

Menacing Strangers, Ineffectual Husbands, and Vacations from Hell: Lifetime TV as the New American Domestic Gothic

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Introduction

Freud famously lamented, “What does a woman want?” (“Sigmund Freud”) Lifetime Entertainment seems, at least in part to be able to finally answer that question. According to Nielsen ratings, Lifetime is the number one basic cable station in primetime (“About Lifetime”) with a female viewership of over seventy-eight percent (Mediamark Research). Women who watch Lifetime are middle class (median income of \$49K); own their own homes (over seventy-two percent); and have children in the household (forty-three percent)(Doublebase Mediamark Research). While Lifetime network has its critics, the most common complaints are that it is anti-male and that it glorifies the miseries of women (“What Is Your Favorite Lifetime Movie?” August 26, 2003). Lifetime executives counter that their network is a place where women and girls go to “feel wonderful about themselves”(Brady, 57) and that women respond to Lifetime because its show are “honest, true-to-life and relatable”(Hall). The artistic and aesthetic merits of Lifetime can be debated, but as evidenced by its ratings, its strongly female demographics, and the intense loyalty of its many fans, it must be acknowledged that Lifetime – Television for Women is a powerful, popular culture force for American women and as such, worthy of study and inquiry. Lifetime is speaking to women and it is important to listen to hear what it is saying.

This project had its origins in a Masters level seminar entitled Gothic Women, a survey of American women gothic writers, from E.D.E.N. Southworth, author of The Hidden Hand (1859) to Anne Rice of Interview with the Vampire (1976). While reading the gothic works of Southworth, Harriet Spofford (The Amber Gods and Other Stories, 1863), Louisa May Alcott (A Long Fatal Love Chase, 1868), and Charlotte Perkins Gilman (The Yellow Wallpaper, 1899) I was struck by how familiar the plots, characters, and the emotional intensity of these stories seemed. These works are all examples of a particularly American tradition of gothic writing, the domestic gothic, which can best be characterized as the works of “women writers who express fears of being persecuted in domestic, patriarchal spaces, and of becoming the dark double of the feminine victim – the monster or the madwoman”(Blackford). Upon reflection, I realized that the evil, ineffectual, or insipid men who dominate the domestic gothic reminded me of the men that populate the Lifetime Network movies on cable television. The plucky, resourceful, downtrodden domestic gothic women who triumph over adversity also resonated with me as the forerunners of the plucky, resourceful, downtrodden heroines who torch The Burning Beds or who fall in love with their noble, Native American captors in Stolen Women, Captive Hearts (both part of Lifetime’s roster). The social, financial, and legal status of women in the United States has dramatically changed since the rise of the domestic gothic story in the mid-1800s. Why then do the themes and tropes of this convention, although in modern guise, still speak so strongly to American women?

There are a number of popular culture outlets available to modern Americans, including, film, television, radio, the Internet, as well as printed texts. For Victorians the choices were rather more limited. Novels and short fiction were the mass media of the day and the main source of entertainment (Wallen). Gothic literature was initially popular in the second half of the eighteenth century. Horace Walpole’s Castle of Otranto, published in 1765, is one of the earliest well-known novels of this genre (“The Gothic Novel”). Ann Radcliffe (The Mysteries of Udolpho, 1794) was another widely read and widely admired writer of early British, gothic fiction. Sir Walter Scott lauded Radcliffe as “the first poetess of romantic fiction”(Napier). Gothic has always had a strong feminine component – both in terms of appeal to women as entertainment and as an outlet for women fiction writers. “Because of its instant popularity with women both as writers and as readers, the gothic was early on seen as part of female culture and as a ‘women’s genre’”(Becker, 2). Lloyd-Smith states that women writers of gothic fiction seized on the genre early-on as an outlet for exploring issues of “patriarch, slavery, and racism,” and other horrors of the

“female experience”(Lloyd-Smith). These female authors were developing a political voice which contained “a sense of their own fears and oppression” in a relentlessly constricted society (Lloyd-Smith).

It is my contention that Lifetime Network’s stated mission, i.e. to address the needs and concerns of women (“About Lifetime”), is a modern expression of a story-telling tradition with a long lineage and that Lifetime is the daughter of a specific kind of gothic literature, the “domestic gothic” literary form. Each of these narrative forms, Lifetime and the domestic gothic, is feminine in outlook, domestic in its setting, and explores the darker side of home and hearth. If Lifetime TV is fulfilling the same role now that gothic fiction did a century ago, it would seem that despite social, economic, and political strides, modern women seek stories that address anxieties similar to those experienced by their female fore-bearers. Thematically, both narrative forms center on what are commonly perceived as women’s issues: work, home, rites of passage, relationships, and family. The settings for Lifetime reflect the day-to-day realities of its mostly middle-class female viewership, the updated damsel-in-distress drives her own minivan and lives in a housing development, but the incumbent fears and insecurities of the life domestic remain the same.

Is Lifetime Television for Women the New American Domestic Gothic?

The adjective, “Gothic,” in contemporary popular culture has become rather ubiquitous. “Gothic” no longer refers to the Goth and Visigoth barbarian hordes of the Middle Ages. It now refers to a style of fashion and music that deeply taps into teenage angst. The Encyclopedia of Literature defines “gothic” as “a literary style or an example of such style characterized by grotesque, macabre, or fantastic incidents or by an atmosphere of irrational violence, desolation, and decay” (“Gothic”). This definition, while accurate, does not take into account the subtleties and nuances of gothic literature. As the examples which follow indicate, scholars, especially feminist scholars, have expanded the definition beyond these limiting constraints. In scholarly literature, gothic is defined not so much by what it is but in terms of what it contains especially in terms of setting, subject matter, and mood. “Traditional accounts of Gothic plots are familiar enough. The Ur-plot is a terror inflected variant of Richardsonian courtship narrative in which an unprotected young female in an isolated setting uncovers a sinister plot”(Masse, 679).

A common strain that runs through critical studies of gothic literature is a discussion of emotionalism and excess in style and tone. Specifically, “in the gothic world anything might happen and its excessive emotional experiences of desire, terror, and pleasure become reading-experiences of liberation (Becker, 1-2). Darlene H. Unrue, in her examination of the gothic elements of Thomas Wolfe’s Look Homeward, Angel discusses how gothic literature has at its heart a journey or a quest with a heroine as the protagonist. Unrue states that gothic differs from romantic literature by “...the intensity of the extreme experiences completed against the backdrop of thunder, lightning, howling winds, wailing ghosts, and screeching demons”(Unrue, 49).

As previously stated, starting with Ann Radcliffe, gothic literature has always had a strong feminine voice. Domestic gothic can be seen as that voice amplified. Joan Lidoff, in her essay on Christina Stead’s Man Who Loved Children, argues that gothic fiction is an artistic expression of the rage by women writers living in a repressive society. Lidoff states that the domestic gothic, which is constructed from the “details of daily life”, deals with the “violent emotional forces that seethe beneath ordinary events,” particularly feminine forces (Lidoff, 201-203). Simply put, domestic gothic is literature that deals with “the absorbing tyranny of everyday life” (Mulvey-Roberts, 83).

The Victorian domestic gothic definitely had such tyranny at its heart. In Southworth’s The Hidden Hand, female characters are “disappeared,” hidden away from society in attics, forced into loveless marriages, and threatened with expulsion from the family home or with physical beatings. The narrator of The Yellow Wallpaper, isolated and virtually imprisoned by her husband, goes slowly mad. Rosamund in Alcott’s A Long Fatal Love Chase is treated as a

commodity, tricked into a false marriage, and stalked by her jilted lover. There are few legal protections for these women and their traditional, male protectors, consistently seem to fail them.

Thus, for the purposes of this discussion, the domestic gothic will be defined as a narrative which meets a set of criteria based on the literary tropes and conventions cited above: it centers on women and domestic, day-to-day life; the protagonist is a woman; the initial setting is familiar and mundane; the action or problem centers around an issue relating to family, a love interest, or work; vacations or journeys feature in the storyline; conflict arises when a significant male transgresses boundaries or when he can not protect or help the protagonist regarding transgressed boundaries; the story ends with the heroine prevailing (while the heroine may die she will nevertheless triumph); finally, there is always an element of extreme tension, suspense, or un-ease which is engendered by a person or situation which threatens the protagonist's happiness. To ascertain whether Lifetime movies met these criteria, I viewed a sample set of Lifetime movies and scored them against a checklist of domestic gothic elements (Appendix 1).

To facilitate the discussion, I will give a brief synopsis of each of the movies that were viewed and analyzed, starting with Fatal Lessons: The Good Teacher. (Note: more information about the movies can be found in Appendix 2). Fatal Lessons is a made-for-TV movie (2004) which premiered on Lifetime but it is not a Lifetime production. Erika Eleniak (formerly of the TV series Baywatch) portrays a serial killer/teacher, Victoria Page. Victoria's modus operandi is: to get a job as an elementary school teacher in a small town; befriend one of the children's mothers; become that mother's best friend; and ingratiate herself into the household. She then poisons the mom, marries the dad, becomes the new mom to the family. When she gets bored, Victoria poisons the rest of the family and moves on to a new town. Victoria travels with an elaborate herb garden from which she obtains the all-natural ingredients she uses for poisoning her victims. The movie centers on Samantha Stephens (which, coincidentally, was also the name of the suburban housewife witch in the 1960's sit-com Bewitched) and her family. Samantha and her best friend, Jane, combine resources to uncover Victoria's shady past and expose her before it is too late.

The Return of Alex Kelly is a made-for-TV movie from 1999 and is based on a true story. Also known as Crime in Connecticut: The Story of Alex Kelly, it stars Matthew Settle and Cassidy Rae. It is the story of a popular high-school athlete who rapes a sixteen-year old neighbor and flees to Europe to escape prosecution. The movie follows the story of Carrie Robert, the young girl who was raped, through the aftermath of the attack, her decision to reclaim her life, and her quest to see Alex Kelly brought to trial for the crime he committed.

Nurses on the Line: The Crash of Flight 7 is also a made-for-TV movie (1993) and is also based on a true incident. Jennifer Lopez, Robert Loggia, and Lindsay Wagner star in this story of a team of doctors and student nurses from a Los Angeles hospital who volunteer to work at an isolated clinic in the rainforests of Mexico for a couple of weeks. On the way to the clinic, one of the three small planes – the one in which most of the doctors are in - crashes. The nurses, with the help of the two doctors who escaped injury and the compassionate Mexican villagers, give expert medical attention to the injured, transport them to a makeshift airstrip, get them back to civilization, and save their lives. The final moments of the movie features a "What happened to them after..." pastiche.

Summer of Fear is a made-for-TV movie from 1996 and stars Gregory Harrison and Glynnis O'Connor. The Marshall family is on its way to a summer vacation home which the dad, Lucas, has inherited from his recently deceased aunt. They get hijacked on a deserted road by a couple of thugs who beat the father while threatening to rape and brutalize the wife, son, and daughter. In the nick of time, a handsome, young stranger, Simon, arrives on the scene and rescues the family. Over the course of a few days, Simon becomes part of the family and moves in with the Marshall's. Cat (Mrs. Marshall) becomes suspicious of Simon when he starts flirting with her and then attempts to seduce her. Cat investigates Simon's background and his real identity is revealed – he is Lucas's long lost, illegitimate son. Cat uncovers the fact that Simon arranged the

hijacking incident and hired the assailants so that he could rescue the family and win their favor. In the climatic scene in which Simon is threatening the life of the Marshall's youngest son, Lucas reconciles with Simon and forgives him for terrorizing the family.

The People Next Door is also a 1996, made-for-TV movie, based on a true story. Nicolette Sheridan and Faye Dunaway star in this story about Anna, the mother of three young daughters, who leaves an abusive husband to start a new life in Albuquerque, New Mexico. Her neighbors, Donna and Garrett, are helpful and kind. They love children, but as Donna confides to Anna, they cannot have any children of their own. They become a second family to Anna's children, watching them at night while Anna works in the only job she can get – a waitress at a country-western bar. Things go completely awry when it is revealed that Garrett is really a criminal who specializes in credit card scams. Garrett and Donna abduct Anna's two youngest daughters and move cross country with them to begin a new life. Through a series of flashbacks, it is revealed that Donna and Garrett did have a child, a little girl who died under mysterious circumstances. Garrett apparently murdered the child to prevent her from revealing that he was a criminal. Donna eventually realizes that Garrett was responsible for their daughter's death. To protect the little girls she is now caring for, she contacts Anna and arranges to return the girls to her. Anna, who has been searching relentlessly for the children, meets Donna, confronts Garrett, rescues the girls, and sees Garrett arrested. The family is reunited.

The final film is, Two Came Back, a made for TV movie (1997) starring Melissa Joan Hart (formerly of Nickelodeon's Clarissa Explains It All and ABC's Sabrina the Teenage Witch). A group of young sailing enthusiasts are hired to bring a yacht from southern California to northern California. On the way romantic complications arise, personalities conflict, and a catastrophic storm capsizes the boat. The five passengers survive but the rigors of staying alive on a lifeboat with no supplies and no water prove too much for all but two of the crew. Susan (Hart) and her best-friend/ex-boyfriend are the two that come back. They survive because of their resilience and courage and also due, in large part, to the determination of Susan's mother who refuses to let the Coast Guard give up the search.

Setting is an important element in the list of tropes for the domestic gothic. Unlike the cob-webbed, decaying castles in the gothic fiction of Walpole or Radcliffe, the American domestic gothic is set in the familiar. It is a familiar, however, that is fraught with danger. For example, Southworth's The Hidden Hand, is set in antebellum Virginia. The plantation is as isolated as a castle and ruled by a patriarch who wields power similar to a feudal lord. Gothic narratives frequently incorporate a journey or adventure and the setting transfers to more exciting locales, but usually, the narrative begins and ends at the homestead. In Louisa May Alcott's A Long Fatal Love Chase, the action opens in a coastal American town, but shifts to exotic places as the heroine, Rosamund flees from her tyrannical lover. The tension and the terror emanate from the understanding that the reader/viewer has of how fragile domestic tranquility and security actually are. The mundane, home-like setting underscores that tension.

Like the literary domestic gothic narrative, the Lifetime movies are planted firmly in reality. Carole Black, former president of Lifetime Entertainment (1999 – 2005), stated that women who watch Lifetime are not watching for romance or fantasy but rather they want to see their own lives dramatized and that women escape by “empathizing and feeling they are empathized with” (Orecklin, 65). The settings and characters of Lifetime movies are familiar and have a ring-of-truth to them. The roster of movies that the network shows is heavily skewed to those that are “based on a true story.” The reality portrayed is a dramatized reality in that, as in its literary counterpart the domestic gothic the heroine is always victorious, be it by overcoming tremendous obstacles to save herself or her loved ones or through a noble death. As one critic wrote, “Lifetime does tweak reality a bit, making sure women always triumph”(Orecklin, 65). Four of the six movies in the sample set take place in white, middle-class suburban settings. Two of the movies employ the journey/adventure motif. Two Came Back takes place at sea and Crash of Flight 7 takes place in a Mexican rainforest. However, these two “journey” movies start and end

in white, middle-class settings. The characters leave civilization and its constraints, have an adventure, and come back to civilization with some deeper insights about themselves. Except for Jennifer Lopez and the kind-hearted Mexican peasants in Crash of Flight 7, the casts of all the other movies consist of “Pretty White People with Problems” (to paraphrase the title of a recurring skit on the Fox Network’s Mad TV). There is nary a minority or a person with a disability among the policemen, friends, or neighbors to be found in this universe of made-for-TV movies.

Even the movies that center on journeys have a distinctly middle-class feel to them. Two Came Back takes place on a yacht. At the height of the suffering of the survivors in the lifeboat, the worst injury that seems to afflict them is sweat and bad sunburn. In Crash of Flight 7, the group is traveling in private jets in outfits straight out of Eddie Bauer and L.L. Bean catalogs. Although the doctors are apparently at death’s door, their injuries are not visually offensive; there is little blood and no gore.

Characterization is another important element of domestic gothic fiction. Doubling, the pairing of opposite characters types, is a literary convention used frequently in gothic fiction as a dramatic device. E.D.E.N. Southworth’s The Hidden Hand abounds in doubles. The strong-willed female protagonist, Capitola, is contrasted with the traditional and compliant Clara. Capitola’s romantic interest, the stalwart Herbert is contrasted with the handsome and dashing ne’er-do-well, Black Donald. Similarly, the Lifetime movies in this sample set rely heavily on this device. Fatal Lessons was the only movie features a heroine and an anti-heroine (Samantha, the good mother vs. the psycho-school teacher, Victoria). In the other movies, the heroine is contrasted against a weak-willed woman (who is paired with an evil man) or a “party girl.” The Weak-Willed Consort to the Evil Male is seen in: The Return of Alex Kelly (a sweet, but clueless Swedish girl falls for Alex when he is on-the-run in Europe) and The People Next Door (Garrett is an evil criminal, but his wife Donna is just downtrodden). Summer of Fear, Two Came Back, and Crash of Flight 7 all have a strong, centered heroine who is doubled with a character in the story who is flighty and shallow. At the end of each of these three movies the flighty female straightens up under the tutelage of the heroine. In all of these movies, the evil or weak-willed double, serves to highlight the goodness and inner-strength of the heroine. The device also provides an opportunity for the transformation or the defeat of “the other” by the heroine.

As with the male figures in the literary domestic gothic narratives, the men in the movies do not fare very well when it comes to positive characterization. There are evil male characters in three of the six movies: Alex, the rapist in The Return of Alex Kelly; Garrett, the child-murderer and scam artist in The People Next Door, and Simon, the Prodigal Son of Summer of Fear, who attempts to seduce his half-sister and step-mother, and plans to murder his little half-brother. The nominally good male characters are, for the most part, completely ineffectual. The father in Fatal Lessons can’t see through Victoria’s machinations and seems to feel a pull of sexual tension in her direction. No male in The Return of Alex Kelly aids Carrie; Alex is only caught because he gives himself up. In the Crash of Flight 7, with the exception of Robert Loggia’s character, all of the doctors are smug and arrogant. At the end of the movie they are shown the error of their ways when the student nurses defy all odds to save their lives. In Two Came Back, two of the male members of the crew go mad and commit suicide because they are not strong enough to survive the tedium and hardships of being castaways.

The “male as menacing other” is a dominant theme in domestic gothic. Victorian women had little social, economic, or political power. These women were very much dependent on the males in their lives (fathers, husband, and brothers) for happiness, security, and status. Men had the power and the potential for a malevolent use of that power is a palpable fear that permeates domestic gothic fiction; case in point, The Yellow Wallpaper. The female protagonist is basically imprisoned by her husband, deprived of freedom and any form of intellectual stimulation or artistic expression, and goes completely mad. The nameless heroine of The Yellow Wallpaper along with Bertha, the first Mrs. Rochester in Charlotte Bronte’s Jane Eyre, “Madwoman in the Attic,” a

woman repressed and completely at the mercy of her husband, a staple of domestic gothic fiction.

The menacing male shows up in three of the movies: The Return of Alex Kelly, Summer of Fear, and The People Next Door. The “Madwoman in the Attic” surfaces in Fatal Lessons as Victoria attempts to do away with Samantha and usurp her family. The storylines of Crash of Flight 7 and Two Came Back utilize forces of nature and acts of God as mechanisms to show how easily world order can be upset and boundaries re-arranged. With regard to final outcome, each of these movies has a happy ending. The heroine triumphs and all endangered families are reunited.

Along with madness, supernatural phenomenon elements figure strongly in the domestic gothic. The supernatural is not strongly represented in the Lifetime movies under discussion, due largely in part, no doubt to Lifetime’s mission to reflect the highly dramatized reality of their viewers’ day-to-day reality. The only movie with supernatural elements is Fatal Lessons. The Stephens’s family dog dislikes Victoria from the get-go. The psychic ability of the dog is apparent to the audience, but lost on the Stephens themselves. Although the audience does not directly observe the act, it is strongly suggested that Victoria does away with the dog by poisoning its food. Victoria’s traveling herb garden also invokes a supernatural element. The mystery of how she transports several dozen rare and exotic poisonous plants, along with backlights, heat lamps and other gardening paraphernalia from Motel 6 to Motel 6 is not revealed to the audience. Victoria is apparently practicing dark magic with herbs; she brews special teas with strychnine to sicken poor Samantha and extracts curare to paralyze a nasty date that she picks up at a bar before drowning him. While not exactly supernatural, Victoria’s herb craft smacks strongly of witchcraft. In the end, she is subdued when, during a struggle with Samantha, Victoria gets injected with her own curare.

There is, however, plenty of madness in these Lifetime selections. Victoria, the serial killer, is a psychopath in Fatal Lessons as is Garrett, the child murderer from The People Next Door. Alex, the rapist in The Return of Alex Kelly, seems to be a sociopath; he shows no remorse and no acknowledgement of wrong-doing. Simon in Summer of Fear is deranged – filled with hatred of his long-absent father. Matt and Rick in Two Came Back go mad from drinking salt water and jump into shark-infested waters. Jill, the only woman doctor in Crash of Flight 7, goes mad because of internal bleeding in her skull. Her madness is not destructive, however. Jill just imagines that she is going to the opera and wanders off into the rain forest (where the ever-efficient nurses find her and bring her back).

As previously noted, emotional intensity is a hallmark of the domestic gothic. Many fine moments of high emotional intensity lurk within the movies on Lifetime. One scene in Fatal Lessons consists of Victoria tutoring Molly, the Stephens’s little girl, by reading to her (with barely contained glee) The Tales of the Borgia. The rape scene in The Return of Alex Kelly, while not graphic, is fraught with tension and overacting. In Crash of Flight 7, one of the doctor’s heart stops in reaction to a medication. Dr. Perrin (Loggia) administers CPR but gives up in despair when his friend does not respond. LiAnne, one of the plucky student nurses who almost flunked out of nursing school, continues to administer the CPR to the patient while yelling at him: “Don’t you give up on me!” The patient, of course, recovers completely. The character of Garrett in The People Next Door has a cold emotional intensity echoes that of Rev. Harry Powell (played by Robert Mitchum) in Night of the Hunter. Garrett steals, beats, and murders children, beats and threatens to murder his wife. But he also tucks the kids into bed at night and helps them with their homework

In particular, the opening scene in Summer of Fear is very intense (and somewhat creepy). Simon’s hired henchmen are reminiscent of the Men in the Woods who terrorize the hunters in Deliverance. The children are tied to a tree and witness their father being beaten and their mother’s blouse being torn asunder. They hear the bad guys tell their father that they, the

children, are going to be next. The audience feels an immense relief when the character of Simon arrives on the scene to seemingly put things right. The emotional intensity of Two Came Back begins with the title. The audience knows right from the start that three out of the five characters are not going to make it to the end of the movie. After the yacht sinks, and the survivors lose all ties to civilization, the audience sees baser instincts and raw feelings come to the fore in all except the two more noble characters. These are the ones who come back.

Each of the Lifetime films discussed is a made-for-TV movie. They do not possess a sophisticated set of aesthetics but nor do they profess to do so. They are stories of great emotional intensity, with sympathetic heroines, with settings that are both familiar yet exciting enough to hold interest and invite the viewer to suspend belief. While none of these movies met all of the criteria of the definition of the domestic gothic, as demonstrated in the analysis above, there is a preponderance of important elements: each is a story told in an emotionally intensive feeling with a strong element of tension and un-ease in the unfolding of the plot. The protagonist is a woman who is situated, at least at the outset of the narrative, in a normal, everyday life. This woman overcomes an obstacle that threatens the happiness or safety of herself or her loved ones. The males may be good but not quite as strong as the women. If the males are evil, they are truly evil.

As previously stated, Lifetime executive Carole Black noted that Lifetime's own research stated that women were watching not for fantasy but for the reality of seeing themselves and their lives dramatized. Lifetime Network research identified that women want to empathize with the heroine but also that women want to see the heroine triumph. Again, as noted above, many of the movies shown on Lifetime are "based on a true story." Three of the six movies discussed were based on real events. The common element of the six movies analyzed is that the heroine creates the happy ending through her own efforts. She is not rescued by a knight in shining armor. This is what distinguishes Lifetime movies from romance novels, another genre of narrative with a predominately female audience. The escapism is not found through the fantastic but through the triumphal retelling and reworking of the everyday.

Perhaps the most compelling element linking Lifetime movies and domestic gothic fiction is that they both directly speak to women about the importance of their lives. They tell women about their worth, their innate power, and the fact that they are not alone in their anxieties. They also both provide viewers with some entertainment and escapism. In The Hidden Hand Southworth's unconventional heroine, Capitola stands up for herself against every male that tries to dominate her. The book was wildly popular in its time ("E.D.E.N. Southworth"). It was liberating for women to read about spunky heroines in exciting and mysterious situations who prevail in the end. There is the element of: "If she can do it, then so can I!" So it was then and so it is now.

The women authors of domestic gothic fiction examined the lives of women who lived in a strictly patriarchal society. These women lacked status, power, money, and (until 1920) the right to vote. The domestic gothic narrative explored the fears and anxieties of a home life which could be benevolent or malevolent, secure or precarious, loving or emotionally bereft. Home could be a prison or a castle depending on the rule of the dominant male be it father, husband, or brother. Women were totally dependent on the patriarch. A woman alone, i.e. a woman without a home, was a social pariah, someone to be pitied, suspected, or perhaps scorned. Laws governing divorce were skewed to the men of society and a divorcee could easily lose rights to her children. Abortion was illegal; reliable birth control options were virtually non-existent; the act of childbirth was dangerous; many children did not live to see their second birthday. Respectable job options for middle-class women were few and salaries were low. Such were the realities, fears and anxieties of the women readers of domestic gothic fiction.

If, as it has been said above, Lifetime Television is the New Domestic Gothic, what then are the realities, fears and anxieties of the women viewers? The status of women has changed dramatically for women in the United States over the past 150 years. Why then do the same kind

of narratives, those with the same themes, plots, and tropes (although in modern guise), speak so strongly to women? The next section will address these questions by analyzing viewer responses to the movies via the Lifetime message board.

Why Are Women Watching Lifetime?

In January 2002, the Lifetime Web site began hosting a message board and invited viewers to share their responses to the movies shown: "Talk about your favorite Lifetime movies" ("What's Your Favorite Lifetime Movie"). According to the online dictionary, NetLingo (<http://www.netlingo.com>), a message board, which is also known as a discussion board, is a place hosted by Web sites where users can post and respond to messages. An analysis of the message boards shows that between January 2002 and December 2004, there were 1,724 messages posted. Of these messages, seventy-three percent were viewers writing to say that they had enjoyed a particular movie. Of that seventy-three percent, six percent had some personal connection to the movie and were particularly moved by it. Usually such a viewer had experienced the same situation as the main character in the movie or was close to someone who had been in a similar situation. Twenty-three percent of the responses were viewers asking for more information about a movie, such as they had missed the ending and wanted to know what happened or they were trying to remember the title of a movie. Three percent of the postings were people using the board for personal conversations between people they had met through the posts or some other non-movie related purpose (e.g. talking about TV shows, etc.). Less than one percent of the postings were negative in nature. In only one of the postings did the person identify himself as a male ("Lifetime is the network for women, and gay men.") ("What Is Your Favorite Lifetime Movie?" May 27, 2002). All the other postings were apparently from women.

In order to discover the issues that were resonating with Lifetime movie viewers, a count was made of all the titles mentioned in the posts from 2002 to 2004. Out of the over seventeen hundred posts, only twenty-five titles were mentioned ten times or more over the three year span. These "Top Twenty-Five" were selected for theme analysis, since they were the ones that the viewers themselves were discussing the most. Appendix Four lists the titles of the movies, the total number of posts for each movie, gives a brief description, and groups the movies by dominant theme. Some movies are listed under more than one category because they contained strong elements of each theme.

The dominant themes that emerged from the twenty-five most talked about movies are consistent with the themes found in domestic gothic fiction, but with some modern twists. The themes that emerged were: "Family/Child/Wife in Peril" (eleven movies; seven of these were based on a true story); "Teenage Sexuality/Coming of Age" (six movies; only one true story); "Transgressive Love", i.e. love outside the bounds of a loving, stable, heterogeneous relationship (five movies; only one true story); "Poverty and Homelessness" (three movies; one true story); "Suspense" (two movies; both fiction); "Eating Disorders" (two movies; one true); "Revenge" (a true story); "Romance" (a period piece fiction about the Russian Revolution); and "Life-Threatening Illness" (a true story). It is interesting to note that while "Family/Child/Wife in Peril" was the largest category, the two movies that were the most discussed were in the "Transgressive Love" category: An Unexpected Love (forty-nine messages) and Stolen Women; Captured Hearts (twenty-seven messages). While An Unexpected Love is a fairly new movie (2003), Stolen Women is nine years old and has not played on Lifetime for several years. According to fans, Stolen Women; Captured Hearts is the quintessential Lifetime movie. Neither movie is available for purchase on DVD or video tape.

It is also interesting to note how the "based on a true story" movies tend to cluster in different categories. In the "Family/Child/Wife in Peril" category, all except one is a true story. Whereas in "Teen Sexuality/Coming of Age" only one movie is based on true events and the rest are fiction. Only one of the "Transgressive Love" movies is based on true events and that is the Mary Kay

LaTourneau story. It would seem that when it comes to women and children in peril, the viewers respond strongly to movies identified as true stories. The movies in this category are linked by the common thread that the female protagonist seeks justice for the person in danger. She fights the system and finds a way to overcome the situation. Of the six percent of the viewers who wrote that they had a personal connection with the movies, one-third of those responses were in relation to the movies based on true stories in the "Family/Child/Wife in Peril" category.

In the "Transgressive Love" category, the women viewers respond to fiction. The response to the movie, An Unexpected Love, was big and unanimous in its praise. Women found the story tender ("What Is Your Favorite Lifetime Movie?" April 24, 2003) and praised Lifetime for airing it ("What is Your Favorite Lifetime Movie?" January 7, 2004). On the Lifetime Web site for the movie are links to a quiz that the user can take to see how adventurous she is willing to be in her sex life and a discussion about same-sex affection by a woman psychologist. The "Teen Sexuality/Coming of Age" category reflects the same clustering. Again, the movies are all fiction, except one, and the girls who post messages about these movies post responses that are unanimously positive. One can conclude that when it comes to adversity, women – both young and middle aged – want to see a real-life heroine who actually triumphed over a situation, but when it comes to love, viewers respond to an idealized, or at least, fictionalized version.

Of the message board postings, a majority of those writers who identified themselves as teenagers responded most strongly to the movies listed in the "Teen Sexuality" and "Eating Disorders Category." This would seem in keeping with the concerns of the teenage viewers. There was also a strong teenage response to the movie, Shattered Hearts, in the "Life Threatening Illness" category. As one teen wrote, "I like to see stories about young people." ("What Is Your Favorite Lifetime Movie?" July 24, 2004).

It is also interesting to note Lifetime viewers' responses to two highly publicized, true crime cases: the Mary Kay LaTourneau story and the Betty Broderick story. Mary Kay LaTourneau is recently (2005) in the news again because she has been released from jail and has been reunited with her lover, now in his early twenties. The women who wrote about the movie were unanimously sympathetic to Ms. LaTourneau. While acknowledging that what she did was not wise or commendable, the posts echoed the sentiment that the heart loves whom the heart loves. Women also responded positively to the revenge narrative, A Woman Scorned: The Betty Broderick Story. Betty Broderick was a real life wealthy socialite whose husband dumped her for a younger woman. Ms. Broderick killed her husband for revenge. The women who responded to this movie were also sympathetic to Ms. Broderick. The majority of the messages said that while they did not condone murder they could understand the impulse.

As has been noted above, negative responses are rare on the Lifetime message board (less than one percent). It should be stated that two of the "Top Twenty-Five" received negative responses: Stranger in the House (one viewer wrote that this was a "dumb movie") ("What Is Your Favorite Lifetime Movie?" March 26, 2004) and Homeless to Harvard (one viewer wrote that she had no interest in seeing how a white girl made it to Harvard) ("What is Your Favorite Lifetime Movie?" April 10, 2003). This would indicate that the "Top Twenty-Five" elicited strong responses, both pro and con.

What Does It All Mean?

As noted above, for several years in a row, Lifetime Television for Women has been rated cable television's number one prime-time network. Over seventy-eight percent of Lifetime's viewers are women and over sixty percent of those viewers are between the ages of eighteen and forty-nine; fifty-percent are between the ages of twenty-five and fifty-four (Mediamark Research). In short Baby Boomer and Baby Buster women are watching Lifetime. By contrast, forty-eight percent of the viewers of MTV are women, while ninety-four percent of its viewers are between the ages of eighteen and forty-nine (Mediamark Research). Advertisers prize the young, male viewer (ages

eighteen to thirty-four)(Larson, 5). MTV is a land of male fantasy wish fulfillment. While young women watch it, a larger percentage of young women watch Lifetime. One reason is that Lifetime targets women as its audience in contrast to other mainstream media (such as movies and both network and cable TV). Young women see narratives in which they are the protagonists and their issues and concerns are addressed. Young women are responding to the stories that Lifetime portrays, and to problems that they face every day of their young lives: body image; pressures and confusion about sex and sexuality; struggles for empowerment; and confusion about what it means to be a successful woman in the new millennium. A short-hand phrase for this would be issues of coming of age in menacing times. Many of these issues, save pedophiles on the Internet, are the very same ones which their grandmothers and great-grandmothers felt and responded to through domestic gothic fiction.

What of their mothers, the Baby Boomers? Why are these women drawn to stories that speak to fears about the breakdown of the family, love outside the bounds of traditional marriage, revenge, and the threat of poverty or illness? Baby Boomer women, who were born in the late 1940s through the early 1960s are the transitional generation. Feminism hit its stride in the 1970s when most of these women were coming of age, graduating college, entering the workforce, or starting families. These women are the transitional women – seeing saw massive sociological changes such as the legalization of abortion, easy access to birth control, expectations of women contributing to the workplace and to the family income, and the pressures of being full-time wife, mother, and professional/working woman. While the Victorian women, the readers of the domestic gothic fiction, lived their lives under the burden of a strict patriarchal society, constricted in their roles, and subject to the dominant males in their lives, Baby Boomer women are cut adrift. The old models of family and male/female relationships are outmoded yet nothing has been codified to take its place. While there is no domestic patriarchy to keep women in their place, there are few social structures yet in place for women to seize their full measure of equality. Job options are still limited; pay still unequal, as are chances for advances; and kinder and kuche still remain predominantly the province of women. Lifetime movies speak to these fears and anxieties. In these movies, it is women who find the solution and women who find their own way. Husband and significant others are evil or well-meaning but ineffective. These tropes speak to modern women who feel cut loose from the traditional roles and guidelines afforded to their mothers and grandmothers, yet who are expected to perform many of the same tasks and shoulder the bulk of the same domestic chores and responsibilities.

Lifetime is often criticized for its blandness and its mediocrity. It is perhaps this very blandness, predictability, and lack of complication which speaks so strongly to its primarily woman audience. There is a fairy-tale quality to the stereotype characters which appear in many of the Lifetime movies: the good girl, the devoted wife, the vamp, the n'er-do-well handsome stranger, the devoted-but-boring husband. The plots are predictable and the characters two-dimensional, but there is a comfort in knowing what is going to happen next. Good will eventually triumph. The ugly duckling will become the swan. The handsome prince will see the inner beauty of the scullery maid. Young women, especially, seem to respond to the hyper-emotionalism of Lifetime movies. Many a young fan talks about being drawn into the narrative, crying, and relating to the problems afflicting the central character. Lifetime offers a haven to Boomers and Millenials where their stories are valued and their concerns are examined. Domestic tranquility and stability are fragile commodities which can be lost by sudden and unexpected twists of fate, such as the loss of a job, divorce, natural disasters, or other catastrophes out of a and mother's control. Predators lurk within and without the domestic sphere. In Lifetime movies, at least, as in domestic gothic fiction, goodness and perseverance are rewarded, cheaters never prosper, and children are ultimately safe at the end of the day. The women consumers of domestic narratives, from the Victorians to the Boomers and Millenials use these narratives to both escape the anxieties of everyday concerns and to find an outlet for a feeling of empowerment for the complexities of their everyday lives.

In discussing what makes a good horror story Stephen King proposes that often, the stories that are most effective and memorable are those which are simple, without artifice, and that provide an emotional whollop (King, 33). I would suggest that the same holds true for Lifetime. While it does not aspire to high art, and should not be judged as such, it nevertheless deserves consideration for the fact that it does indeed attempt to touch women's hearts and minds.

Appendix 1
Checklist of Domestic Gothic Elements
Adapted from The Art of Darkness: A Poetics of Gothic by Anne Williams

Characterization

- **The Women**
 - Heroine
 - Anti-Heroine
 - Confidant (True)
 - Confidant (False)

- **The Men**
 - Husband/Lover (Good)
 - Husband/Lover (Evil)
 - Husband/Lover (Weak, Absent, or Ineffectual)
 - Confidant/Friend (True)
 - Confidant/Friend (False)

- **The Children**
 - Son (Good)
 - Son (Evil)
 - Anti-son (Good)
 - Anti-son (Evil)
 - Daughter (Good)
 - Daughter (Evil)
 - Daughter (Good)
 - Daughter (Evil)

Setting

- Home
- The Vacation or Journey

Themes

- Male as Menacing "Other"
- Heroine's Female Other/Double Threatens Family Unit/Heroine
- Demon Child Threatens Family Unit/Heroine
- Terror Exists within the Patriarchal Family Unit
- "Madwoman in the Attic"
- Family Secrets
- Inter-generational Problems/Legacies/Curses

Plot Outcomes

- Heroine Triumphs/Empowered
- Heroine Destroyed
- Family Unit Saved
- Family Unit Lost
- Good Suitor Successful – Family Unit Created

Supernatural Elements

- Ghosts
- Extrasensory Perceptions
- Guidance from Lost Loved One

Other

- Elements of Madness or Disease
- Forces of Nature
- Notes of Evidence of Intensity of Emotion (Over-the-Top)

Appendix 2

A Selection of Lifetime Network Movies (from 2004) Source for Movie Information: Internet Movie Data Base (Available on line at <<http://imdb.com>>)

Fatal Lessons: The Good Teacher, 2004 (TV Movie). Featuring: Erika Eleniak, Patricia Kalember, Ken Tremblent; Directed by: Michael Scott; Written by: Casey T. Mitchell. Plot summary: A serial-killer school teacher moves into a small town and threatens the welfare of a family.

Nurses on the Line: The Crash of Flight 7, 1993 (TV Movie). Featuring: Lindsay Wagner, Jennifer Lopez, Robert Loggia; Directed by: Larry Shaw; Written by: Andrew Laskos and Norman Morrill. Plot summary: Doctors and student nurses on their way to work on a clinic in rural Mexico encounter disaster when one of the planes their party is traveling on crashes. The student nurses must work to save the injured doctors and return them to the United States.

The People Next Door, 1996 (TV Movie). Featuring: Nicolette Sheridan, Tracy Ellis, and Michael O'Keefe; Directed by: Tim Hunter; Written by: Fred Mills. Plot summary: A young mother fleeing an abusive husband is befriended by kindly neighbors. The neighbors turn out to be criminals who kidnap the woman's daughters. The mother must fight to get them back.

The Return of Alex Kelly, 1999 (TV Movie). Featuring: Matthew Settle and Cassidy Rae; Directed by: Ted Kotcheff; Written by: Joe Cacaci. Plot summary: A high school athlete rapes his sixteen year old neighbor and flees to Europe to escape a trial. The rape victim fights for ten years to bring him back to justice.

Summer of Fear, 1996 (TV Movie). Featuring: Gregory Harrison, Glynnis O'Connor, Corin Nemec; Directed by: Mike Robe; Written by: Gloria Murphy and John Gay. Plot summary: A family on vacation encounters thugs who terrorize them. They are saved by a mysterious drifter who has secret plans and who isn't what he seems to be.

Two Came Back, 1997 (TV Movie). Featuring: Melissa Joan Hart, Jonathan Brandis, Susan Sullivan; Directed by: Dick Lowry; Written by: Deborah Scaling-Kiley and Meg Noonan. Plot summary: A team of young sailors, hired to pilot a yacht, meet with disaster and struggle to stay alive until help can reach them.

Appendix 3

Top 25 Movies Discussed on the Lifetime Message Board 2002-2004 Information for Movies from Lifetime (<<http://lifetimetv.com/movies/archive/index.html>>) and the Independent Movie Database (<<http://imdb.com>>)

Note: The following includes the total number of messages, the title of the movie, and a short description of the movie.

49 An Unexpected Love – story about a divorced wife and mother who falls in love with another woman.

27 Stolen Women; Captured Hearts – classic Lifetime movie about women settlers captured during an Indian raid that fall in love with their captors.

26 A Cry for Help: The Tracy Thurman Story – true story about landmark domestic violence case.

24 For My Daughter's Honor – true story about a 14 year old girl seduced by high school coach. Town turns against family when they report the abuse.

24 She Fought Alone – true story about a high school girl who is ostracized when she reports a case of date rape by a popular male student.

19 A Moment of Truth: A Secret among Friends – two high school girls make a weight loss pact that leads to bulimia.

19 Homeless to Harvard: The Liz Murray Story- a fifteen year old homeless girl overcomes poverty and drugs to graduate Harvard.

17 A Killer among Friends – true story of a high school girl who was murdered by her best friends.

16 Fifteen and Pregnant – a fifteen year old girl becomes pregnant. Her family pulls together amidst many problems to come to her aid.

14 Gracie's Choice – Gracie is only sixteen but is raising her young siblings in lieu of their self-destructive mom. The family overcomes difficulties when the authorities threaten to break up the children.

14 In a Child's Name – when a women's sister is murdered, she fights to put the murderer – her brother-in-law in jail and to gain custody of her nephew.

13 Perfect Body – a young gymnast develops anorexia when competing for the Olympic team.

13 Shattered Hearts – high school sweethearts face adversity when the young boy is diagnosed with cancer.

13 She's Too Young – drama about a sexually active fourteen year old girl. Discusses peer pressure and oral sex.

13 The Truth about Jane – two high school girls fall in love with each other. Deals with problems of coming out to family and friends.

12 A Mother's Right: The Elizabeth Morgan Story – a mother goes to jail rather than reveal the location of her daughter, who is in hiding from her sexually abusive father.

12 Too Young to be a Dad – the story of a high school freshman becomes a father.

11 All American Girl: The Mary Kay LaTourneau Story – a married teacher falls in love with her thirteen year old student.

11 A Bastard out of Carolina – the emotional story of an impoverished mother and daughter in South Carolina and the destructive effect of the mother's remarriage to an abusive man.

10 Danielle Steele's Zoya – the story of a young Russian royal who moves to America with her soldier husband after World War I.

10 Defending Our Kids: The Julia Posey Story – after her daughter is threatened by Internet predators, a mother helps the police to help catch online pedophiles.

10 Lying Eyes – high school cheerleader falls in love with an older man only to find out that he is married.

10 Stranger in the House – a thriller about a stolen diamonds and the murder of an advertising executive.

10 Tempted – a wife and mother on vacation back in her home town in Hawaii is drawn to an incredibly handsome young local.

10 A Woman Scorned: The Betty Broderick Story – husband abandons wife of sixteen years for a younger woman. Wife gets revenge through murder.

Appendix 4 Themes in Top 25 Most Discussed Lifetime Movies

Family (Wife/Child) in Peril

- A Cry for Help: The Tracy Thurman Story (26 messages) – domestic violence
- For My Daughter's Honor (24 messages) – girl seduced by teacher; mother seeks justice
- She Fought Alone (24 messages) – high school girl involved in date rape; parents seek justice
- A Killer among Friends (17 messages) – daughter murdered; mother seeks justice
- Fifteen and Pregnant (16 messages) – family, ready to split apart, pulls together when daughter becomes pregnant
- Gracie's Choice (14 messages) – young girl struggles to keep family together
- In a Child's Name (14 messages) – aunt attempts to get custody of nephew and seek justice for her murdered sister

- She's Too Young (13 messages) – mother copes with sexually active fourteen year old daughter
- A Mother's Right (12 messages) – mother hides daughter from abusive husband; fights the system; goes to jail
- A Bastard out of Carolina (11 messages) – impoverished mother remarries a man who abuses her daughter
- Defending Our Kids (10 messages) – mother helps police after she discovers her daughter is stalked by Internet predators

Teen Sexuality

- Fifteen and Pregnant (16 messages) – family, ready to split apart, pulls together when daughter becomes pregnant
- She's Too Young (13 messages) – mother copes with sexually active fourteen year old daughter
- The Truth about Jane (13 messages) – two high school girls fall in love with each other
- Too Young to be a Dad (12 messages) – high school student becomes a dad
- Lying Eyes (10 messages) – high school cheerleader gets involved with older man only to find out that he is married. She then begins to receive threats.
- Shattered Hearts (13 messages) – high school couple face boy's struggle with cancer

Transgressive Love

- An Unexpected Love (49 messages) – married woman falls in love with woman friend
- Stolen Women; Captured Hearts (27 messages) – stolen away by Indians
- All American Girl (11 messages) – married teacher falls in love with a 13 year old student
- Lying Eyes (10 messages) – high school cheerleader gets involved with older man only to find out that he is married. She then begins to receive threats.
- Tempted (10 messages) – married woman tempted by handsome local during visit home to Hawaii.

Poverty/Homelessness

- Homeless to Harvard (19 messages) – homeless girl makes it to Harvard University
- A Bastard out of Carolina (11 messages) – impoverished mother remarries a man who abuses her daughter.
- Danielle Steele's Zoya (10 messages) – young Russian royal falls in love with an American soldier and moves to USA after World War I.; Great Depression brings disaster.

Suspense/Thriller

- Stranger in the House (10 messages) – woman caught in a tangled web of jewel thieves and murderess.
- Lying Eyes (10 messages) – high school cheerleader gets involved with older man only to find out that he is married. She then begins to receive threats.

Eating Disorders

- A Moment of Truth: A Secret among Friends (19 messages) – two high school friends suffer from bulimia
- Perfect Body (13 messages) – Olympic hopeful gymnast develops anorexia

Revenge Narrative

- A Woman Scorned (10 messages) – jilted wife murders husband

Period Romance

- Danielle Steele's Zoya (10 messages) – young Russian royal falls in love with an American soldier and moves to USA after World War I

Life Threatening Illness

- Shattered Hearts (13 messages) – high school couple face boy's struggle with cancer

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