



# From Poe to *Marrowbone* : Resonance and the Legacy of American Gothic Traditions

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## Abstract

Edgar Allen Poe quoted “I became insane, with long intervals of horrible sanity” and how does one’s psychological turmoil turn their minds into some eerie, uncanny, unsettling space. This paper examines the enduring legacy of American Gothic traditions, tracing their evolution from the 19<sup>th</sup> century works of Edgar Allan Poe and others to their contemporary cinematic resonance in Sergio G. Sánchez’s 2017 film, *Marrowbone*. While traditional Gothic literature is often centered on decaying European castles and supernatural occurrences, Poe domesticated the genre, shifting its focus to the psychological turmoil, haunted familial spaces, and repressed traumas that define a distinctly American horror. The research employs a comparative textual analysis to explore how key thematic elements- including hereditary madness, the uncanny, and the grotesque. They are transformed and recontextualized across different media and historical periods. We argue that *Marrowbone* serves as a modern-day echo chamber, not merely borrowing from but actively engaging with and reinterpreting the foundational anxieties articulated by Poe, Hawthorne, Henry James, etc. The film’s isolated mansion, fractured family unit, and psychological twists resonate with Poe’s explorations of internal decay and the haunting presence of the past. The central hypothesis is that *Marrowbone* is a critical reinterpretation of American Gothic conventions, demonstrating how a 21<sup>st</sup> century film uses conventions’ foundational elements to explore contemporary anxieties surrounding family, identity, and mental health. The study uses Freudian psychoanalysis and genre theory to demonstrate this thematic continuity and evolution.

**Keywords:** Gothic, Psychological turmoil, horror, multidisciplinary

## Introduction

*Marrowbone* is a 2017 Spanish psychological horror mystery drama film written and directed by Sergio G. Sánchez, featuring George MacKay, Anya Taylor-Joy, Charlie Heaton, Mia Goth, and Matthew Stagg. The movie delves into the trauma and struggles experienced by children living in abusive homes. The acting is well done, the storytelling is innovative and creative, and the amount of twists will keep one on their toes the entire time the film.

Not just a classic horror story rather, it is a highly psychological film that explores how the ghosts of the past become imprisoned in the mind and corrode and corrupt it with fear, grief and guilt. Even the dilapidated old house, which serves as a metaphor for the bewildered, ruined maze of a human mind, is a classic Gothic trope.

**Gothic elements in *Marrowbone*:** Although *Marrowbone* clearly draws upon established Gothic conventions, Sánchez’s adaptation demonstrates how contemporary horror cinema can revitalize these traditional elements through modern psychological



understanding. The film's treatment of trauma-induced psychosis reflects current comprehension of mental health issues while maintaining the Gothic atmosphere of supernatural dread. This synthesis allows *Marrowbone* to function simultaneously as period piece and contemporary psychological thriller.

The film uses a lot of gothic fiction conventions: live burial or being trapped in walls, using the bricked up attic as a metaphor for repressed memories in the subconscious, ghosts as manifestations of guilt, trauma, or secrets and the use of an unreliable narrator. We don't know what exactly is reality or who to believe. We're not supposed to know whether or not Simon is really alive or another one of Jack's personalities. The twist was still rather devastating. But then one is left wondering if they should feel bad for Jack or be afraid of him. The ending leaves the viewer off-balance, without closure and with many questions. Like the black cat staring out of the driver's intestines at the end of one of Edgar Allen Poe stories, this film sits in your stomach and lingers.

#### **Supernatural elements in *Marrowbone*:**

A displaced English family moves into a rural landed estate on the US East Coast, where they are escaping something from their past. The four siblings are soon left to care for themselves in an ancient, run-down home and it soon becomes clear that they are not alone there. Their only link to the outside world is two residents of the nearby town including Allie and the local Lawyer. The setting creates a gothic, haunting, and ethereal atmosphere, with the decaying manor and overgrown grounds reflecting the family's hidden secrets and emotional state. The eerie, cold surroundings of a haunted house, reminiscent of an abandoned mansion or secluded country home, are filled with secrets and haunting ghosts that scare both characters and viewers.

The house functions as a physical repository for repression and delusion. This movie is almost a reminiscent of the wave of psychological ghost movies. The subgenre of supernatural ambiguity is definitely used in the movie. Something that starts off as almost an actual horror movie quickly turns to a psychological thriller involving Jack's

Dissociative Identity Disorder (DID) caused by the trauma of his father's death and murder of his siblings. The initial supernatural events are portrayed as real ghost stories and a haunted house experience, but the twist is that the "ghosts" are actually Jack's personalities, Allie's attempts to support his delusion and the lingering presence of his victims. There is a deliberate misdirection so that the tension around the climax builds up and supernatural is mostly used as a metaphor instead.

#### **Familial Secrecy and Decaying Family Dynamics**

Family, the longest existing human institution, is ever prone to scientific controversy owing to its history of changes and dynamic evolution of modern family forms. (Silverstein and Auerbach, 1999; Gabud, 2016; Zloković and Čekolj, 2018). Parents have a significant impact on their children's moral, intellectual, and emotional development. A healthy, stable, and communicative family lays the groundwork for children to grow up to be resilient, well-balanced adults. That is just not the case here in the movie. *Marrowbone* dramatizes how family can be both sanctuary and prison. The children's desperate attempt to preserve their bond transforms into a pathology that consumes Jack's reality. It demonstrates how trauma distorts love into repression.

After the death of their mother, the siblings cling to each other and shut out the outside world in an effort to stay together, making their bond both their greatest strength and their deepest weakness. Jack, forced into the role of protector and parent, carries a responsibility far beyond his years, and his inability to face the family's tragedies pushes him into denial and psychological collapse. The abusive father, though dead, lingers as a shadow over the family, a reminder of violence that refuses to fade. What begins as a desperate attempt to preserve family unity turns into a haunting illusion, showing how unprocessed grief and fear can twist love into delusion.

In *Marrowbone*, the family is rendered as both refuge and entrapment, a paradox at the very heart of the American Gothic tradition. The siblings' fragile pact to remain together after their mother's death



recalls Poe's doomed House of Usher and Shirley Jackson's cloistered sisters, where devotion hardens into a form of captivity. The house itself, with its shuttered rooms and the father's decaying body locked away in the attic, becomes a living allegory of trauma-memory suppressed yet never silenced. What makes *Marrowbone* striking is the way it entwines tenderness with terror. The desire to preserve family becomes inseparable from the very delusions that destroy it. In this, the film offers not just a ghost story, but a meditation on how love, grief, and fear entwine to shape the most intimate bonds.

**Psychosis and psychological instability:** In *Marrowbone*, "Psychosis" emerges not as a sudden rupture but as the cumulative weight of unresolved trauma, grief, and fear, embodied most clearly in Jack. Jack being forced into a parental role makes him internalize unbearable responsibility, leading him to construct an alternate reality in which his siblings continue to live even after their deaths. This delusional splitting and hallucinatory conversations, denial of visible death, and blurred boundaries between memory and present reflects a psychological defense mechanism against overwhelming loss. His psychosis is not represented as random madness but as the psychological residue of trauma and grief. His hallucinations and fragmented sense of time reveal a psyche collapsing under the weight of repression, echoing Freud's idea that the return of the repressed manifests in haunting forms. The decaying house becomes an externalization of this fractured mind, where hidden rooms and buried secrets mirror Jack's denial. By framing psychosis as an extreme yet human response to unbearable trauma, the film situates Gothic horror within the realm of psychological realism, blurring the boundary between haunting and delusion. His trauma triggers dissociative behaviours and delusional thinking, most notably his hallucinations of his siblings being alive after their deaths.

Some of the psychological issues represented in the movie includes:

***Dissociative Disorder / Dissociative Identity-like Symptoms (Jack)***

The cause for this includes his childhood trauma, parental abuse, sudden loss of mother, and

overwhelming responsibility for siblings. Jack continues to perceive his deceased siblings as alive and even goes on to interact with them, assigning them distinct personalities and behaviours in his mind. His sense of reality is fragmented, and he creates a delusional narrative to cope with grief.

***Trauma-Induced Psychosis (Jack)***

The accumulation of fear, repression of father's violence, and unresolved grief from siblings' deaths can be counted as the causes for Jack's trauma induced psychosis. There are recurring hallucinations (seeing and hearing his siblings), obsessive secrecy, and distorted perception of events. He isn't able to distinguish between past trauma and present reality.

***Post-Traumatic Stress Reactions (All Siblings)***

The exposure to abusive father, sudden loss of mother, and forced isolation are key incidents for their individual as well as collective PTSD. Hence the development of hypervigilance, anxiety, and constant fear of being discovered, withdrawal from external social contacts and extremely avoidant behaviours (hiding mirrors, locked rooms).

***Attachment Disorders***

The sudden loss of their mother and the absence of any stable parental figure force the children to rely almost entirely on one another for emotional support and security. Jack, as the eldest, becomes the primary attachment figure, shouldering the role of protector, caretaker, and surrogate parent. The difficulty forming healthy external attachments is also represented.

***Depressive Symptoms***

In *Marrowbone*, depressive symptoms are a significant consequence of prolonged trauma, loss, and isolation. Jack, in particular, exhibits emotional withdrawal, moments of despair, and a pervasive sense of hopelessness as he struggles to maintain the illusion of a united family.



### **Comparative Study of *Marrowbone* and the American Gothic Literary Tradition**

Sánchez's *Marrowbone* is a compelling contemporary manifestation of American Gothic sensibilities and literary tradition. Through examination of the film's narrative architecture and thematic preoccupations, distinct parallels with canonical American Gothic texts can be observed, particularly with *House of Usher* by Edgar Allan Poe, Nathaniel Hawthorne's *House of the Seven Gables*, Henry James's *The Turn of the Screw*, and Shirley Jackson's haunted house stories are interwoven in today's cinematic tradition. The dilapidated *Marrowbone* house, repeated in Poe's *House of Usher* and Hawthorne's Pyncheon house, represents terminal decline.

The film's visual language invokes Poe's conception of the house as mirror to psychological states, where the building's structural decomposition parallels the mental deterioration of its inhabitants. Hawthorne's *House of the Seven Gables* provides another crucial comparative framework, particularly in its treatment of inherited guilt and family curses. Both inhabit spaces tainted by familial trauma. Their past transgressions manifest through supernatural phenomena. The film's revelation of the father's violent history and its psychological impact on the surviving children parallels Hawthorne's exploration of how ancestral sins perpetuate through generations.

*Marrowbone* employs narrative unreliability as a fundamental structural device. Jack is central to the process of structuring the story. This positions viewers within the fractured consciousness of Jack Fairbairn. It is similar in ways that recall Henry James's deployment of ambiguous perspective in *The Turn of the Screw*. James's governess narrator presents readers with interpretive uncertainty regarding supernatural manifestations versus psychological projection. This technique, Sánchez adapts through Jack's increasingly unstable mental state. The film's climactic revelation that the supernatural occurrences represent Jack's psychotic break mirrors James's deliberate ambiguity about whether the ghosts at Bly Manor exist independently or emerge from the governess's troubled psyche.

This narrative strategy extends to the film's treatment of temporal displacement, where Jack's creation of an elaborate and perhaps deliberate fantasy involving his deceased siblings parallels the Gothic tradition of past events intruding upon present consciousness. Shirley Jackson's exploration of psychological deterioration within domestic spaces, provide additional context for understanding how *Marrowbone* positions mental instability as both supernatural threat and naturalistic consequence of trauma.

The Fairbairn children's self-imposed isolation following their mother's death resonates powerfully with Gothic traditions of claustrophobic containment. Their decision to remain hidden within the mansion, where they maintain the fiction of adult supervision while concealing their vulnerability from other people in the town, creates the kind of hermetic environment that characterizes American Gothic literature. This isolation intensifies the psychological pressure. And this ultimately fractures Jack's hold on reality, where his protective seclusion turns into destructive entrapment. The film's exploration of sibling relationships under extreme duress recalls the intense familial dynamics present in Gothic literature, where blood relations often prove more threatening than external dangers. Jack's psychological creation of his dead siblings as continuing presences reflects the Gothic preoccupation with family bonds that transcend death. Which is again, similar to Poe's treatment of the Usher twins whose connection proves literally fatal.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, *Marrowbone* offers a rich exploration of family dynamics, trauma, and psychological instability within a Gothic framework. When we examine movies such as *Marrowbone* through the perspectives of psychological trauma, familial dynamics, and Gothic conventions, it offers a framework for the amalgamation of film analysis with literary and psychological theory, facilitating further interdisciplinary inquiry. This paper illustrates how modern cinema serves as a medium



for the exploration of themes typically addressed in literature, including family, grief, and repression, while integrating perspectives from psychology, trauma studies, and Gothic criticism. From a multidisciplinary perspective, these insights can guide future approaches in arts and science, encouraging curricula and research that blend literature, psychology, and film studies, while fostering deeper engagement with themes of trauma, resilience, and the human condition. In doing so, the study not only enriches critical discourse but also models how interdisciplinary frameworks can address contemporary challenges in understanding both narrative and psyche.

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