles with Julia. Because of memory issues that are never quite explained, Julia Farren believes her daughter died at the age of six and refuses to accept Barbara as anything but an imposter, saying, "You're only the woman who takes care of me." And later, when Julia catches sight of Barbara watching them from outside of the drawing room, the elderly woman leans closer to Amy and whispers, "She's always spying on me. She creeps into the room. She lives here... That woman is an imposter. She's a liar and a cheat." These conversations prove integral to the narrative because they reveal how gothic elements can symbolize a child's internal struggles, and how doppelganger figures can "provoke reflection on the question of identity."⁷ When examining the two main domestic spaces in the film—Amy's own house and Julia Farren's house—it becomes clear that both Julia and Oliver do not show the proper affection to their children. In many ways, Barbara's interactions with Julia reveal what the future might hold for Amy and her father if they continue to drift apart—he dismissing the importance of one's imagination and Amy relying on hers too much to combat the loneliness she feels.

Julia Farren—who also functions as a doppelganger of Oliver—is a warning for people who continue to live in the past, boasting to Amy that, "I've played every theatre from Boston to San Francisco." She is alone in her large house, clutching the fading memories of her bygone days as a famous stage actress. Perhaps the old woman suggests to children what might become of Amy if she continues to spend too much time in a dream world, and if she does not find the proper balance between fantasy and reality. Even the Farren house itself—which is dark and stifling, confining with all of its furniture and countless heirlooms filling every shot—symbolizes the overpowering ways in which an overactive imagination can cripple one's self-identity, as well as the ways it can damage one's relationships with friends and family. In this way, the film's doppelgangers become a point of instruction by illustrating to children the importance of setting limits.

If Julia Farren revels in theatrics, then it comes as no surprise that Amy's entrance into the house is quite a dramatic experience, what with strange creaking sounds and a winding staircase. The entire drawing room in which she eventually finds herself takes on the appearance of a haunted house, complete with pages of a book that blow open by themselves, as well as a stuffed cat with a stuffed bird in its mouth and a

cackling laugh emanating from the shadows. When the blinds are suddenly opened and sunlight pours into the darkened room, Julia walks toward a stunned Amy and invites her to sit down and have tea, after which Julia then delivers a theatrical performance by telling Amy the legendary story of the Headless Horseman. Again, the film shows an adult acting fun and innocent in much the same way that Amy's teacher told the class folktales about Sleepy Hollow, or in the same way that Oliver played with the toy while waiting for the children to arrive at Amy's birthday party.

Julia delights in hiding behind a curtain in the room—pretending to stand on a stage while she whispers in a spooky voice—and as she tells the story Amy appears shaken, as evidenced by the close-up that frames the child's face. Later, though, as Amy is leaving the Farren house with Edward, she tells Julia, "I've had a nice time." Her reaction to Julia's retelling of the story of the Headless Horseman encapsulates the spirit of the sublime in that it has the ability to frighten the child while also entertaining her. Amy's reaction, which is common among both children and adults, occurs for the simple reason that "we enjoy being disturbed because the horror-scene means something to us, at least unconsciously or implicitly, and we respond to it in terms of its meaning."⁸ For Amy, the importance of this scene is not simply the excitement at hearing a fun story, but the closeness shared with a new friend who shares with the child a similar love and respect for fantasy and imagination. This scene is also a stark reminder of the many ways in which Amy's imagination is stifled at home. The Farren house—associated with so many gothic elements—becomes a home full of energy and possibilities, while the Reed household—a typical representation of middle-class domesticity—seems boring and sterile by comparison.

Later that night, when Amy has a nightmare about the Headless Horseman, she touches the ring on her finger and says, "My friend, I'm frightened." That Amy still possesses the ring symbolizes her refusal to kowtow to her father's incessant demand that the child spend less time ensconced in her imagination and more time making friends in the real world. Sure enough, Irina appears to calm Amy after her nightmare, and her presence in the child's bedroom is a testament to the ways in which one's imagination can serve as protector as well as encourager. The safety and calmness Amy now feels with Irina in the room is illustrated by the camera focusing on the child's face as she falls into a peaceful sleep.

The next morning, after Amy discovers a picture of Irina among a stack of old photographs, her mother suggests that Oliver get rid of any pictures containing his ex-wife. As he stands beside the fireplace, however, flipping through several of the photos, he stops to gaze fondly at one of him and Irina, both of them smiling. This is the only picture Oliver does not toss into the fire—choosing instead to hide it inside a book like some dark secret—and this action shows his hesitation to let go of the past. Perhaps this inability is what causes Oliver to lash out at Amy. Given his conflicted emotions

regarding his previous and troubled relationship with Irina—how he claims she always told lies to herself and believed them, and that no matter how much he tried to save her, he couldn't—it makes sense why Oliver does not want Amy spending all of her time living in a fantasy world. Oliver knows that Irina went insane, killed a man, and then killed herself, and he fears the same fate could befall Amy if she does not put away childish fancies to play with school-age friends with whom she can grow and mature.

But the imagination is not a switch that one can easily turn on and off, especially a child who often uses her imagination to make sense of the world around her, and Oliver's actions regarding the photographs of Irina raise a number of questions. How can he chastise Amy for continuing to indulge in her fantasies when he cannot bring himself to burn a photograph that represents his own past? And is Oliver's refusal to listen to his wife the same as Amy's refusal to listen to him? A parent is supposed to teach by example, and while Amy does not witness the conversation between her parents, a child watching the film will observe this important scene and might feel more sympathy toward Amy and the unfair treatment she receives from her father.

These conflicts and family dynamics are integral to appreciating the film's Gothicism because when linked with psychoanalytic study it "becomes a fiction of unconscious desires, a release of repressed energies and antisocial fantasies."⁹ Clearly, Oliver has a desire to forget the past, and his failure to do so generates anger and frustration that is built upon those repressed emotions. Likewise, Amy has a desire to make friends, and retreating into her imagination is a coping mechanism to deal with her own loneliness. As viewers, we observe how Amy's fantasies help to give power to the powerless when she plays house with Irina by laying out her dolls on the ground so they can all take a nap; she covers them with a blanket and proceeds to tell Irina about each of her "children," explaining how one is "very good," another is "good sometimes," and still another is "hardly ever good." By pretending to be a mother, Amy is acting out a role of which her father would certainly approve. In some ways, as all children are prone to do, Amy is testing out the waters of maturity and adulthood, and in doing so she assumes control over the situation and becomes one who can issue punishments to imaginary children. In addition, this role-playing allows Amy to understand how her own parents must feel when she misbehaves and when she does not meet the expectations that they've set forth.

The climax of *The Curse of the Cat People* occurs during the family's Christmas festivities, and so it is not surprising that this is the moment when Amy and Oliver reach the understanding and reconciliation toward which the film has been heading. When Amy finds a picture of Irina and reveals that they've been playing together out in the garden, Oliver becomes upset and brings Amy outside where he tries to convince his daughter that Irina is a figment of her imagination, despite the fact that Irina is standing underneath the tree that houses the magic mailbox. Amy stands firm on her belief that

Irina is real, however, until Oliver kneels down in front of her and says, “I want you to look once more. Take as long as you want, look very carefully, and then I want you to tell me there’s no one there...If you insist that this woman you call your friend is in the garden, I’m afraid I shall have to punish you.”

The punishment—which is never seen, though it’s alluded to as a spanking—clearly unnerves Oliver, as he seems saddened and unfocused when he returns downstairs after leaving Amy alone in her bedroom. His frustration and unhappiness seem to strike a chord with Amy’s teacher, who is visiting the house and proceeds to tell him, “Children have only one way of escape. They build companions for themselves.” Later, she says, “You’ve got to be her friend so she won’t need other friends. You’ve got to believe what she says. Her friend will vanish the moment her hunger for friendship is satisfied by a real person.” It’s interesting that while the teacher is speaking with Oliver, Irina appears in Amy’s bedroom and tells the child that she became her friend, “because you called to me. Out of your loneliness you called me and brought me into being...So that your childhood could be bright and full of friendliness. Now you must send me away.” The juxtaposition of these two scenes reveals that Amy’s teacher and Irina are both champions and defenders of a child’s imagination, with one woman rooted in reality and the other rooted in fantasy. Both women play a central role in healing the fractured relationship between Amy and Oliver. While Irina’s speech suggests that Amy is now more confident and secure—ready to give up part of her imagination so she can make friends and become a part of her community—the teacher’s speech is reminding Oliver that imagination is important, and that it should be viewed not as a hindrance, but as a support system.

Distraught after Irina’s vanishing, Amy goes outside looking for her friend. She wanders through the woods and eventually arrives at the Farren house in the middle of a raging snowstorm. Julia believes she needs to hide Amy from Barbara because earlier in the film Barbara told her mother, “If that child comes here again I’ll kill her. Yes, I’ll kill her.” On their way upstairs, however, Julia collapses and dies from the exertion. Amy is now alone in the Farren house with no one to help her, and the question arises as to whether Barbara will indeed make good on her threat to harm the little girl. The suspense in this scene is intensified when one considers that Amy is alone without any adult supervision and must now make choices all by herself.

As Amy stands over the body of Julia Farren, she looks down the winding staircase to see an approaching shadow, looming larger with each passing second. Barbara Farren stands at the foot of the stairs and says, “Even my mother’s last moments you’ve stolen from me. Come here.” Scared and confused, Amy calls out for her Daddy. She then touches the ring on her finger and repeats, “My friend” until Irina suddenly appears in front of the terrified child, her image superimposed over Barbara’s body. Entranced, Amy walks down the staircase and calls Barbara her friend, at which

point she hugs the woman. Barbara's fingers clench as if she means to strangle Amy, but then her toughness crumbles and she embraces the child, warmed by a love and tenderness her own mother had not shown her in years. Irina's appearance during this scene is an important part of Amy's development because it shows how Amy is able to recognize Barbara as someone like herself who is lonely and needs affection. This empathy has certainly been influenced by the film's Gothicism and its nurturing power over Amy's imagination.

Meanwhile, Oliver has realized that Amy is missing and has wandered into the woods. Panic-stricken at the thought of losing his daughter, and certainly feeling guilty at having pushed her into these drastic actions, he tells his wife, "I'll make it up to her. I'll trust her. I'll believe her." Part of Oliver's transformation is a result of listening to other adults remind him that to be a child is to embrace fantasy, but another part stems from the idea that when Gothicism combines with domesticity, "the growing emphasis on internal threats, on metamorphoses...and on the likelihood of destructive forces emerging from and/or attacking the family unit, together constitute a central focus of paranoid horror."¹⁰ This apprehension and unease—the idea that one's stable life can unravel at any moment because of influence's beyond one's control—is especially potent in *The Curse of the Cat People* because those destructive forces are caused by Oliver's anxieties and fears, which he allows to seep into his home life. By impeding Amy's growth and maturation, rather than helping to cultivate it, Oliver becomes the antithesis of Irina.

Back home, Oliver holds Amy in his arms and together they stare out into the backyard. Unlike previous scenes—in which Oliver dominated Amy with either his words or his towering presence—here he clutches her in his arms and they seem as equals, a point emphasized when he says, "Amy, from now on you and I are going to be friends...Is your friend in the garden? Can you see Irina now?" And when she says yes, Oliver smiles and tells his daughter, "I see her, too, darling." This conversation provides the validation that Amy has needed throughout the entire film, and there is the implication that with her father's love and support she can now balance the appropriate levels of fantasy and reality that all children possess and continue to reevaluate as they move toward adolescence. Additionally, Oliver's acceptance of Irina illustrates that he is not only ready to foster and partake in Amy's fantasies, but he is beginning the crucial process of reconciling his own past.

The last shot of the film shows Irina standing beside the tree with the magic mailbox, smiling as she watches Oliver carry Amy into the house, whereupon she fades away. This ending completes the home-away-home element found in most children's stories. The child begins the story in a domestic setting; sets out on her own where she encounters a conflict and is forced to make important choices; and then she returns home a bit wiser and more mature than when she first left. Amy completes this

important cycle—which illustrates the importance of the journey in the formation of a child’s self-identity—and she does so at night, a common staple in gothic stories because it represents the unknown that one must wander through in order to find the answers.

Val Lewton’s *The Curse of the Cat People* explores the positive effects that Gothicism can have on strengthening social skills and family bonds, and it does so by presenting those darker elements not as stumbling blocks, but as learning opportunities that can help children to question their own choices and to reflect on their ever-broadening world. By incorporating Gothicism into its narrative, the film suggests that while struggles and conflicts are an unavoidable part of life, those same struggles and conflicts can also contribute to one’s growth and development.

Notes

¹ “Rick Yancey: “Monstrumologist’ Author Peeks through his Fingers,” Book Page, accessed February 2, 2016, <http://bookpage.com/interviews/8632-rick-yancey#.VWTYeqbTpIJ>.

² Although Gunther von Fritsch was the film’s initial director, Val Lewton replaced him with Robert Wise when von Fritsch fell behind schedule.

³ Marshall Brown, “A Philosophical View of the Gothic Novel,” *Studies in Romanticism* 26 (Summer 1987): 299.

⁴ Donna Heiland, *Gothic and Gender: An Introduction* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), 33.

⁵ Fred Botting, *Gothic* (London: Routledge, 1996), 3.

⁶ Anna Cosslett, “Transformations of Pastoral and Gothic in Children’s Fiction,” *Signal* 98 (2002): 96.

⁷ Brown, “A Philosophical View,” 292.

⁸ Damian Cox et al., *Thinking Through Film: Doing Philosophy, Watching Movies* (West Sussex, UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), 151.

⁹ Botting, *Gothic*, 18-19.

¹⁰ Andrew Tudor, *Monsters and Mad Scientists: A Cultural History of the Horror Movie* (Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishing, 1989), 128.

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