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"FLOATING IN THIS OCEAN OF NOTHING": WOMEN IN DARK WATERS IN MIKE FLANAGAN'S *THE HAUNTING OF BLY MANOR*

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ABSTRACT: This article reads Mike Flanagan's 2020 series, *The Haunting of Bly Manor*, through the lens of the dark waters of the lake at the centre of the narrative. Through textual analyses of *The Haunting of Bly Manor* supported by Gaston Bachelard's notions of "dead waters" and underwater "substance-space" as well as Julia Kristeva's seminal study of the corpse as the quintessential form of abjection, this study demonstrates the ways in which Bly's lake crystallises the haunting mechanics of the series by attracting and harbouring death in its boundless and unfathomable depths. In particular, the dark waters of the lake engulf women defying the rules of the heteronormative, upper-class society in which they exist, leaving them stagnant in abject waters.

RESUMEN: En este artículo se hace una lectura de la serie 2020 de Mike Flanagan, *The Haunting of Bly Manor*, a través de la perspectiva de las aguas oscuras del lago que ocupa el centro de la narración. A través de análisis textuales de *The Haunting of Bly Manor* respaldados por las nociones de Gaston Bachelard acerca de las "aguas muertas" y el "espacio-sustancia" submarino, así como el estudio seminal de Julia Kristeva sobre el cadáver como forma por excelencia de la abyección, este estudio demuestra las formas en que el lago de Bly cristaliza la mecánica inquietante de la serie al atraer y albergar la muerte en sus profundidades ilimitadas e insondables. En particular, las oscuras aguas del lago envuelven a las mujeres que desafían las reglas de la sociedad heteronormativa de clase alta en la que existen, dejándolas ancladas en aguas abyectas.

INTRODUCTION: OVERLOOKING THE LAKE OF BLY MANOR

Mike Flanagan's *The Haunting of Bly Manor* (2020) constitutes an exemplary instance of darkness in horror, through the literal darkness of the space and the cinematography, as well as the metaphorical darkness of the characters and storylines. The miniseries, a loose adaptation of Henry James' work, primarily, *The Turn of the Screw* (1898), tells the story of Dani (Victoria Pedretti), a young American woman who, after breaking off her engagement with and losing her childhood sweetheart, moves to England, where she becomes the au-pair to two young children, Miles (Benjamin Evan Ainsworth) and Flora (Amelie Bea Smith), in the haunted Manor of Bly. As days go by, the two children's behaviour grows concerning under the influence of increasingly threatening ghosts, including former valet Peter Quint (Oliver Jackson-Cohen), former governess Rebecca (Tahirah Sharif), and former Lady of the Manor, Viola (Kate Siegel), who surfaces from the estate's lake at night to walk around what was once her property.

This lake constitutes another trope associated with darkness in Flanagan's imagination, as spelled out in *The Haunting of Bly Manor*'s sister series, *The Haunting of Hill House* (2018).[1] In episode 8, Theo (Kate Siegel), a woman who can feel emotions from people or objects simply by coming into contact with them, explains, after touching her sister's corpse:

> I couldn't feel anything […] And then […] the lights go out and I can't see. And I can't feel. And I'm just… I'm just floating in this ocean of nothing, and I wonder if this is it, if this is what death is, just out there in the darkness, just darkness and numbness and alone. […] And then the lights come on and there he was. And I didn't see him. He was a light in the darkness and a life preserver in the ocean. ("Witness Marks" 36:25-37:17)

In this monologue, Theo brings together the notions of darkness and water as constituting parameters of the experience of death, imagined as an "ocean of nothing." This vision of death as dark water is extensively literalised in *Bly Manor*, in which the lake on the property's grounds forms a body of dark water where characters, especially women, find their death.

While water, in the form of violent seas, dangerous storms, stagnant lakes, and putrid ponds, permeates Horror and Gothic texts from the very inception of Gothic literature, with *The Castle of Otranto* (1764) taking place on the Italian coast, Horror and Gothic Studies have only recently developed an interest in these waters, with, for

[1] From here, *Bly Manor*. When non-italicised, Bly Manor and Bly refer to the physical space featured throughout the series.

instance, a special issue of *Gothic Studies* on the Nautical Gothic in 2017. Nonetheless, time and time again, aqueous environments are overlooked in favour of the dry lands and solid landscapes of EcoGothic Studies, a strand of scholarship popularised in the last decade in response to the urgency of climate change and its increasingly marked consequences on the environment. For instance, Andrew Smith and William Hughes split the chapters of their *Ecogothic* (2013) between ice banks, cities, and forests, while liquid environments do not feature in the collection of essays. Reflecting on this tendency, Emily Alder argues, in her article on the nautical Gothic, that "[t]o date, landscapes and buildings tend to do rather better in Gothic criticism than ships and the sea" (3), suggesting that solid landscapes and things constitute more easily delineated and thus more readily approachable objects of study. Waters are not primary objects of study, simply because they are not perceived as graspable objects.

Studies on Flanagan's *Bly Manor* do not evade this tendency. Despite the significance of water in the series, the motif has yet to be addressed in scholarship on the series, which, overall, remains scarce as *Bly Manor* has not yet gathered as much scholarly attention as Flanagan's first series, *The Haunting of Hill House*, as a more recent, less culturally innovative, and therefore less critically successful text.[2] So far, scholarship on *Bly Manor* has focused on links with James' novella, particularly in terms of reimagining and subversion. Studies strongly emphasise intertextuality and adaptation as, for instance, in Kristoffer S. Ekroll's paper on the representation of the space of Bly Manor across screen and literary adaptations of the novella (2023). Genre-focused critics approach adaptation and subversion in *Bly Manor* in relation to the notion of Romance, such as Lotte de Boers (2022), or of neo-Victorian inflections, using and subverting the central metaphors and conventions of the genre as it existed in the Victorian era, like in Jelena Trajković and Stefan Čizmar's study (2022). Trajković and Čizmar's study also delves into another strand of scholarship, focusing on the politics and representation of gender and sexuality in the series. This strand stems from the often-mentioned sexual politics of the original novella, as famously studied by Edmund Wilson (1934) or, more recently, by George Haggerty (2006). Shahin Ghazaee, Ali Ghaderi and Paria Farhaditabar, reading Horror bodies and their representation in the series, argue that Flanagan turns Horror into a "postfeminist tragedy" (365). In a similar

[2] On *Rotten Tomatoes* critic and audience scores for *The Haunting of Hill House* respectively reached 93% and 91% ("The Haunting of Hill House"), while the critic score for *Bly Manor* reached 88% and the audience score reached 67% ("The Haunting of Bly Manor").

vein, Michelle Drake's chapter, in the edited collection *Black Witches and Queer Ghosts*, focuses on queer women in *Bly Manor*, with a particular consideration of audience responses (2024).

Therefore, within a restricted body of scholarship on *Bly Manor*, water remains understudied because it does not obviously relate to the critical traditions of adaptations and queerness stemming from scholarly work on James' original novella. In the original text, the lake only constitutes an atmospheric element, which does not directly participate in the haunting. For instance, in, arguably, the most famous scene of the novella, the governess and the housekeeper, Mrs. Grose, find Flora by the lake. The governess sees the ghost of her predecessor, Miss Jessel, on the opposite bank of the sheet of water, but neither Mrs. Grose nor Flora acknowledges the presence. Desperate to be believed, the governess frantically grabs and scolds the child, accusing her of pretending not to see the ghost. In this scene, while the lake constitutes a key clue in the governess' mind, as she sees the relocation of the heavy boat from one bank of the lake to the other as proof that young Flora was, in fact, not alone but aided by Miss Jessel, the lake and its water do not in themselves participate in the haunting mechanics. In Flanagan's *Bly Manor*, however, the dark water constitutes a key cog in the haunting. In the iteration of the aforementioned scene, again, the water does not play a role beyond heightening the fear and paranoia of Dani, the au-pair/governess. However, throughout the series, the Lady of the Lake alternates between lying at the bottom of the lake during the day and walking into the house at night, leaving wet footprints all over the manor's floors. The muddy waters of the lake also erode the Lady of the Lake's physical form and that of all the other ghosts haunting the grounds, again, defining the specific haunting mechanics of Flanagan's adaptation. Therefore, Flanagan puts the lake and its dark water to work in new and expansive ways compared to the novella.

This paper demonstrates the key role of the dark waters of *Bly Manor* and hints at their importance as a motif in Gothic and Horror film and television more widely. I use French critic Gaston Bachelard's concepts of "the death of water" and "substance-space," defined respectively in *L'Eau et les Rêves: Essai sur l'Imagination de la Matière* (1942) and in *La Poétique de l'Espace* (1961), as well as Julia Kristeva's seminal study of the abject (1982), to argue that the sinister lake of *Bly Manor* is a body of dark and dead water with its own physical and temporal rules, where defiant women find their deaths. Focusing on the lake provides a new understanding of the mechanics of aqueous Horror and gender in *Bly Manor*. Following a characterisation of the lake as a body of dark and abject water contaminated with death waste, this article demonstrates that the lake constitutes a liminal space hostile to living humans as, in its depths, time and space, and,

by extension, life itself, disappear, before approaching the gender politics of the series through the drowning or endless sinking of defiant women.

BLY MANOR'S DARK WATERS: MUDDY DEPTHS AND ABJECT DEATH

When Dani arrives in Bly, in the first episode of the series, she finds Flora by the lake. The scene is peaceful, with the sun shining softly on the sheet of water while the child plays on the bank, driving Dani to exclaim "What a gorgeous lake!" ("The Great Good place" 18:38-18:55). The lake of Bly Manor indeed presents itself as a typical topos of serenity (figure 1). In his study of film endings, Michael Walker asserts that, on screen, a lake "heightens the sense of the peacefulness and tranquillity of the setting" (45). Nevertheless, *Bly Manor* uses and subverts the peacefulness associated with the lake, as Flora quickly stiffens, pushes the au-pair away from the lake, and warns her that "[She] mustn't. It really is just a smelly old pond" ("The Great Good place" 18:38-18:55). Flora immediately characterises the lake as a negative space. As she pushes the au-pair away from the "smelly old pond," the little girl highlights the threatening nature of this dirty body of water. While Flora is characterised around her hatred of the lake throughout the series, other characters also hint at the threatening potential of the water. In episode 3, Hannah (T'Nia Miller), the housekeeper, warns Peter that she will throw him "into that dirty lake" ("The Two Faces, Part 1" 41:49-42:04) if she catches him rummaging through the former owners' belongings again. Far from a "gorgeous lake," the body of water on the grounds of Bly Manor constitutes a dirty space where both loved ones and enemies can disappear.

Figure 1: Long shot of the idyllic lake of Bly Manor and its tranquil surface as Dani first arrives at the estate.

Visually, this conceptual dirtiness is expressed through the darkness and muddiness of the lake's water. In Horror and Gothic texts, darkness crystallises the polluted nature of bodies of water as in, for instance, *Dark Water* (2005) or *Matriarch* (2022). The muddy, unclean or dark water signals that rotting death taints the water. In this sense, the dark waters of Horror, and of *Bly Manor*, correspond to what Bachelard describes, in *L'Eau et les Rêves: Essai sur l'Imagination de la Matière*, as "des eaux mortes [dead waters]" (64). Dead waters are slow or still waters, heavy with literal and metaphorical death (90). They evoke the dead, inviting the onlooker to ponder death and loss. Such waters exist in contrast to pure, clean, clear and running waters, such as the waters of spring rivers, which invigorate, sing as they flow, and laugh as they cascade (47). In Bly Manor, the muddy footprints of the Lady of the Lake, leading from the lake to the forbidden wing inside the manor, function as catalysers of the threat reigning over the property. At the beginning of episode 2, before the first shot materialises on screen, the sloshing sound of water echoes on a black screen. The sound bridges to the first image of the episode, a panning shot on the muddy footprints leading to the mop held by Hannah as she erases the path of the ghost. The clean water of the mop erases the dark and dead waters which have penetrated the house. This opposition between clean and dead water persists throughout the series, as, for instance, older Jamie (Carla Gugino) looks for her beloved wife, lost to the dead waters of the lake,

in the clear and clean domestic waters of sinks and bathtubs in the final episode of the series.

In episode 2, as the children are blamed for the muddy footprints, Miles, aware of the origin of the trail, tries to minimise the issue, stating that "[i]t is just a bit of mud" ("The Pupil" 1:07-1:58). This "bit of mud" in fact signifies the greater threat posed by the Lady of the Lake, who will take back to the muddy waters of the lake anyone who is unlucky enough to stand in her way. As a dark and shapeless matter, an oxymoronic organic thing, both solid and liquid, mud materialises the abjection hidden in the lake. Mud, a common equivalent of excrement, represents, according to Julia Kristeva in her seminal study of the abject, "the ego threatened by the non-ego, society threatened by its outside, life by death" (71). Mud inconspicuously threatens the inhabitants of Bly Manor by materialising the trail of the dead and deadly other literally coming from the outside to the inside of the manor. Similarly, after warning her new au-pair against the lake, Flora explains, to deter her further, that "there are leeches in there. Horrid little things, like vampire slugs, and the nastiest beetles" ("The Great Good place" 18:38-18:55). These monstrous crawlers again constitute a manageable and acceptable form of abjection hiding the greater threat, namely, the deaths that litter the depths of this dark water, including vampire-like possessing ghosts.

The mud and crawlers thus stand in for the death at the bottom of the lake (ghosts, bodies, skeletons), which is the true abject threat. As Kristeva famously argues, corpses are the quintessential abjection, as that which is at once human and matter, self and other, life and death: "the corpse, seen without God and outside of science, is the utmost abjection. It is death infecting life. Abject" (4). Mud and vampiric crawlers might *signify* death, but corpses and ghosts *are* death, this utmost and unmanageable abjection. As ghosts, corpses and skeletons accumulate at the bottom of the lake, their abjection spreads to the water, which, in turn, becomes dark, dirty, polluted and rotting water. This abjection appears in the seventh episode of the series, as Peter possesses Rebecca's body to drown her in the lake. As he looks through her eyes, he finds his own decomposing corpse at the bottom of the water, surrounded by skeletons (fig. 2). A close up on his face shows his open mouth and eyes rolled back in their sockets as slats of skin dance in the soft waves, in a pure body horror fashion, which underlines the abject nature of the decomposing corpse. Kristeva adds about the cadaver "[i]t is a rejection from which one cannot part, from which one cannot protect oneself as from an object. Imaginary strangeness and real threat, it calls us and ends up engulfing us" (4). This is precisely what happens to Peter, Rebecca and Dani, who are dragged down the dark waters of the lake by ghosts

from which they cannot part, Peter because of Viola's unbreakable grip, Rebecca because of love and Dani because of a curse. As they cannot part from the corpses at the bottom of the lake, they end up, literally, engulfed by dead waters and dragged to their depths.

Fig. 2: Peter rots in the depths of the dark water surrounded by skeletons.

UNDERWATER: DARK OCEAN OF NOTHING

The depths of the lake are approached at several points in the series, i.e., when Rebecca drowns, when Viola is thrown into the lake, and when Dani becomes the new Lady of the Lake and Jamie attempts, in vain, to get her back. All these scenes present the depths as a threatening and inhospitable space for living humans who, in the darkness, lose any markers of space or time. The lake, from under the surface, becomes a dark, deep, boundless space in which time both expands and condenses, thus correlating with what Bachelard, in his study of maritime space, calls an "espace-substance, un espace à une dimension [substance-space, a one-dimensional space]" which also "porte le signe de l'illimité [bears the sign of the limitless]" (*Poétique de l'Espace* 186). While Bachelard applies the notion of *espace-substance* to the sea, the framing of the lake as a boundless and dark water-coded space allows for the expansion of Bachelard's definition. Indeed, in terms of space, while the lake is introduced by Flora as a "pond," its depths constitute what Theo, quoted in the introduction, describes as an "ocean of nothing." In the deep substance-space of the lake, water and the consequential darkness (light does not travel to the

overtly hyperbolised depth of the lake) erase and replace all markers of space, thus creating a limitless field of shadows and death. In episode 8, as we see the ghost of Viola slowly erode and turn into the Lady of the Lake, a medium to close-up dolly shot shows her lying at the bottom of the water, completely still in the darkness (fig. 3). While rays of light illuminate parts of her pale face, greyish gown, and the blades of weeds in her immediate proximity, these rays only highlight the contrast with the watery darkness all around her, eroding the contours of her face and body, both literally, as her features slowly vanish, and cinematographically, as her hair, for instance, is completely invisible. Through darkness, the substance-space becomes one-dimensional and boundless as dark water transcends the boundaries of the screen and of the body of the character.

Fig. 3: Viola's face eroding as she lies at the bottom of the lake.

Characters thus face what Bachelard calls "l'absolu de la profondeur [the absolute depth]" (*Poétique de l'Espace* 186), an immeasurable and ungraspable depth. Both Rebecca and Jamie cannot reach what they seek in this extensive and dark substance-space. In episode 7, when Rebecca enters the lake, the combination of medium close up and dark monochromatic palette creates an impression of nowhereness as she drowns in the dark watery space, completely indeterminable, boundless and unfathomable (fig. 4). Her black dress and hair completely fuse with the dark waters surrounding her. The boundless space, again, seeps into the character whose boundaries become blurry through darkness, and one cannot be sure where the space ends and Rebecca's body begins. While Rebecca

manages to rid herself of Peter's influence on her possessed body once deep underwater, her attempt to fight the watery darkness around her fails as notions of up and down, left and right, are lost to the dark substance-space. Similarly, as Jamie jumps in the lake in a desperate attempt to rescue Dani, now Lady of the Lake, she finds herself floating in dark water. In every shot focusing on Jamie, nothing but her body and the watery environment is visible (fig. 5). There is no sense of how big, or small, the body of water really is. Again, the darkness of the water swallows her bodily boundaries around the edges of the screen. While Jamie screams and fights against the depths, she cannot come close to her wife. She resurfaces, not having managed to reach the absolute depths.

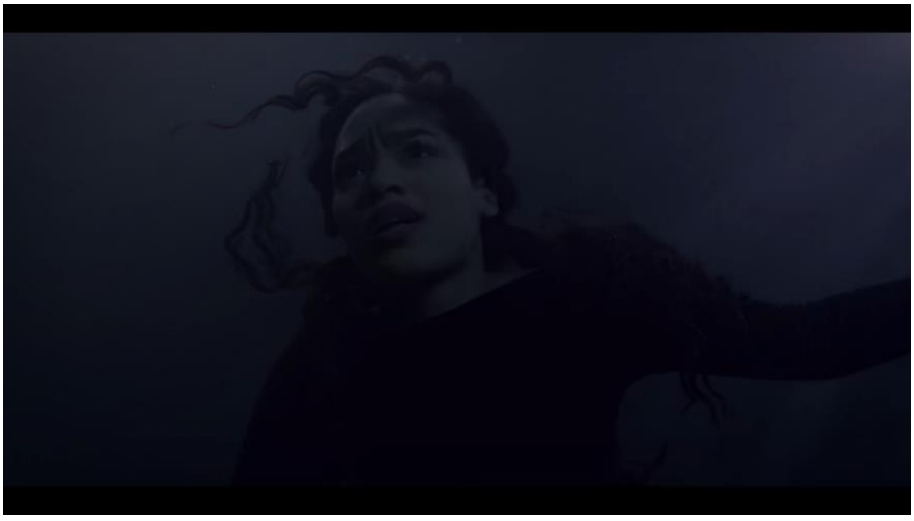

Fig. 4: Rebecca sinking into the dark waters of the lake.

Fig. 5: Jamie screaming in the substance-space.

With this absolute of space necessarily comes an absolute of time. As Pascal Auger explains about his "espace quelconque," an indeterminate locus with the capacity to break down both time and space made famous by Gilles Deleuze in his *Cinema 1*,[3]

> Un lieu est aussi du temps, le temps impliqué dans ce lieu. Quand je parle d'un espace, du temps est lié à cet espace. […] Dans un lieu en perspective, très souvent, la profondeur de champ donne aussi la profondeur du temps : le personnage s'enfonce dans l'image et il s'enfonce dans la profondeur du temps. C'est une perspective temporelle. [A space is also time, the time implied in said space. When I speak of a space, time is linked to this space. […] In a space in perspective, often, the depth of field also gives away the depth of time: the character moves deeper in the shot and they move deeper in the time depth. It is a temporal perspective.] (cited in Rousseau 17)

The absence of spatial perspective in the substance-space of the lake means that time cannot be discerned. As darkness seeps throughout the space, I cannot tell how far or close things are, nor how long they would take to reach. The only visible marker of time left, the body, is also no longer reliable. The buoyancy of the water slows down light and movement, and everything slows down (Past, *Lives Aquatic* 57). When Rebecca floats in the void, her eyes fixed, the slow-motion effect

[3] Deleuze's obscure mention of the "espace quelconque" as "un terme de Pascal Augé [Pascal Augé's term]" (154) created a long line of misattribution of the original concept. However, Augé never mentions the "espace quelconque." The term actually belongs to Pascal Auger, former student of Deleuze and filmmaker (see Rousseau).

and the slow non-diegetic music playing over her death accentuate the stillness of the underwater world. Once she dies, the music stops and for 16 seconds, everything, space, time, the narrative, is suspended as her still body sinks to the depths. In Viola's case, time speeds up as centuries go by in seconds. A close-up shot shows the accelerated gradual eroding of the ghost's face underwater, as she lies completely still. Around her, the subtle markers of space, the algae, remain untouched, moving at the rhythm of the water. In the deep space, the rules of time do not apply.

With space and time unanchored, life itself is suspended as the breathing and moving body evolves in and against the water. As Elena Past explains in a study on Mediterranean cinema, for characters underwater, "[l]ife stops temporarily–for since they are not breathing, they are in a sense not quite living" (*Lives Aquatic* 58). The substance-space suspends life itself. It is an altered space where, as Past argues about the sea, the "particular qualities of water," such as "surface tension, different viscosity, different reflectivity, waves, ripples," transform the environment and its dwellers (*Island Hopping* 60). As the physicality of things changes (weights are lighter, movements elongated, sounds dampened, skins erode etc.), the substance-space becomes a space where, "[t]he mechanics of existence are altered" (Past, *Lives Aquatic* 57). This alteration of the very mechanics of existence does not allow for living human to inhabit, or even, encounter the space. The lake is the space of what needs to be thrown away, to be ab-jected. It is the space of death waste, ghosts, corpses and skeletons, which cannot have a place in the manor. Significantly, Viola finds herself at the bottom of the lake because her husband, after running her estate to bankruptcy, grows suspicious of the chest of luxury clothes beloved by his late wife. To protect his daughter, he throws the chest to which his wife's soul is bound into the lake, as the narrator explains, "casting her to the swampy depths" ("The Romance of Certain Old Clothes" 44:27-44:54). Similarly, Peter, after breaking the rules set by Hannah, finds himself thrown into the lake, thus seeing Hannah's threat fulfilled. The substance-space is therefore a space to dispose of threats.

DEFIANT WOMEN AND OPPRESSIVE MEN

Noticeably, most characters featured and disposed of underwater in *Bly Manor* are female. Rebecca, Jamie, Dani, and Viola are all shown in a struggle with the depths of the lake. The exception, Peter, is indeed shown in the depths as a decomposing corpse, but significantly, he is not featured in his struggle with the dark waters of the lake. Peter enters the lake, already dead, having crossed the path of the Lady of the Lake. This link and struggle between the women who

dwell in Bly Manor and the dark water of its lake relates to the common association between women and water. Klaus Theweleit, in his seminal study of fascist literature, suggests how far this association between women and water spreads by drawing a list of some of the manifestations of the correlation in world literature:

> Over and over again: the women-in-the-water; woman as water, as a stormy, cavorting, cooling ocean, a raging stream, a waterfall; as a limitless body of water that ships pass through, with tributaries, pools, surfs, and deltas; woman as the enticing (or perilous) deep, as a cup of bubbling body fluids; the vagina as wave, as foam, as a dark place ringed with Pacific ridges; love as the foam from the collision of two waves, as a sea voyage, a slow ebbing, a fish-catch, a storm; love as a process that washes people up as flotsam, smoothing the sea again; where we swim in the divine song of the sea knowing no laws, one fish, two fish; where we are part of every ocean, which is part of every vagina. (283)

The mere length of Theweleit's list suggests the constant association between women and water in literature alone, an association which of course spreads through other media (film, television, music, etc.). Women in water, women as water or as watery, women as water-coded creatures, women as leaky and porous, all constitute images reinforcing the association between water and female characters in the cultural imagination of implied audiences.

While this association can be synonymous with beauty or power, in the lake of *Bly Manor* women meet much more sinister fates, namely, death (Rebecca), undeath (Viola and Dani) and loss (Jamie). Lost in and to the dark substance-space, these female characters find themselves participating in a subverted version of what Charles S. Ross, in his study of women underwater in Shakespearian films, calls the "trope of the underwater woman" (Ross 47), where

> a figure, usually a woman, floats underwater, silently and in slow motion, and then emerges, often as a changed person or in different circumstances. […] [T]he immersion and surfacing of a woman does not express a complaint about a specific man, but a more general grievance about the way women are forced to exist in the world. (36)

In Ross' approach, the oppressed woman is submerged and, as she resurfaces, she gains emancipation. Her victory over the water allows her to be re-born. Ross continues by saying that water or drowning become "a metaphor for whatever oppresses women" (37). In the western tradition of water as the washing away of sins in baptism, this specifically female "baptism" becomes a washing away of limitations. This topos is also mentioned in Past's works on Mediterranean cinema, where she explains that immersion becomes a "symbolic liberation

from earthly concerns" (*Lives Aquatic* 57) as well as a way "to avoid the fixity that would come with capitulating to the status quo" (*Island Hopping* 59). The immersion into the dark and haunted waters and the subsequent return to the surface functions as a cleansing experience, a victory over and an escape from the oppressive body.

Nevertheless, while they ultimately resurface from the dark waters as ghostly figures, the women of *Bly Manor* never resurface alive and, therefore, cannot emancipate themselves. The dark substance-space constitutes a space of threatening stagnation. In her study of Japanese films and their remakes, Valerie Wee mentions that the drowning or burial of women in stagnant water constitutes a possible symbol of their belonging to a stagnant society or culture (107). In *Bly Manor*, the dead waters of the stagnant lake symbolise the stagnation of the women who find themselves underwater, having embodied a threat to the status quo assigned by gender, sexual, social or racial rules and expectations of a genre traditionally focused on white, heteronormative and/or upper-class characters. While Bly Manor "is populated with marginalized characters, including two black women, two lesbians, and an Indian immigrant" (Trajković and Čizmar 16), when studying these marginalised characters through their interactions with dark water, it becomes clear that Owen, a male of Indian descent, is not presented as a character whose ambitions are limited. Owen wants to open a restaurant in Paris and succeeds. Unlike the male cook, as Shahin Ghazaee, Ali Ghaderi and Paria Farhaditabar explain, in *Bly Manor,* "women are chained in shackles of patriarchal and middle-class values in two different countries and in two different ages" (368). Dark water comes specifically for insurgent *women* trying (and failing) to reach toward a future which does not fit their gender, sexuality, class or race.

Rebecca is the first woman shown to drown in the lake. She is a woman of colour working as a governess for an upper-class family, who dreams of becoming a barrister. As Peter, her lover, goes missing, Jamie urges Rebecca to go and pursue her dreams. This potential emancipation is annihilated when Peter fulfils his own desire to be reunited with his lover in death by drowning her in the lake. A shot of Rebecca's body floating in the deep space of the lake is quickly followed by her sinking to the bottom, symbolising her aborted dreams. As her corpse resurfaces, her ghost wails on the bank of the lake underlining her grief for a life that will never come. The second woman to be thrown in the lake is Viola. In life, Viola, the Lady of the Manor, is presented as an independent and powerful woman, who fights to keep ownership of her family estate despite the patriarchal rules of her time. Her refusal to vow to "obey" her husband-to-be at their wedding ("The Romance of Certain Old Clothes" 6:42-7:14) underlines her standing up to conventional roles imposed by the patriarchy. Having fallen ill,

Viola stubbornly refuses to bow to death, until, after many years, her sister kills her to take her place as mistress of the estate. After her death, her soul binds to her chest of luxury gowns and jewels, which is later thrown into the lake by her husband. Viola's husband thus takes Viola from master to Lady of the house, and, ultimately, from Lady of the Manor to Lady of the Lake. Finally, Dani, a queer character, fills the role of caretaker for the children, a role which is forsaken by their male guardian, their uncle Henry (Henry Thomas), who states clearly in episode 6, "I'm unavailable unless someone is hurt" ("The Jolly Corner" 42:57-43:08). Henry only intervenes once it is already too late. Hence, in the final episode of the series, when he finally arrives at Bly Manor, it is too late. The Lady of the Lake has already carried Flora to the middle of the water leaving Dani to sacrifice herself by letting Viola's ghost possess her in exchange for Flora's life. Ultimately, after some years, the Lady of the Lake takes over Dani, who is denied a life with the gardener as she, in turn, becomes the Lady of the Lake. Both Dani and Jamie suffer through dark waters and Henry's inaction. While it is true that "Dani is granted full agency over her life and ultimately her death" (Trajković and Čizmar 20), especially in comparison to Rebecca, this agency is only that exercised under the shadow of the ghost possessing her and, ultimately, forcing her to return to Bly Manor. Drowned, thrown and engulfed in the lake, these women are denied any form of advancement. For trying to bypass the white middle-class and/or heteronormative rules of their class, race, gender, these defiant women are condemned to stagnate and drown as men watch from above.

Oceans, as mentioned by Theweleit above, and lakes, as hollow and watery spaces, can also function as symbolic female bodies, especially if they are constructed in opposition to penetrative weapons wielded by men (such as possession in *Bly Manor*).[4] By sending defiant women back to the space of their material and abject bodies (abject because leaking and uncontrollable, but also abject because these bodies attempt to overcome established gender boundaries), male characters fill the lake, the symbolically yonic hole. As Rebecca, Viola and Dani sink to the depths of the lake, they confound themselves with the abject space contaminated by death waste, thus comforting the male characters' vision of these ambitious women as boundary-breaking and, as such, abject. These images of female stagnation in *Bly Manor* are therefore embedded in perceptions of female bodiliness. Women are denied social mobility by being sent back to their symbolic

[4] While Shahin Ghazaee, Ali Ghaderi and Paria Farhaditabar in their study of *Bly Manor* describes both Peter and Rebecca as vampiric figures penetrating and possessing Miles and Flora's bodies (365), Rebecca constitutes more specifically a reluctant vampire, primarily a victim of Peter's possession acting under the influence of the authoritative man she loves.

bodies. A man throwing a woman in a lake is reminding her that, on the basis of her body, she is not allowed social mobility. For trying to bypass the patriarchal rules of their class, race or gender Rebecca, Viola and Dani are condemned to stagnate in watery depths. Therefore, while "Flanagan's gender-swapping of the frame narrator, as well as the introduction of a lesbian protagonist, suggests the potential for destabilizing the patriarchal and heterosexist structures" (Trajković and Čizmar 14-15), these structures remain firmly in place.

CONCLUSION

In *Bly Manor*, Flanagan associates the waters of the lake with darkness and death to support the haunting mechanics of the series, which deals with the resurfacing of the past and the abjection of threatening characters, principally women. The muddy waters of the lake penetrating the space of the manor signify the greater abject threat posed by death waste hiding in the depths of the dark lake, so much so that the waters themselves become dead waters from which living humans should stay clear. The series presents the hidden depths as a boundless substance-space unaffected by laws of space and time and engulfing whoever dares to challenge them. Primarily, these characters are female and, as they struggle against the rules of white heteronormative and patriarchal societies, they end up in the dark waters of Bly Manor's lake, as a space in which women are kept in their stagnant and watery darkness, away from the heights of ambitions reached by male characters. Flanagan's dark water participates in a wider cultural current in which Gothic horror texts utilise water and bodies of water as essential horror tropes. Water seeps into spaces and characters, hinting at the greater threat. In recent years, the motif of dark water has grown exponentially, often to display and reflect the ubiquity of threats. Horror films such as *Dark Water* (2005), *A Cure for Wellness* (2016), *The Lodgers* (2017) or *The Curse of La Llorona* (2019) all use images of dark water to hide the deadly threat in their depths.

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