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Revisiting Suburban Gothic Narratives: Intertextualities, Gender, and the Invisible Trope of Old Age in *The Stepford Wives* and *Edward Scissorhands*

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Suburban Gothic fiction explores the latent dysfunctionality that lies beneath residential areas despite their apparently blissful image upholding the ideals of the American dream. Insofar as suburban Gothic is rooted in domestic Gothic and, by extension, female Gothic, it underscores the inextricable relation established between gender and aging, particularly with regard to the Victorian trope of arrested development, which acquires different connotations along gender lines. As representative of the early origins of suburban Gothic, Ira Levin's novel The Stepford Wives (1972) portrays the arrival of a female newcomer at a conservative community comprising suburban housewives who never seem to grow old. As a postmodern exponent, Tim Burton's Edward Scissorhands (1990) tackles how an eternally young and androgynous humanoid is introduced in a suburban neighbourhood of middle-aged residents and their adolescent children. This article aims to analyse the intertextualities between these two paradigmatic narratives of suburban Gothic and, in particular, in relation to gender and aging—bearing in mind that, as suggestive of the metaphor of arrested development, the trope of old age remains invisible—and how these narratives evince either submission or rebellion with regard to gender and age conventions.

Introduction

In the last decades, there has been a proliferation of novels, films, and series that fall under the denomination of suburban Gothic. From early forerunners, such as Shirley Jackson's novels and David Lynch's films, to more contemporary exponents, comprising novels like Jeffrey Eugenides's *The Virgin Suicides* (1993) and Paula Hawkins's *The Girl on the Train* (2015)—both of them also adapted to the screen—, the subgenre of suburban Gothic has attracted significant interest from its classic representatives, such as Sam Mendes's *American Beauty* (1999) and the immensely popular television series *Desperate Housewives* (2004-2012) to its most recent manifestations to date, comprising Jordan Peele's *Get Out* (2017) and Olivia Wilde's film *Don't Worry Darling* (2022), which give evidence of the enduring revitalisation of the genre.

Ira Levin's novel *The Stepford Wives*, published in 1972, which was adapted to the screen by Bryan Forbes in 1975 and by Frank Oz in 2004—both films being significantly different in tone, since the former is a horror story, whereas the latter is a dark comedy— and Tim Burton's film *Edward Scissorhands*, released in 1990, may be taken as narratives that respectively represent the early stages and subsequent

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postmodern reinterpretations of the genre. In Levin's novel, Joanna Eberhart and her family settle down in the idyllic town of Stepford, where female newcomers notice that all the women in town conform to the subservient role of contented housewives and look significantly younger in comparison with their husbands. In Burton's film, as a grandmother, Kim Boggs recollects her memories of youth about a young man named Edward who had scissor blades for hands, and came to live in the suburbs where he faced the predicament of adjusting or diverging from conventions along his process of socialisation onto adulthood.

What follows is a comparative analysis of Levin's novel and Burton's film with the aim to highlight the significance that the discourses of gender and aging acquire in suburban Gothic narratives, insofar as individuals are coerced into conforming or dissenting from established conventions. In terms of gender, in both narratives, main characters, as paradigmatic of alternative femininities and masculinities, are exposed to traditional femininities and hegemonic masculinities to which they are made to conform, although Levin's novel underlines the individual's being forced to succumb to social pressures, whereas Burton's film rather accentuates the individual's dissention from prevailing discourses. As inextricably related to gender, the discourses of aging become pervasive in both narratives, since the compulsory or rebellious tendency not to grow older is interpreted differently according to gender, insofar as, in Levin's novel, Joanna is pressured not to age in order to conform to the prevailing gender dictates established for women, whereas, conversely, in Burton's film, Edward's inability to grow older is taken as symptomatic of his social ostracism and his deviant masculinity, although both narratives envision old age as an invisible trope, insofar as the main characters never grow old.

This analysis will comprise a brief overview of its theoretical framework, particularly in relation to suburban Gothic and its precedents in the genres of domestic Gothic and female Gothic, the legacy of Victorian discourses of gender and aging that prevail in suburban Gothic—especially in relation to the notion of arrested development—, the influence of gender theories from second-wave and third-wave feminist movements, and the notion of gender and age performance that reveals how these discourses are culturally constructed and are susceptible to be transformed. Furthermore, according to Julia Kristeva's narratological concept of intertextuality, and Gérard Genette's categorisations of transtextuality concerning the hypotext and the hypertext—since textualities are transformed from preceding to subsequent paradigms—and given the significant parallelisms existing between Levin's novel and Burton's film, this analysis will also address the intertextualities that both narratives present together with the contrasting conclusion that they eventually reach, taking into consideration how the discourses of gender and aging become pervasive in both narratives and remain inextricably related and influence one another.

From Victorian Domestic Fiction to Suburban Gothic: Gender, Aging, Performance

Ira Levin's novel *The Stepford Wives* and Tim Burton's film *Edward Scissorhands* are representative narratives of suburban Gothic. As Catherine Redford claims, suburban Gothic tackles "the anxiety lying beneath the surface of idealized suburban communities,"[1] with the particularity that the agent that threatens to disrupt the apparent placidity in these residential areas is commonly identified as internal. Given the prevalent impression that there is some danger lurking within these idealised residential areas, Bernice Murphy refers to the play on words between the terms 'suburbia' and 'disturbia.'[2] Suburban Gothic fiction flourished in the United States during the postwar period, in the decades of the 1950s and 1960s, when prosperity and social mobility were extolled as part of the American Dream, and found correlation in the mass suburban development of American homes inhabited by nuclear families comprising fathers with a white-collar profession and contented mothers who looked after their children. As Redford further explains, although the early exponents of the suburban Gothic subgenre emerged in the prosperous American society of the mid-twentieth century, the latent sense of menace and unease arising from suburban development could be traced back to the beginning of the nineteenth-century in the expanding suburbs of London and found its fictional counterpart in the contemporary genre of domestic Gothic fiction, which reached its peak of popularity in Victorian times.

In Levin's novel and Burton's film, the life in domesticity in suburban communities lies its roots in Victorian precepts about the ethics of domestic life, which reveals conventional notions about the separation of spheres along gender lines, inasmuch as the main characters in these narratives are exposed to traditional femininities and hegemonic masculinities. Domestic Gothic fiction—written from a female perspective and addressed to female readers—tackled women's fears and concerns as a result of their oppressive situation within the household in the Victorian period. As Elaine Hartnell-Mottram explains, the values attached to the home triggered the increasing disjunction between domestic and commercial interests, which also entailed a separation of spheres according to gender, whereby women were assigned the private sphere and men worked outside the domestic space, thus involving that women were removed from remunerative employment.[3] The home was considered a shelter for privacy where women embodied domestic

1. Catherine Redford, "Suburban Gothic," in *The Encyclopedia of the Gothic* (eds.) W. Hughes, D. Punter, and A. Smith (Oxford: Blackwell, 2016), 658.

2. Bernice Murphy, *The Suburban Gothic in American Popular Culture* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 1.

3. Elaine Hartnell-Mottram, "Domestic Gothic," in *The Encyclopedia of the Gothic* (eds.) W. Hughes, D. Punter, and A. Smith (Oxford: Blackwell, 2016), 184.

values to the extent that female confinement became a requirement not only for the preservation of labour division and family ethics, but also for women's respectability.

Insofar as domestic Gothic mainly addressed women's anxieties about their household confinement, theorist Ellen Moers (1976) coined the term female Gothic. As Diana Wallace explains, Moers argues that, in its early stages, the genre of female Gothic presented two developments, which respectively addressed a particular thematic focus.[4] In the first development, usually represented by Ann Radcliffe's novels, female Gothic novels revolve around anxieties arising from marriage and sexuality, insofar as a heroine is threatened with imprisonment in a castle or a manor by a male despot, who symbolises a patriarchal figure. In the second development, traditionally epitomised by Mary Shelley's novel *Frankenstein* (1818), female Gothic narratives address the birth myth, whereby a hideous progeny escapes the creator's control, thus tackling repressed horrors related to procreation. Levin's novel and Burton's film respectively explore these two stages of development in female Gothic, inasmuch as, in the former, Joanna is confined in life in domesticity at her husband's request and, in the latter, Edward is a humanoid created by a male inventor who must find his way in a disaffecting environment.

Bearing in mind the dyad of gender and aging, Claudia Nelson's notion of arrested development in Victorian narratives becomes relevant, as it pervades Levin's novel and Burton's film. In *The Stepford Wives*, Joanna is disallowed to grow older as a woman owing to prevailing conventions, whereas, in *Edward Scissorhands*, Edward is coerced into growing up and adjusting to conventional displays of masculinity in spite of his reluctance. To use Nelson's terms, Victorian middle-class society is organised "to keep its females perpetual children, sexually innocent, financially dependent, adorably helpless,"[5] whereas "the man who carries juvenile characteristics into adulthood is often perceived as posing a threat" to the extent that "the arrested child-man often carries with him an aura of the pathologically damaged."[6] Hence, in Victorian narratives, female characters are often encouraged to remain perpetually young in appearance and attitude, thus being precluded to grow old, whereas male characters who embrace arrested development are portrayed as necessarily deviant. This gender-differentiated notion responds to the prevailing ethics of separate spheres as a result of gender conventions.

The discourses of gender remain prevalent in these two narratives, although each of them presents a different approach owing to the historical context in which they were created. Levin's novel was published in the context of second-wave feminism, as represented by theorists like Betty Friedan, Kate Millett, Carol Hanisch, Germaine Greer, and Gloria Steinem, who respectively encouraged women to gain

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4. Diana Wallace, "Female Gothic," in *The Encyclopedia of the Gothic* (eds.) W. Hughes, D. Punter, and A. Smith (Oxford: Blackwell, 2016), 232.

5. Claudia Nelson, *Precocious Children and Childish Adults: Age Inversion in Victorian Literature* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2012), 72.

6. Ibidem, 43.

awareness of the stifling quality of domesticity, the patriarchal control of women's sexuality, the political dimension inherent in women's personal concerns, the relation between patriarchy and consumerism, and the visibility of women's bodies from their own perspective. All of these issues and concerns are tackled in Levin's novel. An excerpt from Simone de Beauvoir's *Le Deuxième Sexe* (1949), taken as the volume which inspired the creation of the second-wave feminist movement, precedes *The Stepford Wives*, and explicit and implicit references to other feminist theorists of the period also recur throughout Levin's novel. In her seminal volume *The Feminine Mystique* (1963), Friedan gave voice to the unsatisfied lives that housewives often led owing to the fact that their confinement in the domestic sphere limited their aspirations in life. In her book *Sexual Politics* (1970), Millett drew attention to the crucial part that patriarchy played on the discourses of sexuality, which relegated women to a secondary role. Hanisch's seminal essay "The Personal Is Political" (1970) claimed that gaining insight into women's personal concerns was as important as taking political action. In her volume *The Female Eunuch* (1970), Greer argued that the suburban consumerism and the nuclear family contributed to women's repression and, in *The Change: Women, Ageing, and the Menopause* (1991), Greer unveiled the myths around the climacteric and suggested that this stage in women's life could turn into a source of female empowerment.

In comparison, Burton's film was released in the context of third-wave feminism, whereby critics like Rebecca Walker, Judith Butler, and Rosi Braidotti drew attention to issues such as the notion of gender as culturally determined, the generation gap that differentiated them from their feminist predecessors, and the concept of the cyborg that transcended the human condition, which are addressed in Burton's film. Walker called for the need to inaugurate the third-wave movement to re-evaluate the aims of feminism in her book *To Be Real* (1995), thus acknowledging the differing approach between older and younger generations within the movement. In *Gender Trouble* (1990), Butler deconstructed the essentialist concept of gender identity and introduced the notion of gender performance as a series of repeated acts that trigger the possibility of transforming how gender is perceived. Braidotti coined the notion of the posthuman subject and the cyborg, along with Nina Lykke, in their book *Between Monsters, Goddesses and Cyborgs* (1996), as they envisioned the gendered subject as the embodiment of flexible and multiple identities.

Besides, the discourses of gender are inextricably linked to those of aging, as evinced by the fact that, decades after publishing *Le Deuxième Sexe*, Beauvoir would write *La Vieillesse* (1970). Butler's premise of gender performance which envisions gender as a series of repeated acts that are liable to change, thus paving the way for transforming gender conventions, acquires special relevance in these two narratives, particularly insofar as gender performance is revealed to be inextricably related to age performance. In Levin's novel, upon reaching middle age, Joanna is symbolically precluded to grow older according to gender conventions established for women, whereas, in Burton's film, Edward is coerced into growing older upon reaching adolescence along gender conventions addressed to men. Drawing on Butler's

notion of gender performance, Anne Basting (2001) claims that the discourses of aging are also performed insofar as they are culturally constructed. Based on Basting's premises, cultural gerontologists such as Kathleen Woodward (2006) argue that age can be performed inasmuch as gender is performed, while Margaret Gullette (2004) has drawn attention to the possibility of acting age—that is, acting younger or older—according to established age conventions. In Levin's novel, Joanna is triggered to act younger as a middle-aged woman, whereas, in Burton's film, Edward is forced to act older as a male adolescent.

Intertextualities: From Plot Parallelisms to Literary Influences

From the early notion of dialogism to that of intertextual function, Julia Kristeva coins the concept of intertextuality to refuse the idea of a text as a self-contained and autonomous entity in favour of envisioning it as a site of intersection and existing only in relation to other texts. Subsequently, for Gérard Genette, intertextuality becomes a category within the broader concept of transtextuality, which he defines as "all that sets the text in a relationship, whether obvious or concealed, with other texts."[7] In particular, Genette introduces the relation between the hypertext, which transforms an earlier text that is known as the hypotext. Insofar as Levin's novel and Burton's film are narratives pertaining to suburban Gothic, they present significant intertextualities, comprising plot parallelisms, themes, character types, settings, aesthetics, tropes and motifs, narrative voices, and literary influences. Furthermore, inasmuch as Levin's novel is representative of the early origins of the genre, whereas Burton's film turns into a postmodern paradigm, it may be argued that, to use Genette's term, Levin's novel functions as a hypotext and Burton's film can be described as a hypertext, since Burton's film revisits, but also reverses, premises related to age and gender that are addressed in Levin's novel.

In terms of their plot, both narratives portray a tripartite structure comprising the arrival of outsiders at a suburban community, the predicament between retaining their individuality and conforming to prevailing conventions, and the final outcome of joining or departing from the community. In Levin's novel, it is not out of her will that Joanna moves to live in Stepford, but she rather follows her husband's initiative, while, in Burton's film, it is Peg Boggs who enters Edward's palace and entices him to come to live in the suburbs. Although Joanna has professional ambitions as a photographer, she is gradually made to conform to the ethics of domesticity prescribed for women in Stepford and, despite Edward's own ways as a result of his upbringing in isolation, he is also triggered to comply with

7. Gérard Genette, *The Architext: An Introduction* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), 83-84.

the conventions of life in suburbia, thus engaging in the dynamics between adjustment and exclusion. Notwithstanding these parallelisms in terms of plot, both narratives display a differing conclusion, inasmuch as Joanna is forced to succumb to the constraining dictates prevailing in Stepford, while Edward feels rather excluded and resumes his secluded existence.

Drawing on Joseph Campbell's inventory of character typologies following Jungian archetypes, Levin's novel and Burton's film comprise the characters of the hero or heroine, the mentor, the ally, the herald, the trickster, the shapeshifter, the guardian, and the shadow. Levin's novel revolves around a central heroine, Joanna, who is called to adventure by the figure of the herald, personified by her husband Walter. In her new context, Joanna befriends Bobbie, her ally, who helps her find her way, but also becomes acquainted with Dale Coba, the head of the Men's Association, who is evil and stands for the shadow. In the course of her adventure, Joanna meets Ike Mazzard, one of the members of the Men's Association, who prevents her from achieving her purpose and personifies the character of the guardian. Conversely, Joanna resorts to the help of symbolic wiser and older women, such as Doctor Fancher, who acts as her mentor. Joanna also comes across characters like Charmaine Wimperis, who initially shows loyalty to her, but eventually transforms into another Stepford wife, thus fulfilling her role as a shapeshifter, while Joanna also identifies some of the women in Stepford as promoters of comic relief in their part as tricksters, as is the case of Carol Van Sant. Analogously, in Burton's film, Edward is triggered into change by his herald, Peg Boggs, who takes him with her to live in the suburban community. It is there that Edward is assisted by Kim, who becomes his ally, while Edward meets his shadow, who is embodied by Kim's boyfriend, Jim, whom Edward must learn to defeat. Edward recollects the teachings of his old mentor, the late inventor who brought him into life, but also meets characters who trample on his well-being, as is the case of Esmeralda, who prevents Edward from being accepted in the community and stands for the figure of the guardian. Edward realises that Joy, who initially supports him, subsequently betrays him and accuses him of abusing her, thus arising as the shapeshifter in the story, while other characters that represent the community, such as Bill Boggs, ultimately turn into tricksters that entice Edward to reassess his situation.

In terms of narrative voices, in Levin's novel, an omniscient narrator unfolds the story which remains focalised on the main character, Joanna, whereas, in Burton's film, it is a homodiegetic narrator, Kim, who also plays a major role in the main narrative, the one who tells the story that remains focalised on Edward. From a narratological perspective, the choice of an omniscient narrator in Levin's novel reveals the social component of the narrative, which symbolically portrays the latent social concerns arising from women's increasing demands of power and authority. As a homodiegetic narrator unfolds the plot in Burton's film, the narrative acquires a mythical quality and follows the conventions of a fairy tale, as Kim

identifies Edward as the enthralling character who is responsible for making it snow in a land that used to have a mostly temperate climate.

Both narratives address themes that are distinctive of suburban Gothic, such as the relation of the individual and society, the issue of conforming to social conventions, the role of consumer culture and capitalism, the increasing technification of society and its subsequent dehumanising effects, the categorisation of bodies as normative or extraordinary, and the prevalent cult of life in domesticity as legacy of Victorian domestic fiction. As individuals, both Joanna and Edward display some artistic gifts—since she is a successful photographer and he creates fabulous topiaries in his garden—that characterise them as individuals who stand out from the crowd. Nonetheless, they must come to terms with social conventions, when Joanna leaves behind the anonymity of living in a conurbation like New York, and Edward abandons his existence in isolation in order to embrace suburban life in a tightly-knit community. The residential areas where Joanna and Edward live turn into microcosms reflective of capitalist and consumerist ideas prevailing in the American society, insofar as Joanna and her female neighbours meet in the supermarket, and Edward frequents the shopping mall with his foster family. The technocracy that controls these communities is reflected in the literal and symbolic process of roboticization befalling the women in Stepford on behalf of their husbands—most of whom are leading scientists—and Edward's condition as a humanoid created in a laboratory by a male inventor who dies before completing his creation. In communities where appearances define personal identity, bodies acquire particular significance as signs of conformity or disconformity with the prevailing discourses, since, in Levin's novel, non-normative female bodies are made to conform, while, in Burton's film, Edward's robotic body makes itself stand out from the rest of standardised bodies. In these suburban communities, both Joanna and Edward are coerced into embracing the ethics of domesticity exemplified by their respective neighbours, which is symptomatic of the American way of life in mid-twentieth-century.

The juxtaposition of settings in both narratives reinforces the dichotomy established between the community and the individual, public and private spheres, and exposure and concealment, which signify the moral dilemma that the heroine and the hero must confront as individuals who inhabit transitional spaces that symbolise their progression. The gothic palace that Edward inhabits becomes the epitome of the individual and remains apart from the colourful houses that make up the suburban community. In Levin's novel, the Men's Association's Manor also arises as an imposing and ancient building, but, in contrast with Edward's castle, it belongs to the residential area and symbolises the reactionary ideals lying at the core of the town. In Levin's novel and Burton's film, the schism between separate spheres is portrayed by means of the contrast established between private settings, such as bedrooms and kitchens, and public locations where families get together in social gatherings, such as gardens and commercial centres. The pulse between exposure and concealment is enacted in both narratives by means

of settings such as attics—in which the Men's Association exhibits the idyllic families in Stepford, and Edward displays the ice figurines he carves with his scissorhands—and cellars and locked rooms—insofar as, in her cellar, Joanna finds an old newspaper which informs her that the town used to have a Women's Club, while Edward falls into the trap of breaking into Jim's father's locked room, which precipitates his fall from favour in the community. In the course of their progression, Joanna and Edward traverse transitional places, such as staircases and laboratories, which symbolically envision their condition as individuals trapped in intermediate spaces that physically signify their struggle between social conformity and personal insurgence.

In terms of aesthetics, Levin's novel and Burton's film establish a visual contrast between the multicoloured suburban communities and the black-and-white expressionism characterising the imposing manor house of the Men's Association and Edward's gothic palace. Nonetheless, in terms of connotations, if, in Levin's novel, the Men's Association's Manor is portrayed as an eminently evil place in contrast with the comforting houses in suburbia, in Burton's film, this tendency is subverted, since, in spite of its bleak appearance, Edward's gothic palace proves to be more convivial than the residential area from which he is eventually expelled. Frames from Burton's film depicting the suburban cottages and their adjacent gardens present a significant parallelism with some of David Hockney's paintings describing life in suburbia. Besides, Edward Hopper's paintings depicting the isolation of life in domesticity are evoked in Forbes's film adaptation of Levin's novel, particularly Hopper's paintings portraying women situated behind windows, which find correlation in Joanna's lonely domestic life. In contrast with these pastel-coloured designs, the chiaroscuro lightning in the films, legacy of German expressionism—thus, depicting sharp angles, stylised shapes, and distorted figures—suggests the estrangement of individuals entrapped in mechanised and alienating locations. German expressionistic cinema influenced Edward's spectral features and the depiction of the laboratory in Burton's film, along with the mechanical transformation of the Stepford women into robots in Forbes's and Oz's film adaptations of Levin's novel.

Finally, both narratives display intertextualities with Gothic fairy tales and Victorian narratives. Insofar as women's presence is banned from the Men's Association's Manor, Levin's novel is evocative of Charles Perrault's fairy tale "Bluebeard" (1697). Furthermore, the multicoloured fantasy world that conceals the suburban community of Stepford, in which women's bodies are transformed, acquires an unreal dimension that is evocative of Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865). Analogously, Burton's film is also suggestive of fairy tales, such as Suzanne Barbot de Villeneuve's "Beauty and the Beast" (1740), as it depicts the platonic love between Edward and Kim. Insofar as Edward is unable and unwilling to succumb to the prevailing discourses of gender and aging, his perpetual youth is also evocative of James Matthew Barrie's *Peter Pan; or The Boy Who*

Wouldn't Grow Up (1904), since, like Peter Pan, Edward is also unable to grow older and, instead, cherishes the myth of eternal youth.

Constructing and Subverting Gender and Aging

Having considered the numerous intertextualities existing between these two narratives, this comparative analysis will now focus on the relevance that the discourses of gender and aging acquire in both of them. As Redford notes, suburban Gothic usually portrays the menacing undertones of "the father working hard in a white-collar profession for his family" and "the contented mother looking after her home,"[8] thus referring explicitly to gender conventions. Nonetheless, in relation to gender, the discourses of aging also become prevalent insofar as suburban Gothic lays its roots in domestic Gothic and, in particular, in female Gothic, which usually addresses momentous transitions at different stages in the course of women's life. Insofar as suburban Gothic hints at the sinister connotations lying at the core of gender discourses, it could be argued that suburban Gothic also unveils the latent threat of culturally-determined aging dictates, given the mutual influence that gender and aging exert on each other.

Between Gender Orthodoxy and Dissention: Androgyny, Conventions, Performance

According to Melanie Waters, in twenty-first century suburban Gothic fiction, there is the tendency to feature older women who reject domesticity for the sake of professional success in contrast with younger women who are reluctant to give priority to their careers and rather appear to embrace domestic duties.[9] As illustrative of the early origins of the genre, Levin's novel already reflects this duality between feminism and domesticity on the basis of aging, as older female characters extol the ideals of second-wave feminism, while their younger counterparts seem to conform to the ethics of domestic life. Also, in Burton's film, middle-aged women, like Peg Boggs, have a profession of their own outside the home, while younger women, like Esmeralda, hold on to highly reactionary discourses of gender. Characters like Joanna in Levin's novel and Edward in Burton's film are acquainted with the predicament between complying or dissenting in relation to gender conventions, while their own gender identity also influences the divergent outcome of their

8. Catherine Redford, "Suburban Gothic," in *The Encyclopedia of the Gothic* (eds.) W. Hughes, D. Punter, and A. Smith (Oxford: Blackwell, 2016), 659.

9. Melanie Waters, "The Horrors of Home: Feminism and Femininity in the Suburban Gothic," in *Women on Screen: Feminism and Femininity in Visual Culture* (ed.) M. Waters (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 59.

respective situations. Taking into account this dilemma in terms of gender, this comparative analysis will address the embodiments of alternative femininities and masculinities that the central characters represent, their exposure to traditional femininities and hegemonic masculinities, the pressure to conform to gender dictates, the metatextual references to gender discourses, instances of gender performance, and the final resolution to embrace or discard gender dictates.

Embodiments of Alternative Femininities and Masculinities

As Joanna and Edward join their respective suburban communities, they symbolically become epitomes of Mikhail Bakhtin's carnivalesque body. On the one hand, both characters arise as agents of insurgency that destabilise the homogenous and conservative societies they encounter. On the other hand, they turn into grotesque bodies, which are defined as a source of becoming and open to change as opposed to the aesthetically standardised bodies inhabiting their respective communities. As personifications of the carnivalesque body, Joanna and Edward turn into embodiments of alternative femininities and masculinities.

Upon their arrival at their respective suburban communities, Joanna and Edward immediately stand out in the crowd, since their physical appearance—in particular, their dark hair, pale complexion, and black clothes—remain at variance with the homogenous, albeit colourful, looks of the rest of the members in the neighbourhood. They feel out of place in the suburbs, since it is at her husband's request that Joanna moves from New York to Stepford, where women reveal an obsessive adherence to domesticity, whereas it is Peg Boggs who takes Edward away from his cloistered existence in the palace on top of the mountain so that he may adopt the lifestyle and gender conventions prevailing in the suburbs.

Both Joanna and Edward look androgynous in comparison with the surrounding overstated displays of femininity and masculinity. If Joanna looks masculine according to the prevailing gender conventions in Stepford, as she often wears casual clothes and prefers comfort to sophistication, conversely, Edward's looks acquire a feminine quality, adopting a meek and passive role, which has conventionally been associated with traditional femininities.

Besides, as artists—since Joanna is a photographer, and Edward trims shrubs and creates topiaries—they are portrayed as individuals who observe society, but remain detached and turn into witnesses rather than participants. In contrast with the women in Stepford, who are used to incarnating the object of the male gaze, to use Laura Mulvey's term, as a photographer, Joanna is in command of the gaze and adopts the role of the observer who has traditionally been assigned to the male. Analogously, Edward's scissorhands, as indicative of his alternative masculinity, are revealed to be an agent of disruption and change that turns the standardised suburban gardens, which are an extension of their conservative owners, into unique and creative topiaries with an identity of their own.

Exposure to Traditional Femininities and Hegemonic Masculinities

In the suburbs, Joanna and Edward become exposed to embodiments of traditional femininities and hegemonic masculinities which appear to be rooted in Victorian discourses of gender. Theorists like John Ruskin referred to the philosophy of separate spheres, whereby women were considered more suited to the domestic sphere, while men took their professional responsibilities in the public sphere. As Maureen Moran observes, cultural assumptions were made on the basis of the biological differences between women and men, which were interpreted as contributing to fixing social expectations.[10] The politics of separate spheres was reflected in domestic Gothic in the Victorian period and perpetuated in suburban Gothic as its current genre counterpart.

Joanna soon realises that the women in Stepford appear to be "completely absorbed in household duties"[11] and "work like robots all their lives,"[12] thus looking satisfied in their domesticity despite being deprived of professional ambitions. In contrast, their husbands occupy important positions in leading technological companies, while their wives stay at home and take care of the children. In the evenings, the men join together at the Men's Association's Manor, which is described, in eloquently masculine terms, as rising "up on the hill" as a "square old nineteenth-century house, solid and symmetrical, tipsily parasolled by a glistening TV antenna,"[13] thus symbolically evoking the phallus in a portrayal redolent with hegemonic masculinities, particularly insofar as women's presence within its walls is categorically banned.

In Burton's film, social roles are also perceived as gender-differentiated, as is shown when the Boggs family organise a barbecue in order to introduce Edward as a new member in their suburban community. As men gather round, they entice Edward to take part in their games involving strength and dexterity, hence bringing to the fore the schism existing between the hegemonic masculinity that they represent and Edward's alternative manhood symbolised by his scissorhands which exclude him from taking part in men's games. Conversely, as women detect Edward's helplessness upon eating, they exhibit their maternal instincts, overprotective predispositions, and cooking abilities—values associated with traditional femininities—to nurture him even to the extent of competing among themselves so that he tries all the meals that they have cooked for the occasion.

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10. Maureen Moran, *Victorian Literature and Culture* (London: Continuum, 2006), 35.
11. Ira Levin, *The Stepford Wives* (New York: HarperCollins Perennial, 2002), 2.
12. Ibidem, 64.
13. Ibidem, 45.

Pressure to Conform to Gender Dictates

As Joanna and Edward settle down in apparently idyllic suburbia, they are made to conform to the prevailing clearly-differentiated gender dictates. Susan Sontag has drawn attention to the diverging configuration of female and male bodies according to conventional gender discourses. As Sontag claims, femininity has traditionally been associated with caring about one's physical appearance, whereas masculinity has often involved not caring about one's looks, at the same time that it is assumed that, if men's bodies develop, women's bodies are rather forced to remain unchanged as long as possible.[14] Gender conventions thus coerce bodies into conforming to culturally-determined configurations clearly differentiated along gender lines.

Although Joanna's husband, Walter, initially exposes his compliance with gender equality, his perspective begins to emulate that of his male associates when he begins to spend longer evenings at the Men's Association, which has effect on his changing views about the way his wife should look and behave. As he tells Joanna, "it wouldn't hurt you to look in the mirror"[15] and "I'd just like you to put on a little lipstick once in a while,"[16] so that he gradually reveals he would like his wife to adjust her looks to match those of the rest of Stepford women. Among the members of the Men's Association, Joanna identifies Ike Mazzard as the illustrator of gorgeous female figurines that she used to admire in her adolescence. As Joanna sits down in her living room, she notices that Ike is drawing her sketch, but, when he shows it to her, she realises that it is an idealised image that she will never be able to match, in resemblance with the projected images that she was raised to attempt to emulate in her teenage years. Reluctance to conform to gender dictates is met with profound displeasure among the male community in Stepford. When Joanna tells her husband that she wishes to leave Stepford to avoid the same fate that has befallen her closest friends, Charmaine and Bobbie—who have eventually embraced the traditional femininities characterising all the women in Stepford—, Walter advises his wife to visit a psychiatrist, hence categorising her reluctance to conform to prevailing gender dictates established for women not only as non-normative, but also as pathological.

Analogously, when Edward abandons his isolated existence in favour of a suburban way of life, Peg Boggs, who turns into his foster mother, orchestrates Edward's socialising process, which involves erasing the signs of his unrestrained upbringing in order to adopt, instead, the appearance and attitudes epitomising the figure of a dandified gentleman. To this purpose, as an Avon saleswoman, Peg tries cream lotions on Edward's scars to disguise them and give him the appearance

14. Susan Sontag, "The Double Standard of Aging." *The Other within Us: Feminist Explorations of Women and Aging* (ed.) Marilyn Pearsall (Oxford: Westview Press, 1997), 24.

15. Ira Levin, *The Stepford Wives* (New York: HarperCollins Perennial, 2002), 86.

16. Ibidem, 88.

of a clean and smooth complexion. Furthermore, she provides him with formal clothes and even attempts to train him to use cutlery at meals, which only serves the purpose of highlighting his inability to fit in the established conventions of etiquette. Conversely, when Kim's boyfriend, Jim, discovers Edward's ability to open locked doors with his scissorhands, he coerces Edward into taking part in illegal activities, thus triggering him to adopt a kind of rough masculinity for which he also feels mostly unsuited. Edward thus feels equally detached from displays of traditional femininities and hegemonic masculinities. As Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock argues, the hedges that Edward encounters function as "symbols of middle-class conformity that exist to be either transformed into art or trampled to the ground."[17] As Edward trims these hedges and gives them heterogenous shapes, he exhibits his discomfort with the standardised gender patterns that prevail in suburbia.

Metatextual References to Gender Discourses

Throughout the narratives of *The Stepford Wives* and *Edward Scissorhands*, self-conscious references explicitly draw attention to the discourses of gender. In his treaty on Gothic fiction, American writer Stephen King refers to Levin's novel as a book "which has some witty things to say about Women's Liberation, and some disquieting things to say about the American male's response to it,"[18] thus revealing the self-aware gender discourse pervading the novel in the context of second-wave feminism. Burton's film rather arises as a postmodern suburban Gothic narrative, set in the context of third-wave feminism, in which gender difference goes beyond the conventional dyad established between male and female. As Carol Siegel claims, "Edward is different from the others and part of his difference is that he cannot hold Kim […], cannot consummate their love, cannot give her a child […] in the time-honoured mode of heterosexual marital reproduction."[19] As representative of postmodern gender discourses, Edward evokes notions related to gender deconstruction, transgender, and the posthuman cyborg.

Once they have moved to live in Stepford, in their home cellar, Joanna discovers a piece of yellowed newspaper, which is not only evocative of Gilman's classic feminist piece "The Yellow Wallpaper," but also informs her that there used to be a Stepford Women's Club, which was founded many years before the Men's Association was instituted. As Joanna and her closest friends, Charmaine and Bobbie, get together to found a new Women's Club in town, references to the Women's Liberation movement—and their claims of women taking control of their

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17. Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock, "Mainstream Outsider: Burton Adapts Burton," in *The Works of Tim Burton* (ed.) Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 10.

18. Stephen King, *Danse Macabre* (London: Warner Books, 2000), 192.

19. Carol Siegel, "Tim Burton's Popularization of Perversity: *Edward Scissorhands*, *Batman Returns*, *Sleepy Hollow*, and *Corpse Bride*," in *The Works of Tim Burton* (ed.) Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 203.

reproduction rights and liberating themselves from domestic constraints—along with allusions to second-wave feminist theorists, such as Kate Millett, Betty Friedan and Gloria Steinem, become pervasive. As a case in point, when she becomes acquainted with her domesticised neighbour Carol Van Sant, Joanna tells her husband that "next to her […] my mother is Kate Millett."[20] In addition, Joanna finds out that "Betty Friedan, the author of *The Feminine Mystique*, addressed members of the Stepford Women's Club."[21] Furthermore, when Joanna must rise to the occasion when she has the members of the Men's Association as guests at home, she cheers herself up saying "*move over, Gloria Steinem*."[22] Nonetheless, despite the feminist ideas that Joanna, Bobbie and Charmaine embrace and their intention to found a Women's Club, as soon as they try to find supporters among their female neighbours, Joanna and her comrades realise that the women who used to support this organisation have abandoned their ideals in order to embrace traditional femininities.

Likewise, as Edward spends his days with the Boggs family, he also recollects memories from his early years, when he would sit and listen to the Inventor who brought him into life, as he read excerpts from different sorts of books that initiated him into gender premises. The Inventor used to read conduct books in order to teach Edward how to behave, although he often switched to poetry, which he regarded as more liberating and contributed to unleashing Edward's imagination to become an artist. From his childhood, Edward was exposed to the classic dilemma of nature and nurture, positioning himself in favour of the former, and thus being ostracised by some of the members of the suburban community, such as Esmeralda, whose strict puritanical upbringing leads her to consider Edward a "hideous progeny of nature."[23] As Edward undergoes his process of socialisation, he is exposed to clearly gender-differentiated discourses that modulate his appearance with the purpose of either femininizing or masculinising him. As Siegel notes, Edward is made to turn into a "bifurcated persona,"[24] but he resists by means of evading established and constraining gender categorisations. In the context of third-wave feminism, Edward's androgynous body recalls Butler's precepts about deconstructing clearly-differentiated gender patterns, while, his condition as a humanoid, also brings to the fore Braidotti's precepts about the interaction between the human and the robot as embodied by the figure of the cyborg, which also contributes to reconstructing traditional gender dictates in favour of multiple gender identities.

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20. Ira Levin, *The Stepford Wives* (New York: HarperCollins Perennial, 2002), 9.

21. Ibidem, 37.

22. Ibidem, 27.

23. Tim Burton (dir), *Edward Scissorhands* (20th Century Fox, 1990).

24. Carol Siegel, "Tim Burton's Popularization of Perversity: *Edward Scissorhands*, *Batman Returns*, *Sleepy Hollow*, and *Corpse Bride*," in *The Works of Tim Burton* (ed.) Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 204.

Displaying Gender Performance

From Joan Rivière's seminal notion of womanliness as masquerade to Sontag's statement that being a woman involves being an actress, since "being feminine is a kind of theatre, with its appropriate costumes […] and stylised gestures,"[25] gender is proven to be performed. According to Butler (1990), gender involves a repeated series of acts that reveal their constructed nature and their performative quality. Drawing on Butler's precepts about gender being performative, Levin's novel and Burton's film display instances of gender performance.

As she observes the women in Stepford, who take delight in life in domesticity and try to match the idealised image of the perfect housewife, Joanna has the impression that all of them behave according to an unwritten common script as if they were women actors. As Joanna states, "that's what they *all* were, all the Stepford wives: actresses in commercials, pleased with detergents and floor wax, with cleansers, shampoos, and deodorants. Pretty actresses, big in the bosom but small in the talent, playing suburban housewives unconvincingly, too nicey-nice to be real."[26] Furthermore, a member of the Men's Association, Claude Axhelm, requests Joanna to participate in an experiment in which she is required to record herself reading a series of sentences, as if she were rehearsing for a theatrical role. As women are made to emulate a specific image, behave in a particular way, and even talk in a precise manner, it is suggested that they are required to perform gender according to established dictates that are culturally determined.

In Burton's film, as Edward comes of age and takes part in a socialising process, established gender dictates trigger him into performing his masculinity, mostly by means of highlighting his interaction with women. When he realises that Edward feels attracted towards Kim, Jim roughly grabs her and takes hold of her in an attempt to show Edward how to perform his hegemonic masculinity. Besides, Joyce, one of the women in the suburbs who is categorised as a *femme fatale*, sets Edward as her new target and tries to seduce him and unleash his latent manhood as she emphasises Edward's masculine traits in the process. Nonetheless, the spectre of androgyny haunting Edward is ironically made explicit when Edward's sharp blades turn into a grotesque counterpart to Joyce's long polished nails, which she perceives as a sign of hyperfemininity and female sex appeal. Besides, as Edward gains in popularity as an artist, Pegg takes him to a talk show where he exhibits his scissorhands as the source of his uniqueness, while some of the enthralled women in the audience ask him whether he has any girlfriend. Edward feels embarrassed and, as he leans forward to hold the microphone, he unwillingly produces a short circuit that leaves the question unanswered. Edward is thus gradually exposed to how masculinity is performed according to gender dictates, although he refuses to

25. Susan Sontag, "The Double Standard of Aging." *The Other within Us: Feminist Explorations of Women and Aging* (ed.) Marilyn Pearsall (Oxford: Westview Press, 1997), 22.

26. Ira Levin, *The Stepford Wives* (New York: HarperCollins Perennial, 2002), 43.

succumb to gender categorisations, which makes it difficult for him to find his place in suburbia, where social roles are determined by gender conventions.

The Dilemma of Conforming or Dissenting

Although both Joanna and Edward are pressured into adjusting to the gender dictates prevailing in the suburbs, they meet different outcomes, insofar as, in Levin's original novel, Joanna is made to abandon her feminist ideals and conform to the ethics of domesticity, whereas Edward dissents from the prevailing gender dictates and resumes his former secluded existence in his palace.

Initially, Joanna, together with her friends Charmaine and Bobbie, arise as elements of discordance in Stepford, insofar as their appearance, attitude and principles differ from the homogenous traditional set of values and beliefs prevailing in suburbia. Nonetheless, as time progresses, Joanna realises that Charmaine "was wearing an apron over slacks,"[27] she had abandoned her habit to play sports like tennis and, as regards her husband, she states that "Ed's a pretty wonderful guy, and I've been lazy and selfish."[28] Analogously, when Joanna visits her friend Bobbie and finds her looks rather changed, she accuses her of having turned into another Stepford wife, although Bobbie justifies herself, claiming, "I simply realized that I was awfully sloppy and self-indulgent, and now I'm doing my job conscientiously, the way Dave does his."[29] When the time comes, Joanna is also made to surrender her feminist ideals and succumb to the gender dictates prevailing in Stepford. Her friend Ruthanne, who has recently arrived at Stepford, marvels at Joanna's unusual "fine figure," her "thick-lashed brown eyes," and "her complexion pale rose and perfect"[30] while she is doing the shopping in the supermarket, which confirms that Joanna has eventually transformed into another Stepford wife.

Conversely, although Edward is also exposed to gender dictates and is made to adjust, in contrast with Joanna, he is unable to fit in the established gender categorisations and abandons life in suburbia—which is characterised by orthodoxy and constraint—for a life on his own, in which he can enjoy liberty and give full vent to his creativity. Edward realises that his relationship with Kim is unfeasible owing to his extraordinary condition and, keeping apart from each other, their love acquires a platonic dimension. Moreover, by means of defeating his shadow, Jim, who symbolically arises as an embodiment of rough masculinity, Edward reaffirms that he embodies a kind of alternative masculinity that differs from the traditional masculinities mostly prevailing in the suburban community. In order to bring this resolution into effect, Edward literally and allegorically takes off the clothes he was made to wear, which he regards as unnatural to him, and goes back to his palace

27. Ira Levin, *The Stepford Wives* (New York: HarperCollins Perennial, 2002), 52.
28. Ibidem, 52-53.
29. Ibidem, 90.
30. Ibidem, 120.

in order to embrace his aloof existence whereby he can enjoy his individuality free from gender constraints.

Pervasive Aging: Transitional Moments, Arrested Development, Invisibility of Old Age

Gender conventions condition the discourses of aging insofar as the conceptualisations of age also influence the way that gender is perceived. Along these premises, Sontag even refers to a prevailing double standard of aging whereby, in contrast with men, women have conventionally been more exposed to ageist discourses whereby they are perceived to grow older earlier than men, thus revealing a latent sense of displeasure with women's process of aging in contrast with that of men. On the basis that aging conditions gender and that the discourses of aging acquire equal relevance in these suburban Gothic narratives, this analysis will revolve around the presence of older characters, metaphors of transitional moments and references to time, the Victorian notion of arrested development along gender lines, instances of age performance, and the invisible trope of old age.

The Presence of Older Characters

Although the role of older characters appears to be mostly peripheral in both narratives, their incidence acquires relevance, since they are portrayed as mentoring figures that the main characters admire and revere, but also consider them as adopting a differing attitude from that of their own. As Herbert Covey claims, old age has traditionally been associated with wisdom, as elders in the community and scholars were presumed to stand above and hold spiritual and cultural knowledge that they could pass on to younger generations.[31] This conventional characterisation of the elderly is revisited in these two suburban Gothic textualities.

In Levin's novel, Joanna becomes acquainted with some older women in Stepford whose energetic and rebellious ways differ from the compliant and orthodox attitudes of most of the younger women who live in Stepford. These older women are the only females in Stepford who feel eager to join Joanna and her comrades in their project to found a Women's Association. As Joanna notes, they were "one eighty-five-year-old widow who dragged me through her door"[32] and "a plump quick-moving white-haired woman named Mary Migliardi."[33] Joanna thus realises that the older generations of women in Stepford display a radically feminist approach to life which appears to be more in accordance with the current times. As Joanna realises, when women reach a certain stage in life, they undergo

31. Herbert Covey, *Images of Older People in Western Art and Society* (New York: Praeger, 1991), 61.

32. Ira Levin, *The Stepford Wives* (New York: HarperCollins Perennial, 2002), 22.

33. Ibidem, 49.

a symbolic change that manifests in their physical appearance, but also in their attitudes, which acquire a marked reactionary turn. Conversely, the women from older generations seem unaffected by the effects of this transitional moment and, thus, enjoy a higher degree of freedom in comparison with their younger counterparts.

Conversely, in Burton's film, older characters rather represent traditional values from which Edward deviates, as is visually symbolised by the fact that Edward will never grow old. When she tells her granddaughter Edward's story as a contemporary myth that explains the origins of snow in such a sunny area in the country, Kim declares that she is an old woman, whereas it is inferred that, given his extraordinary condition as a humanoid, Edward will remain young ever after and unaffected by the effects of old age. Owing to the age gap between them, Kim adopts the role of an aging mother in relation to Edward, which is evocative of the Inventor as the older man who brought him into life. As older characters, in addition to symbolic parental figures, the Inventor and Kim act as mentors whose old age contrasts with Edward's youth and whose values diverge from those of their younger disciple.

Metaphors of Transitional Moments and References to Time

Both *The Stepford Wives* and *Edward Scissorhands* can be interpreted as narratives of aging that focus on different transitional moments in the lives of the main characters. Furthermore, aging acquires a latent presence in both narratives as indicated by pervasive references to the passage of time.

When she befriends a younger newcomer in Stepford, Ruthanne, Joanna blatantly confesses that she feels old in comparison, thus revealing that she is gradually gaining awareness of her own aging process. When she tells Ruthanne about Ike Mazzard, the popular illustrator whose stories she admired in her youth, and realises that Ruthanne has never heard of him, it is stated that it made "Joanna feel very old."[34] Joanna refers to the iconic term of 'the change' to refer to the manifest transformation befalling her friends Charmaine and Bobbie, while she keeps track of the months that it takes for women to undergo this rite of passage. As Joanna and Bobbie speculate on the origins of this change, Bobbie affirms "it's some kind of hormone thing,"[35] thus suggesting that, inasmuch as the conversion that the Stepford women undergo is related to a biological process, it symbolically turns into a metaphor of menopause or climacteric, which feminist theorist Germaine Greer precisely referred to as 'the change' and, according to established ageist dictates, has conventionally been interpreted as the turning point that marks women's transition from middle age to old age.

In contrast, Burton's film rather revolves around the life stage of adolescence, insofar as Edward befriends Kim, along with her brother Kevin and her boyfriend

34. Ira Levin, *The Stepford Wives* (New York: HarperCollins Perennial, 2002), 74.

35. Ibidem, 57.

Jim, who are all undergoing this transitional moment from childhood to adulthood. Kim's father, Bill Boggs, explicitly and ironically, refers to adolescence and the impact it has on teenagers, stating that "they reach a certain age—they develop these gland things—their bodies swell up,"[36] thus describing the biological process befalling them that accounts for what he perceives as their peculiar behaviour. In subtle terms, Bill suggests that the menarche or first menstrual cycle may be responsible for the eccentric conduct and emotional outburst that young women must learn to repress in order to comply with the conventions prevailing in conventional suburbia. The biological transition befalling the teenagers in the suburbs reverberates by means of allusions to the passage of time and the preparations for the Christmas season. When Edward is hosted at the Boggs home, he occupies Kim's bedroom, since she is away at a campsite with the rest of her friends, thus taking part in activities which categorise her as going through the phase of adolescence. Conversely, when Edward leaves and Kim realises that their relationship is unfeasible, it is during Christmas time that she learns to leave behind her fantasies and embrace adulthood, as opposed to Edward, whose exclusion from the community ratifies his expulsion from the world of adults and his symbolic and perpetual adherence to childhood.

The Victorian Notion of Arrested Development along Gender Lines

Sontag's reference to the double standard of aging according to gender precepts is rooted in Victorian notions of age that were influenced by gender conventions. Although *The Stepford Wives* addresses the transitional moment of the climacteric, which has often been interpreted as the interim between middle age and old age, and *Edward Scissorhands* focuses on the interlude between childhood and adulthood, both narratives evoke the Victorian notion of arrested development, which bears different connotations for women and men.

As Joanna and her female comrades approach the stage of menopause, which has traditionally been interpreted as the advent of women's later years, their projected change onto old age is reverted, as not only are the Stepford women prevented from growing older, but they also appear to look significantly younger than before. The fact that women are disallowed to age correlates with their willing submissiveness to their husbands, who adopt the role of a paternal figure with regard to their younger wives. As Nelson argues, in Victorian fiction, the notion of arrested development often befalls young female characters,[37] who are infantilised and encouraged not to grow older so that they remain under the rule of a male figure, such as their father or their husband. In Levin's novel, women's arrested development is enacted as, when women reach their menopause, their bodies are

36. Tim Burton (dir), *Edward Scissorhands* (20th Century Fox, 1990).

37. Claudia Nelson, *Precocious Children and Childish Adults: Age Inversion in Victorian Literature* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2012), 71.

exchanged for that of robotic and compliant women, who look perpetually young and eager to submit their will to that of their husbands.

In Burton's film, when Peg finds Edward in the attic of his palace and stares at his scissorhands, he blatantly declares that he is "unfinished."[38] Owing to the premature death of his creator, it is suggested that Edward was brought into life too soon, as his scissorhands constantly evince, thus patently exposing an arrested process of development. As a result of these circumstances and his isolated upbringing, in spite of looking like an almost grown-up man, he truly possesses the innocence of a young child, which renders him unable to fit in a suburban community mostly made up of adults. According to Nelson, although the notion of arrested development is praised in young female characters in Victorian fiction, it is considered most disturbing when it characterises young male characters,[39] insofar as it is alleged to deprive them of the manly qualities they are presumed to acquire along their aging process. Edward defies the cultural conventions of aging, inasmuch as, when Peg meets him, his adolescent looks stand in contrast with his childish attitude, while, as time goes by and Kim tells Edward's story as an older woman, it is revealed that Edward's everlasting youthful body, which is unable to grow old, will never truly reflect his chronological age. Edward is thus unaffected by the cultural conventions of age and gender prevailing in suburbia and remains under the notion of arrested development, which allows him to enjoy eternal youth, but inevitably disallows him to join the life in the suburban community.

Snapshots of Age Performance

On the basis of Butler's premises about gender performance, Basting refers to age as also being susceptible to be performed in correlation with gender. According to Basting, it is in the impossibility of exact repetition that performance allows entry into age transformation.[40] These premises have led critics like Gullette to claim that it is possible to act younger or older,[41] thus laying bare the performative quality of aging in resemblance with that of gender. In Levin's novel and Burton's film, Joanna and Edward also gain insight into how aging may be performed.

As soon as Joanna arrives in Stepford, she is welcomed by a woman whom she describes as "working at youth and vivacity (ginger hair, red lips, a sunshine-yellow dress),"[42] thus acting younger than her chronological age. As the Stepford women go through the change, not only does their attitude become progressively

38. Tim Burton (dir) *Edward Scissorhands* (20th Century Fox, 1990).

39. Claudia Nelson, *Precocious Children and Childish Adults: Age Inversion in Victorian Literature* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2012), 42.

40. Anne Basting, *The Stages of Age: Performing Age in Contemporary American Culture* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2001), 7.

41. Margaret Morganroth Gullette, *Aged by Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 163.

42. Ira Levin, *The Stepford Wives* (New York: HarperCollins Perennial, 2002), 1.

submissive and compliant, but they apparently succumb to an everlasting performance of youth. At this juncture, Joanna symbolically faces the dilemma of growing older naturally, like her dissident friends Charmaine and Bobbie, or denying the natural effects of age, as the rest of Stepford women do, by means of wearing girdles and bras that shape their bodies to suit the prevailing dictates of age and gender. If women are pressured into acting younger than their chronological age, conversely, husbands are allowed to act their age, since Joanna notices that her husband Walter "was gaining weight—and below his wonderfully blue eyes pouches of flesh had begun to form."[43] When Joanna begins to record herself reading some sentences at Claude Axhelm's request and she looks at the idealised portrait that Ike Mazard sketched for her, she realises that she is approaching the change that, literally and metaphorically, also befalls her friends and prevents them from growing older and, instead, urges them to engage in an everlasting performance of youth.

Accordingly, when Edward embraces suburban life, in the course of his process of socialisation, he is exposed to how age is performed and the way age performance is necessarily influenced by gender conventions. As his foster mother, Pegg, takes care of him and nurtures him, she treats him like a child and infantilises him. Conversely, his foster father, Bill, urges him to establish his own business, once he realises Edward is capable of applying his artistic skills to gardening and hairdressing, thus encouraging him to become self-sufficient at an early stage in life. Pegg thus coerces Edward into acting younger, whereas Bill triggers him to act older than his chronological age, thus displaying conflicting models of age performance. Subsequently, Edward rather chooses to act younger, since he becomes disaffected with the social pressures that urge him to grow up.

Invisible Trope of Old Age

Even though *The Stepford Wives* and *Edward Scissorhands* respectively portray the transitional moments of the advent of aging and adolescence, in both cases, Joanna and Edward arise as embodiments of the invisible trope of old age in narratives in which aging paradoxically acquires momentous relevance. As legacy of the Victorian notion of arrested development, old age remains virtually invisible in both Levin's novel and Burton's film, except for the peripheral, albeit important, role that some older characters play.

In his novel, Levin envisioned the horrific male-gendered response to the demands of second-wave feminist theorists, as the latter claimed to be treated as independent adult women entitled to take control of their own bodies. In Stepford, the members of the Men's Association, who are all leading scientists, join efforts to develop some machinery whereby the aging bodies of their wives are replicated and substituted by youthful female robots. As families arrive in Stepford, women

43. Ibidem, 103-104.

are made to leave behind their professional aspirations in order to conform to the reactionary mindsets that infantilise them and lead them to accept a patronising treatment on behalf of their husbands. The Stepford wives apparently live in permanent bliss and joy in their eternal youthful bodies, although they are deprived of their will and volition, insofar as, from older women, they are reverted back to helpless female children dependent on their more experienced husbands. Even if Joanna meets some aging women, whose feminist attitudes she also shares, female old age remains mostly absent in Stepford.

In his film, Burton addressed the internal conflicts that adolescents must bear as they move from childhood to adulthood and are exposed to different discourses that both discourage and propel their aging progression. Edward is infantilised, but is also pressured to conform to the prevailing conventions of age and gender established for young men along his process of socialisation. His body looks older than his chronological age, but, as he comes of age, it is evinced that his young appearance will never match his chronological age, thus symbolically suggesting that he will look young ever after. Edward's incapacity and unwillingness to succumb to the established dictates of age render him an outcast who feels compelled to abandon his life in suburbia and resume his secluded existence in his palace. In Burton's film, old age is also almost reduced to an invisible trope despite the presence of older characters like the late Inventor and Kim characterised as an aging narrator. Despite the fact that, in his memories, he evokes the presence of his creator, Edward immaturely explains to his foster mother that he did not wake up, hence implying that his creator is dead. Moreover, when Kim finishes her story and her granddaughter suggests the possibility that she should meet Edward again, she replies, "I'm an old woman—I'd rather him remember me the way I was."[44] Kim thus cherishes the myth of eternal youth that Edward personifies and, in so doing, she also contributes to rendering old age virtually invisible. As the Inventor is already dead at the beginning of the narrative and, as an aging narrator, Kim only appears at the beginning and end of the framed narrative, old age mostly remains on the margins of the narrative.

Conclusion

The prevalent intertextualities existing between *The Stepford Wives*—as representative of the early stages of suburban Gothic—and *Edward Scissorhands*—as a postmodern reinterpretation—reveal the evolving resurgence of suburban Gothic narratives, which extends to current times. Both textualities evince how the discourses of gender and aging influence each other, insofar as they are both culturally constructed, also displaying that their performative quality paves the way for transforming the premises on which they are based. Insofar as they reveal

44. Tim Burton (dir), *Edward Scissorhands* (20th Century Fox, 1990).

the legacy of Victorian conventions, mostly by means of the notion of arrested development—which elicits a differing interpretation along gender lines—these narratives underscore that the precepts of Victorian domesticity depicted in domestic Gothic are resumed in contemporary suburban Gothic textualities. Nonetheless, despite their similarities, *The Stepford Wives* and *Edward Scissorhands* also present some differences, since they reflect the times in which they were respectively produced. Levin's novel gives priority to its social content as a response to the rise of second-wave feminism. It focuses on the character of Joanna and the biological transition that she is about to undergo—the change or climacteric—which acquires literal and symbolic connotations. As a social horror text, Levin's novel underscores the conformity to which Joanna and her comrades are forced to succumb as a result of the patriarchal response to women's increasing demands. Conversely, Burton's film turns into a cinematic allegory which arose in the context of third-wave feminism and revolves around an androgynous character who subverts the established gender identities and personifies the notion of the cyborg. As a postmodern fairy tale, Burton's film focuses on Edward's process of socialisation and coming of age, as he undergoes the symbolic transition from childhood to adulthood, which Edward challenges in order to embrace childhood and its resulting defiance of the gender and age conventions characterising a society made up of adults. Despite their respective emphasis on conformity or dissention, as exemplified by Joanna and Edward, both narratives reveal old age as an invisible trope, which is symptomatic of social pressures to prevent women's bodies from growing old, but also of the male fantasy to embrace the myth of never growing up.

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