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HAUNTED AND HUNTED: THE GOTHIC AND THE GHOSTLY
IN *THE LIGHT* AND *ASYLUM*

by

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A Thesis
Submitted to the Graduate School,
the College of Arts and Sciences
and the School of Humanities
at The University of Southern Mississippi
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Master of Arts

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ABSTRACT

Young adult Gothic horror fiction acts as a coming-of-age story wherein the protagonists must confront the metaphorical and literal ghosts while simultaneously attempting to establish a sense of identity. Applying Gothic theory and ghost theory to the ghostly stories in young adult Gothic horror demonstrates how certain young adult Gothic stories represent the struggle of adolescents as they mature into adulthood and search for their identities. I use Madeline Roux's *Asylum* (2013) and D.J. MacHale's *The Light* (2010) as case studies to analyze how ghostly antagonists directly oppose adolescent protagonists on their coming-of-age journeys. Analyzing these young adult Gothic horror novels through the lens of the aforementioned theories allows for a different understanding of the genre of young adult Gothic, shedding a new light on the mechanics of the genre within the discourse surrounding young adult overall. This new understanding of how YA Gothic horror works sheds light on how all horror texts operate as coming-of-age stories for their protagonists who must confront and overcome their individual fears, emerging on the other side as more mature, self-assured, and autonomous people.

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HUNTED AND HAUNTED: THE GOTHIC AND THE GHOSTLY IN *THE LIGHT* AND *ASYLUM*

While considerable scholarship may still be needed on this topic, recent years have seen a rise in scholarship surrounding the overlap of young adult and gothic fiction. This point can be demonstrated in literary scholar Gina Wisker's entire chapter dedicated to young adult gothic fiction in *The Edinburgh Companion to Gothic and the Arts*. Wisker even combines these two terms, creating the new term of "YA Gothic," when she claims, "YA Gothic raises a number of issues which are central to literature in general, and also to the Gothic" (378). While Wisker asserts that YA Gothic fiction has many purposes, she briefly cites "identity formation" and how YA Gothic "deal[s] with . . . identity and self-determination" (378). In this thesis, I explore the relationship between YA Gothic and identity, and I argue that YA Gothic fiction relies on the nature of both Gothic fiction and coming-of-age stories to adequately represent the struggle of adolescents as they mature into adulthood. While I assert that this form of storytelling would hold true for many YA Gothic fiction novels, I use *The Light* by D. J. MacHale and *Asylum* by Madeline Roux as case studies showing that the adolescent protagonists of YA Gothic fiction must overcome both Gothic and YA obstacles, such as confronting ghosts and finding identities, to reach maturation.

Defining the term *YA Gothic* could prove rather difficult, since the definitions of both terms comprising it —young adult and Gothic— have permeable boundaries. Numerous definitions have been proposed for "young adult," as Roberta Trites demonstrates in her book *Disturbing the Universe* when she looks at library

classifications: “In trying to define adolescent literature, Sheila Schwartz¹ notes that the American Library Association classifies adolescent literature into three categories: ‘Books Written Specifically for Adolescents,’ ‘Books Written for General Trade Market Which Have Adolescent Heroes and Heroines,’ and ‘General Books of Interest to Young Adults’” (7). Trites refers to all three of these categories as “adolescent literature,” but settles on the first of these definitions as the one that she chooses to mark “young adult novels.” Young adult literature scholar Michael Cart likewise calls attention to the difficulty in defining “young adult literature,” in his case due to the amorphous definition of “young adult” (13). However, Cart describes Maureen Daly’s *Seventeenth Summer*—a book widely regarded as one of the first if not the first young adult novel—as “an early indicator to publishers of an emerging market for literature that spoke with immediacy and relevance to teenagers” (23). Young adult literature has often also been associated with the term “coming-of-age novel,” as explained by Chris Baldick in the *Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms*: “. . . a coming-of-age novel may be devoted entirely to the crisis of late adolescence” (69). Combining Roberta Trites’s and Michael Cart’s definitions of young adult literature as literature directed at young adults with Chris Baldick’s definition of the coming-of-age novel creates a nice working idea of the young adult coming-of-age novel. This conception of young adult coming-of-age novels will be my working definition of the “YA” portion of the term “YA Gothic.”

The term “Gothic” is similarly difficult to define. It has evolved over centuries and can be associated with architecture, art, fashion, music, or even an overall aesthetic.

¹ While it is best to cite original sources, I am still waiting to receive this book via ILL request, since no copy of this book is readily available.

In *Sleeping with the Lights On*, horror scholar Daryl Jones claims that *Gothic* signifies an excess, and “one of the Gothic’s many excesses is an excess of *definition*” (8, italics in original). Nevertheless, Jones does offer a definition of Gothic: “a cultural and aesthetic mode associated with and expressive of darkness and death, irrationality and obsession, sensuality and disorder, the past and its mysteries” (7). Other Gothic scholars have offered slightly different definitions. For example, according to Jamieson Ridenhour, “The Gothic’s primary characteristic is a tension between the present and the past” (4), whereas Anna Jackson, Karen Coats, and Roderick McGillis remark in the introduction to *The Gothic in Children’s Literature*, “The Gothic chronotype is often a place, very often a house, haunted by a past that remains present” (4). The commonality between these three definitions is that the past conflicts in some way with the present. Gothic literature, therefore, must include the conflict between the past and the present. While there are other markers of Gothic, such as disorder, madness, and decadence, the conflict between the past and present is one of the most prominent markers of Gothic; therefore, while factors like madness and decadence will be evident in the texts examined by this thesis, the concept of the past haunting the present will serve as the primary defining factor for the “Gothic” portion of the “YA Gothic” term. Based on these definitions, I will stipulate that a YA Gothic novel is a coming-of-age novel, specifically written for young adults, where the past conflicts with the present.

One way in which the past can conflict with the present in a particularly Gothic manner is in a ghost story. Julia Briggs argues that there is “an extensive overlap” between the Gothic and the ghost story (177), though she does not, after making this

claim, list the components of that overlap. Briggs does describe ghost stories as representations of the past, noting, “The figure of the ghost has provided a powerful imagery for the darkness of the past and its inescapable historical legacies” (185). Gothic scholar Nick Groom makes a similar claim in *The Gothic: A Very Short Introduction*, saying of the ghosts in Ann Radcliffe’s *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, “the past keeps attempting to manifest itself in hauntings” (84). These examples of ghosts as representations of Gothic themes demonstrate how ghosts serve not only as a typical trope of the Gothic, but also as an embodiment of the past coming into conflict with the present. This overlap makes sense, since a ghostly figure from the past intruding on the present and haunting characters that are still alive would also represent this conflict.

The Gothic and the ghostly inherit new subtexts when applied to YA texts. YA Gothic opens many possibilities beyond the traditional tropes of late nineteenth and early twentieth century Gothic fiction. As stated by Anna Jackson et al., “Children’s and young adult texts have become veritable playgrounds for revising and expanding the Gothic chronotype” (6). Furthermore, Anna Jackson also connects YA Gothic and ghost stories to conceptions of identity in the same collection. In her “Uncanny Hauntings, Canny Children,” she points out that “The ghost plot is what compels the central character to reconsider issues of identity—to grow up” (160) and that the “central theme” of certain YA Gothic novels² is “the protagonist’s uncertain sense of identity” (160). Ghost plots can be seen as the essential force driving the plots of YA Gothic novels and making

² While Jackson’s essay is particularly formative on this topic, she works exclusively with the novels *The Time of the Ghost* by Diana Wynne Jones, *Charlotte Sometimes* by Penelope Farmer, and *The Haunting* by Margaret Mahy and how they work as “pop-Gothic texts” (157).

protagonists form their own identities. If the central theme of YA coming-of-age stories is the formation of an identity, then YA Gothic adds the specter of the ghost story to push the plot along, providing a catalyst for the identity formation which the protagonists must undergo. By taking a form—whether that form be spiritual or physical—ghosts can serve as the embodiment of the obstacles that an adolescent must overcome to reach a fully-formed sense of self.

Indeed, ghostly figures play a prominent role in the two YA Gothic novels that this thesis discusses, specifically in terms of the formation of the protagonists' identities. In D. J. MacHale's *The Light*,³ sixteen-year-old Marshall "Marsh" Seaver begins to experience a haunting by a horrifying ghostly presence that identifies itself as "Gravedigger," a character that Marsh himself has created in his sketchbook. When Marsh's father leaves town on a business trip early in the novel, the hauntings truly begin. At the same time, Marsh begins to look for Cooper Foley, his best friend who has mysteriously gone missing, with some help from Cooper's sister Sydney. While it initially seems that Marsh created Gravedigger, we eventually learn that the ghostly presence that terrifies Marsh and Sydney and took Cooper's life is the ghost of an ancient Greek soldier named Damon, who will wreak havoc in two further novels. Since we only learn of Gravedigger's real identity as Damon at the end of *The Light*, I will refer to him throughout this thesis as Gravedigger. Throughout the novel, Gravedigger serves as an entity of the past—both Marsh's past and the past of his mother—conflicting with the

³ *The Light* is the first book in a trilogy; the second and third books of which are titled *The Black* and *The Blood*, respectively. In the *School Library Journal*, Jessica Miller identifies *The Light* as a particularly affective ghost story, calling the book "a ghost tale with true bite" (61).

present of Marsh. In doing so, Gravedigger is actively preventing Marsh from maturation and it is only when Marsh seemingly defeats Gravedigger and overcomes his confrontation with the spirit that Marsh can begin to mature into an adult.

While Gravedigger may not be a traditional ghost (i.e., not the ghost of a particular person, but a figure conjured by another entity), Julia Briggs notes that her own definitions for the ghost story permit some latitude in terms of non-literal ghosts: “The narrowest definition of the ghost story would describe it as a story about the spirits of the returning dead, but many of the best-known examples of the genre do not strictly conform to this description” (177). However, Gravedigger’s status as a ghost can be defined with more specific boundaries than just merely saying that he is a ghost, and defining a ghost’s boundaries can be helpful in defining the ghost itself. For example, Nick Groom characterizes two different kinds of ghosts in relation to space: “The Ghost in *Hamlet* is witnessed by others,⁴ but in *Macbeth* only the king sees the bloody ghost of Banquo and the air-drawn dagger” (41). In these terms, Gravedigger’s nature is tricky. Gravedigger shows himself to anyone that Marsh speaks to, as we will see in further discussion of the novel, and he actively manipulates Marsh’s surroundings, attempting to terrify him and ultimately take his life. Gravedigger also kills most of the adults in Marsh’s life that could try to help Marsh defeat Gravedigger, isolating Marsh from any adult assistance. Gravedigger is not like the ghosts of either *Hamlet* or *Macbeth*, since Gravedigger is tied directly to the personage of Marsh, yet he can make himself appear to

⁴ While Groom says that the ghost in *Hamlet* can be seen by others, he may be speaking in more general terms, since the ghost is not always seen by other characters, as evidenced by Queen Gertrude’s inability to see the Ghost in Act III, scene iv.

others as he chooses. As a non-traditional ghost, Gravedigger can apparently choose when and to whom he appears, but his appearance always hinges on Marsh's connection to that person, especially revealing himself to anyone from whom Marsh seeks help. Gravedigger is never referenced by other characters until those characters see him, and characters only see Gravedigger when they are near Marsh. Gravedigger is directly linked to Marsh's location, and he uses his presence to influence Marsh.

Gravedigger's specific connection to Marsh directly relates him to Marsh's past, making him a representation of the Gothic past haunting the present. Gravedigger only begins to haunt Marsh after Marsh destroys a gift given to him by his late mother. Marsh had gotten into an argument with his friend Cooper, and now in a fit of rage, he grabs a small, decorative sphere—a dying gift from his photojournalist mother—and throws it at the last picture she took before passing away: “I spun, cocked my arm, and whipped the golden orb across the room. . . . When the golden sphere hit the picture, it shattered, along with the glass over the photo” (29). As soon as the sphere shatters, the haunting results of his actions begin. Marsh instantly knows that something is wrong. “When the ball broke, it splattered deep red liquid all over the photo and wall. The spray reached beyond the black frame, staining the wall with dark, red-brown juice. . . . It was blood” (29). However, when Marsh calls his dad into the room to see the blood-splattered wall, it is completely clean (30), implying that this bloody illusion is the first in the haunting episodes that will follow from the breaking of the sphere. Gravedigger was born from Marsh's past. Marsh destroyed a gift given to him by his late mother, and that destruction

of the gift led to Marsh's haunting.⁵ Gravedigger acts as a physical representation of the past coming back to the present to haunt someone.

Gravedigger's name and appearance are also related to Marsh's past. First, the name alone of Gravedigger implies someone who digs graves. The only person that Marsh knows at the beginning of the novel who is dead and would belong in a grave is Marsh's own mother. While Marsh knows that his mother is no longer alive, he does not actively engage with his life without her and has not been able to move on from his grief, as evidenced when Marsh's father says that he and Marsh "never talk about Mom anymore" (25). Gravedigger acts as a representation of not only mortality (specifically his mother's mortality), another Gothic trope, but also Marsh's inability to engage with his mother's death. Due to this inability to grieve her passing, Marsh is haunted by his past. Gravedigger acts as the physical manifestation of death in the past.

Beyond Marsh's inability to reconcile his mother's passing with his own life, Gravedigger also represents a part of Marsh's mind, since Gravedigger is born from the pages of Marsh's sketchbook. Marsh draws Gravedigger over and over again. When Marsh first sets out to start drawing in his first drawing scene of the novel, Marsh explains, "What popped out of my head instead was something I hadn't planned on or set out to do. I kept coming back to a character I called 'Gravedigger'" (12). Marsh's compulsion to draw Gravedigger may represent a safe part of his mind. He goes back to drawing Gravedigger so that he does not have to confront the realities of the world, like

⁵ While the connection between the sphere and Gravedigger is never fully explained in the first book of the series, the second book explains that the destruction of these spheres allows for Damon to affect the real world, as he does with the creation of Gravedigger.

his mother's death. Marsh retreats into a familiar world so that he does not have to engage with the unfamiliar. In a way, Gravedigger represents the part of Marsh's mind that wishes to remain in childhood and not grow up, as he acts as a reminder of mortality, which reminds Marsh of his own mother. The fact that Gravedigger later manifests as a physical entity with which Marsh must engage and overcome only strengthens this connection between Gravedigger and Marsh's childhood. Marsh has never properly grieved his mother's passing as a child, so now he must face a representation of her mortality in order to mature beyond adolescence.

Marsh's refusal to grow up is evidenced in other parts of the text as well. Marsh tries to convince Cooper to build rockets with him during the summer, but Cooper dismisses the activity as stupid. Marsh retorts, "You always liked doing stupid stuff like building rockets," and Cooper responds with, "I liked Power Rangers too . . . when I was six" (9; ellipsis in original). Cooper wants Marsh to put away the activities and behaviors that he considers more childish, as does Marsh's own father, who tells him, "You need to get out. Go to parties. Chase girls. You know . . . do normal stuff" (26). Two of the most important people in Marsh's life, Cooper and his father, tell him that he needs to participate in activities more appropriate for his age. Instead of doing the things that the people in his life wish for him to do, Marsh retreats back into his childhood ways, like drawing Gravedigger, and holds on to that childhood, even when those around him try to shake him out of it. Gravedigger represents the past haunting the present.

Gravedigger instills in Marsh a distrust for the adults in his life, strengthening Marsh's desire to hold on to childhood. Gravedigger impersonates Tyler Frano, the young

student art teacher at Marsh's school. Frano seemingly calls Marsh's cell phone, but when Marsh confronts Frano and Frano denies calling Marsh, Marsh cannot find the call on his phone's call log (66). When Marsh arrives at the school, he finds one of his drawings of Gravedigger, seeming to confirm that Gravedigger is responsible for the phantom phone call. Frano is a character that Marsh has already described as "creepy but harmless" (13). We eventually see that Gravedigger insidiously manipulates many adults in Marsh's life, but by beginning with an adult that Marsh already dislikes, the manipulation is less clear. By Gravedigger's othering adults and making Marsh distance himself from them, he keeps Marsh in a childlike state.

Gravedigger goes after increasingly older targets, as Frano is not the only adult that Gravedigger manipulates in order to create a distance between Marsh and adulthood. Frano is a student teacher, and therefore an adult, but still a younger adult. Gravedigger's targets become more adult and more matured as his attacks become more brazen. For instance, later in the novel, Gravedigger frightens and attacks a local eccentric referred to as George O. Gravedigger implicates George in the disappearance of Cooper Foley, since Marsh sees George with Cooper's jacket. Marsh pursues the man to question him. As George runs away from Marsh and the specter of Gravedigger, he runs into the road, getting struck and killed by an oncoming vehicle. Up until this point, Marsh was unsure about the existence of ghosts, but "Whatever this monster was, it was real and it had claimed a victim" (173). While George represents the first adult victim of Gravedigger, he also lived in a state of arrested development, as explained by the sheriff, Sheriff Vrtiak: "George O. was a local fixture. . . . He's lived here longer than anybody I know.

He may be a little . . . eccentric, but he's not crazy. At least not by my standard" (175).

We believe Vrtiak's depiction of George as "eccentric" when we see George's house: "It was surrounded by more weeds than grass, along with a collection of odd machine parts, ancient cars, and old road signs. I saw a rusted baby carriage; outboard engines on blocks; a wooden dinghy loaded with moldy life preservers . . . It would be easy to think of George O. as a nutcase hermit who lived to collect odds and ends that others threw away" (191). George's house acts a Gothic representation of George's arrested state of development. It uses suburban trailer imagery to recreate a Gothic setting while also showing how Gothic settings can represent a liminal state of identity; as George's identity was in disrepair, so was his home.

Another adult manipulated by Gravedigger is the local law enforcement agent, Sheriff Vrtiak. When Marsh tries to explain his situation to Sheriff Vrtiak, Vrtiak himself becomes a victim. Marsh finds himself in the back of Vrtiak's police car at one point in the novel, and that is when Gravedigger tries to kill both Vrtiak and Marsh: "Vrtiak gripped the mirror and turned it so I could see his reflection. It wasn't the reflection of Vrtiak that glared back at me. It was the dead gaze of Gravedigger. . . . Vrtiak, or somebody, jerked the wheel, sending us directly in front of the oncoming car" (219). Marsh survives the crash, but Vrtiak does not. Not only does Vrtiak become another victim, but this victimization affects Marsh much more, because not only was the sheriff another adult otherized by Gravedigger, but the sheriff represented a viable source of help for Marsh and his friends. Gravedigger has isolated Marsh from any real source of authority who could "fix" the issue. Furthermore, Vrtiak is the ultimate developed adult.

He is older than Tyler Frano and more developed than George O. As a sheriff, he represents a certain adult stability, since he has the most defined adult identity of all of Gravedigger's victims, being clearly an adult with a clear position in society. Gravedigger is making the prospect of growing up even more terrifying compared to Marsh's current adolescent state, since even a full adult such as Vrtiak cannot escape the attacks of Gravedigger.

While he never succeeds, Gravedigger does indeed try to kill Marsh on multiple occasions. The attempt in which he nearly succeeds takes place towards the end of the novel, when he traps Marsh and Sydney Foley, Cooper's sister, in a boat house seemingly flooded with blood. Marsh immediately recognizes the blood as an illusion, since "The big doors had to still be open, that's how the blood came in. But if they were still open, why didn't the blood rush back out?" (209). However, the illusory nature of the blood does not change the real danger: "I had no thoughts about the impossibility of what was happening, only that we were both about to drown" (209). While the use of blood in a scenario like this is indeed frightening, the use of blood here also hearkens back to the blood that appeared and disappeared on Marsh's wall at the beginning of the novel. This attempt at killing Marsh connects Marsh again to the death of his mother and the past that is haunting him. Additionally, we can understand Gravedigger—at least in part—as a representation of Marsh's desire to remain a child. Marsh is coming close to moving beyond his adolescence, so the manifestation of his childhood identity must stop him from doing so.

Only when Marsh is able to confront Gravedigger head-on is Marsh able to develop his own sense of identity. After this encounter where Marsh and Sydney nearly drown in the boathouse, Marsh notices a change in himself as he confronts Sydney, Cooper's sister, about the reality of their situation: "She wasn't used to being confronted like that, especially by me. But I wasn't the same guy who built rockets and read comics with Cooper. Not anymore" (213). Every time Marsh survives an encounter with Gravedigger, he matures some, helping to establish his own identity. By confronting Gravedigger and the terrors of Gravedigger's ghost, Marsh has inadvertently grown up. He no longer sees himself in the same childish light that he used to, as he has explicitly outgrown building rockets, the same action for which Cooper ridiculed him earlier in the novel. By facing a manifestation of his childhood identity and his past, Marsh has seen that he needs to mature, denouncing the very same things that he previously wanted to do with his friend, the things that his friend called childish.

Marsh's identity has also developed by the end of the novel when he develops a relationship with Sydney Foley. When Marsh's dad was encouraging him to grow up, he suggested that Marsh do things that he considered more age appropriate. One of those activities mentioned above was "chase girls." The only girl that Marsh shows any interest in is Sydney, and when Sydney is first introduced in the novel, Marsh explains that she is unattainable, saying, "I didn't have the same trouble making conversation with her like I did with other girls. That's because when I was with her, I couldn't speak at all. . . . Sydney Foley was definitely out of my league . . . if I were to be in a league at all" (10). However, after all of the interactions that they have with each other and their attempts to

save Cooper and escape Gravedigger, Sydney kisses Marsh. “Sydney leaned over, held my chin with her hand, pulled me closer, and kissed me. A real kiss” (290). This kiss between Marsh and Sydney works to mark Marsh’s further maturation. By growing up and refusing to see himself as a child any longer, Marsh now accepts himself as a partner for Sydney, a romantic equal. I am not arguing that sexual maturation must lead to maturation into adulthood, but for Marsh, this encounter serves as a very specific measure of growth for him, showing Marsh that, in overcoming the crisis set in motion by Gravedigger, he is on his way to forming his own identity and maturing.

The full growth of Marsh appears in the final book in the *Morpheus Road* trilogy, *The Blood*. After confronting Gravedigger, now recognized as Damon, and defeating the true evil presences in the series, Marsh grows up to become a famous fantasy writer and artist, composing a graphic novel series starring Gravedigger, the same creature that haunted him in his teens:

His most famous and successful creation by far was his first. After having drawn Gravedigger in so many incarnations with no connective narrative, he finally found the story by creating a nemesis for the demon. . . . As a joke that only he and Sydney could appreciate, the ironic name he chose for Gravedigger’s spirit nemesis was Damon . . . he always came back to drawing Gravedigger and Damon for the simple reason that it made him happy. (371)

Not only has the existence of Gravedigger and Damon now become something that Marsh can turn into a drawing, trivializing their existence, but he downright enjoys drawing them. Marsh now views his harrowing experience from a distance and can think

of it as an enjoyable memory. While Gravedigger formerly represented a fear of Marsh's, a part of Marsh's past that he was unable to run from, he now represents a memory for Marsh, a formative part of his past.

This example from the final book of the trilogy also shows how Marsh has grown in his identity as a graphic novel artist and writer. At the beginning of the trilogy, Tyler Frano confronts Marsh about the fact that Gravedigger is "all you ever draw" (13) and suggests that this obsession with Gravedigger is because Marsh is either "obsessed with death" or has "no significant life experiences to draw upon for inspiration" (13). Additionally, the fact that the character of Gravedigger, a character that Marsh created, was the one haunting him perhaps challenged Marsh's perception of his artistic identity. His drawing was not only something that he considered more of a childish hobby, but it proves to be dangerous, even, given that Marsh could create a monster that haunts him and his friends. However, when Marsh grows up and becomes a graphic novel writer and artist, he has many successful creations, even though Gravedigger was his "most successful." This quotation shows that Marsh has the ability to draw more than just Gravedigger. He has parlayed what he previously saw as a "folly of a juvenile sensibility" (*The Blood* 370) into a successful career as an artist. Marsh has emerged from his encounter with Gravedigger no longer haunted by the Gothic past and with a stronger sense of identity as an artist.

Another YA Gothic novel that deals with the past haunting the future while also forcing a protagonist to confront their own identity is the titular volume of Madeline

Roux's *Asylum* trilogy. In *Asylum*,⁶ Daniel "Dan" Crawford travels to a college preparatory summer program in New Hampshire. While there, he and his classmates stay in Brookline Dorm, a residence hall converted from Brookline Asylum, an infamous institution that once treated the criminally insane. The mysterious former warden—who happens to have the same name as Dan—was highly controversial because of his outdated and often dangerous treatment methods. Warden Crawford's spirit lurks in the background of the novel as Dan and his friends attempt to make it through the summer program. The ghostly warden also precipitates an identity crisis within Dan, since the warden nearly succeeds in merging Dan's identity with his own while Dan struggles to secure his own sense of identity.

From the very start of the novel, the Gothic elements of Roux's story are evident. As an example, an abandoned asylum is one of the common representations of the Gothic in contemporary culture. In Roux's novel, the setting of the former Brookline Asylum presents some of the same imagery of the crumbling monasteries characteristic of early gothic fiction, but in a more contemporary setting – suburban New Hampshire:

It didn't matter that the college had slapped a fresh coat of paint on the outer walls, or that some enterprising gardener had gone a little overboard planting cheerful hydrangea bushes along the path—Brookline loomed at the far end of the road like a warning. Dan had never imagined that a building could look *threatening*, but Brookline managed that fear and then some. (12, italics in original)

⁶ *Asylum* is the first book in a trilogy, with the second and third books titled *Sanctum* and *Catacomb*, respectively.

This passage serves as a physical description of Brookline, demonstrating the same threatening impulses present in more traditional gothic settings. Roux's novel also intersperses the narrative with real photographs, and a picture accompanies this description of the building. While the picture is clearly one of Brookline, the image almost appears to be that of a castle, with vines creeping and stretching across the left side of the building. Brookline looms in the distance, an overwhelmingly large building full of secrets (11). Roux is very clearly using Gothic motifs in this trilogy of YA Gothic stories.

Like in D. J. MacHale's *The Light*, the ghost in *Asylum* is not a ghost in the traditional sense. While the ghost of Warden Crawford is the ghost of a real person this time, the warden's spirit never physically appears as a full-bodied apparition. Instead, the ghostly presence of Warden Crawford, and the warden's spirit, manifests itself inside of Dan himself, managing to infect the lives of Dan and his friends and challenging Dan's identity and his friends' identities. For example, Dan and his friend Jordan, who happens to be gay, explore the former office of the warden, a room closed off to the students, and after that exploration, Jordan begins to have nightmares that challenge his identity: "Thanks to your stupid office I've been having these dreams. *Nightmares*. . . . They show me pictures. And they shock me. They shock me over and over again . . . saying, 'He'll be better now'" (156-57). When Dan hears about the dreams, he immediately understands who "they" are and what the dreams refers to, because "[Dan] knew from Professor Reyes's class that they used to administer electroshock therapy to homosexuals in order to 'cure' them. Did Jordan know that, too, or had he dreamed it out of nowhere?" (157).

Not only is this dream a direct challenge to Jordan's identity via the ghost of Brookline, but it also is a very explicit example of the past haunting the present in the challenge of that identity. The warden has infected Jordan's brain, torturing him because of Jordan's own identity.

The warden's ghost has also left its mark on the local community. This effect of the warden is shown when Dan and his friends begin to investigate the history of the asylum and meet Sal Weathers, a local expert on the asylum. When Dan introduces himself to Sal and his wife by his full name of Daniel Crawford, he is met with a violent reaction: "Suddenly, Sal's wife was screaming, throwing herself down on the island countertop, swinging her arms, and sending Sal's mug and a stack of dishes crashing to the floor." Sal is enraged: "'What the hell kind of sick joke are you trying to pull? My wife is ill and you come in here like that, you damned college kids, always so smart, so clever, eh?'" (133). At this point in the novel, Dan does not yet know about the fact that he and the warden share the same name, so it is not entirely evident to Dan at first that Sal and his wife's reactions are connected to the warden. However, once the name of the warden is revealed, it becomes clear that this interaction is directly related to the warden. Upon hearing the name "Daniel Crawford," Sal is reacting to the past of the warden haunting his present.

Sal's wife is also an example of the past of the warden haunting the present. It is revealed at the end of the novel that Sal's wife was actually Lucy Valdez, a former patient of Warden Crawford. Dan and his friends find a picture of Lucy from when she was a patient at Brookline as a child, and she has "a jagged scar across her forehead and .

. . something wrong with her eyes,” and Dan thinks to himself that she looks “empty” (37). It is clear that she was experimented on by the warden, which led to the reaction she had to Dan’s name at Sal’s home earlier. Lucy is also a very present manifestation of the past of the warden. Though the warden’s experiments stopped and he is no longer at Brookline, his effects are still felt by the locals. While the effect of the name “Daniel Crawford” on both Sal Weathers and Lucy Valdez is not explicitly ghostly in nature, their reactions show that the name “Daniel Crawford” is linked to the mysterious past of Brookline. The past and the mysteries of the past are other characteristics of the Gothic.

The ghost of the warden also challenges Dan’s identity in multiple ways, the most evident of these ways being that the Warden and Dan share a name. In fact, the relationship between Dan’s name and his identity is part of the explanation for why Dan’s name was never changed when he was formally adopted by his parents. When Dan’s parents are questioned by someone about why Dan’s last name is different from their own, Dan’s father simply says that “Crawford is the name he came to us with” (254), but his mother elaborates, “We gave him a choice, just like our social worker said we could. . . . Dan had already lived with so many families by that point. I think he just wanted to keep one thing the same—one piece of himself” (254). The implication from his mother’s words is that, as Dan bounced between foster families, Dan’s identity had been in flux, constantly changing as he moved from one family to another. When his foster parents finally adopted him formally, they allowed him to cling to the only part of himself that had been constant throughout his childhood, which was his name. The only sense of identity that he had from his status as a foster child to the child of his new parents was

that his name was the same. While his parents eventually brush this similarity off as a coincidence and do not worry about what this coincidence could mean (255), the haunting implications for Dan are preeminent. Dan clung to his name as the only constant identifier for his sense of self as a child, and that very same name that he clung to is the name that is haunting him as he attempts to transition through adolescence and into adulthood.

The potential familial or biological link⁷ implied with the similarities in names makes itself apparent as soon as the fourth chapter, when Dan and his friends, exploring the old asylum office, come across a door with the letters “W D N R A F D” on the window, arranged in this manner, and the accompanying picture shows that just enough spaces exist to fill in the missing letters to spell out “Warden Crawford.” Dan, of course, already had his name before adoption, although for legal reasons, his adoptive parents do not know the identity of Dan’s biological parents (254). All of these name-related coincidences directly challenge Dan’s identity, especially since Dan came to the school to study psychology, the field in which Warden Crawford worked (23). These similarities in Warden Crawford’s identity and Dan’s identity challenge any conception Dan has of his own sense of self. If he and the warden are related and he shares the same interest in psychology as the warden, then he could end up turning out the same as the warden.

The lack of an identity as Dan bounced between homes also speaks to Dan’s character from before he makes it to Brookline. As *Asylum* begins, Dan is arriving at Brookline, and his character from before he arrives at Brookline is never fully established

⁷ The familial connection becomes clear in later books in the series, when Warden Crawford is revealed to be Dan’s biological uncle (*Catacomb* 15).

or characterized. The only distinguishing characteristic of Dan's identity is that he has some connection to Brookline, as shown when he corrects the cab driver who is taking him there: "'It's left,' Dan repeated . . . He wasn't actually sure how he knew the way—he hadn't looked up direction ahead of time—but there was something . . . that stirred a memory, and if not a memory, a gut instinct" (10). As a protagonist, Dan's only defining characteristic is the instinctive reaction to Brookline. Other than that, Dan is mostly a blank slate, especially when compared to some of the other characters in the narrative that Dan meets. For instance, Dan's friend Jordan has far more characterization than Dan, as Jordan is described as "trendy" (25), and while Dan never says as much, he clearly feels intimidated by Jordan's "blithe" demeanor when they first meet, as he thinks "Well, I can't compete with that" (25). Jordan is also responsible for picking the lock on the door that blocks off part of the abandoned asylum, which allows Dan and company to explore the abandoned wings of Brookline (31). Part of Dan's coming-of-age process is that he must find his own identity, but his only real identity up to this point in his life was his connection to Brookline and by extension, the warden. This lack of an identity means that, when Dan has established his own identity independent from Brookline at the end of the novel, Dan has overcome the past.

This conflict between the warden's identity and Dan's attempt at establishing an identity serves as the crux of the novel, as also indicated by when the haunting begins. While the name on the door is an example of challenges to Dan's identity, it is not an explicitly ghostly manifestation of the warden. Dan even finds a picture of the warden in his desk in his dorm room, but this event also has no direct consequences. The haunting

of Dan only begins after he and his friends explore Warden Crawford's office, connecting the ghost of the warden to his former office, like an evil spirit trapped inside and waiting to be released. Dan displays a deeper connection to the warden and even embodies him following this encounter. The first instance of this connection occurs when Dan explores abandoned portions of the former asylum and finds the warden's glasses. A voice tells him, "Try them on, Dan" (105). Dan does, and sees that he looks exactly like the warden: "They fit perfectly. He looked again at the photograph in which no one was smiling. The glass of the frame reflected his face back at him, overlaid on the photo. With a jolt he realized that he looked like the warden. He tore off the glasses as though they had burned him" (105). By this point, Dan has seen pictures of the warden and knows about the warden's questionable past, but the warden's spirit seems to inhabit the same room as Dan, if not already inhabiting Dan himself. The voice that told Dan to try on the glasses could be understood as the specter of Warden Crawford, looking to inhabit Dan's body. The warden seems to want Dan to carry on the warden's legacy at Brookline, and getting Dan to put on the glasses and see the warden's image in himself is just one step in that process.

Another instance occurs when Dan is in class taking notes. He drifts off and begins to daydream, yet he continues to write his notes, barely paying attention to the words of the professor. When he looks back at his notes, he sees not his own writing, but the handwriting of the warden (200). Not only does Dan begin to literally see himself as the warden when he puts on the warden's glasses, but he also begins to write like the warden as the ghost begins to take over Dan's body and mind, haunting him to the point

that Dan questions his own identity. The spirit of the warden is actively attempting to override Dan's own identity and supplant it with his own, making Dan a vessel for the warden himself. Dan's own search for an identity is being hampered by the warden's multiple attempts to overtake him. The ghost of the warden represents outside influences on the identity of adolescents. The warden wants Dan to act as a vessel for the warden to take over, much in the same way that adults may wish to live vicariously through their children. The concept of an adolescent confronting an outside influence on their life and ultimately rejecting that influence is a common trope of YA coming-of-age novels, and this instance of the warden attempting to influence Dan is a ghostly version of that traditional plot device.

This haunting of Dan escalates to nearly total possession at the end of the novel, with the final confrontation of the novel serving as Dan's ultimate test to completely expel the spirit of the warden from his mind while attempting to maintain his own identity. While Dan has been slowly transforming into the warden, someone else has been committing murders, killing people in the same manner as the Sculptor, a former serial killer and patient at Brookline under the care of Warden Crawford. During the climax of the novel, Dan and his friends apprehend the copycat killer: Dan's roommate, Felix, who has been possessed by the Sculptor. At this point, Dan fully becomes the warden. Dan shouts to his friends to, "Strap [Felix] down!" and becomes horrified when he finds himself approaching Felix with a scalpel.

The scalpel lowered against Dan's will.

No, no, this isn't what I want, this isn't me . . .

I am you.

The scalpel drew closer and closer to Felix.

No. (294)

The overlapping dialogue between both Dan and the warden does not mention which character is speaking, suggesting that the warden has nearly taken over Dan's very mind. This encounter between Dan and the warden serves as the ultimate test of Dan's identity. The warden's identity has nearly supplanted his own. Dan must attempt to expel the warden from his mind in a fight for his very sense of self, even as we wonder who is speaking. It is even unclear who speaks the final "No." Is it Dan, fighting off the warden, or is it the warden, fighting off Dan? The ghostly spirit of the warden represents the past haunting the present Dan, trying to pull Dan back into the ways of the warden. While the warden never appears as an apparition, this encounter is the closest that the warden gets to being fully present in the novel; he even has dialogue.

Dan eventually overcomes the warden's spirit inside of him. After fighting off the warden's control when the spirit of the warden wanted to cut into Felix, Dan tells the warden inside of him, "I'm not you. I will never be you" (297). Dan is able to banish the warden from his mind and can begin to mature into an adult, secure in his own identity as a person entirely independent of the warden. One consequence of Dan's resulting maturation is that he is able to enter a romantic relationship with Abby Valdez, a fellow student in the program with him, much in the same way that Marsh became romantically involved with Sydney Foley. After the final confrontation, which coincides with the end of the college preparatory program, Abby sees Dan off, with a romance clearly budding

between the two. “Abby . . . [gave Dan] a quick peck on the cheek . . . He wondered if he ought to give her one final kiss here, before they parted, or wait until he got down to the car. It seemed like such an important moment; he really didn’t want to spoil it” (309). Again, this is not to say that general maturation necessitates sexual maturation and growth, but this particular incident for the character of Dan is notable because Dan is able to recognize that he has grown. He has established, at least in part, his own identity. If not a full identity, he has at least established an identity that is distinct from the warden’s identity. Part of this new, independent identity is his romantic interest in Abby, which he is able to fully realize with a kiss.

These two YA Gothic novels heavily rely on the ghost story. Ghosts like Warden Crawford and Gravedigger allow for the embodiment of the past haunting the present, the classic trope of Gothic fiction, while also representing the obstacles that young adults must overcome as they establish their own identities as they mature and grow. Not only are these specters ghosts, but they are ghosts of *adults*; they are the manifestations of people who have already lived and died, coming back to the present to influence adolescents. These ghosts can also serve the dual purpose of representing the unknowns of what lies beyond the physical realm of existence and the unknowns of what lies beyond adolescence and a fully formed identity, a familiar fear for most young people. Dan and Marsh begin their stories without knowledge of the horrors of the world; however, when the existence of a supernatural and malevolent source challenges their sense of self and actively causes harm to those around them, they must overcome their own lack of an identity and emerge on the other side with a more stable sense of self.

While the scope of this paper only included these two novels, the same pattern likely extends beyond just these two instances. Further analysis of YA Gothic fiction would likely reveal the same concepts of a ghostly or generally malevolent spirit that attempts to prevent the young adult protagonist from maturing. For example, Anna Jackson makes a similar argument in her analysis of Diana Wynne Jones's *The Time of the Ghost*, citing how "[Jones's novel] ends with Sally not only comfortably surrounded by her family and friends, but with a new sense of her abilities, too, and a new sense of purpose" (174). Two adolescent horror novels by Joseph Bruchac are also described as "novels that wed frightening situations within the novels with the terrifying angst of adolescence" (Stewart 84). Adolescents exist in a state of in-between, and this "terrifying angst of adolescence" can be linked to the adolescent's forced transition into adulthood while still wishing to hold onto their past childhood. YA Gothic novels enact this conflict between the past and present as a way to have their protagonists confront their past, and by extension, their childhood, and move on to have a stronger identity. While both *The Light* and *Asylum* also wed these two elements, they go even further and demonstrate in detail how YA Gothic operates, giving us a better understanding of how horrific Gothic and coming-of-age novels work hand in hand to successfully portray the adolescent search for identity, with their protagonists emerging on the other side of their respective crises as more self-assured people.

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