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**HAUNTED BY GUILT: MORAL MASOCHISM AND TRAUMA IN
JOHN LANGAN'S *HOUSE OF WINDOWS* AND *THE FISHERMAN***

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ÖZET

Yasin Anıl Dimli, Suçlulukla Lanetlenmiş: John Langan'ın *House of Windows* ve *The Fisherman* Eserlerindeki Ahlaki Mazoşizm ve Travma, Başkent Üniversitesi, Sosyal Bilimler Enstitüsü, Amerikan Kültürü ve Edebiyatı Yüksek Lisans Programı, 2025.

Bu çalışma, John Langan'ın *House of Windows* (2009/2017) ve *The Fisherman* (2016/2023) adlı Gotik romanlarındaki travmatik kayıp ve suçluluk duygusunun tetiklediği ahlaki mazoşizm olgusunu incelemektedir. Roger, Dan ve Balıkçı gibi karakterler, yoğun zihinsel çalkantı karşısında kendilerini cezalandırmaya yönelik bilinçdışı bir arzuya kapılmakta ve yaslarını doğrudan yaşayamadıkları için tekrar, suçluluk ve mazoşizm döngüsüne hapsolmaktadır. Her iki roman da esrarengiz mekânlar ve doğaüstü unsurlar aracılığıyla kaygı ve suçluluk duygularını görünür kılarken, aynı zamanda Amerikan tarihsel bağlamındaki savaş ve toplulukların yerinden edilmesi gibi travmaları da yansıtmaktadır. Bu şekilde çalışma, Langan'ın romanlarını kişisel psikolojiyi geniş çaplı Amerikan ulusal kaygıları ve sorunlarıyla ilişkilendiren psikanalitik ve kültürel bir bağlamda ele alacaktır. Sonuç olarak, yas, melankoli, mazoşizm ve haz ilkesi kuramları üzerinden, bu çalışmada Langan'ın *House of Windows* ve *The Fisherman* romanlarının insanın kendini cezalandırıcı davranışlar yoluyla kurtuluş arayışını nasıl temsil ettiğine dair yeni bir bakış açısı sunulması amaçlanmaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: suçluluk, ahlaki mazoşizm, John Langan, *House of Windows*, *The Fisherman*.

ABSTRACT

Yasin Anıl Dimli, Haunted by Guilt: Moral Masochism and Trauma in John Langan's *House of Windows* and *The Fisherman*, Başkent University, Institute of Social Sciences, American Culture and Literature Master's Program, 2025.

This study aims to explore the concept of moral masochism induced by traumatic loss and guilt, as featured in John Langan's Gothic novels, *House of Windows* (2009/2017) and *The Fisherman* (2016/2023). The study intends to show how various fictional characters from different backgrounds, primarily Roger, Dan, and the Fisherman, succumb to having an unconscious desire to punish themselves as a way of coping with overwhelming mental turmoil and guilt. Both novels have characters who cannot face their grief, and they end up getting stuck in paradoxical cycles of compulsive repetition, extreme guilt, and masochism. The study will also demonstrate that both novels employ Gothic elements such as uncanny places and supernatural forces to express internal psychological states of grief and guilt, while highlighting a broader discussion of the historical American context at the same time. Through an analysis of these Gothic elements, this study examines how unresolved trauma materializes in spectral presences and uncanny environments that both mirror the inner turmoil of the characters and reflect the anxieties and guilt arising from wars and displacement in the American context. Building on this framework, the analysis will examine Langan's novels within a psychoanalytic and cultural context that links personal psychology to broader national American anxieties and issues. Ultimately, using the theories of mourning, melancholia, masochism, and the pleasure principle, this study aims to provide new insights into how John Langan's *House of Windows* and *The Fisherman* represent the human tendency to seek redemption through the infliction of self-punishing behavior and tendencies.

Key Words: guilt, moral masochism, John Langan, *House of Windows*, *The Fisherman*.

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1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. The Aim of the Study

1.1.1. Literary context

As a genre that often combines elements of horror and psychology with dark supernatural themes, Gothic fiction has always had strong connections with the workings of human psychology and behavior. With elements such as repression, self-destructive tendencies, guilty conscience, and fear of the unknown, Gothic fiction explores human consciousness and subtly comments on personal and societal issues while also presenting a fictional reflection of the human psyche. According to Fred Botting (2014), Gothic literature often appears irrational, portraying disruptions to mental stability and a sense of safety. These works include everything from belief in ghosts and monsters to intense emotional outbursts, uncontrollable desires, and obsessive behavior. Rather than adhering to the logic of realism, the Gothic embraces the supernatural while opening space for fear and the unknown (*Gothic*, p. 2). John Langan's *House of Windows* (2009/2017) and *The Fisherman* (2016/2023) are both contemporary American Gothic works that feature characters haunted supernaturally, traumatic events, self-blame, guilt, and repression, which cause these hauntings. One of the central characters of *House of Windows*, Roger, loses his son, whereas Abe and Dan lose their wives in *The Fisherman*. The story of *House of Windows* is confined within a Gothic-style mansion called the Belvedere House, with the addition of utilizing a post-9/11 narrative since Roger mistreats and alienates his son Ted, causing him to join the US military and die in action in Afghanistan. Throughout the story, his guilt manifests as the ghost of his son, haunting and tormenting him (Langan, 2009/2017). On the other hand, in *The Fisherman*, Dan blames himself for the traffic accident that caused the death of his wife Sophie and his twin children, since he was the one driving the car. His underlying guilt causes him to seek a mysterious figure called the Fisherman in order to resurrect his family and face his guilt (Langan, 2016/2023). The majority of the story is primarily set in the modern-day Ashokan Reservoir, a location that has a tragic real-life history. During its construction, more than two thousand people were forced to relocate, and more than two thousand and five hundred graves were demolished ("Ashokan Reservoir Collection," n.d.).

All these characters lose their family members and deal with their traumas and manifestations of their unresolved issues throughout the novels. Losing a loved one and self-

blaming become the catalyst for their traumas and their consequent hauntings as they struggle to move on. Most importantly, because of their immense guilt, both Roger and Dan get haunted supernaturally by the specters of their lost loved ones, invite unconscious suffering as a means to atonement, and consequently embody a set of characteristics of what Sigmund Freud (1924/2010c) coined “moral masochism” in “The Economic Problem of Masochism.” In Gothic literature, haunting is not merely a supernatural element but a psychological and ethical force that confronts characters with their repressed guilt. The past, especially when it involves guilt, could refuse to stay buried. Botting (2014) states that the Gothic often portrays haunting as not just a mental phenomenon, but rather as something that repeatedly resurfaces, as if the past forces itself back into the present. It reminds the readers that pain sometimes does not fade with time; instead, it lingers, like a scar, alive and impossible to forget. These haunting returns frequently trigger what Freud (1924/2010c) termed moral masochism— a tendency to seek out suffering as a means of self-inflicted punishment for unconscious guilt. Therefore, this thesis will study the connection between guilt and self-desire for punishment in *House of Windows* and *The Fisherman* to showcase that traumatic events can lead to self-blame, guilt, and repression, and guilt itself leads to a desire for self-punishment, while emphasizing Gothic as a genre is one of the most suitable mediums for exploring these issues. Since both novels feature characters who suffer from a guilty conscience and seek redemption, punishment, and subsequent self-gratification on a subconscious level, this study will further analyze the characters who mourn their lost ones and feel responsible and guilty for their deaths in order to understand the relationship between guilt and seeking punishment for self-gratification and their psychological effects on the psyche.

According to Andrew Smith (2007/2013), American Gothic avoids the medieval castles of the European Gothic and relocates terror to ordinary American settings, from the frontier wilderness and small towns to the intimate space of the family home, thereby creating an atmosphere of inescapable gloom and psychological tension. In these tales, the uncanny is found to be internal to home and community (Botting, 2014), as the greatest horrors often spring from familiar domestic spaces and repressed secrets rather than distant places. Dale Bailey (1999) states the haunted house theme, in particular, has developed “a distinctly American resonance” from Edgar Allan Poe onward, becoming an enduring symbol through which authors explore the fault lines of their society. According to Catherine Spooner (2007), American Gothic narratives often expose the underside of national ideals,

consistently exploring the dark side of the American dream of liberty and transcendence since they confront the collective traumas underlying American history similar to the historically significant settings of both *House of Windows* and *The Fisherman* as the former is set during the post-9/11 era while the latter features a real location which is plagued by tragedy, the Ashokan Reservoir. Furthermore, these narratives use ghosts, cryptic family histories, and madness to dramatize horrors such as the legacy of slavery and racial oppression (Smith, 2007/2013) or the moral corruption lurking beneath seemingly healthy communities. Frequently, the line blurs between external supernatural threats and internal psychological breakdowns, as Gothic tropes are used to stage “deeply subversive critiques of all that we hold to be true—about class, about race, about gender, about American history itself” (Bailey, 1999, p. 6). In short, the American Gothic tradition is defined by its brooding atmosphere, its emphasis on psychological and moral terror, its iconic haunted architecture, and its recurring insistence that the nation’s past and psyche are prevalent by unresolved horrors. This preoccupation with unsettling occurrences and the subversion of cultural ideals aligns with broader critical views and discussions of American Gothic since it frequently portrays its engagement with the darker aspects of liberty and transcendence within the American dream, a perspective that, as Spooner (2007) notes, leads literary critics such as Leslie Fiedler to argue that “American literature itself is Gothic” (Fiedler, 1960, as cited in Spooner, 2007, p. 163).

Building on this cultural and historical setting, the genre’s fixation on unresolved horrors and the foundation of national ideals often manifests at the level of individual psychology, where guilt becomes embodied through supernatural hauntings, madness, or acts of self-punishment. Edgar Allan Poe’s tales are specifically exemplary since in “The Tell-Tale Heart” (1843/2014d), a murderer is so haunted by the imagined beating of his victim’s heart that he finally breaks down and confesses to the crime. Poe (1843/2014d) implies that a guilty conscience will inevitably betray its bearer. Similarly, in his “The Black Cat” (1843/2014b), the narrator is tormented by guilt after killing his cat and then his wife, to the point that he inadvertently reveals his wife’s corpse to the police, thus condemning himself. In “Poe, ‘Ligeia,’ and the Problem of Dying Women,” Gerald Kennedy (1993) emphasizes a “mechanism of dependency-desolation-retribution” that underlies many of Poe’s Gothic narratives (p. 126). Kennedy’s (1993) framework suggests that Poe’s male characters are figures driven by unconscious guilt, emotional dependency, and a compulsion to suffer, an example of moral masochism. Similarly, a Puritan minister named Arthur

Dimmesdale in Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* (1850) physically harms himself with a whip in the form of self-flagellation to relieve his immense guilt that is caused by his affair with Hester Prynne, since she has been branded an adulterer and shunned from their Puritan society, while he is never caught. Therefore, the guilt drives these characters to invite punishment upon themselves. In other words, they desire the release of confession and punishment as a form of atonement, mirroring the issues that will be discussed when further analyzing *House of Windows* and *The Fisherman*.

In addition, since the analysis of *The Fisherman* will examine the concept of sacrificial exchange, a motif common in many American Gothic narratives, to provide a deeper understanding of the central characters' motivations and the consequences of their actions, briefly examining American, English and Irish Gothic works like Poe's *Ligeia* (1838/2014a), Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818), and Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890/1994) will provide a literary background to the concept. Firstly, Poe's "Ligeia" (1838/2014a) features a narrator driven to a dark rite of resurrection as Lady Rowena's life is essentially surrendered so that Ligeia may return, symbolizing a sacrifice of one being for another's transcendent revival. In Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818), Victor Frankenstein sacrifices family and conscience to attain forbidden knowledge, unwittingly destroying those he loves. Lastly, in Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890/1994), Dorian makes a supernatural trade, sacrificing his own soul and Basil's life for eternal youth. Similarly, in *The Fisherman*, a guilt-driven bargaining takes center stage as Dan accepts a sacrificial choice where he can reunite with his family at the cost of his life force (Langan, 2016/2023). Collectively, these works emphasize the Gothic element that quests for personal transcendence or restoration through a sacrificial exchange, inevitably exacting a terrible moral and human price.

On the other hand, contemporary Gothic is marked by a heightened self-awareness of its own nature, shaped by post-Freudian, Marxist, and feminist thought and an unprecedented degree of mass production and global marketing (Spooner, 2007). Spooner (2007) states that rather than centering on the "end of the world" scenarios, contemporary Gothic often explores the "end of innocence," employing a pronounced irony layered over its narratives due to centuries of Gothic revivals while also merging the Gothic with consumer culture, functioning as both mass-appeal entertainment and a vehicle for incisive political or social commentary (p. 23). Although it retains enduring Gothic concerns, such as the burdens of the past, fractured identity, monstrosity, and the grotesque body, it presents them through

postmodern aesthetics, with an emphasis on spectacle, surface, and performance (Spooner, 2007). These shifts do not replace Gothic's core concerns but reshape them, enabling contemporary American Gothic to interrogate national myths of freedom, prosperity, and progress. As Spooner (2007) argues, it functions as a flexible genre that revisits these myths by exposing their darker dimensions, continuing the Gothic's role of revealing cultural contradictions while adapting them to new settings, media, and social concerns.

Since both *House of Windows* and *The Fisherman* are works of contemporary American Gothic, explaining why these types of works are significant is very crucial. Spooner (2007) states that

...as a genre deliberately intended to provoke horror and unease, it plays to audience expectations and therefore is rather too self-conscious to illuminate our most secret fears – it certainly engages with them on a variety of often quite sophisticated levels. It provides a language and a lexicon through which anxieties, both personal and collective can be narrativized. (pp. 8–9)

Moreover, according to Spooner (2007), contemporary Gothic thrives on a tension between surface performance and inner psychological depth, balancing postmodern spectacle with genuine emotional anguish. This perfectly reflects the way Langan's novels use ghosts and specters as metaphors for unresolved psychological wounds and self-punishing behavior. That is the main reason why contemporary Gothic is a powerful way to tell stories about trauma and guilt, since it is a genre that is built around the idea that what people try to bury does not stay buried (Botting, 2014). In the novels, these characters are carrying a heavy, unresolved grief. They have lost people they loved, and they blame themselves, causing their guilt to bleed into the world around them through ghosts, cursed places, or strange, supernatural events that would not let them forget. As it demonstrates, Gothic as a genre does not just explain these issues but shows them, through haunted settings, strange visions, ghosts, and that constant sense that something is deeply wrong. Therefore, Gothic fiction provides its readers with one of the most suitable platforms to navigate through such topics.

1.1.2. Primary texts and analytical direction

In this section, each novel is summarized first in order to provide the background needed for the analysis that follows. *House of Windows* is structured as a story within a story, also known as an embedded narrative. The story begins with an unnamed writer paying a visit to the mysterious Veronica Croydon at her mansion, the Belvedere House. Over a series

of evenings, Veronica tells the story of how her husband, Professor Roger Croydon, disappeared under mysterious circumstances about a year and a half ago (Langan, 2009/2017). The story that is told by Veronica is about the destructive breakdown of the Croydon family. Roger Croydon is a well-regarded professor of literature at SUNY Huguenot, a Dickens expert whose great charisma is balanced by great character flaws. His first marriage to Joanne ended in bitterness when Roger began an affair with Veronica, a significantly younger graduate student. Ted, the adult son of Roger, had a lot of trouble coming to terms with this, and the animosity reached its peak when Roger remarried. During a subsequent fight with Ted, Roger makes several cruel statements to Ted and a verbal curse that resulted in Roger disowning Ted. After that, Ted leaves for military service and is killed in an ambush in Afghanistan. Roger, in his deep grief and immense guilt, takes Veronica to the Belvedere House, a large family estate. During his stay there, he is more and more convinced that the spirit of Ted is talking to him beyond the grave. Veronica starts to question whether the presence in the house is benevolent, and instead, Roger, in his anguish and anger, accidentally calls upon a malevolent force, in other words, summons something evil through his hateful and vengeful curse upon Ted (Langan, 2009/2017).

The psychological decline of Roger begins to gather pace the moment he sets foot in the Belvedere House, as he becomes obsessive, erratic, and believes that he has to appease or unite with the spirit that he senses in the house. On the other hand, Veronica goes through a miscarriage (Langan, 2009/2017). She blames this loss on the cost of Roger's curse, adding to the Gothic and psychological tone of the narrative. Veronica hallucinates a precise image of the Belvedere's interior as she realizes she is having a miscarriage, and hears the voice of Roger uttering his curse to Ted. This vision affirms the belief of Veronica that the curse of Roger has damned their lives. In the climax, Roger finally faces the entity that haunts them directly and disappears in an unexplainable supernatural occurrence since he just vanishes into thin air. Thus, he is assumed dead after having disappeared for eighteen months. By the time Veronica has caught up with the present, she tells the frame narrator, with shocking directness, that Roger has been dead for two years and that the circumstances of his disappearance are impossible to explain thoroughly and rationally. In the end, Langan (2009/2017) leaves Roger's fate ambiguous and up to the imagination of the readers. The novel ultimately closes with the frame narrator going home and tightly hugging his infant son and telling him: "That's all right. Daddy's here. Daddy's here. Shhh. Daddy's good boy. Daddy's good boy" (Langan, 2009/2017, p. 334), showing how the frame narrator is terrified

by Roger's fate as a father himself, since it is a cautionary tale of broken familial ties and the burden of the guilt caused by being a father who failed.

On a similar note, *The Fisherman* also features an embedded narrative, which is all told by a single survivor of the novel's events. The primary narrator and the protagonist, Abe, is a widower living in upstate New York who takes up fishing as a means of coping in the wake of his wife's death due to cancer (Langan, 2016/2023). The story is divided into three distinct parts. The first part introduces Abe and his colleague Dan, who both develop a friendship based on shared grief. Dan suffers a tragic loss, that is, the death of his whole family in one car accident, his wife Sophie and his twin sons Jonas and Jason. While he blames himself deep down, Abe loses his wife, Marie, to cancer. The two men spend their weekends fishing in the streams of the region, finding temporary relief in nature and the company of each other. The story develops when Dan suggests going to a remote location known as Dutchman's Creek,¹ a place that is said to have great fishing spots, although it has a dark and mysterious reputation. On the way, they visit a diner where an old local, Howard, greets them with a long, foreboding story about the region, which incorporates the second part of the narrative. This part takes the reader into a dislocated tale of the early twentieth century, the building of the Ashokan Reservoir, and a series of strange happenings that surround a German immigrant, Rainer, and a mysterious figure known as the Fisherman, the titular character. This folkloric subplot occupies a large central portion of the novel, and the reader is plunged into a nested narrative that puts curses, resurrection, and mythical beings in the foreground. Finally, the last part brings the story back to the main plot, when Abe and Dan's journey intersects with the discoveries made in the story of Howard, and it leads to a confrontation with supernatural powers at Dutchman's Creek (Langan, 2016/2023).

The story that is told by Howard, which is entitled "Der Fischer"² in the novel, brings the readers to the early twentieth-century Ashokan Reservoir, where he tells the story of the construction work through the eyes of Rainer Schmidt, a German emigrant laborer. The plot is developed as a series of grotesque events that take place in a migratory work camp. The

¹ Langan's Dutchman's Creek in *The Fisherman* (2016/2023) is a fictional invention. Although there is a real Dutchman's Landing Park in Catskill, New York, and waterways called Dutchmans Creek in places such as North Carolina and Virginia, none of these matches the novel's setting. Langan's version instead serves as an imagined Gothic landscape linked to the history of the Ashokan Reservoir.

² Langan's "Der Fischer" should not be confused with Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's poem "Der Fischer" (1779) or with any other real work of literature. While Goethe's work is a poem depicting a fisherman lured by a mermaid, Langan's version is an in-universe Gothic folktale within the novel, narrated by the character named Howard and centered on the characterization of the Fisherman.

most prominent character in this tale is the Fisherman, who is said to have the power to bring the dead back to life (Langan, 2016/2023). Rainer himself comes face-to-face with him when one of his fellow workers, George, who has lost his wife Helen, turns to supernatural resurrection. Howard explains that the recently resurrected woman by the Fisherman brought destruction upon the reunited couple. With that being said, the story of the Fisherman is directly tied to Dutchman's Creek, the Ashokan Reservoir, and by extension, the surrounding waters themselves. Furthermore, the story heavily emphasizes that the Fisherman is an evil being that is connected to the waters of Dutchman's Creek. He is involved in a seemingly endless hunt for a creature known as Leviathan, a primordial mythical monster summoned out of the depths. By capturing Leviathan, he hopes to seize an unimaginable source of power that will enable him to resurrect his own dead family, for which he blames himself, just like how Dan does for his family (Langan, 2016/2023). The story by Howard, therefore, exposes the main plot point since Dutchman's Creek is a gateway to a black ocean, which holds the possibility of obtaining the power of resurrection, while also being a place of horrors since people who go there to find miracles might find nothing but pain and misery.

Upon telling the story, Howard tries to warn the duo, but Dan is determined to meet the Fisherman and resurrect his family to satiate his guilt (Langan, 2016/2023). In the last part, the two men neglect the advice of Howard and proceed to Dutchman's Creek and encounter, as Howard had foretold, the very nightmare his warnings had indicated. At the creek, they find a secret way through the forest that leads unbelievably to the edge of a strange realm of the Fisherman. This is where they meet him, and he offers to give each man what they want the most. The temptation is too strong in the case of Dan, as he is given the opportunity to see his family again. Abe is also put to the test on several occasions. At one point, he is confronted with an ethereal presence of his dead wife alive and well, and this almost breaks him as he describes this painful experience. Yet, Abe is aware of these apparitions as deceptions, malicious lures to the living, just as the Fisherman is trying to lure Leviathan out. Abe is finally able to resist this supernatural deception, while Dan fully succumbs to it. The turning point of the story is devastating as Dan decides to accept the offer of the Fisherman in order to reunite with his freshly resurrected, distorted, and monstrous forms of his late family members. The result is tragic since Dan is effectively taken by the dark forces of the place. His resurrected monstrous family devours him as he gets lost forever in the black waters, just as other characters in Howard's tale were. Abe, on the other hand, survives the ordeal by resisting the Fisherman's dark pact and fighting back

by arming himself with only an old knife. He fends off horrors and narrowly escapes with his life. After a brief timeskip, the novel closes as Abe takes on fishing again. On a fateful day, his house suddenly gets flooded, and from the waters, Dan arises just like his family once did while seeking revenge on Abe. For the last time, he fends off Dan back to the waters; however, as he is doing so, he sees a haunting reflection on the water. Upon a closer look, he sees his late wife, Marie, with a child who closely resembles them both (Langan, 2016/2023), an image of the life they never had the chance to share.

As is depicted in both novels, losing a loved one can be an incredibly challenging and emotional experience that may lead to self-blame because of guilt and shame. Specifically, the way that both Roger and Dan respond to trauma and the consequential guilt that displays self-blame often may arise from the belief that something could have been done differently to prevent the loss. Freud (1930/2010b) states in *Civilizations and Its Discontents* that “the tension between the harsh super-ego and the ego that is subjected to it, it is called by us the sense of guilt; it expresses itself as a need for punishment” (p. 4513). Primarily constructed from parental behavior, alongside other authority figures and the broader cultural ethos, the superego embodies the internal adoption of societal norms. Both of their guilt stems from their understanding of being a father/husband or paternal figure. Traditionally, the role of a protector figure within a family is appointed to the father/husband by patriarchal societies in which these characters are featured. As Freud (1930/2010b) states: “I cannot think of any need in childhood as strong as the need for a father’s protection” (p. 4472). In line with what Freud (1930/2010b) states, this is why Roger is heavily distressed by his son’s death, because he comes to the conclusion that he previously mistreated his son both throughout his childhood and adulthood. He consequently thinks that he failed as a father. The same could be stated for Dan because he holds himself responsible for the traffic accident that claimed his family’s lives, since he was the driver on that unfortunate day. He also views himself as a failed patriarchal figure due to his inability to prevent the death of his family. Thus, according to their internalized morals and values, they failed in both societally given roles and personal beliefs. Hence, they subconsciously begin to seek punishment and pain to relieve themselves from guilt and shame.

The article “Posttraumatic Shame and Guilt” (2006) highlights how guilt and trauma response interplay with each other:

In trauma, failed enactments are embedded in the matrix of traumatic stressors and the responses the individual makes to them. In the posttraumatic self, guilt is self-recrimination for failed actions that the individual believes would have created a more salutary outcome. (Wilson et al., p. 130)

Essentially, the shared belief of the characters means that they believe they could have prevented the loss of their loved ones. Whether this is right or wrong, they have an underlying desire to inflict pain and punishment on themselves. They are depicted as trying to reconcile, weighed down with guilt, and faced with the need to find some way to absolve themselves of their guilt. Punishment, in this case, is a form of settling one's moral debt, fulfilling the inner ethical balance, and receiving personal satisfaction. As stated above, Gothic as a genre has a strong connection with deep-seated fears, anxieties, guilt, and the supernatural, according to both Spooner (2007) and Botting (2014). Thus, the intersection of Gothic elements with the contemporary narrative of these novels produces morally and psychologically complex themes of guilt, grief, and a desire to self-punish in a way that is not only grounded but also thought-provoking and intricate. Through the use of supernatural imagery, a sense of unease, and characters who are haunted by their past mistakes, Gothic texts allow readers not only to experience the weight of such feelings but also to understand how the unconscious works in conjunction with the moral masochism that could occur following trauma.

Furthermore, it is essential to address the recurring pattern of how the father figure influences family dynamics, a theme that plays a significant role throughout both novels. For that reason, it would be beneficial to take a glance at the author John Langan's background since he also had a complex relationship with his father (Postscripts to Darkness, 2016). Not only that, but he also teaches at SUNY New Paltz, strikingly similar to Roger, who teaches at the fictional SUNY Huguenot (The 2009 Stoker Awards Weekend, 2009). This may suggest that Langan loosely based the character of Roger on aspects of his own life, grounding *House of Windows* in a sense of reality. Despite the presence of supernatural elements in both novels, the characters remain firmly rooted in human experience, allowing their struggles to resonate with readers as realistic and emotionally authentic beyond the boundaries of fiction. That being said, during Ted's formative years, Roger and Ted had a very dysfunctional father-son relationship since Roger is portrayed as an oppressive and forceful father figure. Langan's personal history with his father is vital at this point, as it reflects a similar relationship dynamic. In one of his interviews, when asked about his relationship with his father, Langan states:

I had a very complex relationship with my dad, who died when I was twenty-three. On the one hand, he was a great storyteller, and I think some measure of my own ability in this regard descends directly from his relating not only personal and family stories, but detailed summaries of movies he had seen and books he had read. On the other hand, he had a very forceful personality, and especially when I hit my teen years, I struggled with that. His death was unexpected and traumatic, and I suppose I'm still trying to come to terms with it. In part, my experience as father to a pair of extraordinary sons has helped me to understand some of what passed between my dad and me. His anxieties about me— both the general fears that every parent has for a child and his specific concerns about me, about what I think he worried were some of my insane life choices— make much more sense now than they did when I was on the receiving end of them. But that father-son relationship is present, to varying degrees, in a majority of the fictions I've written. (Postscripts to Darkness, 2016)

It is clear that Langan draws some inspiration from his own father-son dynamic to portray the relationship between Ted and Roger Croydon. Eventually, upon graduating from high school, Ted enlists in the US Marines and is deployed to Afghanistan, much to the dislike of Roger. He has always wanted Ted to be interested in literature like himself. This is similar to Langan's own father, since apparently, both had a forceful and oppressive nature when it came to their children. Furthermore, Ted is an undiagnosed dyslexic and thus never gets around to reading. This makes Roger dissatisfied with Ted's lack of interest in literature, and he begins to distance himself from his own son. Years later, upon learning about Roger's divorce from his mother and subsequent second marriage to now-pregnant Veronica, Ted gets into an immense physical altercation with Roger. After the fight, Roger burns all the bridges with Ted and disowns him. This is followed by Veronica's miscarriage, so he loses both his sons on the same day.

This chain of events reaches its climax when Ted gets blown up by a rocket-propelled grenade in Afghanistan during an operation in the aftermath of the 9/11 events. Ted's untimely demise crushes Roger's psyche, and he gets overcome with immense guilt and regret. The loss of his son at first psychologically haunts him, and later on, it physically haunts him as a ghost in the Belvedere House. Jacques Derrida (1994/2006), who coined the term "hauntology," states, "a ghost never dies, it remains always to come and to come-back" (p.123). In the *House of Windows*, it is essential to ask why the ghost returns. Roger suffers from a guilty conscience, and his dead son comes back to haunt him further about Roger's character because he seeks punishment in his mind for the harsh and unjust treatment of his son. Freud (1930/2010b) states that "bad intentions are equated with bad actions and hence come to a sense of guilt and need for punishment" (p. 4518). The connection between guilt, the need for punishment, and masochism is a complex psychological phenomenon. Guilt is

often rooted in unresolved conflicts and unconscious desires, particularly those related to early childhood experiences. Feelings of guilt may arise from a perceived violation of internalized moral standards or expectations. Masochistic tendencies might be considered as a way to cope with guilt by seeking punishment or suffering as a form of atonement. Roger wants to be punished because he knows what he has done is wrong, and deep down, he blames himself for the death of his son, since he has forced him into enlisting in the army, which has led to his untimely death. This need for punishment comes in the form of a specter in the image of his son who haunts him relentlessly within the boundaries of the Belvedere House.

On the other hand, in the case of *The Fisherman*, the trauma and specifically the guilt that plagues Dan may not appear clearly at first glance. Therefore, it will be important to navigate through the car crash that caused them. Furthermore, shedding light on Abe's mindset throughout these events is crucial for establishing a dichotomy between the two characters, which helps illustrate how moral masochism functions as a coping mechanism for guilt. When Dan loses his whole family, his wife Sophie and their twin kids in the accident, unlike Abe, he blames himself for the death of his family because he was driving the car at the time of the accident. Thus, they decide to take up fishing as a form of solace after the loss of their wives. Yet, it should be noted that Abe does not particularly enjoy fishing at the beginning, but it gives him peace of mind in an unexplainable way (Langan, 2016/2023). According to Freud (1915/2010h):

Obsessional neurosis is shown in the patient's being occupied with thoughts in which he is in fact not interested, in his being aware of impulses in himself which appear very strange to him, and in his being led to the actions the performance of which give him no enjoyment, but which it is quite impossible for him to omit. (p. 3339)

Hence, it may be argued that despite not showing it on the surface, Abe also suffers from repressed and unresolved feelings because of his wife's death. Abe and Dan's strong desire to reunite with their loved ones drives the story forward at its core and leads to a downward spiral that ends in a tragedy. Although they have the same goal of reuniting with their dead loved ones, Dan is fueled by guilt and regret, unlike Abe. He holds himself responsible for his family's death because he thinks that he was careless on the day of the traffic accident. He seems ready to go through irrational great lengths and suffering to bring his family back to life. In contrast, Abe evaluates things differently as he refuses to go along with the outrageous offer the Fisherman makes, which Dan pushes him into later on.

At this point, it is possible to clearly state that the underlying guilt that haunts Roger and Dan is caused by trauma. In *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*, Cathy Caruth (1996/2010) states that “Trauma is described as the response to an unexpected or overwhelming violent event or events that are not fully grasped as they occur, but return later in repeated flashbacks, nightmares, and other repetitive phenomena” (p. 91). Both novels portray this theory through the characters facing dreadful supernatural events that reveal and magnify their loss and trauma through repetition. The ghost of his late son, Ted, brings overwhelming guilt to Roger’s life. Similarly, the psychological pain and suffering for Dan gets worse when his resurrected family members chase them relentlessly, resulting in a constant, unbreakable reminder of the mistakes they believe they have made. These terrifying events show how the lingering trauma finds its expression in numerous, intense, nightmarish manifestations, which change the behaviors, choices, and emotional lives of the characters. They subconsciously want to get punished for their actions, so the supernatural settings they reside in create supernatural manifestations that torment and haunt them. Furthermore, since unresolved issues and trauma repeatedly resurface, just as Caruth (1996/2010) implies, the response given to them is also paradoxical on the surface. Instead of pursuing activities that bring pleasure and joy, individuals may gravitate towards experiences that cause them discomfort to alleviate the initial pain. Because of their preliminary suffering, which is mainly caused by guilt, people may be attracted to more pain to lift the guilt in order to redeem themselves. Even if it seems like a suboptimal solution or a coping mechanism, this is a natural process. As Freud (1930/2010b) states:

When one has a sense of guilt after having committed a misdeed, and because of it, the feeling should more properly be called remorse. It relates only to a deed that has been done, and, of course, it presupposes that a *conscience*- the readiness to feel guilty- was already in existence before the deed took place. Remorse of this sort can, therefore, never help us to discover the origin of conscience and of the sense of guilt in general. What happens in these everyday cases is usually this: an instinctual need acquires the strength to achieve satisfaction in spite of the conscience, which is, after all, limited in its strength; and with the natural weakening of the need owing to its having been satisfied, the former balance of power is restored. Psychoanalysis is thus justified in excluding from the present discussion the case of a sense of guilt due to remorse, however frequently such cases occur and however great their practical importance. (p. 4521)

It could be stated that an individual who possesses the capacity to feel guilt and remorse will inevitably experience the burden of these emotions when they engage in morally wrong actions. This internal conflict arises from a deep sense of ethical responsibility and awareness of having transgressed accepted moral or societal standards. Therefore, many of

these people may develop a great desire to make amends for what they feel they have done wrong. In the course of trying to right their wrongs, they may put themselves through a variety of painful or uncomfortable situations. Such efforts can appear in many guises, from physical pain to emotional turmoil or self-inflicted punishment.

In this framework, this study will primarily focus on John Langan's *House of Windows* and *The Fisherman*, analyzing them through a psychoanalytic framework to demonstrate how moral masochism emerges in the aftermath of traumatic experiences that give rise to guilt within a contemporary American Gothic context. In addition, a historical reading of these novels will be employed to examine how each story is situated within its historical context, allowing for connections between the events in the narrative and real-life circumstances within the context of American literature. Specifically, *House of Windows* is set in the post-9/11 socio-political space, revealing American national trauma, doubt, and possibly guilt related to the Iraq War and US presence in Afghanistan in the form of trauma and family fragmentation as seen in the novel itself. Similarly, *The Fisherman* includes the actual work of constructing New York's Ashokan Reservoir, which had catastrophic real-life results while depicting this event's displacement and disruption as unleashing supernatural consequences to criticize the mystical and social repercussions. Such approaches will reflect Langan's treatment of the American historical context, elaborating narrative tension and thematic complexities.

The study will mainly discuss self-punishment as a means to deal with guilt and seek redemption after traumatic events, as presented in *House of Windows*. Based on Freud's theory of moral masochism, the chapter will discuss the way Roger manages the challenges of unresolved trauma and guilt. A deep look into Roger's repressed trauma and guilty conscience will show how these reactions point to a larger tendency in people who have experienced similar events. This chapter will examine how Roger mourns a deep loss and how that grief holds itself tightly with guilt. Roger disappears from the world after his climactic clash with Ted's ghost, while his behavior gradually becomes erratic and unpredictable throughout the story. Ultimately, beneath it all lies hidden guilt tied to the fractured, painful relationship with Ted. Over time, the signs grow stronger, with Roger coming to see the ghost of his son as the living symbol of punishment and revenge (Langan, 2009/2017). Without intending so, Roger falls into a loop that keeps circling back on itself: a restless rhythm of thoughts and behaviors where he does not openly invite suffering, yet somehow cannot help but pull it close. The weight of his inner conflict, the desire for

atonement, holds him fast. Through a careful look at these characters, this chapter will follow the interconnecting paths of trauma, guilt, and the relentless urge for self-inflicted punishment. It will show how, for some people, pain becomes not just a negative feeling but an effort towards redemption, where it may not truly be achievable in the first place.

Furthermore, the study will also analyze the supernatural manifestations of guilt in John Langan's *The Fisherman*, emphasizing the intense burden of guilt experienced by its characters. The novel interweaves a deeply psychological exploration of guilt with supernatural and mythical elements since it employs reanimated beings brought back from the dead while featuring a giant mythical creature called Leviathan. Both Abe and Dan are confronted by the ghosts of their deceased family members; for Dan in particular, they demonstrate that his past mistakes now physically haunt him (Langan, 2016/2023). Such manifestations of the dead reflect a classic Gothic motif as ghosts and resurrected figures serve as embodiments of unresolved guilt and trauma. By forcing the characters to relive their initial tragic mistakes repeatedly, these hauntings trap them in a vicious cycle of moral masochism, pain, and guilt. This dynamic aligns the novel with the tradition of psychological Gothic literature, in which external horrors mirror internal moral anguish, as noted by Spooner (2007) and Botting (2014). Consequently, this chapter will demonstrate that the interaction of trauma and guilt in Langan's narrative functions as a form of extended, morally charged self-punishment for the characters. By situating the novel within a broader American Gothic framework, this methodology aims to provide a more comprehensive view of how supernatural imagery in these works reflects untreated guilt and reveals the long-term consequences of unresolved trauma in the form of moral masochism.

Henceforth, this thesis examines the relationship between guilt and the unconscious desire for self-punishment in John Langan's *House of Windows* and *The Fisherman*, while also framing this analysis within the narrative and aesthetic framework of contemporary American Gothic. It aims to show how traumatic loss can result in self-blame, repression, and overwhelming guilt that, in turn, give rise to an unconscious desire for punishment as a form of atonement. Both novels feature grieving characters whose guilty consciences drive them to seek redemption and punishment on an unconscious level, a desire rendered visible through Gothic elements of haunted spaces, psychological horror, uncanny supernatural manifestations, and even subversive critiques of American ideals. In line with Spooner's (2007) and Botting's (2014) observations on the genre, the external horrors in these contemporary American Gothic narratives, ranging from ghost-ridden houses to cursed

landscapes, can symbolically mirror internal trauma and moral anguish, providing a cultural language to narrativize personal and collective anxieties. Furthermore, by analyzing characters who mourn their loved ones and feel responsible for their deaths, the study will illustrate the relationship between guilt and the compulsion toward self-punishment and display how Gothic elements are employed to externalize this psychology. In doing so, the thesis will demonstrate why American Gothic, with its brooding atmosphere, spectral hauntings, and constant interrogation of national myths, offers an especially suitable genre for exploring themes of trauma, guilt, repression, and self-imposed punishment. To do so, the study will mainly draw on Freud's theory of "moral masochism" and Caruth's trauma framework, illuminating how the central characters of each novel unconsciously desire punishment as a deserved outcome of their actions. In conclusion, this thesis will argue that overwhelming guilt can give rise to an unconscious drive toward self-punishment and that the contemporary American Gothic provides an especially effective framework through which to represent and critically examine this dynamic.

1.2. Theoretical Background

1.2.1. Trauma theory

To develop this argument, the study turns to trauma theory, drawing on Freud, Caruth, and other scholars whose work clarifies the intricate relationship between guilt, trauma, and the unconscious drive toward self-punishment. In this context, trauma is understood as a profoundly distressing event that disrupts an individual's sense of physical or emotional integrity. The American Psychological Association defines it as:

Trauma is an emotional response to a terrible event like an accident, crime, natural disaster, physical or emotional abuse, neglect, experiencing or witnessing violence, death of a loved one, war, and more. Immediately after the event, shock and denial are typical. Longer term reactions include unpredictable emotions, flashbacks, strained relationships, and even physical symptoms like headaches or nausea. ("Trauma," n.d.)

This experience can be perceived in different ways depending on the nature of the event and the individual's ability to cope with it. The effects of trauma can extend over much wider periods than an immediate event. More specifically, psychological trauma is an experience of extreme stress and difficulty that deeply affects an individual's mental and emotional health. Psychological trauma usually occurs as a result of unexpected and frightening events

and threatens the emotional integrity of the individual. Trauma theory, on the other hand, could be described as a framework for understanding the psychological, emotional, and social dimensions of traumatic experiences while portraying how trauma is dealt with and conceivably resolved in literature in terms of psychological and psychiatric disciplines. The French neurologist Jean–Martin Charcot was one of the first pioneers and important contributors to trauma studies. In “History and Development of Trauma Theory: Discussion of Main Concepts,” Ringel (2019) notes that he was the first person to identify and examine the connection between traumatic disorder and mental illness while working with patients in the nineteenth century since he was the first one to make the connection between hysteria and psychology rather than defending a physiological connection which was the leading theory during that time. Yet, trauma theory would not become popular in psychology, sociology, literature, and cultural studies until the late twentieth century.

Events such as major wars, genocides, and natural disasters that occurred in the mid–twentieth century contributed to the increase in conditions leading to post–traumatic stress disorder’s rise in popularity. While such traumatic events brought the hidden wounds of individuals and societies starkly into view, they also laid bare the lingering pain and struggles that trauma leaves in its wake. In this light, the aftermath of these experiences called for a closer look at how people attempt to cope, survive, and make sense of what they have endured. Ringel (2019) explains that soldiers and veterans returning from the Vietnam War dealt with serious psychological symptoms. Ringel (2019) exemplifies this by mentioning the fact that some of them developed drug and alcohol addictions, exhibited violent behaviors against their spouses, or became homeless and unemployed as a result of their trauma. Ringel (2019) further states that such symptoms not only affected the mental health of these individuals but also seriously impaired their ability to adapt and function in civilian life. Over time, these symptoms tended to become permanent. As a result, these symptoms were later included in the diagnosis of PTSD (Ringel, 2019). The American Psychological Association (n.d) defines PTSD as “reliving the trauma through painful memories, flashbacks, or recurring dreams or nightmares, and avoiding activities or places that remind you of the traumatic event” (“Trauma”). This definition highlights how traumatic events can lead to psychological distress. Symptoms that emerge after trauma can be intensified by conditions such as guilt, psychological distress, anxiety, and paranoia. During this process, complex dynamics can occur in the unconscious mind that can cause the traumatic event to resurface. Therefore, it could be said that the effects of trauma are deep and comprehensive;

so, studies and treatment methods related to trauma are critical to understanding and managing these effects.

Moreover, Caruth (1996/2010) states that “In its most general definition, trauma describes an overwhelming experience of sudden or catastrophic events in which the response to the event occurs in the often delayed, uncontrolled repetitive appearance of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena” (p. 11). With her definition, Caruth (1996/2010) addresses the profound effects of the event on a person’s psychological structure. From Caruth’s (1996/2010) perspective, trauma is an experience that the conscious mind cannot perceive instantaneously but is constantly present in the unconscious. This causes the effects of the traumatic event experienced by the individual to manifest in different ways over time (Caruth, 1996/2010). In other words, trauma is not a momentary experience, but a continuing psychological process that resides in the unconscious mind:

The experience of the soldier faced with sudden and massive death around him, for example, who suffers this sight in a numbed state, only to relive it later on in repeated nightmares, is a central and recurring image of trauma in our century. (Caruth, 1996/2010, p. 11)

Therefore, it is fair to say that trauma stretches far beyond the moment of the event; it clings to the emotional and psychological aftermath that follows. The memories it leaves behind refuse to settle. They return uninvited, repeatedly, causing disturbances in the mind while steadily chipping away at a person’s mental health. It is also safe to assume that the effects of trauma can last throughout a lifetime, and how trauma was perceived during this process may become more important than the nature of the event that was experienced. Thus, Caruth (1996/2010) implies that trauma is not perceived momentarily in the individual’s conscious mind, but is constantly present in the subconscious.

On the other hand, Freud also paid much attention to the description of the symptoms of hysteria and their reference to the moment when the trauma was formed. Yet, Freudian trauma theory has more emphasis on the relationship between repressed memories, unconscious conflicts, and the subconscious. Freud (1915/2010h) mainly argues that traumatic experiences are not consciously remembered by the individual but are instead stored in the unconscious. Thus, trauma develops when the person realizes the nature of the traumatic incident, which they were unconscious of when they lived through it in the past. This indicates that trauma develops following a temporal interruption between the first incident and the moment the person becomes aware of the repercussions of the earlier incident. In *Studies on Hysteria*, Freud and Breuer (1895/2010b) suggest that when an idea

is cut off from psychical association, it can more easily go in the wrong way and develop a bodily innervation. The contradiction of the one concept that needs to be repressed and the predominant mass of ideas that make up the ego can only be explained as the source of repression itself. Repressed memories of the trauma, which are unavoidably going to resurface in the aftermath of a traumatic event, also contribute significantly to the traumatic formation. The repression of memories that attack the present state of mind and subsequently aggravate psychological conditions in individuals is one of the main problems associated with trauma. The conscious state of mind transforms as a result of the mind's response to the recalled memory, making individuals return to the moment of the traumatic incident and relive it. In "On The Psychical Mechanism of Hysterical Phenomena," Freud and Breuer (1893/2010a) describe this as "double consciousness" and expand it as "the emergence of [two] abnormal states of consciousness" (p. 297). Ultimately, the present conscious and unconscious mind is split into two parts, while undesirable and trauma-inducing memories are repressed. These repressed memories involuntarily re-emerge later on and cause emotional distress.

With this in mind, it is also very crucial to understand the implications of trauma theory on literature to use it as a device for narrating and representing these traumatic experiences. Trauma theory offers a way to grasp how this painful process unfolds. Through literature, people can work through overwhelming emotions and connect with the struggles of others. Understanding how writers address the social, cultural, and historical factors of trauma allows for in-depth analysis of works. Such an examination reveals the relationship of literature to social and personal issues and the traumatic past. For instance, in "Trends in Literary Trauma Theory" (2008), Michelle Balaev explains this as follows:

The traumatized protagonist in fiction brings into awareness the specificity of individual trauma is often connected to larger social factors and cultural values or ideologies. We can see that the trauma novel provides a picture of the individual that suffers but paints it in such a way as to suggest that this protagonist is an "everyperson" figure. (p. 155)

This portrays the dynamic relationship between the reader and the traumatized protagonist, which allows readers to connect on an emotional basis. Therefore, trauma theory-based reading of literature allows readers to identify with their own experiences through the universality of traumatic experiences. This encourages empathy and relatability on both a personal and societal level.

These kinds of works can be categorized as trauma novels. Trauma novels compose an important area of literature and refer to stories in which traumatic experiences are experienced by people who are deeply affected. Trauma novels allow both individual and collective experiences to be narrated and offer the reader the opportunity to establish a strong bond to understand the complex nature of trauma. As Vickroy (2002) explains in *Trauma and Survival in Contemporary Fiction*, trauma narratives “help readers to access traumatic experience” and “elucidate our relationship to memory and forgetting within the complex interweavings of social and psychological relationships” (p. 1). Hence, it is possible to state that trauma novels allow both individual and collective experiences to be narrated and offer the reader the opportunity to establish a strong bond to understand the complex nature of trauma. Balaev (2008) suggests that the trauma novel demonstrates how a traumatic event disrupts connections between self and others, challenging core beliefs about moral principles and social relationships tied to particular contexts. According to her, these novels depict this disruption by meticulously depicting the trauma setting, as the physical environment allows for the exploration of both personal and cultural histories embedded in the landscape that shapes the character’s identity and the significance of their traumatic experience.

One of the most distinctive features of such stories is that they address personal and social trauma experiences. Literature is a powerful device for questioning and criticizing social issues. As Vickroy (2002) emphasizes, trauma fiction “chronicles lives under duress that need the powers of literary imagination... to be more fully realized for readers” and offers “a sociocultural critical analysis” that connects private trauma with public ideology (pp. 221–222). Issues such as war, discrimination, and human rights violations have a central place in these works. They are not only narrative backdrops but “implicit critiques of the ways social, economic, and political structures can create and perpetuate trauma” (Vickroy, 2002, p. 4). Furthermore, events such as sexual assault, war, natural disasters, or discrimination create deep wounds in the lives of individuals, and these wounds leave permanent marks in the collective memory. As Neil Smesher (2004) explains in “Psychological Trauma and Cultural Trauma,” cultural traumas are often framed as “a national shame, a permanent scar,” and when this framing takes hold, “the memory does in fact take on the characteristics of indelibility and unshakeability” (p. 42).

Another recurring current in trauma literature is the journey toward healing. Often, the characters’ slow, uneven attempts to confront and mend their pain become a kind of roadmap. Vickroy (2002) notes that many protagonists “engage in a process of reconstituting

a self diminished by loss,” often through imagination, narration, and storytelling, which become symbolic means of recovery (p. 165). *House of Windows* and *The Fisherman* are no exceptions. Ultimately, it is possible to state that such stories encourage not only the narration of trauma but also the questioning of social and psychological problems. Literature provides an indispensable space for understanding the effects of trauma and sharing these experiences, which makes trauma novels and stories deep and reflective both in the writing process and in the reading experience.

1.2.2. Moral masochism

This section will examine Freudian moral masochism and its implications on individuals’ psyches for connecting Langan’s characters’ actions and traumas. The term masochism itself was first coined by the Austrian psychiatrist Richard von Krafft-Ebing in reference to the Austrian nobleman, writer, and journalist Leopold von Sacher-Masoch because of his highly controversial novella during that period, *Venus in Furs* (1870). In “Mastery and Slavery: A Masochist Falls Asleep Reading Hegel,” Albert Koschorke and Joel David Golb (2001) note that “Masoch’s novel *Venus in Furs* can be considered masochism’s founding literary text” (p. 551). This is why in his book *Psychopathia Sexualis: With Especial Reference to the Antipathic Sexual Instinct; A Medico-Forensic Study*, Krafft-Ebing (1886/1965) explains his reasoning behind the term masochism by stating “I feel justified in calling this sexual anomaly ‘Masochism,’ because the author Sacher–Masoch frequently made this perversion, which up to his time was quite unknown to the scientific world as such, the substratum of his writings” (p. 87). With that being mentioned, a simpler and widely known definition for the term masochism is given by Karen Horney (1939/1964) in *New Ways in Psychoanalysis* as “a striving for sexual satisfaction through suffering. This definition contains three postulates: that masochism is essentially a sexual phenomenon; that it is essentially a striving for satisfaction; and that it is essentially a wish to suffer” (p. 246). Individuals usually experience a certain type of pleasure or satisfaction by exhibiting masochistic behaviors. This may lead to the perception of pain not as a physical experience but as a means of emotional release and relief. For some people, this process may mean feeling stronger or providing some kind of relief from past traumas. However, such behaviors often create an unhealthy cycle because the individual may tend to repeat the situation as they experience pain.

Moreover, different communities and individuals may interpret masochistic behaviors in different ways. While such behaviors may be seen as a source of sexual satisfaction for some people, for others, they may be an expression of deeper psychological issues. This is important to understand how masochism is related to social norms and values beyond individual experiences. In this context, Freud (1924/2010c) categorizes masochism under three branches: erotogenic, feminine, and moral masochism. Freud (1924/2010c) defines erotogenic masochism as a biological and constitutional need for suffering, while serving as the foundation for the other two forms of masochism. Normal psychological development in which the pain and suffering of childbirth, menstruation, and defloration result in distress is known as feminine masochism. This kind, according to Freud (1924/2010c), was the easiest to observe and the least enigmatic.

In the development of the criteria for Masochistic Personality Disorder, moral masochism is the most significant kind. In *The Language of Psycho-Analysis*, Jean Laplanche and Jean-Bertrand Pontalis (1967/1973) explain moral masochism and masochism in general as follows:

Freud extends the notion of masochism beyond the perversion as described by sexologists. In the first place, he identifies masochistic elements in numerous types of sexual behaviour and sees rudiments of masochism in infantile sexuality. Secondly, he describes derivative forms, notably 'moral masochism,' where the subject, as a result of an unconscious sense of guilt, seeks out the position of victim without any sexual pleasure being directly involved. (p. 244)

Different from other types of masochism, moral masochism does not directly stem from sexual fixations but rather is developed because of an unconscious sense of guilt. The link between suffering and eroticism is broken in moral masochism. Hence, the pain itself becomes non-sexual. Consequently, unconscious guilt is the root cause of masochistic character development, according to Freud (1924/2010). Unlike other forms of masochism, which may focus more on physical pain or emotional suffering, moral masochism is deeply intertwined with an individual's conscience and moral beliefs. Robert A. Glick and Donald I. Meyers (1988/1993) also explain the disparity between sexual pleasure and moral masochism as follows:

The connection to sexuality had been loosened, and need for punishment held sway... This stood in contrast to and could be reinforced by the ultramorality induced by the aggressive nature of the superego invested with aspects of the death drive, accounting for its sadistic, harsh, and cruel qualities. The moral masochist relentlessly attempted to satisfy his oedipal wishes through the pursuit of pain, subjugation, and humiliation at the hands of all authority or the hands of fate. (p. 7)

Freud (1924/2010c) argues that moral masochism could also manifest itself because of unresolved Oedipal issues, since they imply a fixation on the parents' moral values instead of one's own. Hence, these people may retain an infantile desire to be punished by their parents (Freud, 1924/2010c). Of course, this desire commonly repurposes itself into a compulsive desire to inflict self-pain in response to perceived failures to meet one's moral standards or societal expectations. That is why individuals experiencing moral masochism may repeatedly engage in self-sabotaging behaviors or engage in situations that cause emotional distress, especially when these actions conflict with their moral framework. This can manifest in a variety of ways, including self-criticism, excessive guilt over mistakes, or the pursuit of relationships that cause emotional pain.

Furthermore, Freud's pleasure principle could shed light on the inner workings of moral masochism as it argues that one of the basic motivations of human behavior is the desire to avoid pain and achieve pleasure. According to this principle, people tend to avoid unpleasant experiences with an innate drive while gravitating toward things that are pleasant and satisfying. Freud states that this principle is critical to understanding individuals' internal conflicts and psychic dynamics. On this matter, Freud introduced the concept of the "pleasure principle" in his psychoanalytic theory. In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Freud (1920/2010a) explains this as follows:

We believe, that is to say, that the course of those events is invariably set in motion by an unpleasurable tension, and that it takes a direction such that its final outcome coincides with a lowering of that tension – that is, with an avoidance of unpleasure or a production of pleasure. (p. 3715)

This argues that the basic purpose of individuals is to seek pleasure and avoid pain. According to Freud (1920/2010a), people are innately inclined to seek pleasant and satisfying experiences while trying to eliminate negative and painful situations as much as possible. This impulse resides at the very core of human nature, fundamentally shaping cognition, emotion, and behavior. The pleasure principle is a built-in force that pushes people to chase after pleasure and steer clear of discomfort or pain. It works on a simple yet powerful rule: seek what feels good, avoid what does not. Through this perspective, Freud's (1920/2010a) concept functions not only as a framework for understanding individual choices and desires but also as a lens through which broader relational and social patterns can be interpreted. It offers a way to dig deeper into why people so instinctively dodge unpleasantness while reaching out, sometimes obsessively, for even the briefest taste of satisfaction (Freud, 1920/2010a). As a result, the pleasure principle has a critical place in

understanding the complexity of human nature and the interaction between individuals' inner world and their external environment. With all that being said, seeking pain or discomfort seems highly unreasonable on the surface. Yet, Freud (1920/2010a) explains that:

Under the influence of the ego's instincts of self-preservation, the pleasure principle is replaced by the *reality principle*. This latter principle does not abandon the intention of ultimately obtaining pleasure, but it nevertheless demands and carries into effect the postponement of satisfaction, the abandonment of a number of possibilities of gaining satisfaction and the temporary toleration of unpleasure as a step on the long indirect road to pleasure. (p. 3717)

As a result, it could be said that individuals usually postpone satisfaction and pleasure to maintain their well-being while enduring some type of mandatory pain for self-preservation purposes. Yet, people with strong feelings of guilt may engage in moral masochism as a form of self-punishment or atonement to achieve instant relief and self-gratification. The pain or suffering they endure may be seen as a way to balance out their moral wrongs or mistakes. So, it would be safe to state that the pursuit of pleasure without being conscious of the masochistic sexual gratification resulting from unconscious guilt is known as moral masochism.

Moreover, inflicting self-pain and suffering in general was also seen as a way to relieve guilt in religious circles. Self-flagellation, flogging, or whipping was the most prominent example during the Middle Ages. In his article "Self-Flagellation in the Early Modern Era," Patrick Vandermeersch (2009) states that self-flagellation was first popularized among eleventh-century Italian Christian monks who were expected to whip their naked bodies in the presence of other monks without feeling ashamed. Thus, a historical case of the psychic phenomenon of moral masochism can be made by examining the flagellant movement of 1260. Self-flagellation became evident through the religious fervor and atoning devotion that these medieval Christians expressed, desiring to suffer not for the pursuit of sexual gratification, but to seek redemption. According to Vandermeersch (2009), some debates suggested otherwise, arguing that these acts ultimately served a sexual purpose and gratification. Yet these claims are easily disputable because historical self-flagellation did not target sensual or erogenous areas, unlike what is usually expected from sexual masochism; rather, it focused on the upper shoulders and back, symbolizing Christ carrying the cross (Dickinson, 1989). This suggests more than just a ritual imitation or act since it reflects a masochistic investment in embodying punishment as a means of atonement and redemption. In *Masochism in Modern Man*, Theodor Reik (1941) states, "...suffering is

aimed at unconsciously even if they do not know or do not want to know it. These individuals act as if they were controlled by stringent moral laws and prohibitions, and as if they were forced to punish themselves for disobeying them” (p. 10). In this sense, self-flagellation is not only a religious act of devotion but also an unconscious mechanism to satisfy the internalized guilt and the desire for atonement. Ultimately, moral masochism, then, becomes a psychological mechanism that can be understood within the context of not only the individual psyche but also as a cultural and historical tool for navigating guilt, preserving self-identity, and reestablishing moral equilibrium in the aftermath of immense guilt. Therefore, it can be used for examining and shedding light on the trauma responses of guilt-ridden individuals in a literary context as well. Both the *House of Windows* and *The Fisherman* portray moral masochism through actions and behaviors of their characters since they feature guilt-ridden people who enable their own supernatural hauntings to achieve moral redemption.

In order to examine how these portrayals operate within the novels and convey deeper psychological meaning, this study will employ a psychoanalytic interpretive framework drawn primarily from Freud’s theories, especially his concept of moral masochism. Freud’s own texts on masochism, particularly “The Economic Problem of Masochism,” provide the basis for understanding how characters may unconsciously derive satisfaction from self-inflicted suffering or guilt. In addition, trauma theory serves as a complementary perspective, building on Freud’s insights in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* into traumatic repetitions and emphasizing how unassimilated experiences resurface belatedly, a delayed return of the repressed that returns to haunt the survivor later on (Caruth, 1996/2010). Methodologically, the approach is interpretive and text-centered, relying on close readings of Langan’s *House of Windows* and *The Fisherman*. Through these close readings, the study will analyze how the psychology of the characters and classic Gothic elements, such as haunting, uncanny places, and supernatural elements, function as externalizations of inner psychic conflicts, thus illuminating the workings of moral masochism in the narrative. Furthermore, positioning Langan’s novels within the contemporary American Gothic tradition highlights the connection between personal trauma and broader cultural anxieties. American Gothic literature has long explored the darker sides of national ideals, confronting the collective traumas that lie beneath, as previously discussed in this study. In *House of Windows*, set in the post-9/11 era, and *The Fisherman*, grounded in the real-life tragedies of the Ashokan Reservoir, personal losses and guilt are implicitly linked to larger historical or communal

issues. By applying Freud's concept of moral masochism alongside trauma theory in the analysis, the study will show that Langan's novels firmly inhabit this contemporary American Gothic approach, where psychological trauma and moral guilt not only reveal the inner workings of internal struggles but also display significant representations of guilt and anxiety in the broader American context. In doing so, the study will illuminate how Langan's novels continue the American Gothic's legacy of using hauntings and uncanny encounters to examine the deep-seated guilt and trauma that lie beneath American myths and ideals.

2. GUILT, TRAUMA, AND MORAL MASOCHISM IN *HOUSE OF WINDOWS*: PSYCHOLOGICAL AND SUPERNATURAL DIMENSIONS IN THE HAUNTING OF ROGER

This chapter will examine John Langan's *House of Windows* within the framework of contemporary American Gothic, linking its haunted house narrative to the broader historical trauma of post-9/11 America while emphasizing how guilt can lead to moral masochism. In the wake of the September 11, 2001, attacks and the ensuing wars, Langan's novel comments on national grief and guilt within its exploration of personal trauma, familial loss, and supernatural haunting. While the analysis will primarily focus on Roger Croydon's relationship with his son Ted and the guilt and grief he suffers after Ted's death, it is crucial to recognize that this personal tragedy unfolds against a framework of collective American mourning and moral uncertainty. One of the novel's central points, Roger's mistreatment and alienation of Ted, leading him to enlist and die in Afghanistan, directly ties Roger's suffering to the period's broader national turmoil. Roger's overwhelming remorse and haunted psyche thus become a representation of a post-9/11 American discourse in which personal guilt and loss intersect with a wider cultural trauma and a lingering sense of unresolved national guilt. Not only that, but this can also be traced back to the Vietnam War since it was a period that carried similar sentiments. On the other hand, the Gothic space of Belvedere House reflects the inner world of Roger, his remorse, shame, and immense sadness, and his descent into moral masochism. As Diane E. Goldstein, Sylvia Ann Grider, and Jeannie Banks Thomas (2007) observe, "ghosts and their haunted domains are inseparable... because the presence of the ghost is what changes an otherwise mundane place into a portal through which the living encounter the realm of the supernatural" (p. 143). These two elements become inseparable, as the physical setting not only acts as a character that shapes the narrative but also operates as a device for the paranormal. Ultimately, by framing *House of Windows* within both a post-9/11 context and a Gothic setting, the chapter will transition into an analysis of how the connected nature of guilt, trauma, and moral masochism shapes relationships and behaviors while illuminating the novel's commentary on both individual and national ghosts.

Following this general discussion of guilt, trauma, and setting, it is necessary to situate *House of Windows* within the broader American historical and political context of national

trauma, including the events of September 11, 2001, and the Vietnam War. First of all, as mentioned before, Roger's way of parenting leads Ted to join the army, ultimately causing his untimely, tragic death. During an operation in the aftermath of the 9/11 events, a seemingly innocent old man lures Ted into the middle of a street to talk, and when he reaches him, a rocket-propelled grenade blows them both to pieces (Langan, 2009/2017). This causes Roger to self-blame for knowing it could have been prevented. Veronica also takes note of the guilt that crushes Roger's mental well-being: "You couldn't say that Roger had been unaffected by Ted's death... everything he'd undergone had flowed from the inside out, from the guilt and regret choking his psyche" (Langan, 2009/2017, p.193). This individual trauma is deeply connected with the broader historical context of post-9/11 America. Thus, Roger's story of suffering becomes an allegory for the post-9/11 moral anxieties, collective grief, and the burden of guilt associated with the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Langan's novel then bridges the personal and the political, illuminating how one man's ghostly torment mirrors a nation's struggle to reckon with its actions during a time of drawn-out conflict. This interpretation is supported by literary criticism and trauma theory, which help explain how Roger's hauntings symbolically resonate with national trauma and guilt in post-9/11 American society; as literary critic Emily Horton (2012) notes that contemporary fiction of the post-9/11 era often negotiates trauma as a duality of personal guilt and public catastrophe within an implicit war context. *House of Windows* exemplifies this sentiment, as Roger's guilt unfolds in parallel with the broader sense of unrest and collective guilt provoked by the losses of the era. Ted's death as a soldier directly ties Roger's trauma to the social sphere, considering the fact that the US army was still present in Afghanistan during 2009 when the novel was originally published. Therefore, the novel carefully aligns Roger's familial loss with the nation's broader wartime losses and guilt.

Similarly, this dynamic of personal grief reflecting American national trauma is not just unique to the post-9/11 context, since critics have noted striking parallels between the cultural trauma of post-9/11 America and that of the Vietnam War era. In *American Myth and the Legacy of Vietnam*, John Hellmann (1986) states that the Vietnam War fundamentally shattered America's idealized national mythology, leading to disillusionment and moral uncertainty. Hellman (1986) notes that Vietnam War literature reflects this rupture by portraying US soldiers lost in a "nightmarish wilderness" with no clear moral compass (pp. 110–111), mirroring the way Ted dies in a foreign country, blurring moral lines. Furthermore, in "Afghanistan and the Vietnam Syndrome," Kurt Jacobsen (2001) states that

after September 11, the initial patriotic unity quickly gave way to anxieties reminiscent of Vietnam, as Americans soon exhibited a revived “Vietnam syndrome,” essentially the public’s enduring aversion to “unnecessary foreign adventures” that might push the nation in another futile, ethnically fueled war (pp. 4182–4183). This extended into the ensuing Iraq War, where public trust was shaken, once again revealing a national struggle with disillusionment and guilt over the human costs of conflict.

In contemporary American literature, the Gothic genre bridges these war traumas by externalizing collective guilt as haunting figures. *House of Windows*, for example, features a supernatural haunting to transform Roger’s grief and guilt into a tangible entity in the form of Ted’s ghost in a manner that doubles as an allegory for post-9/11 America’s own haunted conscience. This use of the American Gothic echoes the cultural legacy of Vietnam, a war that, as Hellmann’s (1986) analysis suggests, continued to haunt the national psyche long after its end. Accordingly, Hellmann (1986) also argues that Americans needed to re-enter the symbolic “terrain of the American psyche” through imaginative narratives to confront the conflict’s horrific moral ambiguities (p. 137). By manifesting hidden anxieties and remorse as ghosts or monsters, such narratives provide a symbolic space to reckon with the moral ambiguity and lingering shame of war. In this way, the American Gothic allows both Vietnam and post-9/11 narratives to externalize guilt, forcing characters and societies alike to face the consequences of their past actions.

Furthermore, since Ted died in a conflict that was part of the post-9/11 American military response, Roger’s inability to save him and his subsequent self-blame metaphorically point to the nation’s powerlessness to fully protect its own or to morally justify every loss incurred due to both the initial attack and the wars themselves. In this sense, the novel mirrors what cultural trauma theorist Jeffrey Alexander (2004) calls the work of “collective identity” formation after a catastrophe, the process by which a society publicly mourns, assigns meaning, and sometimes guilt, to traumatic events (p. 10). Ultimately, Roger’s journey through grief and guilt to his ambiguous disappearance can function as a commentary on how America as a collective has coped or failed to cope with the traumas of the 2000s. By linking Roger’s suffering and guilt to the post-9/11 socio-political context, it becomes clear how American Gothic fiction externalizes guilt and self-blame into supernatural forms, reinforcing the argument that Gothic settings provide a unique narrative space for these issues. These symbolic parallels between the personal and

the political are made possible through the deeply intimate nature of Roger's guilt, which originates not in abstract ideology but in a tangible, fractured human relationship.

Similarly, the Gothic space of Belvedere House further reflects the inner world of Roger, his remorse, shame, and immense sadness, and his descent into moral masochism. In this sense, the Belvedere House not only embodies the Gothic tradition of haunted houses but also aligns with theoretical understandings of space as a site where psychological, social, and cultural crises are apparent. In the essay "Of Other Spaces," Michel Foucault (1986) describes these kinds of places as "heterotopias," places that are "outside of all places," and are ultimately connected to every real site they mirror or distort (p. 24). Foucault (1986) notes, such spaces are often "reserved for individuals who are in a state of crisis," or else become the spaces where "individuals whose behavior is deviant in relation to the required mean or norm are placed" (p. 24). This insight applies directly to *House of Windows*, where the Belvedere House functions as a heterotopia of crisis. The house mirrors Roger's psychological collapse after the traumatic loss of his son and his alienation from academic life, becoming a site where past familial tensions and unresolved grief reassert themselves with a spectral force (Langan, 2009/2017). The Belvedere House is saturated with Roger's memories, particularly those of his deceased son, Ted, and his violent disavowal of him, which are compulsively repeated through haunting visions and Roger's self-destructive return to the house. As Veronica notes, Roger's daily runs and walks increasingly fixate on the house, eventually drawing him back to live within its walls, an obsessive return that depicts a detachment from social and psychological norms (Langan, 2009/2017).

This blurring of psychological collapse and spatial distortion becomes most striking in the novel's depictions of the windows themselves, where ordinary reflections give way to unsettling visions. At one point, Roger recounts that, out of the corner of his eye, he noticed something at one of the windows across from him. For an instant, the glass seemed to shimmer, but when he looked directly, it appeared as still and solid as the other windows beside it. He might have dismissed it as a visual trick, but in the windows to the right and left, he could see the living room reflected (Langan, 2009/2017). In the middle window, however, where his reflection should have been, there was only darkness, as if the panes had been painted black: "The middle window, however, where I should have seen myself, was a blank. It was as if the windowpanes had been painted black. I could not understand how this could be, what combination of factors should rob the window of its reflection" (Langan,

2009/2017, p. 86). Although he could not explain what might have caused the reflection to vanish, he states:

The longer I stared at the window, I noticed that I could in fact distinguish something within it... this was so faint as to be all but impossible to see, faint and small, as if I were seeing it from across a great distance. There was a kind of opening, an archway, which gave onto a long corridor. In that corridor, there was a figure—it was too far and too dark for me to discern much about it except that it was holding its hands out to either side, stumbling forward—its left hand trailing along a wall, its right suspended in space. The entire scene—it was so distant, so hard to see I'm not positive I saw it correctly—if I saw anything at all. I squinted, trying to bring it into focus, and, as I watched the figure lurching along, my heart was moved by a tremendous pity mixed with a tremendous dread. I can not say whence the twin emotions had their origin, but their descent was immediate and overpowering. I could not move. I could only sit staring through the presence on the other side of the window at this distant figure, whom I believe were one and the same, although I am not sure why. (Langan, 2009/2017, p. 87)

The sheer number of windows that the Belvedere House has amplifies this effect, surrounding Roger with potential points of intrusion, both visual and metaphysical. Rather than providing light or clarity, these openings become conduits for the past to enter the present, forcing him into repeated confrontations with guilt and grief that are directly caused by the death of Ted. In thematic terms, the scene illustrates how the Belvedere House weaponizes its windows as thresholds between the familiar domestic space and an uncanny realm, aligning with Gothic traditions. The combination of obscurity and inexplicable emotional impact heightens the sense that the house is not merely haunted but actively revealing fragments of another, possibly an antagonistic dimension. Therefore, the house is no longer merely a domestic space but becomes a space that reflects a deep rupture in Roger's identity and moral stability in Foucault's (1986) terms. Its layered history of trauma, infidelity, and guilt marks it as a place of both individual and collective deviation, aligning with Foucault's (1986) observation about heterotopias as the Belvedere House stands "outside of all places" with its uncanny nature (p. 24).

This shift in the function of the Belvedere House can be better understood when placed within the broader American Gothic tradition, particularly in relation to Poe's "The Fall of the House of Usher" (1839/2014c), where architecture similarly reflects psychological collapse. Poe's (1839/2014c) story introduces a family estate whose physical decay and eerie symmetry reflect a deeper psychological descent of its inhabitants, similar to *House of Windows*. The story culminates in the physical and symbolic collapse of the house, coinciding with the deaths of Roderick and his sister Madeline, reinforcing Poe's exploration

of psychological terror and the inextricable bond between environment and mental instability. The house functions as a symbol of hereditary decline and mental collapse. Poe (1839/2014c) intricately ties Roderick's deteriorating psyche to the oppressive atmosphere of the house, characterized by its antiquated architecture and "vacant eye-like windows" (p. 176). Similarly, in *House of Windows*, Langan constructs the Belvedere House as an architectural extension of psychological turmoil. The frame narrator describes the house as resembling "a face hiding amongst its windows and angles, just out of view," evoking the same uncanny personification that disturbs the boundary between the animate and inanimate (Langan, 2009/2017, p. 9). While Poe (1839/2014c) uses the Usher Estate as a Gothic reflection of internal collapse, the Belvedere House is highlighted by a supernatural ambiguity that both subsequently conceals and reveals trauma. Ultimately, both the Belvedere House and the Usher Estate could be categorized under what Anthony Vidler (1992) in *The Architectural Uncanny: Essays in the Modern Unhomely* describes as the "architectural uncanny" (p. 12), spaces wherein the familiar becomes unfamiliar, and the home transforms into a site of psychic unease as he states that the uncanny is not necessarily an inherent property of buildings, but rather a set of qualities projected onto them through cultural, psychological, and historical contexts (Vidler, 1992).

Furthermore, the significance of the Usher Estate to American Gothic fiction is best described by Bailey (1999) in *American Nightmares: The Haunted House Formula in American Popular Fiction*. Bailey (1999) states, "since Poe first described the House of Usher in 1839, the motif of the haunted house has assumed an enduring role in the American tradition" (p. 6). Thus, it is safe to say that haunted houses have long served as a powerful motif in American Gothic literature, from the decaying manors of the nineteenth century to modern spaces, and *House of Windows* is no exception. These haunted houses are more than settings; they often function as living or psychologically charged entities, metaphors for the tortured minds within them. In addition, a defining feature across these tales is their spatial significance, as mentioned by Foucault (1986). As heterotopias, they introduce a sense of instability through architecture that distorts, disorients, or defies reality while producing an uncanny atmosphere where space and psyche entangle. Vidler (1992) states that the haunted house brings "something new, foreign, and hostile invading an old, familiar, customary world" (p. 23), subsequently transforming itself into Foucault's (1986) heterotopias.

Moreover, the Belvedere House not only features a classic American Gothic setting but a layered, almost living symbol in its own right. The house takes on the physical shape

of Roger's guilt, Veronica's despair, and the unresolved tragedy that stains both their lives. In "Schizoid Masculinity and Monstrous Interiors in American Haunted House Narratives," Kerry Gorrill (2021) states that:

This hybridized, quasi-domestic space then proceeds to mutate in ways that develop the traditional notion of the labyrinth into an architectural space that is intended to drive the fragile, schizoid protagonist into a confrontation with his deepest fears, memories, and traumas. (p. 95)

Therefore, it is reasonable to conclude that the Belvedere House is a character on its own, echoing the statements from Vidler (1992) and Foucault (1986). This causes the repetition of guilt that Roger goes through by utilizing its layout, architecture, and symbolic meaning. For instance, Veronica states that the ghost or the entity that haunts them takes the shape of the house's windows rather than hiding behind them (Langan, 2009/2017). Therefore, the house directly acts with the ghost to torture Roger and make him relive his guilt over and over again. As established before, architectural structures of the Gothic narratives have a lineage where the architecture acts as a psychic mirror that absorbs and makes visible human trauma. As with his growing guilt and depression, the Belvedere House's claustrophobic corridors, oppressive windows, and labyrinthine design mirror Roger's progress. Thus, it would be safe to assume that Langan's haunted house framework acknowledges established Gothic stories by examining loss, existential dread, and emotional distress while also reinforcing the novel's core themes of guilt and innate desire to be punished.

Furthermore, Jacques Derrida's theory of "hauntology" provides a crucial framework for understanding the true nature of Belvedere House as it highlights how ghostly presences disrupt physical boundaries and expose unresolved loss. Derrida (1994/2006) asserts that "the specter is a paradoxical incorporation, the becoming-body, a certain phenomenal and carnal form of the spirit" (p. 5), suggesting that ghosts embody unresolved disruptions of time and identity. In this sense, The Belvedere House functions not merely as a haunted space but as an architectural manifestation of Roger's internalized losses, where the past persistently intrudes upon the present. The blurring of temporal boundaries within the house mirrors the collapse of Roger's psyche, illustrating Derrida's (1994/2006) understanding: "Haunting belongs to the structure of every hegemony" (p. 46). Thus, Roger's descent into the spectral atmosphere of The Belvedere House signifies his entrapment, where mourning remains continually repeated. This further pushes Roger's mental state into distress and turmoil, causing him grief and pain. Roger's fixation with the Belvedere House can also be interpreted through Freud's theory of the death drive, also known as Thanatos, the instinctual

compulsion toward self-destruction and a return to an inorganic state. Freud (1920/2010a) describes this drive as “an urge inherent in organic life to restore an earlier state of things” (p. 3738), suggesting that life harbors a covered tendency toward its own undoing. Roger’s decision to reinhabit the very site of his greatest psychic wounds will reflect this regressive pull towards his own destruction. Rather than healing, Roger’s behavior activates a cycle of compulsive repetition that culminates in his symbolic and literal self-destruction. Thus, the Belvedere House operates as the architectural expression of Thanatos, guiding Roger inexorably toward the collapse of both his psychic and physical existence due to his broken relationship with his son and the consequent guilt.

This cycle of destructive repetition also extends into Roger’s personal history, where his tense relationship with his father and early traumas shape the guilt and hauntings that later dominate his life with his own relationship with Ted. Roger goes through physical abuse by his father and eventually loses both of his parents to cancer while he is still very young, and much to his rejection, his familial relationships shape him as a parent: “Suffice it to say, his father was not the most supportive of men. Roger denied his family having any effect on him whatsoever, but obviously, watching everyone he loved relentlessly ground down affected him at the very deepest level” (Langan, 2009/2017, p. 23). This leads to an unconscious desire to be different from his family, which could explain why he stays in an unhappy first marriage for so long, since he does not want a separated or shattered family, and why he treats Ted the way he does, which could be considered unjust and extremely harsh. All of these repressed feelings and childhood trauma Roger goes through support and drive the main focal point of the story, which is the trauma of losing a loved one in a sudden and violent death. Since Roger directly feels responsible for his loss, the story turns into a chain of events that will lead to feelings of guilt and an innate desire for punishment.

Parents’ interactions with their children are frequently shaped by their own personal history, beliefs, desires, and unfulfilled needs, in addition to their firsthand experiences with the child. In “Attachment and Reflective Function: Their Role in Organization,” Peter Fonagy and Mary Target (1997) argue that “[t]he child’s development and perception of mental states in himself and others thus depends on his observation of the mental world of his caregiver” (p. 690). Therefore Roger’s own personal beliefs and values are also shaped by his childhood years since he does not have proper parental guidance and goes through abuse and childhood trauma, creating a paradoxical chain of toxic parental behavior. All these stem from the fact that Roger has an abusive alcoholic father who beats him and his

siblings viciously: “If the offending party was close enough, Father’s hand would lash out and catch us where he could, the jaw, the cheek, the ear. He did not believe in pulling his punches” (Langan, 2009/2017, p. 58). This cycle of violence and dread carves itself into Roger’s view of what authority, parental affection, and discipline are supposed to look like. It leaves marks that never fully heal, quietly steering how he later tries and fails to navigate fatherhood and human connection.

In “Validity of Attachment Theory” Rebecca M. Bolen (2000) explains the relationship between the parent and the child as an innate human mechanism that encourages children to seek out their caregivers’ or parents’ presence and attention when they feel frightened or upset because it guarantees that the child’s needs for comfort and security are satisfied, thus it is crucial for survival. Bolen (2000) suggests that a child forms a stable attachment when they receive loving, caring, and responsive attention from their parents. Knowing that they can always turn to their parents for support and comfort gives a securely attached child the confidence to explore the world. The child can develop good connections as an adult due to this foundation of safety and trust. However, children may exhibit insecure patterns of attachment if they get care that is inconsistent, careless, or unresponsive (Bolen, 2000). As parents, these people may struggle to give the emotional stability and security that their children require. They may either smother their children with excessive care and concern or, similar to Roger’s relationship with Ted, withdraw emotionally, unwittingly creating a situation in which their children feel neglected or uncertain about their parents’ affection. Therefore, a person’s method of parenting may be significantly impacted by childhood trauma.

Early trauma can have both explicit and implicit consequences on a person's interactions with their children, influencing anything from emotional control to discipline and parenting views. Childhood trauma can have a dramatic and long-term impact on a person, altering how they interact with the world and build relationships. Freud (1939/2010e) explains this in *Moses and Monotheism* as:

A trauma in childhood may be followed immediately by a neurotic outbreak, an infantile neurosis, with an abundance of efforts at defence, and accompanied by the formation of symptoms. This neurosis may last a considerable time and cause marked disturbances, but it may also run a latent course and be overlooked. As a rule defence retains the upper hand in it; in any case alterations of the ego, comparable to scars, are left behind. (p. 4902)

These “scars” are formed during formative years and can shape people’s beliefs, behaviors, and emotional responses, as is seen in both Roger and Ted. Those who are neglected, abused, or received inconsistent care as children may have insecure attachments to their parents. This can appear in adulthood as an anxious attachment style, in which a person becomes overly attached or afraid of abandonment, or an avoidant attachment style, in which a person withdraws emotionally and has difficulties building close relationships.

The reasons behind Roger’s parenting style and the ideals he forces upon Ted could be linked to the trauma he himself went through during his childhood. Although he does not physically hurt Ted at any point during his childhood, nor is he an abusive alcoholic, he would mentally distress Ted with his approach to parenting. For instance, when Ted is a child, Roger sits down and reads to him every day, to Ted’s great disinterest, which makes Roger disappointed with his son. Furthermore, Roger would ask him various questions about the books he reads to Ted, and if he fails to answer those questions, Roger would punish him by making him sit on the couch for an hour while making it clear he is disappointed with him (Langan, 2009/2017). One might think that there is nothing wrong with encouraging children to read; however, guilting them whilst putting parental affection on the line and punishing them in a way that would not encourage them positively could hinder the relationship between the parent and the children, similar to Roger and Ted. Despite Ted being later diagnosed as dyslexic, and even after getting help from professionals, he does not show any interest in reading, which further fuels Roger’s disappointment (Langan, 2009/2017).

It is important to note that growing up in an environment where physical punishment and cruelty were daily occurrences, despite trying to distance himself and trying to be different and be better than his father, Roger may have unconsciously internalized a belief that authority is exerted through control, rather than understanding and compassion. As a result, his relationship with Ted becomes strained, as he struggles to express love in a way that is not clouded by the harshness of his upbringing. This might be why he thinks his ideals and method of doing things would benefit Ted’s development, since his values and world views have been shaped in an environment that would enforce stricter principles and values. He projects his beliefs onto Ted, and they consequently backfire because, despite his wishes, Ted enlists in the army:

His expectations for his son circled a fixed point, which was academia, and the military was light years away from that. If Ted had decided to move up to being an officer, it wouldn't have mattered. Roger would have taken that as further proof that Ted was wasting his abilities. (Langan, 2009/2017, p. 24)

Rather than walking the same path as his father, Ted decides to join the army, a choice that cuts sharply against Roger's hopes and leaves him disappointed, while seeing the decision as a personal betrayal and a rejection of his core beliefs rather than as an expression of his individuality, despite not displaying it on a surface level. Roger had pictured a future where his son would follow an academic track, but Ted goes into a life that pulls them even further apart, stretching an already fragile bond to the breaking point. Roger's tense relationship with his only son, Ted, is at the heart of his downfall.

Although Roger's flawed parenting and the collapse of his first marriage to Joanne significantly strain his relationship with Ted and contribute to his son's decision to enlist, their final conversation, marked by anger and emotional rupture, becomes the decisive breaking point in their bond. This conversation happens shortly after Ted learns about Roger's divorce from his mother, Joanne, and his subsequent new marriage to Veronica. Upon learning this news, he gets into a physical fight with him, leaving Roger hospitalized because of a cardiac arrest that is seemingly caused by the intensity of the incident. During the conversation, he disowns and curses Ted in a manner that could only be described as egotistical and spiteful, since he notes how Ted is a disappointment to him while also using a language that befits his own academic status to further berate and insult Ted. He restates that he viewed Ted as a lifelong disappointment, recalling his struggles with reading as a child, his self-indulgence during adolescence, and his unquestioning obedience to authority as an adult, which he saw as a hollow career choice since he enlisted in the military (Langan, 2009/2017). He even says, "Boy, the best part of you dribbled down your mother's leg" (Langan, 2009/2017, p. 41). To him, Ted's life had been, and always would be, meaningless. So, he chooses to sever all ties, rejecting their familial bond and declaring the son a stranger by stating:

As of this moment, I am no longer your father; you are no longer my son. I disown you; I cast you from me. All bonds between us are sundered; let our blood no longer be true. And when you die, may you know fitting torment; may you not escape your failure. You are a stranger to me. (Langan, 2009/2017, p. 42)

In doing so, Roger expresses a final wish that, in the end, Ted would fully grasp the weight of his supposed failures before turning away for good. This would become the cornerstone

behind Roger's guilt and the catalyst for the supernatural occurrences that Roger and Veronica would be subjected to, as the curse not only leads to events that end with Ted's death but also presumably leads to Veronica having a miscarriage immediately after Roger disowns Ted.

Roger's curse and his disowning of Ted become a pivotal point that affects not only him but also Veronica. She states: "I had no doubt the miscarriage had been part of the price Roger had paid for cursing Ted" (Langan, 2009/2017, p. 212). Veronica's miscarriage is a highly symbolic and emotional event, and her blame for Roger originates from her strained relationship with him, as well as the emotional impact of their situation, which can best be described as getting haunted by the physical and emotional manifestation of Roger's guilt. In a way, by disowning Ted in such fashion, he not only loses one child but two on the same day, since Veronica gets hospitalized with a miscarriage shortly after Roger and Ted's last conversation. Furthermore, the miscarriage of Veronica is followed by visions that include blood and bloody imagery in general (Langan, 2009/2017). That is why Veronica blames Roger's negligence and fixation on Ted and the Belvedere House for the miscarriage. His emotional absence and his dysfunctional relationship with Ted have cost them both dearly, and the blood becomes a physical symbol of that cost. Blood acts as a link between the supernatural parts of the story and reality. In an article entitled "The Blood Motif in Culture—Forming Narratives: Morphology and Semantics," Nikola Danišová and Simona Klimková (2023) suggest that "Blood, in its negative aspect, always refers to the cruel and violent acts of malevolent characters, hence it often appears as an unquestionable proof/sign of guilt" (p. 75). Since blood could be interpreted as a symbol of guilt, all of this can be seen as a desire to bleed out the guilt symbolically and suffer in ways that would balance the scales of Roger's mistakes. Thus, it is a larger theme behind his obsession with atonement. Consequently, this symbolic act of self-harm is connected to the motif of blood, which emphasizes Roger's tragic and ultimately futile search for atonement.

Moreover, although never fully defined or described in specific terms, "the thing" that haunts them continues to be an enigmatic and unnerving presence throughout the story, although it is perceived as the ghost Ted by Roger and Veronica since it is deeply connected to mental and emotional suffering of Roger as well as the paranormal or supernatural activity that occurs around the the Belvedere House. Derrida (1994/2006) states: "...we have [our ghosts], but memories no longer recognize such borders; by definition, they pass through walls, these revenants, day and night, they trick consciousness and skip generations." (p. 36)

Ted's ghost is similar since he is not bound by physics and shifts through windows and glass. He appears to have glass eyes, while the skin around them looks like it has been stretched, giving him a tortured look (Langan, 2009/2017). The ghost combines a projection of Roger's intense sadness and remorse since it has that distinct look of someone who has gone through immense torture, while being an internalized supernatural representation of guilt to trick his mind and make him question reality. More importantly, it recurrently asks for blood, and most of its dialogues revolve around blood: "The thing in the corner had asked for blood and pain" (Langan, 2009/2017, p. 212). This perfectly encapsulates the significance of Roger's curse, which disowned Ted by stating that their blood is "no longer true" (Langan, 2009/2017, pp. 41–42). Veronica also makes the same connection by stating, "Despite my inability to relegate Roger's cursing Ted to the past, not once did it occur to me that the... strangeness might be the result of him pronouncing, 'Let our blood no longer be true' " (Langan, 2009/2017, p. 89). Blood represents the moral and emotional toll that Roger's curse has taken on Ted. The curse, which Roger utters in a fit of unbridled rage, turns into symbolic blood on his hands. This symbolic guilt becomes a concrete and unchangeable reality after Ted dies in Afghanistan. Roger believes the blood has tainted every part of his life, and he believes that the death of his son was a direct result of his curse. This traumatic event is the reason why he is haunted by the specters of the past. Moreover, the house itself turns into a symbolic representation of Roger's superego, with every paranormal occurrence and supernatural phenomenon reflecting his inner turmoil. Thus, Roger is judged by the Belvedere House, not just haunted by it.

The ghost of Ted thus emerges not only from Roger's psychological torment but also from the destructive force of his curse, which transforms a moment of rage into the catalyst for both his haunting and his descent into moral masochism. Misunderstandings, pride, and unresolved grief characterize the relationship of these characters, which ends in a disastrous fight that leads to Roger cursing his son out of anger and emotional weakness. Consequently, this becomes the starting point of his haunting. This curse is more than just an outburst since it becomes a pivotal point in the life of Roger and the source of his ongoing psychological and paranormal suffering. In both metaphorical and literal ways, Roger is haunted by the weight of that moment and the sheer force of words uttered in rage and sorrow. His guilt becomes unbearable after Ted dies in Afghanistan, causing him to become angry with himself and use his curse as a representation of his own incompetence as a father. This is why Roger is unable to forgive himself, and in order to find any semblance of peace or

comfort, he unconsciously enables his own supernatural haunting and subsequently gets caught in a vicious cycle of self-punishment and moral masochism. Roger's curse is not simply an emotional reaction but a curse in both a literal and figurative sense. His words take on an almost supernatural power, serving as a device for punishment that pushes him further into guilt and despair. In many ways, his curse acts as a self-fulfilling prophecy; his anger at Ted, fueled by years of unresolved resentment, becomes the very thing that Roger fixates upon in the aftermath of Ted's death. Julia Briggs (2012), in "The Ghost Story," argues that ghost stories operate within an alternative framework of cause and effect, where supernatural occurrences are borne from unresolved transgressions or secrets from the past. She explains that "an unburied corpse, a murder victim or some other secret apparently buried safely in the past returns to haunt the perpetrator" (p. 177). Roger's guilt aligns with this concept, as his own buried guilt over his strained relationship with Ted resurfaces in the form of paranormal occurrences and the resurfacing of Ted's ghost multiple times throughout the novel. Therefore, it can be argued that Roger's inability to move forward keeps his past ever-present, manifesting as repetitive haunting visions of Ted, inexplicable supernatural occurrences, and an overwhelming sense of dread within the Belvedere House.

As the story goes on, Roger's desire for punishment emerges as one of his most unique characteristics. His guilt turns into a masochistic desire to get punished after Ted passes away. This desire is not merely abstract; it takes on more concrete and destructive forms. "Roger might repent his actions and be forgiven, but that wouldn't mean he wouldn't have to atone for them" (Langan, 2009/2017, p. 327). This statement from Veronica very carefully deconstructs Roger's feelings towards his guilt as Freud (1924/2010c) states, "The fact that moral masochism is unconscious leads us to an obvious clue. We were able to translate the expression 'unconscious sense of guilt' as meaning a need for punishment" (p. 4081). While detained in a cell after his physical fight with Ted, he has his first encounter with the entity that is going to haunt him for the rest of the story. When asked why it is there, it replies with "blood" and "pain," and in response, Roger points to his heart and says, "here—you want pain, take it," and strikes a deal with the entity (Langan, 2009/2017, p. 201). This shows Roger's leniency in receiving punishment. In *How Pleasure Works: The New Science of Why We Like What We Like*, Paul Bloom (1963/2010) states, "What is more interesting is that we get pain from pleasure and pleasure from pain." (p. 51). Thus, even if it is unconscious, Roger thinks that the only way to relieve his suffering is through pain. This is why he withdraws to the Belvedere House, which is already replete with echoes of regret and sadness

since it housed his first unsuccessful marriage, while also letting its oppressive atmosphere amplify his feelings of failure. As if he feels he deserves to be consumed by the oppressive weight of the house, he appears to seek out its darkest corners purposefully. Derrida (1994/2006) states that ghosts always come back. That might be the reason why he develops almost a ritualistic obsession with Ted's death, reliving parts of their last fight in repetitive cycles, reciting the curse he spoke, and subsequently punishing himself every time, since hauntings happen in a repetitive cycle according to Derrida. The need for punishment that Roger has begins to overlap with the otherworldly aspects of the mansion. He appears to see visions of Ted, alive but inaccessible, through the windows and glass, which serve as doors or mirrors into the past and alternate realities. Veronica sees the visions of Ted before Roger does, but she describes the visions, or more accurately, Ted as evil or disturbed (Langan, 2009/2017, p. 216). Yet, when confronted about this, Roger says, "No, I am sorry, I understand you have undergone some type of disturbing experience today, but that was not Ted you saw. You are mistaken" (Langan, 2009/2017, p. 216). That is because, ultimately, he is aware of the fact that the entity they encounter is not actually his resurrected son but a supernatural manifestation of his deeply seated guilt and remorse. Since he is unable to move past his guilt, the ghost continues to haunt him.

Furthermore, Ted's ghost haunts Roger and Veronica in multiple ways throughout the novel, both psychologically and supernaturally. The haunting is strongly tied to Roger's unresolved guilt and manifests in repetitive, disturbing experiences through the final parts of the novel. It is also important to note that one of the most prominent ways Ted's ghost haunts Roger is by guilting him about leaving Ted's mom, Joanne, for much younger Veronica, since, upon learning this, Ted and Roger's strained relationship comes to a complete end. The ghost directly tells Roger that:

'THIS IS ABOUT YOU LEAVING MY MOTHER FOR SOME TEENAGED SLUT. THIS IS ABOUT YOU BREAKING UP A THIRTY-EIGHT-YEAR MARRIAGE SO YOU COULD GET YOUR DICK WET. THIS IS ABOUT YOU SPITTING IN THE FACE OF THE WOMAN WHO GAVE HER LIFE TO YOU.' (Langan, 2009/2017, p. 95)

Ted's ghost serves as both a literal and symbolic force of accusation, resurfacing Roger's unconscious guilt and forcing him to confront the decisions that ultimately fractured his first marriage and family. As the supernatural manifestations escalate, they become more than just echoes of the past but active, malevolent forces within the house. Roger begins to hear Ted's voice reverberate through the walls, the floor, and the glass, whispering accusations.

The windows of the Belvedere House reflect distorted images of Ted, showing a version of him twisted with anger and sorrow, reinforcing Roger's perception that he is being judged by the very person he wronged the most. This also shows the innate guilt that Roger may carry for ending his marriage with Joanne, since the ghost reflects his inner psyche and turmoil. Thus, it is possible to come to the conclusion that the ghost of Ted also serves as a doppelganger or double to Roger's guilty psyche, who repeatedly comes back to haunt him for the mistakes that he made. Even though traditionally doppelgangers or doubles in English are expected to have the physical appearance of their other halves, Otto Rank (1914/1971), who first coined the term, states in *The Double: A Psychoanalytic Study* that:

[the double] has been a question either of a physical double, which takes a more distantly related form in the comedies of mistaken identities) or of a likeness which has been detached from the ego and become an individual being (shadow, reflection, portrait). (pp. 19–20)

As Rank (1914/1971) suggests, a double does not always necessarily have to be an exact physical reflection of its counterpart, but rather it could be a projection of the ego's unresolved problems as well. In this case, Ted's ghost serves as a supernatural doppelganger for Roger's psychological state, his voice acting as an externalized version of Roger's guilt and need for self-punishment. Henceforth, Ted's ghost could also be viewed as a reflection of Roger's disturbed ego since it berates and guilt's him for the actions he took. It continues to serve as a representation of Roger's unconscious turmoil, embodying the very guilt and regret that Roger refuses to confront fully. Thus, it is reasonable to conclude that the ghost's accusations are a direct reflection of Roger's fractured psyche, emphasizing how deeply embedded his sense of failure and guilt is.

When presented with a chance to lift his curse and haunting, Roger indicates that it would not actually settle the ghost's unresolved issues since its only purpose is to humiliate him (Langan, 2009/2017). Hence, it could be said that the ghost does not have an actual personality on its own; thus, it also does not have a vendetta against Roger, but rather reinforces the idea that it is a manifestation of Roger's deeply seated desire for pain. In "Foucault's Response to Freud: Sado-Masochism and the Aestheticization of Power," Suzanne Gearhart (1955) states that "masochism is clearly capable of converting the displeasure or pain of repression into pleasure" (p. 392). In line with the Freudian concepts of the pleasure principle and moral masochism, this explains Roger's innate desire to receive punishment. According to Freud (1924/2010c), moral masochism is characterized by an intensified sadistic superego that finds fulfillment in punishing the ego. This is the exact

reason why Roger constructs his own suffering, using the supernatural as a coping mechanism for self-inflicted punishment in a masochistic way. Interestingly enough, Veronica also comes to the same conclusion by referring back to the sessions and analyses that the couple had with the psychiatrist, Dr. Hawkins, whom they began to see upon dealing with these supernatural occurrences. Hawkins thinks Roger has created the haunting himself so he can force himself into a confrontation with Ted, thereby keeping his guilt alive (Langan, 2009/2017). Freud (1924/2010c) suggests:

The satisfaction of this unconscious sense of guilt is perhaps the most powerful bastion in the subject's (usually composite) gain from illness— in the sum of forces which struggle against his recovery and refuse to surrender his state of illness. The suffering entailed by neuroses is precisely the factor that makes them valuable to the masochistic trend. ("The Economic Problem of Masochism," p. 4078)

In this sense, Roger continues to seek discomfort and pain because deep in his mind. This pushes him to live a repetitive cycle of hauntings while reinforcing the idea that he is embodying moral masochism to confront his guilt.

Roger's compulsive return to the Belvedere House and his obsessive reliving of the past exemplify what Freud (1914/2010g) describes in "Remembering, Repeating and Working-Through" as repetition compulsion. Rather than recalling past trauma in a reflective or integrative way, Roger acts it out unconsciously. As Freud (1914/2010g) explains: "the patient does not remember anything of what he has forgotten and repressed, but acts it out. He reproduces it not as a memory but as an action; he repeats it, without, of course, knowing that he is repeating it" (p. 2501). Freud (1914/2010g) notes that such repetition is often a substitute for memory when trauma cannot be directly confronted: "As long as the patient is in the treatment, he cannot escape from this compulsion to repeat; and in the end we understand that this is his way of remembering" (p. 2502). Roger's reenactments are not merely symptoms of unresolved grief but expressions of moral masochism. Veronica observes that Roger wants to be punished, and the house gives him just that (Langan, 2009/2017). Therefore, Roger's return to the Belvedere House is not just a grieving act, but a masochistic submission to haunting, a psychic punishment shaped by loss and guilt. He is not seeking closure; he is seeking to suffer. Moreover, Roger's psychic wound is not an external invasion but a deeply embedded part of his sense of self, enacted repeatedly through rituals and hallucinations. As Freud (1895/2010b) states in *Studies on Hysteria*, "Hysterics suffer mainly from reminiscences" (p. 10). Yet it should be noted that

in Roger's case, those reminiscences are never verbalized; they are staged. The haunted house becomes both a setting and a symbol for his repetitive cycle of trauma and guilt.

Furthermore, in "A Clinical Note on Moral Masochism: Eckerman's Relationship to Goethe," K. R. Eissler (1953) states that "the ego wisely uses its store of masochism in its adaptation to reality" (p. 286), which indicates the way Roger copes with his trauma and guilt. His psyche has become so intertwined with his guilt and shame that he cannot imagine an existence without it, and thus, he refuses to cast away the ghost. The haunting persists because Roger himself unconsciously wills it to continue, unable to forgive himself for the past and unwilling to accept a reality where Ted is completely gone, further making him suffer in a repetitive cycle. Even when faced with the direct presence of Ted's ghost, Roger refuses to acknowledge the possibility of ending the suffering. Veronica urges him to lift the curse, to take back his disownment of Ted, but Roger remains resolute, gripping onto his pain: "It's not that you're fooling yourself—you are, but not the way I thought. It isn't that simple. You don't want to lift the curse because you're afraid that it'll make Ted go away" (Langan, 2009/2017, p. 302). It should be noted that the real reason why Roger cannot let go is his guilt and desire for redemption through pain rather than being considerate of Ted's well-being. Veronica states: "You don't care that he's suffering—you think that, as long as you keep him around, as long as he isn't gone, lost once and for all, there's a chance for, what? Some kind of reconciliation?" (Langan, 2009/2017, p. 302). Roger wants to reconcile with Ted only to get rid of his shame. Yet, by doing so, he intentionally suffers at the hands of Ted's ghost.

Moreover, during the final confrontation with Ted's ghost, when Roger is convinced to directly face the ghost by Veronica at long last, she passes out while feeling like the house is on fire, symbolizing the way Ted dies, an incident caused by a rocket-propelled grenade. When she comes to her senses later, she realizes that both Ted and Roger are gone (Langan, 2009/2017). This can be understood as a moment of letting go of his sense of self, where he lets go of his guilt and shame to face his son, while subsequently letting go of his self-image since he identifies himself with his guilt and shame up to this point. This disappearance suggests that by finally confronting his past and his guilt, Roger has shed the identity he has clung to for so long. His decision to face Ted is significant because it marks a shift from avoidance to direct engagement. For most of the novel, Roger resists acknowledging the true nature of his haunting, insisting that the ghost is something other than an extension of his

psyche. By stepping into the confrontation, he symbolically lets go of the false constructs he has built around himself. In *The Ego and the Id*, Freud (1923/2010d) states:

In the end, we come to see that we are dealing with what may be called a ‘moral’ factor, a sense of guilt which is finding its satisfaction in the illness and refuses to give up the punishment of suffering. (p. 3984)

Since Roger’s guilt is so extreme that it causes his supernatural haunting, when he gives it up and lets go, it leads to the destruction of his ego and subsequently makes him physically disappear as well. The fact that he and Ted both disappear suggests that Roger’s personal identity is no longer needed; his entire existence had become centered on his suffering, and by facing it, he effectively erases himself, concluding his story.

After Roger’s mysterious disappearance, Veronica comes up with three imaginary possible scenarios in which she tries to explain what could have happened to him. In one of them, she pictures that Roger and Ted are reunited, and Ted’s body is restored to its state before the explosion (Langan, 2009/2017). Veronica vividly imagines that Roger is saying this to Ted during their climactic reunion:

Son—Ted—I am sorry; I am so very sorry. This has—all of this, I fear, has been my doing—my responsibility. The fruit of my words—my curse, to call it truly. I was—I was—it isn’t enough—I was angry. I’m not trying to excuse myself—there is no excuse, none at all... What is there left for me to do except beg for your forgiveness? I am sorry, my boy—oh God, I am so sorry. (Langan, 2009/2017, p. 325)

This is not just an apology; this is an admission of the cost of his actions, as he believes that his curses, words of rage and disappointment, have created the supernatural chain reaction that has killed Ted and caused his spectral return. This horrible, vicious linguistic framework to Roger’s curse gives this moment a psychological weight. Veronica’s imagining of Roger’s reunion with Ted symbolizes the complete victory of the superego over the ego as moral masochism attains its peak. Freud (1924/2010c) explains moral masochism as a dynamic where the subject actively pursues suffering not because of pleasure per se, but precipitated by guilt and demand for ethical redemption. The repetition with which Roger says he is sorry and his plea for forgiveness show that psychic collapse arises from his conscience and his inability to contain the emotional aftermath of what he had done earlier. This moment, then, is a Gothic embodiment of Freud’s insight that guilt demands punishment, and in Roger’s case, this punishment constitutes a form of supernatural haunting and self-condemnation.

Langan's *House of Windows* serves as a haunting exploration of trauma, repetitive cycles, and guilt. Roger's downfall illustrates the paradoxical nature of grief and the way past actions continue to resurface, shaping the present and the future, guilt, and suffering. His story showcases how guilt can lead to moral masochism through seeking pain to alleviate feelings of shame and regret. He is the reason why Ted is pushed into enlisting in the army and is killed. Since he curses and disowns him, further pushing him away, he feels directly responsible and seeks punishment. Addressing masochism in this regard can be particularly difficult because a person may struggle with ingrained feelings of worthlessness or a belief that they must pay for their moral failures. In "Clinical Observations on Masochistic Character Structure," Robert Alan Glick (2012) states that:

While it is a truism that pain and suffering are inescapable in life, interwoven with our common experiences of disappointment, failure, regret, loss, grief, shame, and guilt, the driven pursuit of misery in masochism requires a complex and more disquieting understanding of mental life. (p. 77)

The bond between Roger and Ted, and even more so, the unraveling of Roger's mind, fuels his deep inner conflict and an unspoken drive to be punished. Caught in a grim loop, Roger lets pain and suffering wash over him again and again, as though enduring it might somehow settle the debt of his guilt, shame, and regret. What he does is not random; it fits squarely within the framework of moral masochism, where guilt burrows so deep that the person almost welcomes suffering as a twisted form of redemption. Roger does not just feel guilty; instead, the immense feelings of shame and guilt occupy his whole mindset as they affect how he thinks, how he sees the world, how he relates to others, and finally, how he understands himself. In the end, Roger's real tormentor is never Ted's specter but the crushing weight of his own past mistakes, which he could neither outrun nor atone for. Through Roger's fate, *House of Windows* lays bare the uneasy ties between morality, self-image, shame, and how guilt can fester into the desire, or the perceived need for self-inflicted punishment.

Overall, in *House of Windows*, the psychological descent of Roger into guilt and self-imposed suffering exemplifies how contemporary American Gothic fiction intertwines psychological trauma with architectural space to articulate both personal and cultural anxieties. The Belvedere House, functioning as a heterotopia being "outside of all places" (Foucault, 1986, p. 24), yet bound to every reality it reflects, portrays a material manifestation of Roger's internal fragmentation, where windows literalize the collapse of boundaries between past and present, reality and the supernatural. This relationship parallels

Botting's (2014) observation that Gothic spaces externalize states of fear and instability with Spooner's (2007) claim that the genre provides means for narrativizing both private anxieties and guilt. Furthermore, from a post-9/11 context, the guilt that haunts Roger reflects the public discourse of the era, situating the novel within a broader American context. It is also crucial to note that his moral masochism and his unconscious compulsion to seek punishment for the way he treated his son portray Freud's (1924/2010c) understanding of the ego's need to suffer as atonement for guilt. In this way, the novel situates Roger's personal haunting within a contemporary American Gothic discourse in which domestic spaces become unstable, uncanny sites where suppressed past fears and mistakes resurface. This chapter's analysis thus demonstrates that *House of Windows* uses its haunted setting not only to dramatize the destructive cycles of repression and repetition but also to reveal how contemporary American Gothic fiction can transform personal grief and guilt into a stage for exploring the human drive toward self-punishment.

3. MOURNING, REPETITION, AND THE ALLURE OF SELF-DESTRUCTION IN *THE FISHERMAN*: DESCENT OF DAN INTO MORAL MASOCHISM

This chapter examines how John Langan's *The Fisherman* explores the relationship between trauma, guilt, and moral masochism within the framework of contemporary American Gothic, where haunted landscapes and cultural myths are externalized in a personal manner. Set in the Catskill Mountains of New York, primarily around fictional Dutchman's Creek near the real-life Ashokan Reservoir, the novel draws on the isolation, natural eeriness, and tragic history of displacement tied to the reservoir in order to construct a setting that embodies both psychological and supernatural dread. The story is further structured through the story of "Der Fischer," narrated by Howard, which functions as both an in-universe folktale and a parallel to the experiences of Abe and Dan. Both narratives center on grieving men who turn to supernatural means to revive the dead, illustrating an underlying masochistic desire to suffer caused by guilt. Within this Gothic framework, the novel portrays moral masochism as a coping mechanism for trauma through the contrasting figures of Dan and Abe. Most importantly, Dan exemplifies moral masochism, seeking unconscious punishment and self-destruction after causing the tragic death of his family, whereas Abe undergoes a more reflective transformation, channeling his grief into contemplation following the loss of his wife to cancer. By connecting Gothic elements and psychological conflict, *The Fisherman* demonstrates how contemporary American Gothic renders trauma and guilt into a supernatural struggle that highlights moral masochism. Within this context, the story of "Der Fischer" functions as a crucial narrative framework, reinforcing the novel's American Gothic dimensions by linking setting and myth with psychological elements and framing Dan's experiences within a broader cultural and intertextual tradition of grief and resurrection. Therefore, it is essential to explore the story of "Der Fischer" before thoroughly analysing the historical significance of the Ashokan Reservoir or Dan's psychological descent into moral masochism, to provide a structured context for this chapter.

"Der Fischer" is told to generation after generation, from characters such as Lottie Schmidt to Reverend Mapple to Howard, and it is the narrative framework of the novel, mixing in-universe myths and psychological trauma. The story is a tale of guilt and

resurrection, and of the steep price one pays for not letting go of the dead. Howard recounts that in the late nineteenth century, near the area now known as Dutchman's Creek, a wealthy, cruel landowner named Cornelius Dort lived in a mansion with his much younger, ailing wife, Beatrice. Shortly afterward, a strange, mysterious man known only as "the Guest" appears. He is described to have an otherworldly quality: "The man was dressed all in black, and his face showed none of the lines you'd expect the decades to have carved onto it" (Langan, 2016/2023, p. 94). The Guest quickly becomes Dort's confidant and eventually his heir after Dort's mysterious death. Years later, during the early twentieth-century construction of the Ashokan Reservoir, the tale shifts to Rainer Schmidt, a German academic turned stonemason, and his daughter Lottie. They become neighbors with George, a fellow laborer (Langan, 2016/2023). When Helen sees George having an affair with another man, she rushes outside to the street in the heat of the moment and suddenly gets trampled by mules. Then George comes into contact with the same Guest who does not seem to age, and he offers to bring her back as George states to Rainer: "The man understands what it is to lose—what it is to lose. He listens. He understands. He doesn't see why a man should suffer for what he didn't mean to do in the first place" (Langan, 2016/2023, p. 105). So George accepts, and the horror intensifies as his mental state deteriorates and the unnatural presence of newly resurrected Helen begins to affect others. Rainer notes that her physical appearance is also altered since her eyes are entirely made out of gold with small black pupils. Her body still bears the trauma of her death since she was stamped. She looks "jagged, misshapen," bearing the aftereffects of the accident (Langan, 2016/2023, p. 104).

Upon coming back to life, Helen's behavior completely becomes alien as she gets aggressive and predatory, attempting to reclaim her children from their neighbors, Regina and Italo's care (Langan, 2016/2023). Her speaking tone has changed, and now she has a foreign accent which people around her cannot understand (Langan, 2016/2023). This indicates that the physical being they see is not the same as Helen, who has passed away. When Regina refuses to give the children up, she becomes violent and tries to grab one of her children by force, hurting his arm in the process. Later on, she also assaults Lottie, slamming her against a closet door and speaking a "death tongue" that seems both incomprehensible and psychologically oppressive (Langan, 2016/2023, pp. 139–140). After these encounters, Lottie becomes emotionally and spiritually ill, with Rainer stating, "Her soul is sick, very sick... that woman has done violence to a part of Lottie we cannot see or touch" (Langan, 2016/2023, pp. 148–149). Furthermore, Helen's words do not translate in

the conventional sense, as Lottie experiences them as visions. Lottie is physically transported to a vast, storm-wrecked black ocean, full of floating, possibly the dead, each one speaking their monologue of pain, rage, guilt, and their most repressed taboo-driven fantasies: “She’s joined a monologue about a man, one of the girl’s father’s friends. Using the kind of language that would earn Lottie a smack upside the head from Clara and a night in her room without supper, the girl is describing the most pornographic of fantasies about this fellow” (Langan, 2016/2023, pp. 141–142). These voices are endless and overwhelming, and it can be understood that the language Helen is using is not meant to be understood intellectually, but felt viscerally, as they symbolize deep human emotions and the psyche. Lastly, Helen says to Lottie: “He waits, girl...He will always be waiting for you” (Langan, 2016/2023, p. 146). This final sentence is very symbolic. Certainly, “he” is Der Fischer or the Fisherman, the supernatural entity of grief and resurrection, who is the central antagonist of the folktale. Helen’s last message is a threat and a prophecy as the culmination of grief, personified by the Fisherman, is patient, inevitable, and omnipresent, just like death itself. Trauma is not momentary for Lottie, as for others who have met the Fisherman’s realm; it is ongoing and latent.

In this way, Helen’s transformation and the reservoir’s history illustrate how Langan connects the personal and the historical, using Gothic horror to translate personal grief into a reflection of collective traumas embedded within the American landscape. Spooner (2007) argues that American Gothic narratives frequently interrogate the contradictions embedded within national ideals, revealing how the pursuit of liberty, self-reliance, and transcendence can be overshadowed by disillusionment, moral corruption, and destruction. Langan’s *The Fisherman* exemplifies this dynamic by framing its supernatural horrors within the historical location of the Ashokan Reservoir, which was constructed between 1907 and 1915 in New York’s Catskills (“Ashokan Reservoir Collection,” n.d.). The construction displaced roughly two thousand and five hundred immigrant workers, destroyed a dozen towns, and exhumed more than two thousand and five hundred graves, often with minimal notice or compensation. This act of eminent domain has left “bitter memories for descendants” and continues to reverberate as a form of generational trauma (Shannon, 2022). Langan incorporates this historical displacement into the novel’s central legend, situating its supernatural horrors at Dutchman’s Creek and Ashokan Reservoir, since the voices that Lottie hears or the foreign language that Helen speaks can be interpreted as immigrants voicing out their grievances beyond the grave. This establishes a connection between the

novel's fictional immigrants and the real immigrants who worked on the construction of the Ashokan Reservoir. Therefore, Helen's violent resurrection and the oppressive, otherworldly language she speaks are not merely supernatural horrors but can be interpreted as narrative echoes of these deeper historical wounds, with her incomprehensible voices paralleling the silenced histories of immigrant communities tied to the reservoir. In this way, the novel's Gothic atmosphere derives not only from its narrative elements but also from its geographical setting, as the story of "Der Fischer" becomes inseparable from the real traumas of displacement, loss, and cultural erasure.

Furthermore, Langan transforms the Catskills and Ashokan Reservoir into an American Gothic landscape that is attached to the novel's themes of isolation, grief, and supernatural haunting. Far from just being a location, this upstate New York setting embodies accumulated traumas in a way that Gothic fiction traditionally binds place to psychology and history. In his essay entitled "Gothic Landscapes of the South Critics," Matthew Wynn Sivils (2016) notes that Gothic landscapes often serve as a "warehouse of cultural and individual anxieties" (p. 10), and the setting of *The Fisherman* mirrors this statement. Moreover, "In Dreaming of Leviathan: John Langan's *The Fisherman* and American Folk Horror," Alexandra Hauke states (2020):

Most prominently, *The Fisherman* draws its mysteries from the fundamental juxtaposition between land and water in this eastern-US context, and its alternating allusions to lightness and darkness and thus to safety and danger are rooted in the area's ancient traumata that surround the region's original settlers. The suffering they imported from the old world has infused the topography of their settlement with a mesmerizing power and a simultaneous feeling of impending doom. (p. 176)

The Catskills woods mirror the inner desolation of Abe and Dan as two widowers isolated in their grief retreat to this remote place, and the landscape itself seems to punish them by summoning past horror. In this way, the novel's geographical setting becomes a character in its own right, merging place and theme to actively shape the narrative's terror, mirroring the Belvedere House in *House of Windows*. Thus, Langan's novel contributes to American Gothic discourse by affirming that place and psyche are deeply connected, with landscape, memory, and trauma merging to generate the novel's psychological and social structure. This relationship between the place and the psychology lays the groundwork for understanding the deeper mythic structures that drive the narrative. The same way the Catskills and Ashokan Reservoir embody accumulated trauma, the Fisherman himself emerges as a

personification of guilt's persistence, transforming a mythical legend into a living extension of the landscape's haunted history.

In parallel to the Catskills and Ashokan Reservoir as landscapes marked by trauma, the Fisherman emerges as a mythic figure whose origins embody the persistence of grief, guilt, and their transformation into the supernatural. The Fisherman is not just a myth or a monster lurking in Dutchman's Creek; he is the archetypal embodiment of grief that has transformed into an embodiment of death and guilt. Within "Der Fischer," his backstory is told, and it shows him to be once a Hungarian mortal man who has become something godlike and inhuman after the catastrophic loss of his Turkish wife and children due to a war with the Ottoman Empire. His family is later slain because he thinks that they would be safe if they did not attract attention, but he proves to be wrong (Langan, 2016/2023). The man is devastated beyond the limits of human endurance and does not mourn in a conventional way. Instead, he wants to get them back by any means: "But he survived, and afterwards, once he had finished burying his family, he set off to find the means to get them back, to reclaim them from the axes and swords that had cut them from him" (Langan, 2016/2023, p. 307). Then it is revealed he succeeded: "He broke through the mask... It's like, what surrounds you is only a cover for what really is. This guy went through the cover—he punched a hole in the mask and came out here" (Langan, 2016/2023, p. 308). This is the beginning of the Fisherman's metamorphosis from a grieving man into a metaphysical agent of death and resurrection, which is the main reason why Dan gets interested in this folktale and Dutchman's Creek in the first place. Moreover, the Fisherman's primary goal is to cast his lines into the surface world or the real physical world to capture the mythical being Leviathan, to harness its powers, and to look for others who have lost everything and are desperate to undo death like him (Langan, 2016/2023). These individuals are offered by the Fisherman the thing he could not have, which is reunion. The reunions he facilitates are monstrous. He brings those back, and they are not truly restored, but empty, soulless husks of the dead. The price of trying to reverse death comes with catastrophic consequences, contamination, and more loss. That is why, in order to achieve his goals, he becomes obsessed with Leviathan, which will give him the mystic force that is needed to bring his dead family back.

Whereas the Fisherman illustrates grief transformed into the supernatural agency, the figure of Leviathan introduces a broader mythical and theological framework that structures the novel's metaphysical dimension. Leviathan is a deeper mythical and religious being

beneath the Fisherman's ritualized sorrow, which holds the entire novel's metaphysical and supernatural structure. Since the novel acknowledges biblical figures directly and Abe prefers to be called Abe instead of Abraham because it sounds too biblical³, it is crucial to explore the religious and mythical descriptions of Leviathan to get a better grasp of the overarching narrative. According to the King James Bible (1611/2006), Leviathan is described as "the piercing serpent," "crooked serpent," and "dragon that [is] in the sea" (Isaiah 27:1). Interestingly enough, the devil or satan is also described as a dragon:

And there was war in heaven: Michael and his angels fought against the dragon; and the dragon fought and his angels, And prevailed not; neither was their place found any more in heaven. And the great dragon was cast out, that old serpent, called the Devil, and Satan, which deceiveth the whole world: he was cast out into the earth... (King James Bible, 1611/2006, Revelation 12:7-9)

These verses explicitly identify Leviathan as a sea-dragon, linking it thematically to the dragon of Revelation 12:7-9, who is cast from heaven after waging war and "deceiveth the whole world." In the novel, however, Rainer describes Leviathan as a being who is more than just a devil: "This is something else. The old Egyptians spoke about it as a great serpent with a head of flint, a thing of darkness and chaos... It's closer to a god than it is to a devil" (Langan, 2009/2017, p.108). Thus, he is actually referring to the ancient Egyptian deity Apep, or better known as Apophis.

In the *Handbook of Egyptian Mythology* (2002), it is stated that "Apophis was the most dangerous of the chaos monsters who constantly threatened the divine order. He was sometimes described as a huge crocodile but was usually shown as a giant snake." (Pinch, p. 106) Pinch (2002) further states that "In Egyptian myth, snakes can be divine protectors or symbols of renewal, but the Apophis snake seems to be an entirely destructive force. He was the negative counterpart of the snake form of the creator god" (p. 106). Just like Apophis, Leviathan is the negative twin of creation, a being who is bound up with the destruction of life and chaos rather than its rekindling. While biblical tradition frames Leviathan as a "dragon that [is] in the sea" (King James Bible, 1611/2006, Isaiah 27:1), the novel portrays this being as a mythic chaos entity, known by many names— "Tiamat... Jormungand... Leviathan" (Langan, 2016/2023, p. 170). Leviathan is an entity of primordial chaos exiled from divine order and dwelling in the abyss. Yet, the novel's portrayal inverts

³ At the very beginning of the novel, Abe states: "Don't call me Abraham: call me Abe. Though it's what my ma named me, I've never liked Abraham. It's a name that sounds so full of itself, so Biblical" (Langan, 2016/2023, p. 3).

this biblical cosmological conflict as the Fisherman, unlike the archangel Michael, does not seek to slay the sea-dragon but to capture it, declaring that “if he could set his hook in Leviathan’s jaw, he could bend its strength to his purpose. He could have his wife and children back” (Langan, 2016/2023, p. 180). This act transforms the Fisherman into a twisted counterpart to Michael, not casting the dragon down, but reaching down to claim it, aiming to resurrect his family through its dark, mystical, chaotic powers.

By attempting to “set his hook in Leviathan’s jaw” (Langan, 2016/2023, p. 180), the Fisherman is not only acting out of necromantic ambition but a ritualized repetition compulsion, a Freudian symptom of trauma externalized into myth. Rather than conquer and have dominion over death, the Fisherman attempts to align himself with the very serpent that unleashes chaos upon the world, reenacting his grief through a masochistic and destructive alliance with chaos personified. Leviathan, as Apophis reimagines, becomes a symbolic expression of Freud’s moral masochism, the compulsion to suffer in service of guilt and unresolved loss. This twist on biblical narrative reflects Freud’s theory of moral masochism, in which the subject submits to suffering as a form of unconscious atonement, driven by the punishing demands of the superego (Freud, 1924/2010c). Rather than accept loss, the Fisherman keeps it alive and recurrent, seeking not to overcome grief but to ordain it. Leviathan, as sea-dragon and god of the deep, thus becomes both the object and instrument of grief, representing the externalized superego to which the Fisherman offers his unending penance. In this structure, the dragon is not cast down; it is mythologized, and fished for by those who would rather descend into the abyss than live in a world without the dead. It should also be noted that the dead that are brought back from the abyss are never really restored to their original selves. Their return is not with peace or healing, but with a profound corruption and chaos, signifying Leviathan’s portrayal. These revenants are stripped of memory, emotion, and essence; what returns from the dead is not the person who died, but a hollow, often violent echo. This shows that resurrection, as performed by the Fisherman, is not a holy act but a desecration of death itself that serves chaos and punishment. This is why Dan’s proposal to visit Dutchman’s Creek is motivated not by a desire for closure or healing, but by a compulsion toward self-imposed, masochistic suffering.

Furthermore, Langan’s depiction of the Fisherman’s pursuit of Leviathan, shaped by repetition and moral masochism, positions his demise in a direct intertextual manner with Herman Melville’s *Moby-Dick* (1851), extending an American Gothic tradition that links obsession, trauma, and self-destruction. First of all, the Fisherman ultimately meets his end

in a manner that directly mirrors Captain Ahab's obsessive demise. After centuries of roaming the streams and seas, the Fisherman is finally captured by the very force he once sought to master, dragged into a dark void as he shouts Ahab's final words: "From hell's heart... I stab at thee! For hate's sake, I spit my last breath at thee!" (Langan, 2016/2023, p. 206). This statement is not just a pastiche since the Fisherman places himself in a long literary tradition of characters who defy fate. As with Ahab, the Fisherman is not just a man engulfed in grief, but one who tries to make sense of the universe that defies logical interpretation. Yet, while Ahab's blood is sought in response to the whale as a sign of incomprehensible fate, the Fisherman's pursuit is fueled by an all-consuming will to undo the very power of death and natural order in a masochistic cycle. Hence, it could be stated that Langan reimagines *Moby-Dick* in a way that trades Melville's quest for a black sea beneath Dutchman's Creek, which transforms into an abyss where time and death no longer function. Ultimately, the sea swallows both men, and their acts of defiance are not triumphant but destructive. That makes *The Fisherman* a Gothic composition and a metafictional rewriting of Melville's tragedy since the Fisherman is defeated, but the defeat itself is a reminder to rage and anger against death and fate. Moreover, it is possible to state that Ahab and the Fisherman are both examples of the psychic structure of moral masochism. They are not simply tragic figures, but men who respond to traumatic loss by embracing suffering as psychic and symbolic reparation. Moral masochism is a compulsion to suffer that relieves guilt and gives a perverse pleasure in the superego's demand for punishment (Freud, 1924/2010c). Ahab's loss of his leg symbolizes a psychological wound that destroys his sense of self and character. Thus, it could be stated that his vengeful quest against the whale is not just for the sake of revenge, but it is a compulsive repetition of trauma, an unconscious desire to be punished by the very thing he wholeheartedly hates. Similarly, the Fisherman's descent into the occult is also not simply to reclaim his wife and children, but a repetition of grief and guilt that extends his own suffering. Consequently, the two characters demonstrate the theory of the death drive as they are pulled towards their own destruction, not to end pain, but to merge with the source of the pain (Freud, 1920/2010a).

This parallel emphasizes how both figures transform unresolved trauma into cycles of repetition and self-destruction, which in turn frames the Fisherman as an embodiment of Freud's "death instinct." Freud's (1920/2010a) concept of the death instinct is a psychic compulsion toward self-destruction, repetition, and the return to an inorganic state. After seeing his wife and children torn from him in a violent, senseless killing, the Fisherman slips

into a dark, otherworldly void. He does not seek recovery or solace; instead, he willingly sinks deeper into his grief, choosing to live inside the hollow left by their absence. His transformation into a godlike supernatural figure who haunts the living, lures mourners, and resurrects the dead in monstrous forms aligns with what Freud (1914/2010g) describes as the compulsion to repeat, a key feature of the death instinct. Rather than mourning, the Fisherman endlessly repeats his grief, becoming a figure who draws others into the same cycle. He uses his powers not to restore life, since the people he brings back are the monstrous, empty shells of their former selves. Instead, he drags other mourners into his own unresolved loss, symbolically echoing Freud's (1914/2010g) view that the death instinct resists integration and instead "compels the subject to return to earlier states of being" (p. 2502). In this way, the Fisherman represents not just merely a personal trauma, but a metaphysical form of grief and suffering realized, one that has transcended individual psychology and become mythic, repetitive, and unresolved. It should also be noted that the Guest is the physical identity of the Fisherman in human form, an eternal mourner who has become a god of resurrection and death. The Guest and the Fisherman are two intertwined representations of the same force, the embodiment of unresolved grief, repetition, and the death instinct. While it is never explicitly stated that they are the same being, their parallel characteristics make it obvious. Both are figures of death and resurrection since the Guest gives grieving men the opportunity to bring back lost loved ones through the rites performed at the spring, the Fisherman is said to use his cast to lure out Leviathan from the black ocean beneath the world, and bring back echoes of the dead (Langan, 2016/2023). They are identical in symbolic function, having the same metaphysical control over life and death, and an obsession with grief and suffering as a supernatural device. Therefore, it is possible to state that the Fisherman is a godlike being formed from grief, while the Guest operates in the material world, alluring mourners, like George, with false hope.

The Fisherman's compulsion to resurrect the dead for others is not an act of benevolence, but a moral masochistic trend, a way of expressing hatred, grief, and guilt in a self-directed manner. Reik (1941) states that "What ought to happen to the other is represented in such a manner that it is done to the ego through the other" (p. 152). In other words, the masochist refrains from harming others directly but instead invites destruction as a representation of his aggression. This concept provides a compelling explanation for the Fisherman's seemingly altruistic behavior. By helping mourners resurrect their dead loved ones, he does not actually relieve their pain and give them happiness or relief; instead, he

replicates his own suffering upon them since the dead do not come back in a state that resembles their past selves. The novel makes it clear that he is not compassionate: “Not compassionate—no, he’s not compassionate; he’s interested, interested, yes. He will help you if you will help him” (Langan, 2016/2023, p. 105). His interest is only transactional and obsessive; he is not interested in either healing himself or the others. Having failed to resurrect his own wife and children in any true or meaningful sense, the Fisherman now forces others to repeat his trauma, to see their dead returned in mutilated, monstrous form. For instance, Helen does not return as a loving wife or mother, but as a hollow vessel that attacks children and infects the living with terror (Langan, 2016/2023). Her return is not a gift, but a payment, since George drank from his cup, enabling him to perform his necromantic rituals. When asked by Rainer what the Fisherman did, George states: “All he asks is that you drink from his cup. His task is almost done. Why not? He will help you if you will help him” (Langan, 2016/2023, p. 105). Thus, it is purely transactional and not benevolent since he is using dependable and broken people for his own agenda. He externalizes the cruelty and suffering through others’ guilt in line with Reik’s (1941) theory. He throws his line not only into the ocean to capture Leviathan, but into the mourning psyche of others, giving them false hope so that their disillusionment might be the same as his. The Fisherman enacts a self-destructive trend by spreading grief, which punishes himself again and again for the initial loss he could never heal from. Consequently, this makes him a moral masochist as well, just like Dan.

In contrast to the Fisherman’s externalization of masochism through others, Dan’s psychological descent illustrates how moral masochism can take shape on an individual level, as his trauma and guilt after the accident set the stage for his own cycle of self-punishment. The first step of Dan’s downfall occurs when a fast-moving truck crashes into his family’s vehicle on a foggy morning. The crash sends Dan flying out of the car since he is not wearing his seatbelt. The car catches fire and traps Sophie and the boys inside (Langan, 2016/2023). The accident leaves Dan with both physical scars, a long, disfiguring facial scar, and psychological damage, which initiates his downward spiral. More importantly, it could be stated that he blames himself for the accident: “Dan said he saw the truck approaching from his right as he turned left onto 299, but it didn’t look to be moving as fast as it was. He pulled out, and that great white beast slammed into his Subaru like a thunderbolt” (Langan, 2016/2023, p. 27). Although it is never explicitly stated, misjudging the truck’s speed carries an implied responsibility for the accident. This sets the stage for his desire for self-

punishment. Freud (1924/2010c) states that in the context of trauma, the dynamic between discomfort-seeking behavior and relief often emerges when the conscious mind cannot reconcile the sudden or catastrophic loss. Then the ego, overwhelmed by guilt or helplessness, turns against itself, staging scenarios in which it is punished, not for what happened, but for having survived it, which also leads to survivor's guilt. It is within this framework that Dan's behavior is not a quest for healing, but is a desperate attempt to enact suffering equal to the loss he cannot bear.

As it is stated in "Survivor Guilt: Theoretical, Empirical, and Clinical Features," (2021) the term survivor's guilt, first coined by German-American psychoanalyst Dr. William G. Niederland, is used to describe "the intense suffering of Holocaust survivors due to their severe guilt about surviving their loved ones and families" (Fimiani et al., 2021, p. 3). Furthermore, it is stated that:

These survivors unconsciously perceived their survival as unfair, as something that must be justified, and as a betrayal of their loved ones who died, even if they neither did anything aggressive nor had any aggressive feelings toward them. The appraisal underlying the guilt in these people was the belief that they did not deserve the privilege of being alive; that they did not deserve a different fate from that of their loved ones. (Fimiani et al., 2021, p. 3)

Although Dan never expresses hostility toward his wife and children, which could lead to his eventual guilt, nor initially admits to having guilt, his every action after their death is haunted by the belief that his survival is a betrayal and the crash is his fault. This is why he compulsively returns to the crash site later (Langan, 2016/2023). Returning to the crash site is not an attempt to remember or even to mourn, but to subject himself to the emotional tribunal of that intersection, to keep asking himself why he has survived and they have not, while thinking about different possibilities and possibly indicating that maybe god is not a benevolent figure (Langan, 2016/2023). This is precisely why Dan perceives the order of this world as cruel and acknowledges his existence as something that must be atoned for through suffering.

Moreover, when Dan obsessively returns to the crash site, describing the traffic light as a kind of prison gate that opens and shuts mechanically, he states: "I can't escape any of it. Myself am hell" (Langan, 2016/2023, p. 41). Consequently, this echoes the view of the ego under occupation by the superego's accusatory demands (Freud, 1930/2010b). Dan does not seek to forget; rather, he relives his trauma compulsively. In this act of repetition, he accepts suffering as a form of repentance. The intersection itself becomes an altar of self-

punishment, an externalized stage where Dan submits to judgment and retribution for having survived. His own loop of guilt, a mechanical cycle of failure, is mirrored in the traffic signal's mechanical cycle. Sitting in silence, watching the light, Dan thinks punishment and atonement are his due, even if no one else can be there to witness it. Dan's repetitive behavior aligns directly with Freud's statements, as he explains that when people are unable to consciously recall or state their repressed experiences, they often engage in unconscious behavioral repetitions of those experiences. Rather than remembering trauma in a reflective, narrative form, they act it out by reliving the event not as something recognized from the past, but as a fixation that emerges in the present (Freud, 1914/2010g). In Dan's case, this pattern manifests through his repeated morning visits to the intersection where his family died. Rather than openly processing or speaking about the accident, Dan performs a ritualistic return to the scene, sitting in his car and silently watching the traffic light cycle from green to yellow to red (Langan, 2016/2023). This repetition mirrors his internal compulsion, one that can be described as symptomatic of an unresolved trauma (Freud, 1914/2010g).

Freud further elaborates that such compulsive repetition is a masked form of remembering. Until the person is capable of confronting the repressed experience directly, they remain caught in a loop where trauma is continuously re-enacted rather than faced directly (Freud, 1914/2010g). In this sense, Dan's morning routine is not merely an act of mourning or sentimentality; it is his unconscious method of remembering what cannot yet be acknowledged or accepted by him. The crash site becomes a psychic stage upon which Dan repeats his suffering without consciously recognizing its source. Freud (1914/2010g) emphasizes that this kind of repetition is not a harmless habit but a potent and often destructive substitute for memory, one that can dominate a person's life if left unprocessed. Dan's behavior is a perfect example of this dynamic because he is not merely revisiting a place of loss but is trapped within it, compelled by a psychic need to punish himself through repetition. Dan's behavior fits this pattern since he repeats trauma physically, not because he has overcome it, but because he is still trapped within it. This repetition serves as his unconscious attempt to remember, but it is a destructive way of remembering, one in which he sacrifices emotional progress to remain faithful to his pain and make his suffering a focal point. Freud (1914/2010g) also states that "Repeating... is not always harmless and unobjectionable. It should be treated as a piece of real life, and not as a fragment of remembered past" (p. 2053). In Dan's case, repetition has become his reality since it shapes

the structure of his mornings, his identity, and his relationship with time. His very sense of self becomes synonymous with this act of repeating: “Myself am hell” (Langan, p. 146). This illustrates that trauma and masochism have fused. He does not just suffer, but he needs to suffer to sustain his rationale and personal beliefs.

On the other hand, Abe responds to his grief differently, turning to fishing as a means to cope that shapes the course of his mourning. After the death of his wife, Marie, who died of cancer not long after they had moved to the Hudson Valley, Abe starts fishing. Her death leaves him emotionally devastated, and he succumbs to alcoholism and depression. He tells of a strange, almost compulsive urge to go fishing, even though he has never been interested in it before: “I woke up and thought, I’d like to go fishing” (Langan, 2016/2023, p. 6). Fishing is a kind of therapeutic repetition, a solitary, focused activity that gives him control over a small part of his life. Casting a line into still water becomes a metaphor for reaching out into the void of loss, and waiting is a way to learn to be alone with absence. It replaces self-destructive behavior with a calm, controlled ritual. Abe states, “So fishing was no miracle cure but, on balance, I guess it did save my life” (Langan, 2016/2023, p. 17). Thus, for Abe, it could be stated that fishing is not a cure, but a lifeline, a way of surviving grief without collapsing under it. Moreover, Abe introduces Dan to fishing as a gesture of connection. It becomes a shared language between two grieving men, a way of being together without having to speak directly about their pain. For Dan fishing reawakens something in him, a ritual from childhood linked to his father, as he recounts catching a record-setting pike with his dad: “He was almost three feet long. It was a record for that lake... my dad’s name and the date the fish was caught carved on the mount” (Langan, 2016/2023, p. 33). Although Freud does not specifically mention activities such as going fishing as a coping strategy, his framework in “Mourning and Melancholia” (1917/2010f) supports the notion that repetitive, structured actions serve an organized process for dealing with grief during mourning. Freud (1917/2010f) states that mourning involves a gradual process of detaching the libido from the lost object through repeated confrontations with memory. Thus, it could be suggested that this process, with everyday routines and rituals, can externalize bereavement while providing a stable structure that contains emotional turbulence and grief. “Remembering, Repeating and Working-Through” reinforces this view since it implies the structured activity may substitute for psychic turbulence, delaying a confrontation while also reflecting its necessity (Freud, 1914/2010g). For Dan, fishing and the ritualized return to the crash site are not mere distractions to take his mind off his grief, but unconscious enactments

of trauma. This is what Freud (1914/2010g) describes as the mourning process, but for Dan, it is distorted by the weight of guilt and the moral masochism that comes with it.

Freud (1924/2010c) identifies moral masochism as where the subject seeks suffering not for pleasure, but for punishment: “The suffering itself is what matters; whether it is decreed by someone who is loved or by someone who is indifferent is of no importance” (p. 4077). Both the Fisherman and Dan are not looking for relief but rather for an external force, such as fate, nature, or Leviathan itself, that will validate his guilt through punishment. Dan’s decision to seek the Fisherman is therefore not therapeutic but fueled masochistically and is repetitive, as he internalizes the responsibility for his family’s death and pursues Dutchman’s Creek as a place of metaphysical redemption. Freud (1924/2010c) further states that “the true masochist always turns his cheek whenever he has a chance of receiving a blow” (p. 4077), a structure that is portrayed in Dan’s repeated exposure to psychic harm, the “death–tongue” of Helen (Langan, 2016/2023, pp. 139–140), and ultimately, his voluntary immersion and infatuation with the Fisherman’s tale. In refusing to live beyond the loss of his wife and children, Dan converts his grief into a form of punishment, seeking not healing but the moral and symbolic destruction of the self. In this way, Dutchman’s Creek becomes not a site of resurrection but of sacrifice, where Dan reenacts his failure to protect his family by submitting to a chaos that demands his ruin. This is the reason why, after hearing Howard’s story, Dan eagerly desires to go to Dutchman’s Creek (Langan, 2016/2023). The tale does not serve as a warning for Dan; rather, it functions as a confirmation of what he has already internalized, one in which suffering is not only necessary but redemptive

Dan’s pursuit of Dutchman’s Creek illustrates how moral masochism frames the creek within the American Gothic tradition of haunted landscapes, where trauma distorts both environment and personal psyche. Furthermore, the moment of Abe and Dan’s arrival at Dutchman’s Creek is marked by a slight but ominous change in atmosphere that foreshadows the supernatural horror to come. The supernatural elements surrounding Dan’s experiences can also be understood through Roger Luckhurst’s (2008) conceptualization of trauma’s distortive effects on perception. In *The Trauma Question*, Luckhurst (2008) suggests that trauma confounds any linear temporality, thus producing repetitions, gaps in memory, and the haunting presence of an unresolved past. As Dan steps deeper into the domain of the Fisherman, the normal rules of space and time appear to collapse: the environment around Dutchman’s Creek shifts unpredictably, reality blurs with nightmare, and past griefs intrude violently into the present. Luckhurst (2008) further explains that trauma produces a state in

which temporal and spatial experiences become incoherent, resulting in an uncanny disruption of narrative sequences. That is why, through Dan's perception, unprocessed grief and guilt turn the Dutchman's Creek into a living physical symbol of this. Consequently, the Dutchman's Creek is no longer an actual physical location; instead, it turns into a psychic manifestation in which the distinctions between the self and the real world fade. This also falls in line with Kelly Hurley's book entitled *The Gothic Body: Sexuality, Materialism, and Degeneration at the Fin de Siècle* (1996/2004) since it ultimately suggests that Gothic landscapes often function as spaces in which human trauma distorts the natural world. Therefore, Dan's entrance into this uncanny and bizarre place not only represents his descent into a supernatural underworld but also his descent into the consequences of unresolved guilt. As such, the spectral disturbances at Dutchman's Creek are not external threats, but rather Dan's internalization of trauma magnified and made inescapable.

As a result, their arrival is described in sensory detail that immediately starts to blur the line between the physical world and something otherworldly. Dan notes the dissonance between sight and sound, which signals the uncanny qualities of the place: "To the eye, the stream was maybe thirty feet across, not as large as many of the spots I'd fished much further into the Catskills. To the ear, however, Dutchman's Creek was a river in flood" (Langan, 2016/2023, p. 267). Abe finds Dan already ahead of him and reflects on Dan's internal anguish, stating, "His wounds cut down to the bone—through the bone, to the marrow—and any relief you can find from that kind of pain, however temporary, you take" (Langan, 2016/2023, p. 268). Despite Dan's apparent intent to fish, the tone is charged with something deeper, and Abe senses this trip is not about fishing at all but about a repetitive return to trauma. As they approach the stream, Abe sees Dan standing in a spot that resembles a ritual basin or gateway (Langan, 2016/2023). This moment at the creek is the psychological and symbolic representation of what is to come. The physical space becomes a zone where memory, grief, and myth start to meet. Abe and Dan are no longer fishermen in a forest; they are men on the edge of an ancient and supernatural abyss about to cross into a story older and darker than their own. Dan moves on his own, and when Abe eventually encounters him again, he is now in the presence of ghostly figures of whom Dan claims are his deceased family members: "To his right, a slender naked woman... To his left, a pair of toddler boys... 'This is my wife, Sophie,'... 'And these young men are Jason and Jonas'" (Langan, 2016/2023, pp. 304–305). Dan explains how he followed the creek and met Sophie, who led

him to where he met the boys and ultimately the beach with the Fisherman: “Sophie brought me here, where I met Jonas and Jason, met my boys” (Langan, 2016/2023, p. 307).

This scene at Dutchman’s Creek anticipates Dan’s ultimate surrender, where his grief becomes formalized through a sacrificial pact with the Fisherman. Upon arriving at Dutchman’s Creek and meeting the Fisherman, Dan’s behavior reflects this unconscious drive toward self-punishment. Dan has clearly surrendered to an external force of the Fisherman, whose power he idolizes and serves, even at the cost of his own identity. He says to Abe, “What I’m giving [the Fisherman] may not be enough. He might have to conserve his energy. If he does, I could lose Sophie and the boys. I can’t do that, Abe, not again. The first time almost killed me. A second would be too much” (Langan, 2016/2023, pp. 311–312). Dan’s desperate plea to Abe also reveals the full extent of the metaphysical pact he has struck with the Fisherman, which is in line with the Gothic tradition of sacrificial exchanges. In *The Cambridge Companion to Gothic Fiction* (2002), it is stated that “[Gothic] is about its own blurring of different levels of discourse while it is also concerned with the interpenetration of other opposed conditions – including life/death, natural/supernatural, ancient/modern, realistic/artificial, and unconscious/conscious...” (Hogle, p. 9). This is reflected in Dan’s agreement with the Fisherman since his unbearable grief and guilt at the loss of his wife and children drive him to try to reverse death itself, crossing the moral and natural boundaries that have traditionally marked human life. What makes Dan’s decision so terrifying is not simply that he accepts the supernatural terms, but that he has already rationalized them. The fact that he insists that he cannot lose them for the second time shows how guilt blurs rational judgment. Sophie and the children’s return is not a miracle, but a repetitive portrayal of guilt as a means of punishment. In this way, Dan’s behavior recalls Nicholas Royle’s (1957/2003) description of this resurrection as “[a] peculiar commingling of the familiar and unfamiliar” (p. 1). It can come about when something that is ordinarily recognizable appears in an unfamiliar or strange context, or when something unfamiliar invades what was familiar. This experience is usually characterized by a troubling sense of repetition, not of the return of the familiar as it was before (Royle, 1957/2003). Royle (1957/2003) suggests that the uncanny upsets the boundaries between the proper and the natural, making one experience the seemingly familiar as disturbingly strange, unsettling one’s conception of self, reality, and identity.

The desperate actions of Dan also suggest that he is locked in a repetition compulsion, offering himself to the Fisherman’s mysterious power in a bid to reverse or atone for his

previous loss. Caruth's trauma theory further accounts for Dan's compulsive behavior. Caruth (1996/2010) describes trauma as a confrontation with an event that has not yet been fully known, emphasizing that trauma victims are trapped in repetitive cycles of re-experiencing. Dan's repeated fantasies of resurrecting his wife and children, even after recognizing the dangers, exemplify this paradoxical relationship. His actions suggest not the hope of healing but an unconscious compulsion to repeat the initial pain of loss, as if mastering it through repetition. In this light, the Fisherman's supernatural proposition does not offer Dan healing but seduces him deeper into the traumatic repetition that Caruth identifies as the core of unresolved grief. According to Freud (1924/2010c), such behavior is not rational or consciously chosen; rather, it is driven by "a need for punishment at the hands of a parental power" that masks an "unconscious sense of guilt" (p. 4081). In this case, that parental power case could be seen as the Fisherman himself, since he has authority, albeit over death and resurrection. This is one of the reasons why Dan is prompted to follow him and go along with his agenda since the Fisherman experienced a similar trauma and tragedy before Dan, making him a figure he looks up to for guidance, just like a parental figure. This guidance, of course, would come in the form of a punishment. Dan also embodies Freud's point that the masochist "must do what is inexpedient, must act against his own interests, must ruin the prospects which open out to him in the real world and must, perhaps, destroy his own real existence" (Freud, 1924/2010c, p. 4081). Dan has the dark and twisted version of his lost wife and children, but at a terrible existential cost since he must submit to the will of the Fisherman, who feeds on his life force (Langan, 2016/2023).

After Dan expresses his fear that what he is giving to the Fisherman "may not be enough," and pleads with Abe to help, Abe ultimately refuses (Langan, 2016/2023, pp. 311–312). This refusal prompts a dramatic and unsettling escalation in Dan's behavior. The Fisherman briefly turns his gaze on Abe, unleashing a flood of overwhelming emotion and imagery, rage, pain, and determination, which almost forces Abe to his knees (Langan, 2016/2023). Abe begins to walk away, but Dan reacts with desperation and fury, physically assaulting Abe. Dan grabs Abe's shoulder, spins him around, and shouts, accusing Abe of abandoning him and his family: "What the fuck, Abe? What the fuck? You're going to leave? You're going to abandon me? What about Sophie? What about Jonas and Jason? Are you thinking of us? Are you thinking of Marie? What about Marie, Abe? What about her?" (Langan, 2016/2023, p. 313). This depicts Reik's (1941) understanding of how the masochist projects internal guilt onto others in order to provoke punishment or absolution. He

externalizes his own guilt and self-loathing by accusing Abe of the very abandonment that Dan subconsciously feels responsible for, mirroring the Fisherman's actions. Reik (1941) states that masochists often "inflict punishments on themselves to which an inner court has sentenced them," and they "turn events to their own disadvantage," even while making it appear as if they are victims of external injustice (p. 10). Dan's language here does exactly that. He casts Abe as the betraying, neglectful friend: "You're going to abandon me?" (Langan, 2016/2023, p. 313). This intensity and repetition portray the fact that Dan is grappling with his own unconscious sense of guilt for failing to save his family and for falling under the Fisherman's control while also trying to drag Abe down as well. Yet, Abe does not share the same sentiment because he does not share Dan's guilt, since Marie died of cancer, not because of his actions.

Furthermore, Dan exemplifies the psychoanalytic structure of moral masochism as his grief over the death of his wife and children evolves into a destructive psychic compulsion that aligns with the observation that in moral masochism, the only thing that matters is the suffering (Freud, 1924/2010c). By surrendering to the Fisherman, Dan reveals not a desire to heal, but a need to suffer. His willingness to blame and try to drag down Abe in the service of this delusion is not only irrational but clearly suicidal as well: "If he has your strength, then he won't have to take them away from me... I don't want to do this..." (Langan, 2016/2023, p. 313). As Freud (1924/2010c) puts it, the masochist acts against his own interest and even destroys their existence in order to suffer. Dan's behavior confirms that his submission is not motivated by love or hope, but by an unconscious demand for punishment, which the Fisherman, in his authority over death and resurrection, metaphorically represents. Reik (1941) further deepens this analysis by emphasizing that this kind of masochism is not merely passive, but it arranges a downfall through external projection to others as well. Dan's emotionally charged outburst functions as an accusation and a displacement of guilt. In accusing Abe of abandonment, Dan deflects his own culpability and attempts to provoke the moral judgment he inwardly desires. Reik (1941) identifies this as one of the most prominent masochistic characteristics, as it is an unconscious force that drives people to deny themselves out of pleasure and seek punishment. Dan's alliance with the Fisherman, his descent into delusion, and his eventual self-offering to the Leviathan are not acts of liberation or healing, but of self-sentencing. He manipulates the events around him, keeps secrets, and lies to Abe to create the conditions for his destruction, thereby satisfying the unconscious urge Reik (1941) refers to as an "inner court" (p. 10).

Freud's concept of moral masochism provides another insight into the psychological mechanisms that lead Dan to accept the Fisherman's offer, acting in an aggressive manner towards Abe. Since Freud (1924/2010c) defines moral masochism as the ego's need to suffer punishment as a substitute for the external loss of love, the subject, or Dan, in this case, unconsciously seeks suffering to relieve guilt. It is not only guilt that makes Dan willing to entertain the Fisherman's twisted and supernatural offer, but a deeper need to punish himself for having survived his wife and children. In a perverse affirmation of love's endurance beyond death, Freud's (1924/2010c) assertion displays that suffering can be a desperate attempt to maintain mental and emotional ties to loved ones. This explains Dan's acceptance of pain as a desperate attempt to maintain psychic and emotional ties to his lost loved ones. As a result, Dan's submission to the Fisherman's will is not an irrational or unexplainable act but a tragic fulfillment of his moral masochism. This can be taken as a reaction to grief, but also as a form of unconscious loyalty to his dead family, which requires self-punishment as its price, and Dan is willing to endure agony and degradation under the Fisherman's influence. In addition, Dan's emotional response is structured in a way that corresponds to Freud's (1917/2010f) broader theory of melancholia: "the self-reproaches are reproaches against a loved object which have been shifted away from it on to the patient's own ego where the reproaches that were once directed outward are turned inward" (p. 3046). Dan takes in his self-failure to protect his loved ones, and instead of mourning them healthily, he turns this guilt into a masochistic drive to harm himself.

On the other hand, Abe does not display the signs of moral masochism. Abe is deeply affected by the loss of his wife, Marie, which is the reason why he picks up fishing in the first place as a therapeutic medium, but he does not collapse into delusion or self-punishment like Dan does. He does not want suffering for its own sake, nor does he blame others to get them punished. Melancholic but grounded, his response to trauma is to reflect, remember, and narrate, but he resists the Fisherman's offer. Abe does not try to restore the past through magical or punitive means, unlike Dan. He is profoundly grief-stricken, but not in a pathological way. Abe is a foil to Dan in this way, who externalizes guilt and engineers his own destruction while internalizing sorrow without succumbing to a repetitious death-driven compulsion. He mourns and remembers, and instead of self-destruction, he channels his sorrow into a narrative. Freud (1924/2010c), however, also suggests a crucial distinction, especially in his distinction between neurotic suffering and moral masochism, between suffering in itself and suffering that is pathological because it is compulsively pursued and

turned against the self to punish. As a result, it may be concluded that, although guilt can lead to suffering and masochistic tendencies, certain forms of suffering arise solely from grief and melancholia rather than guilt, as exemplified in Abe's case.

Moreover, despite Abe's best attempts to de-escalate the situation and the argument they are having about the Fisherman's offer to resurrect their loved ones, Dan violently shoves him to the ground. As Abe lies injured among the rocks, Dan picks up a large stone with the apparent intention of striking him with it. Dan remarks, "I don't want to do this... If he has your strength, then he won't have to take them away from me... if there were any other way, Abe. Honestly. I don't want to do this" (Langan, 2016/2023, p. 314). Nevertheless, he raises the rock, compelled to use it as a weapon (Langan, 2016/2023). This moment marks a terrifying conclusion of Dan's descent into moral masochism and total submission to the Fisherman's will. It also reveals how far Dan is willing to go—betrayal, violence, and potentially murder—to maintain the illusion of having this twisted version of his family restored, further causing the repetition of his trauma and guilt. The scene portrays Dan's collapse into delusion, sacrifice, and psychological destruction. This climactic act illustrates the full force of the moral masochist's drive to fulfill an unconscious sentence of guilt (Freud, 1924/2010c). Dan's actions against Abe are not a desperate act, but the performance of a psychic compulsion, a ritual by which he attempts to please a metaphysical father figure, the Fisherman, by displaying violence. When he expresses that he does not want to hurt Abe, it is actually a confession that he is under the control of a deeper emotion that needs suffering as atonement. When he betrays Abe, which is to say, he betrays the part of himself that still hangs on to reality, he ceases to exist as a father and a husband who mourns the loss of his family, but he becomes a vessel of sacrifice and suffering symbolizing moral masochism's personification.

Esther Menaker (1953) explains, in "Masochism — A Defense Reaction," that the feelings of worthlessness that characterize moral masochism are rooted in self-hatred, which starts in the early phases of identity formation, as well as an acute sense of helplessness. Unconsciously, these feelings are conveyed as mental protection, giving the person the presence of love while protecting them from the fear of abandonment. This serves as a defense mechanism that resides at the core of moral masochism (Menaker, 1953). Menaker's (1953) conceptualization of moral masochism as a defense mechanism of the ego offers a particularly revealing lens through which to view Dan's spiraling descent. According to Menaker (1953), moral masochism originates in "the hatred of the self, originating at the

earliest level of ego differentiation,” accompanied by “a feeling of powerlessness” that later manifests as worthlessness in adulthood (p. 209). These internalized feelings, she argues, are “used in the service of the ego to protect it from the fear of being abandoned, and to gain for it a fantasied gratification of love” which is a compensatory illusion that constitutes “the essence of moral masochism as a defense reaction of the ego” (Menaker, 1953, p. 209). All of this is evidence that suggests that Dan’s submission to the Fisherman, his belief that he must commit violence to keep his family, since he fears abandonment, and his repeated expressions of guilt and despair are core elements of his character and his masochistic tendencies. Dan clings to a delusional fantasy of his wife and children’s return since they are dark and twisted portrayals of their former selves; thus, it is a fantasy that will cause his destruction.

Consequently, what follows after Dan raises the rock against Abe is the final act in his self-destruction, since when Abe slashes Dan with a knife in self-defense, Dan becomes physically weakened, but he does not flee. Instead, as the grotesque, dark, and twisted reanimated forms of Sophie and the children appear, Dan exhibits “an expression of unutterable sadness” and offers no resistance as they descend upon him. One son tears into his shoulder, the other into his chest, and Sophie completes this brutal sequence with what Abe describes as a “terrible kiss” that consumes his face while his family proceeds to devour him for hours (Langan, 2016/2023, pp. 316–318). Dan’s death is not a struggle for life, surrendering to pain and a fatal embrace from the very phantoms he once loved. Reik (1941) suggests that masochists unconsciously arrange their own suffering to satisfy a moral conflict within. He further observes that such people “stage a predominant part of their disasters and misery,” making it appear as though they are victims of fate, when in truth, they are acting out inner guilt (Reik, 1941, p. 10). Dan’s refusal to defend himself, his emotional submission to the Fisherman, and his passivity in the face of death all function as carefully enacted rituals through which he receives punishment. This is not an accidental death but the culmination of a self-imposed sentence, fulfilling what Reik (1941) describes as receiving the punishment that has been sentenced by the “inner court” (p. 10).

After Dan’s death at the hands of the reanimated forms of his wife and children, Abe manages to escape Dutchman’s Creek (Langan, 2016/2023). Injured but alive, Abe resists the Fisherman’s supernatural bargain as he refuses the offer to reclaim Marie at the cost of his autonomy and moral integrity. Even under the crushing weight of grief and the pull to give in, Abe chooses to run, breaking away from the doomed path Dan could not escape. In

that moment, Abe rejects the lure of moral masochism that had swallowed Dan whole, showing that he can carry his pain without letting it twist into a need to destroy himself. After a while, Abe's house gets submerged in a sudden, mysterious flood while he gets attacked by the monstrous resurrected form of Dan. He manages to survive, and the next morning, as the sheriff's deputies rescue Abe, he looks down into the water and sees a haunting spectacle; endless, pale, golden-eyed figures submerged in the water. Abe recognizes Marie and the two children he imagines could have been the ones he and Marie never had among them. Their mouths are filled with serrated teeth, their eyes are vacant, devoid of warmth or humanity (Langan, 2016/2023). They are deliberately depicted as monsters or specters, not as beloved souls come back to life, but as horrifying shells of their former selves. Thus, Abe carries the trauma of his experience forward into his life, marked but not undone. Even though he survives physically, he remains psychologically haunted by what he saw and by what might have been if he had made the same choice as Dan. Abe reflects and knows that grief must be lived through, not undone through impossible bargains (Langan, 2016/2023).

This contrast between Abe and Dan's behaviors can further be explained by Menaker's theories, providing the final key to understanding Dan's collapse by framing moral masochism as a defense reaction of the ego. According to Menaker (1953), feelings of powerlessness and worthlessness can also evoke the fear of abandonment. When Dan is faced with the loss of his wife and children, believing it happened because of him, he succumbs to a delusion in which they return, but only at the cost of his full submission. His death at their hands is the final compromise of the ego since it is a relinquishment of the self that preserves the illusion of love, even if that love is monstrous. Rather than facing it and trying to heal, Dan reenacts this fantasy of reunion, in which suffering is welcomed unconsciously. As Menaker (1953) states, "[The masochistic] ego sacrifices itself... to sustain the illusion of mother love..." (p. 219), or in Dan's case, familial love. As a result, Dan becomes the ultimate symbol of moral masochism— a man who trades his pleasure and well-being for absolution and life for a twisted bond that requires his suffering. This is not only a portrayal of trauma but also the realization of a psychic structure rooted in guilt, regression, the compulsion to suffer, and self-destructive behavior. His tragedy lies not merely in his death but in the deep psychological requirement that made it inevitable. Overall, what happens to Dan can be explained by moral masochism as the transformation of grief into guilt, and guilt into self-destruction under the pretext of redemption. This

tangled dynamic also shows how moral masochism reaches beyond just a person's inner world; it seeps into how they weigh right and wrong. Dan's choices, which might look senseless to an outsider, fit disturbingly well within the twisted, self-punishing logic that a masochistic ego can follow.

Menaker (1953) suggests that moral masochism is often rooted in a need to maintain lost relations, even at the cost of ego coherence. In Dan's case, it is the loss of his family and the cost of attempting to preserve that broken bond that ultimately culminates in the complete sacrifice of the self. In addition, this also aligns with Judith Butler's (2004) *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*, as she states:

What grief displays... is the thrall in which our relations with others hold us, in ways that we cannot always recount or explain, in ways that often interrupt the self-conscious account of ourselves we might try to provide, in ways that challenge the very notion of ourselves as autonomous and in control. (p. 23)

Grief breaks the sense of self, showing how people are made of their connections to others and how those connections go beyond explanation, even when severed by loss. This explains why Dan gets fixated on the lost connection with his family so deeply that it causes its own downfall in the name of the things that have been lost. Therefore, Dan's downfall cannot be attributed solely to madness or poor judgment. Instead, it takes shape as a warped, almost noble form of loyalty. His choices make sense only through this lens: faced with crushing guilt, Dan does not reach for comfort or recovery. He throws himself into pain, believing that only through suffering can he earn some twisted form of redemption.

In conclusion, *The Fisherman* demonstrates how Gothic conventions become a powerful conduit for depicting the lingering suffering of guilt and trauma. Langan highlights a deeply personal grief within an American Gothic framework, ranging from the uncanny isolation of the Ashokan Reservoir to the layered narrative structure of "Der Fischer," therefore, externalizing psychological distress through vivid, supernatural form. Through characters such as Abe and Dan, the novel demonstrates that unprocessed trauma is not a wound that passively heals over time but one that persistently resurfaces, compelling confrontation and resolution. (Caruth, 1996/2010). Abe's sorrow is channeled into reflection and storytelling, aligning with the idea that narrating trauma can be a symbolic means of recovery (Vickroy, 2002). Dan, by contrast, embodies a masochistic drive toward self-punishment, haunted by guilt; he repeatedly returns to the site of his family's death and ultimately pursues the Fisherman's dark bargain as a means of atonement. Dan's own words:

“I can’t escape any of it. Myself am hell” (Langan, 2016/2023, p. 41), highlight how his guilt has transformed into a personal hell of perpetual punishment. Moreover, the Fisherman character serves as both a literal antagonist and a Gothic double of Dan’s despair, a monstrous mirror of the self-destructive impulse that grief and guilt can intensify (Rank, 1914/1971). Langan links this personal horror with larger historical echoes as the story of “Der Fischer” unfolds against the destroyed towns and graves during the Ashokan Reservoir’s construction, suggesting that the land itself remembers injustice and pain. In this way, Langan situates Gothic elements within a distinctly American landscape, as the Catskill Mountains and the Ashokan Reservoir emerge as haunted sites that echo the silenced voices of displaced immigrants. Dutchman’s Creek and the Fisherman who emerges from it thus stand in for the nation’s buried histories, displaced communities, and unacknowledged losses. Ultimately, the novel makes a broader American point as cultural memory, history, and space are haunted by the traumas, ghosts demand to be acknowledged rather than buried. In true Gothic fashion, “what people try to bury does not stay buried” (Botting, 2014, p. 186); and in masochistic terms, this restless return of the past reflects an unconscious compulsion toward punishment, where grief and guilt are continually revived rather than resolved.

4. CONCLUSION

John Langan's *House of Windows* and *The Fisherman* are contemporary American Gothic novels that use guilt-driven self-punishment to explore how trauma persists through cycles of moral masochism. Drawing on the notion that the ego unconsciously seeks suffering as atonement for guilt (Freud, 1930/2010b), both novels depict characters who transform grief into punishment, illustrating how trauma is not passively endured but actively repeated. At the same time, these patterns of masochistic repetition are embedded in American spaces marked by historical trauma. The Belvedere House becomes a site where Roger's guilt takes material form in the context of contemporary post-9/11 America. Similarly, Dutchman's Creek and the Ashokan Reservoir embody displacement and erasure tied to American history. This is precisely why American Gothic is the most fitting genre for this analysis, since, unlike its European counterpart with its castles and feudal ghosts, American Gothic is uniquely rooted in national landscapes, wars, displacements, and anxieties about progress (Spooner, 2007), which makes it an ideal genre for emphasizing the predicament of personal guilt with collective historical trauma. Langan's novels stand at the intersection of these traditions, showing how haunted houses and uncanny landscapes externalize both individual wounds and America's own unresolved past, while providing a deep insight into how guilt can lead to moral masochism on a personal level as well. Therefore, this study highlights the Gothic elements in Langan's novels as embodiments of repressed guilt, unprocessed grief, and how they can lead to an unconscious desire for punishment.

While both novels situate trauma within broader American Gothic landscapes of historical and cultural anxiety, they also narrow their focus to the intimate struggles of individual characters. In this way, the haunted and uncanny settings of *House of Windows* and *The Fisherman* become inseparable from the guilt that their characters suffer, as their environments externalize and intensify their psychological torment. Primarily, both Roger and Dan are consumed by guilt and drawn to uncanny or horrific experiences that punish them for their perceived failures and guilty consciences. In *House of Windows*, Roger is haunted, first psychologically, then literally, by the ghost of his estranged son, Ted. Roger's trauma was born after his sudden, graphic death in Afghanistan during a military assignment, as he was emotionally pushed to enlist in the army. He comes to believe that Ted's fate is his own failing as a father, and this guilt manifests itself as a spectre within the confines of

the Belvedere House that haunts him (Langan, 2009/2017). In *The Fisherman*, protagonist Abe and his co-worker Dan are two widowers bonded by the loss of their loved ones, yet it is Dan whose trauma leads him down a darker and more destructive path. After a tragic traffic accident that kills Dan's entire family, he becomes fixated on rumors of a supernatural Fisherman who can resurrect the dead, since he feels direct responsibility, as he was behind the wheel during that fateful day. Dan's guilt and commitment to self-punishment lead him to pursue supernatural and mythical forces at Dutchman's Creek. By doing so, he offers his life in the hope of redemption (Langan, 2016/2023). Hence, both works portray characters who are fixated on their losses as they unconsciously seek punishment, even at the cost of their well-being or sanity.

These are the main reasons why moral masochism is a key framework for understanding the behavior of Langan's characters and the supernatural hauntings they undergo. Freud (1924/2010c) defines moral masochism as a psychological condition in which an individual, driven by an unconscious sense of guilt, seeks out suffering and punishment not as a source of erotic pleasure but as a form of atonement or moral gratification. In other words, the punishment becomes the goal, as the individual needs to pay for some perceived wrongdoing or failure (Freud, 1924/2010c). Therefore, it can be argued that both Roger and Dan epitomize moral masochism as they blame themselves for their losses and consequently become a catalyst in their own suffering since they unconsciously internalize the idea that punishment might redeem them. So far, it has been demonstrated that after their traumatic experiences and consequent guilt, these characters do not try to get closure; instead, they gravitate toward experiences that intensify their pain. Indeed, both novels show guilt functioning as a powerful unconscious force that compels the characters to acts of self-harm, recklessness, or deliberate engagement with the supernatural. By examining Langan's characters through moral masochism and a distinctive American context of wars and displacements of communities, it is possible to uncover a deeper psychological logic behind the horrors of the novels since the ghosts and monsters are, in effect, the instruments of the guilt-ridden psyches of those who believe the punishment has been well deserved.

In *House of Windows*, Roger's masochistic tendencies are evident in the way he retreats into the Belvedere House and essentially submits to its haunting as a means to redemption. After Ted's death, Roger is overcome with remorse for having mistreated and alienated his son. He had, in fact, effectively pushed Ted away and failed as a father, a

realization that torments him when Ted is killed in Afghanistan as Veronica observes: “He’d never had to identify with one of Dickens’s failed fathers—now, as his life took on the shape of another of Dickens’s plots” (Langan, 2009/2017, p. 273). Therefore, he unconsciously chooses to remain in the very place where his guilt is most prominent and allows himself to be terrorized by Ted’s ghost. Roger’s isolation within the Belvedere House and obsessive dwelling on his loss can be described as what Freud (1924/2010c) states as “act[ing] against his own interests” (p. 4081) when describing masochism. He believes unconsciously that he deserves the suffering he is put through by Ted’s specter. Thus, Roger’s haunting is partly self-inflicted, as his guilty conscience wants to be punished, and it is metapsychically manifested as a specter. Ted then emerges as both a literal ghost of the past and a manifestation of Roger’s subconscious, while simultaneously embodying the broader cultural discussion surrounding America’s response to domestic wars. Ted functions both as a literal ghost of the past and as a projection of Roger’s subconscious, while also reflecting wider cultural discussion about America’s response to domestic wars. Roger’s eventual disappearance into the Belvedere House can thus be read as the logical culmination of his moral masochism, as he accepts the spectral punishment he has unconsciously invited and withdraws from the real world in an act of self-destruction.

On the other hand, *The Fisherman* illustrates how trauma transforms guilt into cycles of moral masochism, where survival itself becomes a form of punishment. The entire arc of Dan in the story is based on the fact that he failed to protect his wife and children. One might say that the crash was not really Dan’s fault, but his survival while his family died leaves him with an overwhelming sense of guilt. He repeatedly revisits the accident site, subjecting himself to the emotionally charged atmosphere of that spot to repeat a ritual of self-punishment. This shows how far Dan has gone into moral masochism, as his own mind is plagued with guilt, and his very existence is something that must be atoned for through suffering. Therefore, Dan comes to think that his survival is wrong and that only extreme self-punishment could be right. The repetitive visits by Dan to the crash site are not an indication of mourning, but have become a compulsion to punish himself unconsciously. Viewed from a Freudian perspective, this behavior expresses repetition compulsion, which means that the subject tries to repeat the trauma unconsciously in order to master it (Freud, 1920/2010a). Dan does not simply want closure; he wants punishment, as it is the only way to atone for his mistakes, he believes.

Beyond the individual psychology of guilt and repetition, these dynamics are further shaped by broader cultural and familial expectations, as both Roger's and Dan's experiences of guilt are intensified by the patriarchal ideals of fatherhood they have internalized. Therefore, it can be argued that both Roger's and Dan's guilt is intensified by the traditional patriarchal moral framework they have internalized, particularly the prescriptive expectations surrounding fathers' roles within the family structure, as Freud also portrays in *Civilization and Its Discontents*. They felt that they failed in their duties as "protectors," a role the society traditionally places on husbands and fathers. These ideal fatherly responsibilities provide a template for their superegos, which become merciless judges after the fact. As Freud (1930/2010b) points out, even unfounded, imaginary guilt can compel one to atone. Therefore, an association is drawn between bad intentions and bad actions, developing a sense of guilt and a necessity for punishment in the guilty person.

In both *House of Windows* and *The Fisherman*, familial loss is processed in a way that is fueled by guilt. Therefore, these loved ones return in bizarre and terrifying ways, like ghosts, specters, or monstrous forms. Thus, Langan's usage of ghosts and the supernatural can be read as a literalization of Caruth's claim that the traumatic event recurs in involuntary, and often disorienting, forms. In these narratives, the past literally comes back to haunt the living while embodying what Caruth (1996/2010) described. The supernatural elements function as intrusive memories or repetitions of the original traumatic event that the characters are forced to confront. This literary framework converts the intricate and highly complex workings of trauma into a tangible horror as a visceral, visible force of an unconscious psychological downfall and destruction. By doing so, it is possible to state that Langan connects the psychological to the spectral, implying that that which is left unsaid, unfinished, or repressed in the mind may possibly come back to haunt, with massive physical and emotional retaliation.

The "return of the repressed" in *House of Windows* takes the shape of Ted's ghost. Roger's mind cannot deal with the context of both the trauma of losing his son as a result of his own actions and knowing that their relationship was left in bitterness and betrayal. Initially, this shows itself in psychological forms as Roger's extreme depression, his isolation from others, and his compulsive dwelling on the past, which are connected or similar to the flashbacks and rumination that trauma victims suffer. However, as Caruth (1996/2010) points out, trauma can avoid normal and logical conscious understandings and, therefore, manifest itself in paradoxical forms. In the Gothic framework of *House of*

Windows, Roger's guilt and grief take physical shape in Ted's specter in the confines of the Belvedere House. The ghost is, then, an intrusive phenomenon of Roger's trauma and guilt, and he is forced to confront the very loss and guilt in a repetitive manner. Caruth (1996/2010) insists that trauma is experienced belatedly and through repetition. Roger indeed repeats the trauma of Ted's death, not only at the moment he hears the news, but every time Ted's ghost comes back to accuse or terrify him. In this sense, *House of Windows* dramatizes the idea of trauma as "not fully known" at first but relived compulsively later (Caruth, 1996/2010, p. 91). Henceforth, the haunting of Roger and Ted's specter transforms Ted's death, not something that has happened in the past, but an eternally present and repeating experience that punishes Roger.

In a similar fashion, *The Fisherman* also uses supernatural motifs to depict trauma's repetitive grip. Dan's tragedy, namely the tragic death of his family, is overwhelming, and it scars him to the extent that it strips him of the capacity to think rationally. Rather than coming to terms with his actions, Dan enters a state of traumatic repetition compulsion, in which he recreates and literally re-enacts parts of his trauma. The novel even features Dan's return to the crash intersection again and again, almost ceremonially, as if some unseen hand were pulling him towards it (Langan, 2016/2023). He is stuck in his traumatic memory of the loop he cannot get over. The idea that trauma victims are trapped in repetitive cycles of re-experiencing the event is very vividly brought out in the behavior of Dan (Caruth, 1996/2010). Dan's subsequent choice to seek the Fisherman's promise of resurrection is a kind of final repetition of trauma itself by attempting to reverse the fatal accident. As a result, he recreates a reality where broken and maimed dead bodies of his dead family come back to remind him of the accident and his subsequent guilt. Doing so causes him to suffer more, completing his masochistic cycle. Freud (1920/2010a) notes that trauma can trigger an unconscious drive to repeat the traumatic event in the hope of mastering it, even if it is harmful. Therefore, Dan's journey to Dutchman's Creek, despite all warnings and bad omens, is a perfect example of this desire to repeat. He is not seeking closure; instead, as Caruth (1996/2010) suggests, he is repeating the incomprehensible event of causing the loss of his family in a new form, perhaps hoping for a different result, but, in fact, only making his condition worse.

What makes Langan's characters particularly significant is that these supernatural repetitions of trauma do not result in catharsis or resolution for them. Rather, they embody moral masochism as a result of their guilt. Roger's encounter with his son's ghost never

leads to self-forgiveness; instead, it deepens his remorse and ultimately brings about his destruction. Dan's meeting with the Fisherman and the short-lived resurrection of his family do not really return what was lost, but they only validate the impossibility of reversing death and trap Dan in a paradoxical cycle of pain, and ultimately cause his end. In each of these stories, the supernatural haunting is an extension of the characters' inability to work through loss, paralleling what Caruth (1996/2010) says of how trauma victims remain possessed by the past. Therefore, it is possible to read the ghosts and monsters as the embodiments of the part of the trauma that these characters have not processed, and thus they return to haunt them. This haunting causes them to repeat their traumas, which they subconsciously yearn for since they want to be punished for their mistakes. The failure of catharsis is central to Langan's novels, as neither Ted's ghost nor Dan's resurrected family brings redemption, but they serve as repeated reminders of past mistakes. Thus, in both cases, Roger and Dan are trapped not only in personal tragedy but within a metaphysical framework that denies closure. In this fashion, Langan's works are a strong reflection on the nature of trauma, now bound down not towards transcendence, but towards a cruel repetition of human guilt and masochistic suffering through the supernatural. These repetitions are not chosen but arise from the psyche's unresolved conflict. Therefore, moral masochism in these works functions as a trauma-born coping mechanism, fueled by guilt, performed unconsciously, and reliant on the specific emotional context of loss. It is neither an inevitable evolutionary instinct nor a random occurrence; rather, it is conditional upon the relationship of guilt and unresolved grief. As Freud (1930/2010b) implies, this is an attempt to restore a moral balance or satisfy an unforgiving superego by suffering.

Langan's novels ultimately present trauma as an inescapable cycle of repetition, where guilt transforms into moral masochism and forecloses the possibility of cathartic resolution. Having established this framework of suffering and self-punishment, it becomes equally important to consider how Freud's reflections on the heroic figure open another interpretive framework. For instance, a further study could analyze the notion of a hero, drawing from the Freudian perspective that heroes in myth and literature are often ego-ideal projections, embodying the wishes of the child or community for strength, defiance, or forbidden desires (Freud, 1900/2005). Freud (1900/2005) suggests heroes carry out acts that the average individual cannot, especially defying the father or social authority. This notion perfectly mirrors Ted since the biggest reason behind why he becomes a soldier is to defy his academic father, who despises the military (Langan, 2009/2017). Alternatively, Roger's descent into

spiraling moral masochism can also be analyzed from a different perspective as Freud (1915/2010i) suggests that the hero is a person who braves death in the service of a higher ideal, highlighting that the heroic stance involves making peace with, or even embracing, the death drive. This could be interpreted as one of the reasons behind Roger's leniency to suffer and even die to make peace with his past mistakes and with his son. In this way, Freud's idea of the hero deepens the analyses of Ted and Roger, showing how their choices echo larger psychoanalytic patterns of defiance, sacrifice, and even a willingness to embrace death.

Alternatively, the psychoanalytic framework of moral masochism could also be applied to various other forms of media as countless horror films contain guilt-ridden protagonists or survivors such as *Don't Look Now* (1973) in which a grieving couple in Venice are confronted with what appears to be the ghost of the child they have lost (Roeg), *The Babadook* (2014) wherein the haunting monster that is featured is an expression of the narrator's suppressed grief and resentment (Kent), or a more recent example *Hereditary* (2018) which includes a brother causing the death of his sister in a horrific car crash and a mother who indirectly allowed it to happen (Aster). A comparative analysis of Langan's literary approach and cinematic approaches to bringing out the issue of trauma and the supernatural could provide an interesting and insightful perspective on the discussion that surrounds masochism. These patterns stand out vividly in numerous literary and cinematic portrayals since these types of characters use physical or mental suffering as redemption or atonement to get over their morally questionable actions. Traumatic events and unprocessed grief in psychological horror may take monstrous forms like supernatural entities or psychological threats, as it was established in this study. So, they are used as narrative devices to represent characters' repressed sorrows and guilt. Such manifestations are a type of punishment for themselves, which the characters suffer. Combined, these examples may prove the effectiveness of this framework as an interpretative method to decode and understand guilt and repressed aspects of human psychology in a literary or storytelling setting.

While the framework of psychoanalysis is central to this study, it is not the only way to approach Langan's work. Other perspectives can shed light on aspects that fall outside the scope of trauma and guilt. Recognizing this, the findings of this study not only highlight both the psychological dimensions and the American cultural implications of Langan's novels but also may point to the potential for alternative critical approaches that may further deepen the

understanding of his work. Therefore, although this study has focused on John Langan's *House of Windows* and *The Fisherman* from a psychoanalytical perspective, there could be other studies that delve into these novels from feminist and formalist approaches as well. For instance, using feminist criticism, future studies could examine the masculinity and its representations in Langan's texts. A feminist reading of *House of Windows* could analyze patriarchal dogmas, the dynamics of age-gap relationships, given that Veronica is a graduate student while Roger is an established literature professor, and the complexities of stepfamily relations, thereby challenging gendered power structures. On the other hand, *The Fisherman* heavily focuses on the male perspective, looking at male grief, whereas female characters are mostly absent or exist almost only to drive the male character's acts. Finally, a formalist analysis would present the readers with how Langan's intricate construction of narrative structure, literary allusions, and symbolic motifs works within a Gothic framework. Both of the novels use a technique of embedded narratives that displays features of the Gothic tradition, providing suspense and thematic depth. *The Fisherman* specifically refers to texts such as Melville's *Moby-Dick* and accommodates its structure to its intertextual resonances of obsession and grief.

Although these alternative readings can further expand the analysis of *House of Windows* and *The Fisherman*, at their core, these novels show how contemporary American Gothic powerfully conveys the enduring suffering of guilt and trauma. In *House of Windows*, the Belvedere House becomes more than a haunted mansion; it is a Gothic space where Roger's grief and unresolved family conflict materialize in spectral form, linking his personal guilt to the post-9/11 atmosphere of national mourning and the anxieties of the Iraq and Afghanistan wars, as well as the past Vietnam War sentiments. On the other hand, in *The Fisherman*, the Catskills and the Ashokan Reservoir are depicted as haunted landscapes that externalize Dan's guilt while simultaneously evoking America's broader history of immigrant displacement and cultural erasure associated with the reservoir's real-life history. Both novels illustrate how unprocessed trauma does not fade but compulsively resurfaces, aligning with Freud's concept of moral masochism, in which guilt generates an unconscious drive toward self-punishment (Freud, 1924/2010c). Most importantly, in *Love and Death in the American Novel*, Leslie Fiedler (1960/1969) states: "A recurrent problem of our fiction has been the need of our novelists to find a mode of projecting their conflicts which would contain all the dusky horror of gothic romance and yet be palatable to discriminating readers, palatable first of all to themselves" (p. 9). Langan's novels exemplify this distinctly

American challenge, emphasizing how the American Gothic allows the confrontation of guilt, grief, and horror in a way that remains meaningful within both personal and cultural contexts. In this sense, Roger's and Dan's hauntings mirror American culture and history itself, where buried histories from destroyed towns to devastating wars return as spectral reminders of what has not been resolved. In conclusion, both *House of Windows* and *The Fisherman* demonstrate that the American Gothic remains one of the most powerful genres for showing that what is repressed, whether in the individual or in the culture, may return as repetitions and masochistic self-destruction.

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