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Monstrous Women in the Monstrous Wonderland: An Exploration of Abjection and Trauma in the Silent Hill Franchise

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Monstrous Women in the Monstrous Wonderland: An Exploration of Abjection and
Trauma in the *Silent Hill* Franchise

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Abstract

Literary scholars have recently expanded their focus to include emerging media such as video games as literary texts. In particular, these scholars study how video games create an immersive experience with active agency for players. However, there has been little study of horror video games in this rapidly growing line of inquiry. Accordingly, this paper presents a feminist, trauma-informed reading on the horror video game *Silent Hill* (1999), with further consideration of the subsequent American film adaptation *Silent Hill* (2006). This exploration outlines the ways by which trauma organizes an active experience for players. In doing so, this examination applies Cathy Caruth's foundational theory of how trauma manifests in literature as something unknown, as well as how literature attempts to explore this unknown terrain. I conclude that the film adaptation attempts to but does not successfully encapsulate a traumatic experience in the immersive way the original game does, given the player's active role in exploring trauma. In support of this argument, the paper outlines how involving the player in puzzle-solving and the symbolism of the landscape enable the game to mimic traumatic experiences and create a connection between the player and the game's characters not possible in the medium of film.

The horror genre creates the queerest of fascinations while exploring the unanswerable predicaments of human nature and the mind. The genre closely probes the intimate relationships between people and their desires—not only those of the fictional characters but also those of the viewer. Indeed, the genre shows us what a society believes to be ugly or horrifying, as well as what we perceive as different from ourselves. Moreover, it provides scholars with opportunities to question both the visual and metaphorical representations of gender, sexuality, and race. This questioning only grows deeper as the horror genre expands from prose to other visual media like film and video games. For instance, being able to see Bram Stoker’s novel *Dracula* adapted on the screen has allowed scholars to identify Dracula’s queer intentions that were somewhat ambiguous in the text. Video games, like films, have the capacity to go beyond what we previously thought were the limits of the literary experience. By drawing the player in much like novels and plays have been doing for centuries but with an additional interactive component, video games allow scholars to decode more directly the strange, the bizarre, and the horrific.

In one such video game series, the *Silent Hill* franchise, the player’s experience engages a concept central to the development of the horror genre: the monstrous feminine. The monstrous feminine, a theoretical construct first proposed by Barbara Creed, defines patriarchal perceptions of the feminine as monstrous in horror cinema. While women’s monstrousness is often perceived as dangerous, Creed posits that the monstrous feminine actually generates threats to the patriarchy. In the *Silent Hill* franchise, however, the depiction of the monstrous feminine branches out beyond Creed’s initial description to suggest a kind of monstrousness influenced by—in fact, traumatized by—the patriarch, while also trying to pull itself out of patriarchal ideations. By drawing on Creed’s original construct of the monstrous feminine and Cathy Caruth’s study of historical and literary trauma, I will argue that the visual landscape of *Silent*

Hill depicts the patriarch as the agent of trauma. Further, I will demonstrate that the horror in video games, through its creation of player agency, produces a more significant experience of trauma than the passive experiences of film. The game thus disrupts patriarchal values by depicting feminine trauma as generated by the patriarchy and showing how those perceptions contort and control the female monster. In the end, we can see that trauma presents itself as its own monster in the horror genre, as well as how video games portray trauma as an active experience rather than a passive one.

Video games take the experience of horror literature and film one step closer to a completely immersive experience by giving the player power of choice in the outcome of storytelling. The player has to fill in their own road map and make the choices whether to proceed, how to proceed, whether to turn back or to leave the game unfinished. As Kirkland Ewan argues, “[G]amers...are simultaneously players, readers, and authors, constructing stories within game’s structural parameters” (169). The combination of the player’s role within a video game’s narrative also increases emotional investment because we become the character in the game; indeed, the things we lose, keep, and love become an extension of ourselves. This dynamic makes the experience of horror in a video game all the more significant. Imagine if you were being chased by Jason from the *Friday the 13th* film series instead of merely watching him chase someone else. Or what if you *were* Jason? In these interactive scenarios enabled by video games, the narrative becomes a personal one no matter how the protagonist appears in the game.

These immersive worlds allow video games to provide a uniquely interactive literary experience for players through diverse and inventive dialogue. In contrast to reading a book, video games provide direct experiences through significant active engagement with the narrative. As Tavinor Grant argues, “[R]ather than a focus on interpretive and sympathetic engagement

with narratives, video games involve their appreciators in an active engagement with the problem spaces or kinetic narratives of gameplay” (25). In this conception, kinetic narratives mean situations where the player can converse with non-playable characters (NPCs) who often help on the quest for the endgame, allowing players to really know their characters. The player’s active engagement stems from these interactions, and in some cases players can even choose dialogue options to pursue closer relationships with NPCs in the world. If a player can increase friendship with the NPCs, they might unlock new features such as them joining on the journey or the player receiving special perks and rewards. Beyond dialogue options and deeper emotional investment with characters, video games create a form of interactive storytelling by adapting narrative based on the righteous or villainous choices a player makes. In fact, some games are entirely decision-based (*Detroit Become Human*, *The Walking Dead* series, and *Life is Strange*). *Silent Hill* has several endings, all of which can be determined by whether the player chooses to save a certain character from death or to kill them. These choices give the player agency and show where their moral compass may lead them in the end.

In the late nineties when video game companies began to invest unprecedented sums into game development, a new genre of games emerged: survival horror. The first game of this genre was Capcom’s first *Resident Evil*, a game where the player is trapped with mutant creatures and forced to collect weapons and items to survive. And that is a core component of what sets apart the horror game from a horror film: the nightmare becomes one you actively have to face. In this context, what is worthy of our scholarly attention are the interactive characters and creatures within the games and how they behave within their setting. Video games, compared to films, create more tension through interactivity between character and viewer due to the active role of the player. The game that I will be centrally analyzing in this paper, *Silent Hill* (1999), is a

survival horror game designed for the PlayStation (PS1) in the lineage of *Resident Evil*. Survival horror is more immersive than an action-packed horror film because we, the player, have to collect items, solve puzzles, and find ammunition and weapons in order to increase the chances of survival in a setting populated with monstrous creatures.

In the plot of *Silent Hill*, we play as a man named Harry Mason who wakes up from a car accident in a mysterious town called Silent Hill. Upon awakening, he realizes his daughter Cheryl is missing, and he desperately travels through the nightmarish world in search of her while trying to prevent the uprising of a demon in the process. While completing the objective of finding Cheryl, we uncover the secrets of the town and the story of Alessa whose ghostly apparition has been showing up to give us clues. The darkness that has covered the town is revealed to be Alessa's doing, whose special powers allow her to bring her eternal nightmares to life. Alessa is the daughter of Dahlia Gillespie, another character the player will meet through the progress of the game. Alessa is a strange woman whose motives at first appear unclear, but as we play more, we discover her intention to sacrifice Harry's daughter Cheryl to a demon named Samael. Cheryl, we eventually find out, has actually been created by Alessa to function as a substitute sacrifice to Samael, a substitution that will allow Alessa herself to survive Dahlia's plan. In sum, the plot of *Silent Hill* immerses the player in the mysterious landscape of the town wherein plentiful revelations typify the survival horror genre.

The initial *Silent Hill* video game series was so popular that it had several installments including *Silent Hill 3* wherein Heather, Harry's reborn daughter, returns to Silent Hill. The success of the game series also led to a film adaptation (2006) directed by Christophe Gans that revisits the plot of the game and the staple monsters of the franchise. In this version, our main protagonist is now a woman named Rose who takes her daughter Shannon to Silent Hill to find

out the source of her nightmares but loses her in a car accident. In each of these contexts, the player or viewer is in for a ride of betrayals, shocking reveals, and an array of monsters that capitalize on some of the main mechanics of horror such as Julia Kristeva's conception of the abject and Barbara Creed's notion of monstrous feminine.

The deeper meanings and inner workings of horror have been theorized in Julia Kristeva's concept of abjection. Kristeva's definition of the abject and horror characterizes the concept of otherness as something more outside of us than inside of us. Horror elements such as vomit, blood, and death are key components of what instills fear into our audience, with Kristeva arguing that the viewer is engaging with a process of othering from what is seen as a parental or societal view. Kristeva describes the scene of subject formation as one in which a child drink's the mother's milk and then throws up, effectively rejecting it. The milk Kristeva is referring to is symbolic of parental or maternal influences, and the vomit is the act of rejecting those influences. In this example, the act of vomiting itself becomes an explosion and birth of another: "I am in the process of becoming another at the expense of my own death, During [*sic*] that course in which 'I' become, I give birth to myself amid the violence of sobs, of vomit" (Kristeva 3). The birth of the other, and the inability to identify familiar objects, is central to what horrifies according to Kristeva: "[A]bjection is elaborated through a failure to recognize its kin; nothing is familiar, not even the shadow of a memory" (Kristeva 5). Kristeva's concept of the abject in this argument centralizes how trauma becomes horror in the birth of othering and its aftermath. The theories of the abject likewise extend to how gameplay mechanics instantiate the horror of traumatic experiences.

The abject horrors of the *Silent Hill* game originate from the perspective and emotions of Alessa who has been living as a tortured soul, alive but not alive, in the Alchemilla Hospital.

These horrors are suggestive of Kristeva's reading of the horror genre as representing the abject and the othering of oneself from normal society. Alessa does this by rejecting her mother's wishes to be a sacrifice to the demon Samael, and that rejection of parental desire manifests itself in the horrors the gamer encounters. Kristeva addresses this component of the abject: "It is thus not lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite" (4). So while Alessa does not respect her mother's rules, she likewise does not identify with the system or social order, therefore othering herself and becoming something abject and monstrous.

At the same time, *Silent Hill* suggests meaningful connections to the monstrous feminine. In her book, *The Monstrous Feminine, Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis*, Barbara Creed perceives that horror makes the feminine horrific in relation to the viewer's fear of female power. Building on Kristeva's ideology of othering, the monstrous feminine goes one step further to conclude that horror is inherently patriarchal and that women are often part of the abject: "Creed challenges the mythical patriarchal view that woman terrifies because she is castrated by arguing that woman primarily terrifies because of a fear that she might castrate" (Creed i). The *Silent Hill* game suggests a disconnect in the traditional framework of the monstrous feminine, while the medium allows a symbolic exploration of trauma as it appears in the landscape of Silent Hill.

Indeed, the *Silent Hill* franchise is a monstrous wonderland filled with creatures of repressed feminine power. However, it also contains a mixture of patriarchal monsters from Alessa's otherworld with a landscape unable to be experienced or explored fully in the film adaptation due to the lack of direct engagement. In this setting, the patriarchal-influenced creatures are indicative of Alessa's trauma. The monsters go beyond a necessary desire to take away male power. Even though it is impossible to separate the monstrous feminine from the

monstrous trauma, the original game suggests the need for a broadening of the concept of the monstrous feminine. Creed's study only entails opposition to the patriarch, and the *Silent Hill* film, due to the constraints of medium, represents a less than ideal representation of Alessa's trauma with which the viewer can engage.



Figure 1. Alessa's rapist strung up by barbed wire in the 2006 film.

The *Silent Hill* film's problematic use of Alessa's character begins early in the narrative when Rose enters Midwich Elementary in hopes of finding her daughter Sharron. Rose is in the bottom left corner of the frame, although her face is obscured from view. The unidentified male, who the viewer later learns is a rapist, is strung up by barbed wire. His body is contorted like a puppet on a string. His positioning is strangely provocative by his exposed chest and open arms, almost in reception of pleasure while his mouth is agape to mirror ecstasy. The words "I dare you" are written in childlike handwriting. This phrasing is childlike, and we are aware of Alessa's otherworld just by the grotesqueness of this body and its statue-like physique. The handwriting is a device used in the film to reflect Alessa's rage—not to share her story. While there is a lack of physical violence in this still, the violence implied by the barbed wire and the

male's contorted shape reminds us of Creed's concept of the monstrous feminine. She writes, "[W]oman also terrifies because man endows her with imaginary powers of castration" (Creed 87). The image set out before us is horrifying because it involves a woman's power to take away a man. In contrast, in the game version, Alessa in her otherworld does not intend to take away the male's source of power. Rather, she creates a new world around her in an effort to understand her trauma, her relationship with her mother, and her past. As a video game player, we can also feel how the landscape is alive and changes; in this way, its fluidity and vastness are dynamics to be explored, whereas the film locks the viewer into fixed parameters and leaves them without the agency required to solve the mystery on their own.

The film, in an attempt to capture Alessa's dynamic character as enacted in the game's landscape, splits her into three distinct beings: one is representative of the traumatized self, another is demonic manifestation of hate, and the third is Rose's daughter Shannon, who doesn't remember her past. Alessa, having been terrorized by her community for being a witch and burned at the stake, transforms into a rather vengeful creature that is cursed to live in a nightmare. Alessa's ability to conjure and create beyond the physical limitations of most members of her community instantly becomes a threat to the patriarchy, again aligning with Creed's monstrous feminine. According to Creed, "The witch sets out to unsettle boundaries between the rational and irrational, symbolic and imaginary. Her evil powers are seen as part of her 'feminine' nature; she is closer to nature than man is itself a threat to the powers of the patriarch and can control forces in nature such as tempests, hurricanes and storms" (76).



Figure 2. Alessa's evil manifestation towering above Rose in the 2006 film.

The disruption that the witch creates immediately ostracizes her from everyone else and thus characterizes her as a monstrous feminine entity. Finally, when the town believes they have gotten rid of Alessa by attempting to kill her, a film of darkness spreads over the town that envelops all of the people in Alessa's hatred. This hatred has physically manifested into the child version of herself who shares Alessa's story to convince Rose to let the darkness inside to destroy the remaining people living trapped in Silent Hill. The wide shot in Figure 2 occurs after the explanation of Alessa's strong desire for vengeance, wherein she states, "fear turns to hate, and hate starts to change the world" (*Silent Hill* 2006). Her past has made Alessa seek out revenge, and she now wishes to put an end to the town that has always thought her to be evil. In this moment, Rose's body language is vulnerable, arms at her side with no signs of resistance. In fact, she is surrendering herself to the monstrous feminine and allowing herself to be completely incorporated with the other. Alessa's dark counterpart is standing above Rose, dominating her completely. Rose has one knee placed downward as a sign of relinquishing her control to Alessa, this positioning is symbolic of the hierarchy and control that designs itself in the film. This is a

final decision moment for the film: once Rose has made the choice to align herself with the intentions of Alessa, she can no longer return to the world outside of Alessa's dream.

By contrast, the game goes beyond this by exposing our vulnerabilities because, as players, we do not always have a choice in who we trust. For instance, in Silent Hill we trust Dahlia only to discover she has been manipulating us the entire time. Having to trust characters in order to progress in the game forces a level of vulnerability in the player that a cinematic experience does demand from a viewer. We can connect this moment of trust and acceptance between Rose and Alessa's evil other to the moment when Harry has chosen to trust Dahlia to help with finding his daughter. The player may have seen right through Dahlia's character, but the experience of having no choice but to rely on her to progress forward is absent. We only see the choice being made as viewers rather than having to deal with the consequences of our actions.

As such, the film's overarching claim is limited in contrast to the game because the movie depicts Alessa as a female revenge monster while providing limited engagement with the landscape of her nightmare. While playing the game, we realize that the boundary between reality and this nightmare is fairly indistinguishable, effectively representing the ambiguity of the traumatic experience. This depiction of the traumatic experience thus elevates the game beyond the bare conception of a female monster and instead allows for engagement with the interconnectedness of the abject, the feminine monstrous, and the traumatic experience.

In the game, this exploration of the traumatic experience branches out to the landscape as a living beast capable of doing Alessa's bidding in Silent Hill's Otherworld. Alessa's Otherworld includes several strangely gendered, misshapen, and moaning creatures that have no identity as if a child is working to process their own perceptions and grapple with their experience. Caruth

writes, “Traumatic experience, beyond the psychological dimension of suffering it, involves, suggests a certain paradox: that the most direct seeing of a violent event may occur as an absolute inability to know it; that immediacy, paradoxically, may take the form of belatedness” (92). The violent event, even though intense and immediate, occurs at least outwardly in a rather slow process. In this conception, the victim deals with a loss of time in an attempt to understand the pain of the experience. In the world of *Silent Hill*, this belatedness of traumatic experience is shown in the gameplay. Because the town itself is a creation of Alessa’s trauma, it forces the player to go through the world and experience her trauma at the expense of completing the game. The aspects of puzzle-solving, boss sequences and other monsters directly engage with Caruth’s definition of belatedness in personal trauma narratives. The monsters are symbolic of the struggle Alessa is having with her trauma: the creatures are simultaneously a method she uses to communicate her pain and ones she uses to inflict pain. Meanwhile, puzzle-solving showcases to the player that Alessa is first and foremost a child, and through solving the child-like puzzles we learn to empathize with her story.

Likewise, the landscape of *Silent Hill* asks us to draw upon the knowledge we have of Alessa’s trauma in order to survive. In this respect, this landscape is a monstrous creature but not entirely violent in its monstrosity. The town itself is symbolic of Alessa’s trauma, and with Caruth’s interpretation of trauma experience, its strangeness can be perceived as a representation of survival. She writes, “It is only by recognizing traumatic experience as a paradoxical relation between destructiveness and survival that we can also recognize the legacy of incomprehensibility at the heart of catastrophic experience” (58). Thus, the creatures that run rampant inside of Silent Hill and attack Harry (the player character) who is seemingly only doing good for Alessa are a part of the incomprehensibility of her patriarchal-influenced trauma. In our

desire to find Cheryl and complete the game, the gamer is forced to assume Alessa's perspective is evil because Dahlia tells us this, but we gradually discover that things are not so black and white, and much about Alessa's motivations is unknown. The answer to this uncertainty lies in Alessa's backstory, which is scattered across the town of Silent Hill. We do know Alessa's childhood is depicted as an unhappy one. Her mother Dahlia gave birth to her with the intention of sacrificing her to the demon Samael; however, Alessa grew up seeking her own agency and wants outside the scope of her mother's intentions.



Figure 3. A flashback of Dahlia trying to force Alessa into using her power.

Dahlia's neglect of Alessa's aspirations to stay alive and be with her mother present themselves as traits of the patriarch, taking away Alessa's power of choice and presenting motherhood as something to be utilized for power. Dahlia ultimately chooses to manipulate her daughter later in this cutscene when she says, "it will make everyone happy, and it's for your own good, too" (*Silent Hill*). With her use of "everyone," Dahlia makes use of Alessa's desire to be accepted by others, suggesting that sacrificing herself will restore some order that has been disrupted by her powers. Dahlia sees Alessa's power as a threat to order, and while this patriarchal manipulation from a female character is unconventional, her masculine character traits are too strong to ignore.

Dahlia will do anything to get what she wants and touches on this when she realizes she can take advantage of the power of motherhood (a commonly known feminine power) to utilize it for more violent and brutal intentions: “Herein lies the mother’s womb the power in it to create life, I could have done it all myself” (*Silent Hill*). Dahlia only regards Alessa as a life force she can use for power.. Beyond this, the monsters in the game appear to be in service of the patriarchal figure Dahlia’s mission, and this is primarily because Alessa still hopes in some way to connect with her mother. However, there is another side of Alessa that is in service of helping the player reach the end goal of stopping Dahlia from summoning Samael and sacrificing Cheryl.

Silent Hill contains several puzzle-solving mechanisms that connect the confused mindset of Alessa’s trauma. For example, Harry has to fight bosses and solve puzzles that allude to fables and children’s stories. Each key is an indirect reference to the *Wizard of Oz*, each being labeled to a character in the book: the Scarecrow, the Woodman, and the Lion. When Harry is in the otherworld hospital trying to gain access to different parts of the area, the player has to collect a series of stones, each one drawing an allusion from the children’s story *Alice in Wonderland*, Plate of cat, Plate of Hatter, and Plate of Queen (*Silent Hill*). The locations of these various keys to progress in the game are in rather grizzly and dangerous places that put the player in imminent danger. The player experiences this sort of disruption of the familiar with the usage of well-known stories that often invoke nostalgia, and the disruption of nostalgia with horror generates a connection between the player and Alessa’s experience.

Likewise, the geography of Midwich Elementary allows the player to explore further Alessa’s childhood trauma. Midwich Elementary is the first map in the game and we go there in search of Cheryl. The school itself is full of clues to the game’s plot and a gateway between us and finding out what happened to Alessa.

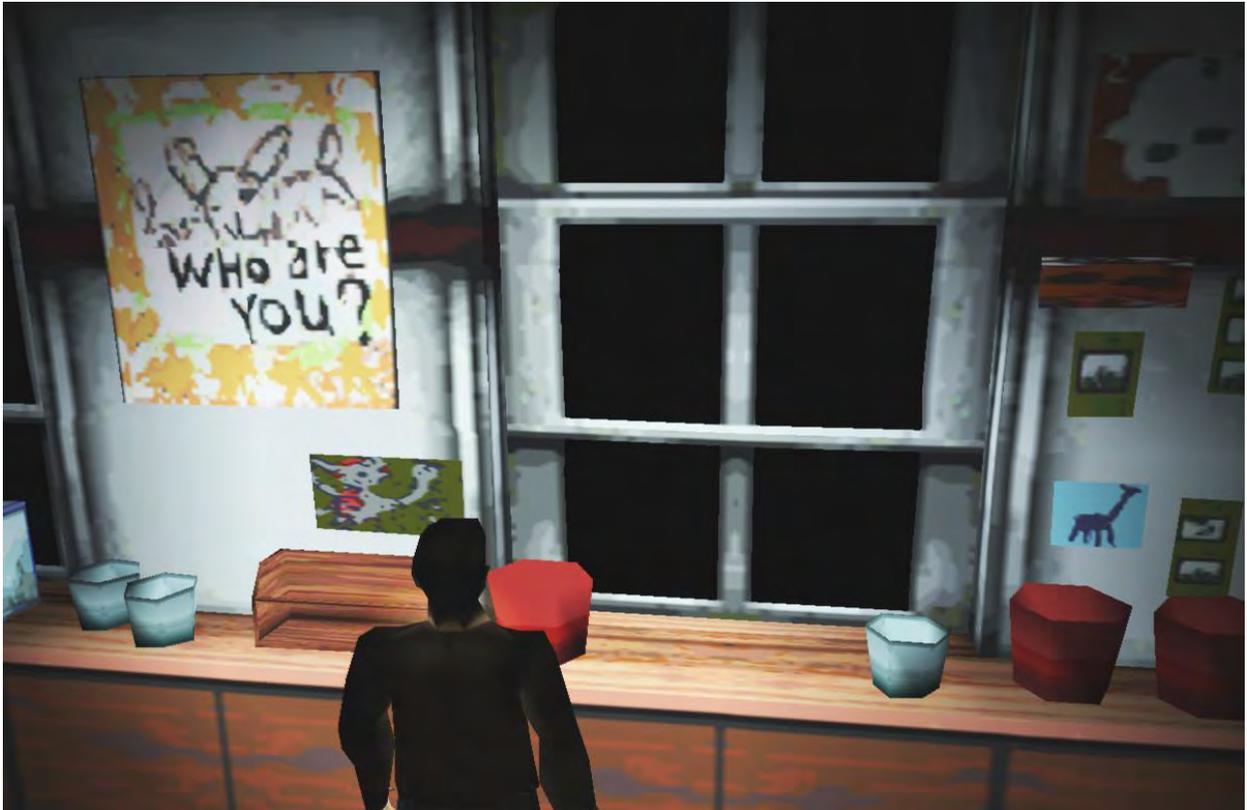


Figure 4. The artwork on the walls of Midwich Elementary *Silent Hill*.

The space is familiar to us: we understand the purpose of a schoolhouse, yet this schoolhouse is nothing like what we expect. The images that normally decorate an elementary school wall are strange and uncanny because the art is childish, as if straight from a child's mind. The images on the wall are also curious: they ask, "who are you?" (Figure 4) but it is impossible to know whether Alessa is wondering who *we* are or who *she* is. The gamer has fallen into the trap she has laid out for us, and the unfamiliar only continues to grow as players are exposed to riddles written in blood, poetry, libraries with torn pages that are suggestive of Alessa's tragedy, and horror. One of these allusions to Alessa's tragedy is her desk.

By wandering through the confusing and exhausting maze of Midwich elementary, the player will progress far enough in the level to eventually notice that the school changes several times—changes symbolically representative of Alessa's trauma. The player, as Harry, walks into

the classroom to find the scenery different. Instead of a group of desks, as usual, there is just one in the middle of the room. As the player gets closer to it, there are a series of scratch marks that look like words, but we cannot make out what is on the desk. This lack of clarity leads the gamer to assume that Alessa has left this behind for a reason¹. Other than the desk, the room is barren, which is odd to us since every other classroom entered previously has contained the exact same

Figure 5. Alessa’s Desk.

with rows of desks. In fact, in this moment, Alessa is trying to share her traumatic experience with the viewer. The object by itself in an empty room is symbolic of Alessa’s ostracisation from



¹ In *Silent Hill 3*, we uncover those markings to be hateful comments from her classmates. One such engraving is revealed to be: “DROP DEAD”.

her fellow classmates and how she views herself as an outsider, belonging in a separate space from others. These objects are from her memory, and within her memories are spaces of the most confusion for her, for example the boiler room. We learn that Alessa's body perished because of an "accident" in the boiler room (*Silent Hill*), and now her wounded body is living in the Alchemilla Hospital. The boiler room returns in several parts throughout the game, being on the levels that reoccur in the "other world," in Midwich Elementary, the Hospital, and the final battle scene. Building on this repetition, when Harry enters more traumatic parts of Alessa's memory the landscape changes, and the space now looks minimized as he walks on metal frameworks. Caruth identifies repetition as a wound from trauma that grows within the survivor:

The wound of the mind—the breach in the mind's experience of time, self, and the world—is not, like the wound of the body, a simple and healable event, but rather an event that...is experienced too soon, too unexpectedly, to be fully known and is therefore not available to consciousness until it imposes itself again, repeatedly, in the nightmares and repetitive actions of the survivor. (Caruth 4)

The boiler room and desk represent a moment Alessa cannot comprehend, and thus they appear again and again even though the player, like Alessa, cannot comprehend their significance. The Alchemilla Hospital is another of the first levels in the game the player has to

complete in order to find out Cheryl's location. What is most compelling about the hospital itself are the creatures that inhabit the space. The creature in Figures 6 and Figure 7 is called Puppet Nurse. These figures show up throughout the hospital region of the game. The woman is hunched over, her body hangs loosely as if she were being pulled by strings. The creature is a zombified woman, and the player can notice a parasitic entity on her back (Figure 7A). This

entity represents the abject and reflects Alessa's experience with otherness. As Kristeva writes, "[T]here, I am at the border of my condition as a living being. My body extricates itself, as being alive, from that border" (3). The zombied body is free of the aforementioned border of life and

Figure 6. Puppet Nurse in Alchemilla Hospital.

Figure 7. The back of Puppet Nurse.

death. At the same time with a parasitic entity attached to the creature, it is still bound to life.

This creature under parasitic manipulation mirrors Alessa's lack of control over her own environment and her life, a representation of how she is still bound to the confines of living even in death. Alessa has been bestowed with powers she didn't want, and due to that, her mother makes decisions for her that she never wanted. Yet in this case, the parasite working to keep her



alive is her mother, Dahlia. Alessa is wandering through the horrors of her life in the otherworld, and they are replicated in visual representations of her imagination that showcase the inner workings of her trauma. Additionally, the sounds of the Puppet Nurse when shot or injured by the player and when attacking sound eerily sexual, suggesting a connection between death and desire.



Figure 8. The red cage in Alchemilla Hospital.

To further register to the player that Alessa is in control of the otherworld, *Silent Hill* incorporates specific symbolic imagery that decorates the landscapes to increasingly present Alessa's trauma. Harry enters several rooms within the hospital, but none are quite like Alessa's patient room: a bright red birdcage sits almost forlornly in the middle of the room (Figure 8). Yet another puzzling moment of Alessa's psyche occurs with the birdcage, which represents Alessa's intuition that her mind and soul are trapped for reasons she cannot comprehend. The object does not belong in the hospital, yet it is there, and it speaks loudly to us: gesturing toward how people can experience trauma, how the brain makes connections between the symbolic and the real. Overall, the way the empty red cage subverts our expectation in its color and emptiness reminds us of how Alessa has been processing trauma all along.

As we have seen, the world of *Silent Hill* organizes itself on the act of trauma as a mode of both survival and destruction. This dynamic reflects Caruth's assertion that "trauma is not simply an effect of destruction but also, fundamentally, an enigma of survival" (58). The survival

element of Alessa's trauma dwells within the shared experience and disruption of the familiar, and the destruction lies in the creatures that arise to attack the player even as we try to help. In these connections, Alessa is simultaneously disruptive in her trauma while also trying to survive. Because the central patriarchal figure in the narrative, Dahlia, is threatening Alessa's ability to survive, Alessa's survival instinct and spirit guides Harry from place to place in order to communicate the truth. Alessa does not tell the player anything; indeed, she *cannot* tell us anything because the nature of her trauma is indescribable. Thus we have to experience her trauma for ourselves through the video game dynamic to comprehend truly what is really happening.

In the unspeakable nature of Alessa's trauma, the game engages with the power of abject and body horror. The ending boss sequence at the end of *Silent Hill* is one that exemplifies the confusion of Alessa's experience. The final boss's appearance is truly chilling. In the original game, Alessa has no free will: her mission is not one of vengeance as we have seen in the film but one of survival, and she is trapped under the control of her mother Dahlia. The player understands that they have yet again entered Alessa's otherworld. A cut scene starts the player out in a darkened room that is practically indiscernible. Suddenly, Dahlia appears and explains to us that our daughter (Cheryl) has been restored to her true form and will now be sacrificed. This cutscene is something straight from the abject, with Alessa's collapsed body tearing in half and the graphic birth-like imagery of the demon Samael. The sheer violence of the scene relates to Caruth's interpretations of traumatic experience by bringing the trauma to the physical: the internal moves to the external, thereby bringing the violence of the psyche out in a grotesque birth for the player to witness. The demon is the rejection of the parental desire brought out of the body thus killing its other selves.

Furthermore, what is unexpected in this resurrection of Samael is the amount of femininity the creature has, with fully developed breasts and a feminine figure. Its hips are jagged and every feature is morphed and accentuated. There is a slice above Samael's chest as if to indicate a separation between the mind and body. This creature was not manifested with love, it is truly a being created by rejection and Alessa's hatred.



Figure 9. The Demon Samael that erupts from Alessa's body.

Its shoulders are manly and brutish, yet the rest of its body is curved and slender. As the player proceeds through this battle and lands blows, its cries are exactly the ones Alessa made before she was sacrificed to Samael. These shrill cries are on a high frequency that is uncanny, yet there is also something tragically human about the sounds. They harmonize, as if Alessa and Cheryl's wails are being utilized to instill guilt in the player. Beyond these cries, the creature lets out a tortuous high-pitched wail each time it is shot, perhaps to invoke Alessa's inability to understand why this has happened via the player's inability to control these events.

The *Silent Hill* franchise depicts the desire for others to understand a traumatic experience. To this end, playing through Harry's perspective forces the player to give up their identity in order to empathize with another. The player understands trauma by experiencing it as a symbolic horrifying landscape and the player's manipulation inside of the symbolic. To further our understanding of trauma as players by being able to explore the landscape and thereby experience Alessa's trauma in the *Silent Hill* video game and simultaneously being unable to stop the loss of our daughter instills within us a different agency. Similar agencies have been explored in the horror genre. Carol Clover in "Men, Women, and Chainsaws" explores the similar topic of how horror cinema outlines viewership with the final girl.² She contends that by viewing horror films we engage with a gender sacrifice: "[A]t the moment the final girl becomes her own savior, she becomes the hero; and the moment the final girl becomes the hero is the moment the male viewer gives up the last pretense of male identification" (Clover 60). This analysis is even more applicable to playership. We can see how, in many games, the player gives up their gendered values. *Silent Hill* poses this dichotomy with Harry's journey as a protagonist as well as the players' journey in the game. Harry's role as the apparent male savior conjures the biggest question: why are we, as the player controlling Harry, allowed into Alessa's nightmare? What is our role in this world? One consideration is that we weren't invited in the first place. Harry, as the male dominant character, forces himself into Alessa's otherworld by penetrating it with the ideals he holds as a masculine figure. He uses guns and violence, and his only dialogue in the story concerns saving his daughter and restoring things to how they were before. Seemingly, he fulfills his duty as the patriarchal figure that saves the day and restores order, but looking deeper into this question we find the gendered strangeness that perpetuates

² Clover defines this as the only surviving character who is female in a horror film that is characterized as a female hero (Clover x).

from the beloved franchise—and the limitations of unproblematically accepting Harry as merely a stand-in for male viewership. By saving Cheryl, the player immediately sacrifices Harry’s superficial patriarchal values to serve the purpose of the feminine revitalization. The moment the player gives up the last of their gendered pretense is the ending sequence of *Silent Hill*: the rebirth of Alessa into the patriarchal demon, and the other birth of a new child.³ This birth is not one that happens for Alessa to be reborn but is rather a birth for Harry. Quite literally, he creates the opportunity for this child to be born and participates in the act. Not in the masculine sexual way that you might think, but instead by destroying Samael. He defeats the patriarch. And in this death of the patriarch, we give birth or create the opportunity for something new to be born outside the constructs of our and Alessa’s now shared, traumatic experience. We free Alessa of her confines, and because of that Alessa chooses not to bestow or reward the hero in the traditional sense but rather chooses for Harry (and by extension the player) to nurture another child that is free from the trauma created by the patriarch.

The *Silent Hill* franchise demonstrates the power of interactive narrative and how deeply our traumas run within our psyche. In general, there are so many elements of horror presented in video games—none perhaps stronger than the notions of the abject. We now understand trauma to be a part of the monstrous feminine beast that is growing and aching to be heard, to be understood, and to be represented in the face of its horror. Our traumas live inside us, spiraling like a broken wonderland, and, like Alessa, in some ways, we are not even aware of what we are feeling but only of what we create. In its interactivity, *Silent Hill* forces an even bigger ethical question upon the gamer: who are we in relation to other people’s trauma?

³ The child, Heather, is the protagonist of the franchise’s third installment.

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