

## **From Damsel in Distress to Femme Fatale: *Her Story* as Modern Gothic Fiction**

by Sam Miller

Gothic literature is about exploring the unknown, the unbelievable, and the unholy. It explores the shadows that creep both outside one's front door and inside one's own mind. This kind of fiction comes with its own set of motifs and themes, not unlike the genre of fantasy or sci-fi. What does a modern day Gothic story look like? Popular gothic stories like William Faulkner's "A Rose for Emily" and Edgar Allen Poe's "The Black Cat" are prime examples of the genre, but are ultimately too old to be entirely applicable to the twenty-first century. To transfer this genre to a modern text, an author must be able to incorporate the elements often found in the genre but do so in a way that makes sense within a modern context. Sam Barlow's *Her Story* is an example of a modern, digital narrative in which elements of the Gothic genre are applied in a way that is believable, unique, and effective for today's audience. The game incorporates elements like the unreliable narrator, transformations, doppelgängers, and entrapment in ways that pay tribute to classic Gothic tales as well as gives an idea of what a modern Gothic story looks like.

*Her Story* starts out as a story about a woman whose husband has gone missing. The player is given access to a database full of video clips from several interviews, and in order to find out what happened the player must type in keywords into the database's search bar. Each result yields only the first five clips in chronological order; any others that contain the keyword are hidden from the player and must be found using other words and phrases. As more and more clips are discovered, a deeper story starts to unfold for the player.

The woman, Hannah Smith, finds her husband's body in the basement of their own home. His throat has been cut and he has been wrapped up in trash bags. If that were not bad enough, it

starts to look more and more like Hannah is the prime suspect. Their marriage was more or less a happy one, but the clips reveal that Hannah and her husband Simon had a fight just a couple days before he went missing, on Hannah's birthday. According to Hannah's story, Simon went to a bar and she ended up driving to Glasgow. She came home the next day, but Simon did not. Hannah waits for him to come home on Saturday, and on Sunday when he still has not shown up is when she goes to the police to report his disappearance.

As the player continues searching through the database, they get a glimpse into Hannah's life. Or they do not, depending on which interview the player is watching. In some interviews, Hannah is more open and more charismatic, whereas in others she is more conservative and private. Other differences begin to appear as well. One clip shows Hannah touching a bruise on her face and claiming that she ran into a kitchen cupboard, but another clip that occurs only two days later shows Hannah bruise free. Not only is the bruise gone, but when asked about the bruise, Hannah touches the side of her face opposite the one that the bruise appeared on in the previous interview.

From there, a theory begins to develop that Hannah might not be the only person in the interview room with the detectives. Eventually, the name Eve gets brought up and it is revealed that Eve and Hannah are twins. A story about sisterhood and identity forms, ending with a final interview from the person the player now perceives to be Eve, in which she tells the whole story of her life, ending with the revelation that Hannah was the one who killed Simon by cutting his throat with a broken piece of mirror from a gift he made her. The story is not quite so cut and dry, however, because even when every clip is revealed to the player, the ending is never confirmed or denied in the game. How, then, does this seemingly inconclusive murder mystery encapsulate the Gothic genre?

*Her Story* uses several fictional elements that are commonly found in Gothic literature. Most prominent are the unreliable narrator, the doppelgänger, and entrapment. Others found within the game are mystery, transformation, and revenge. The game also updates the Gothic genre by shying away from the damsel in distress trope and moving towards a femme fatale character, as it becomes very clear that Hannah and/or Eve are not helpless when it comes to men, nor are they quick to faint at the first sight of something disturbing.

Throughout *Her Story*, Hannah and Eve give nearly identical accounts of the weekend leading up to the first interview in the police station: the argument after dinner, the trip to Glasgow, and then coming home and searching for Simon only to find that he is not there. The last part is even more identical than any other part of the story that the two women tell the police. Word for word, each woman gives the exact same process of coming inside and calling out for Simon, looking for him, and then taking a shower and falling asleep. Normally, consistency is an indicator that someone is telling the truth, but the way Hannah and Eve recite the exact same story makes it sound as though the two of them rehearsed that scenario multiple times. It begs the player to ask exactly why they tried to get that part down so exactly and so perfectly, and if it is rehearsed, then how can the player be sure that what these women are saying is the truth? This paints Hannah and Eve as unreliable narrators, which is the first of many Gothic elements that *Her Story* presents to players.

According to Douglass H. Thomson at Georgia Southern University, an unreliable narrator is defined as a narrator that “makes an incorrect conclusion or assumption about an event that he/she witnesses” (36). In this case, the event is Simon’s disappearance. If we are to believe the final interview with Eve, Simon never actually disappeared. When he came back home, Hannah was there pretending to be Eve and she killed Simon during an argument. Hannah

and Eve go to the police with the story that Simon has gone missing, which immediately paints them as unreliable.

Following this up, the story that Eve tells about how she grew up with the midwife that lived across the street from her biological parents and sister and then hides in the attic for years and years is improbable at best, and an outright lie at worst. A rational person would be hesitant to believe that a person could hide for a majority of their life and never get caught. The absurdity of the story coupled with the rehearsed responses from both women is enough to make Hannah and Eve seem like unreliable narrators. Does the unreliability change if the player considers the theory that Hannah and Eve may not actually be twins, that they may not be different people at all but instead two personalities present in the same person?

It is never confirmed by anyone who is not Hannah or Eve that they are actually twins and that Eve's story holds any truth to it. Because of this uncertainty, another theory arose among players that said Eve is actually a separate personality of Hannah and that Hannah has Dissociative Identity Disorder. If this were the case, it presents another way of looking at the doppelgänger element of Gothic fiction that was not present back when Gothic literature was commonly written. The doppelgänger is often the "ghostly counterpart" of a character, but it can also be an alter ego or a double (Thomson 6). Whether Eve and Hannah are actually twins or they are two pieces of the same person, the presence of this Gothic element is there. One could even argue that because of the open-ended nature of the game, the doppelgänger is present in two ways based on the two different theories. Without an official verdict, each theory has as much possibility of being true as the other.

Whichever theory an individual chooses as the outcome they believe in, the opportunity for the third major Gothic element is present. Entrapment, or imprisonment, is an element that

appears in numerous Gothic stories. The idea of being confined is largely a contribution to the horror aspect of Gothic literature according to Thomson, who goes on to state that it creates a “sense of there being *no way out*” and this becomes a key element in many popular gothic stories (4).

In Poe’s “The Cask of Amontillado,” the character Fortunato is trapped behind a wall. In Faulkner’s “A Rose for Emily,” the husband is killed and his corpse is kept in the attic for years. In *Her Story*, Eve was confined to the house of her adoptive mother for eight years, only to then be stuck in the attic of her biological parents’ house for several more years. Eve stays hidden her whole life because even when she goes out in the world it is as Hannah, until Hannah severs that connection and Eve is forced to craft her own identity.

Even if Hannah and Eve are not actually separate people, Eve hiding in the attic can be construed as a metaphor for Hannah’s subconscious. Eve has no way out if she is just a fragment of Hannah’s mind, and if she is Hannah’s twin then she has created a life in which she does not exist as her own person, meaning she has few opportunities to grow and flourish. It could also be argued that Hannah and Eve are trapped in the interview room, as this is the only place that the player gets to see them.

The interview room setting allows the player to obtain all this information and also sets up the mystery. A woman in an interview talking about her husband disappearing and then finding his body is bound to inspire curiosity; people want to know what happened, when it happened, where, and how. Players also want to know the details of Eve and Hannah’s relationship, and how they managed to pull off being one person. The format of the game allows the player to act as a detective, searching for the right keywords to enter and listening for important pieces of dialogue that might lead to a bigger piece of the story. In order to uncover

the story, the player has to identify things that appear often in the clips they have already seen. By doing this they are unconsciously recognizing different fictional elements that are present in the narrative and therefore the fictional elements that are present in the Gothic genre.

Creator Sam Barlow could have chosen any form to tell this story, but by choosing to use an actress and video clips and by setting up a 1990s era computer screen for the player to navigate, Barlow has created a unique experience that he describes as “True Detective via Blair Witch” on the game’s website. He also says that the format, while it only takes the knowledge of how Google works to play, “can feel like you’re engaged in a genuine dialogue with this woman and her story” (Barlow). Again this level of interaction fosters a greater understanding of the story itself and what themes and motifs are present in Hannah’s interviews.

By incorporating key elements of the Gothic genre into a digital narrative with a modern, yet outdated format, *Her Story* manages to bring a genre associated with older writings into the twenty-first century. Not only does this preserve the genre, it updates it and allows players to get reacquainted with something in a new way. *Her Story* is an important piece of digital literature because of the way it forces the player to examine the themes and motifs of this kind of story. In order to get the whole story, in order to see every clip there is to see, the player has to develop an idea of what kind of story they are absorbing. The amount of work that goes into finding the whole story depends on the player’s own conception of what exactly is happening in this digital narrative.

Works Cited

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