

# Unseen Monsters: *The Horla* by Guy de Maupassant

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As fear is a common trope that dominates the Gothic genre, it embodies subconscious manifestations of anxieties, relationships, and beliefs. There is a resistance against the simplification of fear, as the intimate workings of the mind provide a unique insight onto this trope. The purpose of this paper is to analyse the infiltration of a monster into the life of an unnamed man, driving him to suicide. Taking on the short story, *The Horla* by Guy de Maupassant, and focusing on how the balance between real and unreal is created, the present study aims to will prove that fear can influence the emotional and mental state of an individual, bringing upon hallucinations, paranoia, and extreme actions. Even more so, taking into consideration the author's personal struggles with mental health will help provide an extra layer of understanding the narrator of the short story, as the real-life experiences of the author are mirrored in the tale.

## I. Introduction

The Gothic genre has always provided society with the monsters it needed. Every generation managed to relay a monster which proved capable of portraying its anxieties, fears, or primal desires. We place Guy de Maupassant's *The Horla* under the umbrella of the French Gothic, although more than not, the critical approaches to this short story are associated with Realism or Naturalism. The scope of analysis of this paper is to focus on the Gothic elements it brings forward.

Realism deals with the common life, the depictions of everyday society, often depicting characters and situations without the sentimentalism of Romanticism attached to it. (Hollier, 1989: 715). It grew in tandem with other developments in science, industrialism, and social sciences. We can see how this movement is represented in Maupassant's writings, in his clear depictions of individuals and their social classes, to even the causes for an individual's actions. In *The Horla*, the main character is the narrator, an unnamed man who is well off, has his own house and servants. His life is rather ordinary, until he begins being haunted by an unseen monster, one named Horla. However, it remains to be discussed whether the monster is real or if the story is actually about the decline of a sound mind.

When talking about the Gothic genre as it is today (and also to help better understand the topics which will be further discussed), it is important to look at its' beginnings. To do so, a glance towards Romanticism and Dark Romanticism will be valuable. During the Romantic the individual, his or her emotions and the beauty of nature were main themes in the art world. The emotions of the author that had been poured into a piece of art are considered of utmost value. Looking at the article devoted to Dark Romanticism, we observe that one of the mottos of the period regarded the creation of "art for art's sake", and in doing this, the artists have tried to eliminate the idea that art needed to serve a purpose or a function. An artist's liberty to create was also considered to be precious: the artist followed his own need to create, not the request of a patron. (Contributors, 2017).

Dark Romanticism, as a literary movement, found its dark roots in the idea that the beliefs of Romanticism and Transcendentalism were “far too optimistic and egotistical” (Contributors, 2017). The authors of the Dark Romantic genre are seen as individuals who were more inclined to sin, to self-destruct and to turn away from religion. G.R. Thompson believed that they had not completely turned their backs to religion, but rather they had given it a new shape; the evil was now “in the form of Satan, devils, ghosts, vampires, and ghouls.” (Contributors, 2017). They also showcase nature under a darker light, as it is now “dark, decaying, and mysterious; [and] when it does reveal truth to man, its revelations are evil and hellish.” (Contributors, 2017) and no longer divine and a universal organic mediator.

From a literary point of view, the terms “gothic” and “goth” are related to tales which had been situated in Southern European settings, crude, and barbaric individual pairs with the Catholic and its ceremonial overabundance. On an opposite side, we can see the Northern European settings, with their Protestant prosperity and self-restraint (Cavallaro, 2002: 7).

Davidson speaks about the development of the Gothic novels by using the terms “anachronistic” and “paradoxical”. He uses the term “anachronistic” to describe the appearance of the novels because they emerged during the Enlightenment period, when most authors focused their novels on more contemporary and more “real” issues. The other term, “paradoxical” hints at the opposing link between the past and the present. It came forward as an antithesis to Enlightenment literature and its ideals of balance, reason, harmony, and order by concentration on chaos, irrationality, bizarre and dark side of what meant to be a human. In doing so, one could argue that the Gothic genre itself became “the Other”. At a similar sentiment was Rosemary Jackson that provided a definition of the Gothic as “literature of unreason and terror” (Jackson 2008: .96) and she goes on to complete this point of view by arguing that it should be “seen as a reaction to historical events, particularly to the spread of industrialism and urbanization” (97). She continues to present her exposition by discussing how the Gothic had started to turn inwards and to “concern itself with psychological problems, used to dramatize uncertainty and conflicts of the individual in relation to a difficult social situation” (97). This literature had started to concern itself with what was going on within the human’s mind, how the outside world affected the inside one, what anxieties and what fears it created.

Sigmund Freud developed the concept of the “uncanny” or “unheimlich” (in German) meaning unfamiliar, which “is the class of the frightening which leads back to what is known on old and long familiar” or “the repressed and the unresolved” (Freud 2010: 340) In his theory, he argues that what was once natural to an individual, but with time deeply repressed in his or her unconsciousness, can be brought back to light if the person feels overpowered by the unfamiliar and bizarre. Thus, when looking at the setting of a novel, one can see, for example, the ghosts and the haunted houses deciphered as portrayal of the uncanny of the inhibited traumas that can return to the individual when certain stress factors are in play at the same time. As such, we can look at these concepts in unison, as a way to express a character’s psyche and use it as a connection to social issues that are present at a certain point in time. In Gothic literature we can look at novels from multiple modes such as realistic, uncanny, fantastic, or marvellous.

In contrast to the aforementioned relation between horror and the Gothic, it is necessary to be aware that this is not the norm of the genre. As the Gothic can definitely include “works of fiction that contain neither supernatural nor horror elements, but which do contain similar attitudes to setting, atmosphere or style” (Bloom 2010: 1)

Susanne Becker stresses the idea that the Gothic is “a genre of negatives, of the un-real, the anti-rational, the immoral” and consequently, it has been designated as “the Other, and even as feminine other to the dominant discourse” (1999: 23) She uses the word feminine after explaining that “the traditional critical coding of the non-real, the popular and emotional as feminine has perpetuated binary oppositions, with all the hierarchies this entails.” (23) So to say, by managing to blur the traditionally imposed limits between what the conscious psyche is and what the unconscious psyche is, what represents our objective reality and what represents an individual’s fantasy, what has a place in the past and what has a place in the present, the Gothic genre figure out how to outperform these introduced dualities, while simultaneously abandoning social constructs, such as gender roles and different types of characteristics, enabling its female characters in such a manner that rises about these demonstrations that comply with the established norms. This fits within the idea that Gothic developed a strong interest towards the offense of social and cultural norms.

## II. The two versions of *The Horla*

Before diving into the concept of the monster the story created, it is noteworthy to mention that *The Horla* is a story that has been published twice, in two different formats. The first version was published in a newspaper named *Gil Blas* on the 26<sup>th</sup> of October 1886, and the second version appeared in a volume of Guy de Maupassant’s literary works in 1887. The two stories centre around the same main idea, of a man’s life being drained by an unseen monster. However, the style of writing and the ending are changed drastically. Reminiscing on a previously mentioned idea, that the author himself had attempted suicide, and then had been institutionalised, this can be tied into the abrupt and dark change – as his own mental health declined and he no longer saw hope, he no longer gave this hope to his characters either. (Miles, 2004: ix – xxvi)

The earlier version is shorter and shows the character in a more optimistic setting. The format follows the regular prose style, combined with narration and dialogue. The unnamed narrator is found in a clinic; he is brought forward by Doctor Marrande who depicted as “one of the most eminent psychiatrists in the country” (Maupassant, 2004: 236) to a group of men, where he is asked to talk about his experience with the Horla. This is presented to us as a grave, serious group of scientists – men who would not indulge in ghost stories – who are here to examine and take note of the mental state of this patient. Another important thing to notice in the beginning is that the narrator, as he starts to speak to the men present in the room, affirms that “For a long time he himself believed I was mad. Today he is not so sure”. (236), referencing Doctor Marrande. This brings forward the idea that this man who has been asserted as a rational individual, has started believing the narrator, believing the supernatural experiences the patient has had. From here on, most of the story is similar to the one in 1887, however it lacks a few scenes which were later added and has a completely different ending. As mentioned previously, this earlier version could be seen as more optimistic, as the narrator does not end up committing suicide – the main and uttermost distinction between the two stories. This first version creates a narrator that seems to be more aware, more lucid, and more in control, as he chooses to seek help. Hence, he is presented in the story as a patient in a clinic. The ending of this version shows Doctor Marrande again, as he talks to the other men present in the room “I am in as much of a quandary as you all. I cannot tell if this man is mad or whether we both are ... or whether ... man’s successor is already in our midst...” (244).

The later version, which ends tragically, with the narrator's suicide, brings forth the idea of decline, of degeneration, which can be tied into the author's own mental health decline, that will be discussed later on. The author chose for this second version the epistolary format – the narrator is no longer in a clinic, and we do not have any clue that his diary entries are written for anyone else than himself. From the very start, this version puts the reader in a more intimate relation with the narrator – as he gets to see the first version of his thoughts on paper and not a curated version present in front of a group. It provides a unique suspense, as the reader waits for the monster to strike alongside the narrator. This later version brings to light a different type of desperation of the character. While in the previous version, his desperation and fear had made the unnamed man seek help, the second version made him paranoid and impulsive. There is a clear and certain decline of the man in this story, which is accelerated as the monster takes over his life more and more.

More details are added to this version as well, which give insight into the interest regarding the unconscious mind and what it would allow humans to do. The narrator describes a scene, taking place on July 15 but recorded in his diary on July 16, with Dr. Parent, “who devotes himself a great deal to nervous diseases and to the extraordinary manifestations which just now experiments in hypnotism and suggestion are producing” (Maupassant, 1996: 63) and his female cousin, Madame Sable. The scene shows the Doctor putting Madame Sable under hypnosis, and thus, asking of her that the next day she should ask the narrator for “five thousand francs” (66) saying that her husband needed it. The next day, when the cousin does indeed go to the narrator's house asking him for money is a moment of crisis for him – he realises that hypnosis is a powerful tool of controlling the unconscious side of the human mind, without the conscious side ever knowing. The narrator ends describing this as such “this experiment has altogether upset me” (69), leaving out more input for what is to come. This entire scene is a foreshadowing one of what the narrator experiences at the hands of the Horla, as he is unable to move his own body at will, to do as he wishes, to escape as he wishes. He recounts this scene a month later, on August 15, as he is already under the control of the unseen monster “I am lost” Somebody possesses my soul and governs it! Somebody orders all my acts, all my movements, all my thoughts!”, “I wish to go out; I cannot. HE does not wish to”; “Then suddenly, I must, I MUST go to the foot of my garden to pick some strawberries and eat them – and I go there. I pick the strawberries and I eat them!” (73).

All these instances show the narrator asking for help, yet very distinctly from the first version, there is a sense of isolation here. The narrator only turns towards his diary to describe what he is truly feeling and experiencing. The only instance when he had asked for help in the beginning was from a doctor who had dismissed his symptoms for some sort of cold. The narrator has servants around him, and yet he does not confide in them, even more so, there is a sense of him isolating himself from them as well, as there are fewer mentions of them as the story progresses.

These scenes are a glimpse of the new discoveries in science – Charcot's ideas related to hypnotism mirrored in the edited version of the story, another layer of depth added to it, as it offers a way inside the mind of the character (Straub, 2015: 14-22). The subconscious is put on display, another fear exposed, of being unknowingly controlled by another, of losing agency, or even worse, of being aware that you are losing your agency. However, while the scene with the narrator's cousin could be seen as innocent, a show put on display with the idea of entertaining the guests at the table, the other scenes, when the monster is the one in control of the narrator are presented with a darker understanding of loss.

The other quite distinct scene of the second short story is the ending. As formerly mentioned, the first story ends more abruptly, as the narrator experiences the haunting, when it escalated, he has sought help and the reader finds him in a clinic. However, the second story never mentions a clinic. The narrator is more emotional, acting on his fear and despair. On September 10, he presents the Horla as not a constant presence, but one that comes-and-goes to feed on him and control him. As such, he seeks the opportunity to devise a plan in order to trap it inside his room, and then he mentions “I took the two lamps and poured all the oil on the carpet, the furniture, everywhere; then I set fire to it and made my escape, after having carefully double locked the door.” (Maupassant 1996: 81). This would read as a triumph on his part, a triumph over the monster, and yet immediately we see the narrator guilty, as he had locked his servants inside as well. The servants, together with the monster, are burning inside the house – he had managed to not see them, the same way he did not see the monster. Nevertheless, this feeling is soon replaced by another, paranoia – “If He were not dead? [...] No – no - there is no doubt about it - He is not dead. Then – then - I suppose I must kill MYSELF!” (82). This scene is fast paced, and although written in his journal, the narrator’s description is vivid, which helps the reader discover every thought he has at the same time as him, as well as his decision to end himself in order to escape the monster.

To create the atmosphere of the two short stories, Guy de Maupassant relies on a mix of eerie and vivid descriptions, while at the same time, frustratingly so, leaving out the description of the monster itself. The Horla is never really illustrated as much than a presence, something that looms over him at times and drains his energy. In the first story, the monster gets its name from the narrator, yet in the second one the narrator mentions the monster tells him its name; not in an auditive manner, but he can perceive it in his mind and recognize it. The translated meaning of the monster had been difficult to pinpoint, as it is a mixture of two French words, which do not normally belong together. The French “hors” meaning “out of”, and “là” meaning “there” – these words, combined, form an idea which is echoed in the story as well, of a monster from “out there”, an outsider, illustrating the Gothic “other” in its bare form. (Miles, 2004: 317)

Another attempt at explaining the name has been by tying it into the Cholera epidemic that has stricken a few years prior to the short story being written – which could be argued for due to the description used in the story when tracking the origins of the monster “Madness, an epidemic of madness, which may be compared to that contagious madness which attacked the people of Europe in the Middle Ages”. (Miles, 2004: 317). Calling this monster an epidemic would imply that it can either consume its victim’s lives quickly, or that there are several of these unseen monsters roaming around. Later finding out that this monster travels, would reinforce the idea of an epidemic-type of monster, which has the purpose to conquer humanity.

In the victim’s eyes the Horla is an ever-changing monster, no clear definition is being given to it – it’s a ghost, then a vampire, then a being here to replace humankind as it has surpassed it. Regardless of the label the narrator tries to pin on it, the monster is dominating his thoughts. The Horla infiltrates the man’s life quietly, turning him from a man sure of his sanity, capable of enjoying nature and the company of friends, to an isolated, depressed individual, who no longer can tell reality from supernatural. This is mostly evident in his journals from the very first entry “May 8. What a lovely day! I have spent all the morning lying on the grass in front of my house. I am fond of living here. I love the house in which I grew up.

What a delicious morning it was!” (Maupassant, 1996: 53) - to the last entry where we saw the narrator burning down his house and deciding to commit suicide.

Also found in the first entry is the first connection to the monster that will begin to torment him, “there came a magnificent Brazilian three-master; it was perfectly white and wonderfully clean and shining. I saluted it, I hardly know why, except that the sight of the vessel gave me great pleasure.” (54). This moment foreshadows what the narrator later finds out, from reading about Professor Don Pedro Henriques’s discoveries, about this “contagious madness” (76) that has taken place in the Province of San-Paulo – the illness that is, in actuality, the monster which torments him.

It is impossible to determine whether the character in Maupassant’s story is indeed sane and haunted, or if the story is about progressing delusions. At times, the narrator wishes to prove to himself that he is sane, which provides the narration with a sense of verity. It asks the readers to believe alongside him, as he descends into his fears. In attempting to suppress his feeling of fear, he overuses rationality until it exhausts him – he can no longer perform any day-to-day tasks. Moreover, the refusal to seek the guidance of his servants is also of important notice. The narrator has servants around his house, and he is being tormented inside his house. However, none of the other characters comment on it, none of the other characters go through what he does - which brings to light the question if things are really, truly happening to the narrator, or if his inability to identify reality pervades the story. As soon as things escalate, one point mentioned in both versions of the story, although by different people, once a monk and the other a scholar, is that there are things which do indeed exist in this world, that we as humans cannot perceive. One example given by the monk is the wind: “Do we see the hundred thousandth part of what exists? Look here; there is the wind. Which is the strongest force in nature, the wind which kills, which whistles, which sighs, which roars – have you ever seen it, and can you see it? It exists for all that, however”. (77)

Recalling the mention of the lack of description for the Horla, it becomes evident that it is done intentionally. Not only does it make it harder to define what exactly brings about terror, it also makes it hard to distinguish it from other fears. A creature that is not defined, that has the ability to access one’s subconsciousness and control it, that feeds on the life force of the humans it cohabitates with, the ultimate “other” as it cannot be truly labelled. The progression of the inappropriately named “hauntings” is derived of simple fear – the creature had not presented itself to the narrator, had not tried to make itself known. It incorrectly assumed it would be able to live its own life in company of this man, by drinking his water, enjoying his garden, reading alongside him. A certain boredom could be what had driven the monster to its boldness and increase in actions. And yet, due to the unknown nature of the monster, the narrator reacted as humanely as possible: with fear of the unknown. As ultimately, fear is what has driven the narrator into madness, what has driven him to arson, and what has driven him to suicide.

The possibilities remain open, that the author could have truly met the creature that would bring an end to humans, or that the author had a decline in mental health, ultimately giving in to paranoia.

### III. Guy de Maupassant’s mental illnesses – Hallucinations

An important aspect to understand when reading Guy de Maupassant is the interconnection between his life and his short stories – as the author’s mental illness and history, put into a present-day-context, can help the reader see the monsters the writer created

as a result of his own experiences. Atia Sattar mentions that in Maupassant's stories "the supernatural is internalized: it becomes the mysteries of human mind" (Sattar, 2011: 230), tying into the idea that the illness he had gone through was the inspiration for the monsters he gave life to.

In *Maupassant and Medicine*, Straub comments upon the author's illness "Throughout his life, Maupassant suffered from migraines, and after contracting syphilis in his twenties, developed General Paralysis of the Insane, an advanced form of neurosyphilis, which caused severe neurological and psychiatric symptoms and slowly drove him insane." (2015: 3). There is also a reference (Pillet in Straub, 2015: 6) to a history of mental issues running in the author's family, both his mother, Laure, and his brother, Hervé, suffering from various neurological conditions. Unfortunately, medicine could not help any one of them. The first cure for syphilis, Penicillin, would not be discovered until 1928; as such, any treatment available during Maupassant's life was ineffective (Pearce, 2012: 277). Even more, neurological symptoms were interpreted by scientists as signs of syphilis until the 1900s (Straub, 2015: 7), which leaves us to believe that the suffering writer had no way of pinpointing exactly what was happening to him. Sián Miles, in her notes on Guy de Maupassant's life, details certain instances in which the author had vivid hallucinations, such as seeing a friend sitting on a chair, or, towards the end of his life, being convinced the flies would eat his brain (2004: ix - xxvi). The tragic degeneration of Maupassant's mental health was, ironically, a great source for his writings, as his characters were tormented beings, like him. However, unlike the author himself, his characters had a chance of naming their tormentor. Nearing the end of his life, the author had attempted suicide, which again, can be linked to the plot of his stories.

Guy de Maupassant's illness provides a window for readers to glimpse into the unpleasant aspects of the human existence, often-times pessimistic. In most of his works, his main characters struggle throughout their lives, only to end up let down in the end, realising that all their efforts had been futile. This negative view on life, alongside Maupassant's very own mental issues, had been reflected in *The Horla*. Even more so, given the advancements of knowledge a contemporary reader has on hand, it becomes easier to pinpoint what the hallucinations are caused by, and how they manifest.

Here are some psychological unsettling symptoms evoked by the story. Scopaeesthesia is defined as an eerie feeling of being watched when you know you are alone. Another important term is "scotoma", described as "a spot in the visual field in which vision is absent or deficient", and this spot has the ability to come and go, eventually becoming a fixed spot in advanced cases (Titchener, 1898: 895-897). These affections do become more advanced in people suffering from migraines, as is it known that Maupassant did in his lifetime (Straub, 2015: 28). Another meaningful thing to take note of is that the author had used drugs attempting to self-treat, which is an explanation as to why he had been familiar to these hallucinations (Miles, 2004: ix - xxvi).

In the short story, the unnamed narrator is experiencing these "hauntings" – the first scene portrays the water from his jug disappearing during the night, as he sleeps. In a beautiful play on the sane-insane juxtaposition, the character, auto proclaimed as still sane, decides to conduct two experiments to see if he is the one drinking the water during his sleep and not remembering. This idea of bringing science into his life add a layer of credibility to the story. However, as both of his experiments fail, meaning that someone or something else is drinking the liquid, we see the first crack in the character's sanity. The Horla had infiltrated in his room,

while the protagonist is asleep. This state of sleep puts him in a very vulnerable position, as soon it is revealed that the Horla feeds from his life force during it.

The next incident relays the narrator walking through his garden and seeing a rose floating in the air. As he runs towards the floating rose, the Horla throws it away, at the bottom of the bush, and runs away from the narrator. (Maupassant, 2004: 236-241) This signals the second crack in his lucidity. While the reader can see the narrator attempting to rationalize everything, he or she also has the knowledge of a supernatural being existing in this world, and thus can see the flaws in the protagonist's explanations and justifications.

Nonetheless, as the Horla continues to feed off the protagonist's life, it naturally becomes stronger and the narrator weaker. Due to this, the magnitude of the monster's hauntings increases. The narrator is soon able to feel it around him, to feel its presence, to sense its breath on his body. This, along with the previous two instances of interactions carried out between the Horla and the protagonist, show signs of being inspired by scopaesthesia.

A later scene in the story shows the narrator watching in horror as the pages of a book are moving one by one. In spite of this, the narrator surprises even himself as he proclaims that "With a furious bound, the bound of an enraged wild beast that wishes to disembowel its tamer, I crossed my room to seize him, to strangle him, to kill him!" (75). As this is the first direct confrontation, his rage is palatable, while he attempts to regain a sense of normalcy by ridding himself of the monster. This ends with the monster "running" away from him, which encourages the protagonist to go forth and take action, as he realises that fear is something both of them feel.

The last interaction between the protagonist and the monster is the one which prove to the narrator that he had not gone insane, and that the creature is real, not just a figment of his imagination. As he journals "Horror! It was as bright as at midday, but I did not see myself in the glass! It was empty, clear, profound, full of light! But my figure was not reflected in it – and I, I was opposite to it!" (79). This points towards in the direction of the aforementioned symptom known as scotoma – something blurring a person's vision for a period of time.

These examples of hauntings stand as evidence that Guy de Maupassant had been familiar with mild hallucinations, and with their aggravation, as his illness progressed. Similar to an emotional rollercoaster that had been on a declining track.

#### **IV. Conclusion**

As the unnamed narrator of *The Horla* experiences terrifying hallucinations, often mirrored by the author's own life experiences, he is ultimately at a loss in attempting to explain what is happening to him. There is a constant presence of a fear of the unknown, fear of what will happen, which is what drives the narrator to his final escape - be it by institutionalising himself and asking for help from doctors, or by committing suicide and escaping the material dimension of existence. The short story taps into the unconscious mind, into primal fear, presenting it as a very powerful tool of driving one to insanity. The nemesis is individualized, personal, and strives only to consume its victim.

While Guy de Maupassant incorporated his mental illness and his knowledge of advancements made at that point in time in science, such as hypnotism, hysteria, symptoms of various types of madness, it is worth-while to re-examine his short stories with our own knowledge of contemporary science and advancements. Maupassant's descriptions of nineteenth-century France, through the lenses of a man that is struggling with his mental health, bring a unique literary insight into the attitude which society had towards the mentally



ill. The author's own decline is reflected in his characters' declines: the illness starts with hallucinations, followed by a loss of control over their own bodies, to severe forms of insanity, which no longer hurt only themselves but also the ones around them, such as arson in *The Horla*,

Fear of being driven to madness, fear of losing agency over your own body and mind, plays an important role in this short story. These types of fears serve as insight into the mind of someone who had access to discoveries from the medical field during his time, and who was trying to understand their own mind through their writing. In Maupassant's shortcomings of understanding the human mind, he found refuge in his works, and depicted any sign of madness as a monster, for at least in this way, it was something that he could name and that he could overcome.

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