

## ‘Looking Back’: Scottish Queer Gothic Returns in Zoe Strachan’s *Ever Fallen in Love*

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The tension between remembering and repression harbours an oscillation between fear and desire, since ‘Memory offers the heroine the opportunity to confront her deepest darkest fears and darkest desires.’<sup>(1)</sup> Though Haggerty alludes to the gothic fiction of Ann Radcliffe, it is nevertheless an appropriate commentary that can be applied to Zoe Strachan’s *Ever Fallen in Love* (2011), a contemporary Scottish gothic novel. Strachan’s queer gothic novel straddles past tense first and present tense third person narration to uncover the story of Richard, a gay computer games creator, and his former friendship with apparently heterosexual Luke, whom he met as a student. At the heart of the narrative lurks a dark secret that is gradually exposed through Richard’s memory which conceals an interrelated unrequited love for Luke and a heinous act of sexual coercion/rape carried out by both. This culminates in the female victim, Lucy’s, death and their expulsion from University. Since ‘She was under the influence of drugs’<sup>(2)</sup> a question mark remained over whether her drowning was accidental or suicide, while implicating Luke as the local drug dealer. The return of the repressed is unearthed through memory, triggered by Richard’s sister Stephie visiting him in his remote Highland hideaway. Though he attempts to bury the past, Richard’s haunted self is compelled towards ‘looking back’ (6), which involves the traumatic memory of Lucy as well as the aching love for Luke, whom he spends much time looking for online. It is no accident that Richard’s desire for Luke conflates with the trauma of having to *look* at one’s past, as an erotic longing for unity overlaps with a thanatotic division. Fred Botting posits that Gothic romance embodies ‘the psychic economy of eros and and thanatos’ as desire itself becomes the undead of *Liebestod* since ‘Love never dies’.<sup>(3)</sup> Richard experiences the uncanny as ‘a sense of repetition or “coming back” – the return of the repressed [...] a compulsion to repeat’<sup>(4)</sup>, as past and present narratives intertwine bringing the doubles of his past and present selves ever closer together. While Kirsty Macdonald contends that ‘Scottish fiction has previously only rarely been examined through the lens of the Gothic’<sup>(5)</sup>, I will explore *Ever Fallen in Love* through that lens and argue that it is very much a Scottish Queer Gothic novel replete with uncanny tropes such as doubles, a castle, a fire, death, secrecy, graveyards and returns. Though contemporary fiction, Strachan intertextualises her Gothic literary ancestors, particularly the Celtic texts of Scottish, Irish and French Gothic, looking back in homage while offering her own contemporary view of Scotland’s alterity. In her response to an interview question regarding her decision to relocate to an independent Scottish press from a London publisher, Strachan says that ‘this novel wouldn’t be for them. I thought my kind of fiction, and maybe my personality, might find a better fit with a smaller publisher [...] and I really admire how they combine passion for Scotland in all its diversity with a very ambitious international outlook’.<sup>(6)</sup> She makes a decision to shift from the centrality of London to the devolved remoteness of a small Scottish publisher to signal that this text is part of a Scottish Gothic but is also queer ‘in all its diversity’.

For Botting,

Romance, as it frames gothic, seems to clean up its darker counterpart, sanitising its deprivations; it tries to transform, even ennoble, violent gothic energies as a quest for love in the face of death [...] Monsters, in this romantic transformation of gothic, find themselves increasingly humanised while villains become increasingly alluring: repulsion cedes to attraction as horror gives way to romance.<sup>(7)</sup>

Thus, ‘The gothic genre’s usual trajectory is reversed: a flight from figures of horror and revulsion is turned into a romantic flight towards them, now figures of identification’.<sup>(8)</sup> This is precisely the pattern

followed by Richard who pines for the monstrous manipulator Luke, while simultaneously attempting to sanitise his own culpability and compliance in Luke's twisted plot. Richard's erotic weakness for Luke fuels the latter's control over him, resulting in thanatotic madness. The trope of madness, according to Mair Rigby, signals "excessive relations between men' and, particularly with nineteenth-century Gothic, such men, 'on finding themselves under the domination of another male figure, go "mad" or express a fear of madness'.(9) During such a moment of madness Richard's desire for Luke manifests itself in the sexual degradation of Lucy. Richard recalls that night when Luke orchestrates their dangerous liaison, for 'Part of the appeal, I suppose, that it would happen in a narrow, single bed, under the gaze of Lucy's childhood teddy bear and the photos on her pinboard of friends, family, pet dog' (191). Predatorily, Luke feeds off the sinister pleasure of corrupting her childhood innocence with traumatic acts of sexual debauchery which forever haunt Richard. Fuelled by alcohol, 'things get out of hand and you know there's no point in going back, so it's as if you're sleepwalking, not really there. Until the morning, when it's crystal clear, and you try to layer that gauziness between your waking self and the memory that you can't afford to give house room'.(10) Unable to give this uncanny memory 'house room', Richard cannot evict it from his mind, slowly accepting his complicity: 'Lucy, why did she go along with it? (Did she go along with it?)' (193). This queer abject sexual transgression allows Richard to fulfil his gay desire for Luke, while the latter can maintain his heteronormative veneer, and Lucy serves as the in-between exploited simulacra, for 'While I stayed still but still hard in position, he eased himself in from the front. He began, slowly, to move, and I thought I would explode then expire for the pleasure of feeling him so close to me' (194). She becomes incidental to their queer pleasure yet legitimises its heteronormative boundaries, for

His pace quickened, I had to match it and I did, perfectly, wishing it could last forever. When I opened my eyes he was looking at me again, looking at my face with awful wonder in his eyes, and he smiled, as if he would have kissed me [...] If she hadn't been between us. He reached over and stroked my hair back from my face, and his touch, his touch, the feel of him against me, his fingers brushing my throat, my lips, made me shudder and slow, and as I relaxed I saw his beautiful face contort, as if it was the sight, the sound, the feel of my ecstasy that had brought on his own, and I had to bite the inside of my cheek until I tasted blood to stop myself saying out loud what it was that I felt. (194)

The discarded female is left traumatised and victimised and participates in her ultimate self-erasure, negated by the mirror of their mutual reflection. Lucy is Luke's double: both names mean light, which is refracted through Richard's gaze, while the path to his painful self-enlightenment pivots upon his encounter with both of them. Upon their shared looks and mutual climax, Richard bites his inside cheek, the blood symbolising a vampiric homosexual encounter whose name he dares not speak 'out loud'. Paulina Palmer argues that a Gothic motif is "the unspeakable" and the themes of secrecy and silence relating to it', adding that 'Something can be unspeakable because the individual lacks knowledge of it, because the knowledge is repressed, or because, though having access to it, s/he dare not admit the fact'.(11) Traumatized by his participation in "unspeakable" acts of sexual transgression, Strachan's narrative nevertheless unveils his secret as the gothic tale reveals itself. Considering the 'unspeakable' perversity of the Gothic, Macdonald insists that 'due to its inherently superior and conventionally more powerful position, straight male identity is consequentially receptive to depravity and sordidness'.(12) Acknowledging that power corrupts, she posits that Gothic fiction undermines 'the hegemonic power of the male by destabilising traditionally the most stable of identities'.(13) Strachan's text certainly destabilises heteronormativity and instead offers a plethora of queer identities. Contrary to Macdonald's view, though, not all heterosexual male identities are secure, and Luke's is disrupted on the basis of his marginalised class, Scottish and Oedipal tensions.

Thus, torn between desire and disgust, Richard's secret is eventually revealed. Catherine Spooner notes that 'If Gothic in its eighteenth and early nineteenth-century phase has been seen by some as a "dark side" to Romanticism [...] then in the twenty-first century Romanticism seems to have become a kind of shadow double to the Gothic'.(14) Whenever Richard indulges in erotic memories of Luke, he is immediately suffocated by Lucy's thanatotic shadow. Stephanie contemplates,

imagine how great it would be if you could look inside your head and see all the files stored there, and just delete the stuff that clutters things up. Then once a month or whatever you could empty the recycle bin and they'd be gone. All the crappy memories that you can't quite shake would disappear forever. (45)

In reply to his sister, Richard admits that it is a 'Nice idea [...] But there's always a trace. You might think you've deleted a file, but there's still a shade of it there. Someone could delve in and retrieve it' (45). Memory, then, Richard concedes, cannot be conveniently deleted but, instead, acts as a shadowy palimpsest that forever returns to haunt and pollute the present. Despite living in isolation from his family and previous life in the remote north of Scotland, and taking up running to try to refocus his mind and outrun his past, he battles against constant returns to past mistakes, despairing,

Was it possible, he wondered, ever to escape these small and to anyone else inconsequential recollections that suddenly burst into your consciousness and occupied it completely? [...] An awkward phrase, a stupid comment, long forgotten by the person to whom it was addressed, that years later could still flood you with self-loathing. (105)

The omniscient present tense narrative offers a glimpse into his repressed demons of 'other memories, of stronger things, if you allowed these to slip into your mind' (105). His hope that 'the present should trump the past' (105) mirrors the narrative's present where he tries to live remotely and differently, yet is haunted by the encroaching past tense narrative of his former self. According to Strachan, 'I think of it as a novel about unrequited love, about memory, about how we tell and retell our own stories to try and make sense of our lives – and to try and pinpoint the moment at which we made the decision that changed our paths forever'.(15) The uncanny facet of repetition is part of Richard's haunted memory that he perpetually revisits through the narrative. Strachan continues, 'The novel explores the difference between the person Richard was at eighteen and who he is now, whether he was actively corrupted by the person he fell in love with or whether the relationship simply awakened intrinsic parts of his character, the existence of which he would rather not acknowledge'.(16) As Nicholas Royle explains, 'The uncanny [...] has to do with a sense of ourselves as double, split, at odds with ourselves'.(17) In the split between his present and past, 'There is a sense of a doubled self, needing to recover from a traumatic history, and attempts to acknowledge or reconstruct either a repressed culture or repressed experience'.(18) According to Palmer,

The double is a signifier of psychic division [...] Its significance tends to be ambiguous since, while an encounter with her/his double may furnish the individual with a sense of liberation and even *jouissance*, the double may also represent an aspect of the self that s/he feels anxious or guilty about. It resembles, in this respect, the concept of the abject which, according to Julia Kristeva, fascinates at the same time as it repels.(19)

As much as his past life with Luke horrifies Richard, at the same it entices him, admitting that 'He often wondered what he'd do if he could go back and relive that period, usually coming to the uncomfortable conclusion that he'd do exactly the same again'. (4)

Richard's despair at the seepage of traumatic memories and wish that his past had been different signifies not only an individual psychological struggle but, rather, equates with a cultural loss embedded deep within the national psyche. According to David Punter, being subsumed by England has led Scotland to regret its history and seek to envisage alternative possibilities 'that includes within itself the question "What if?," the implicit possibility of a history that could have been "done differently," the possibility of a writing that would now be speaking from a position of political power rather than from one of subjugation to the invader, the settler, the conqueror'.(20) 'There seems little doubt', he continues, 'that in both Scotland and Ireland Gothic at a certain point became a way of articulating those suppressed histories, as indeed it continues to do so'.(21) Strachan's depiction of the queer Richard, then, manipulated by the heterosexual Luke, mirrors Scotland's hegemonic influence by England, its neighbourly doppelganger. This uneasy national relation resulted in a psychic split within Scotland regarding those in favour and those against the Union established in 1707. The uncanny, notes Royle, 'comes from Scotland, from that "auld country" that has so often been represented as "beyond the borders", liminal, an English foreign body'.(22) Scotland itself serves as a distorted looking-glass of England, both familiar and utterly alien. As with Frankenstein's relocation to the gothic landscape of 'some obscure nook in the northern highlands of Scotland' (23) to undertake another monstrous creation, Richard's retreat to the isolated Highlands allows him to avoid human relationships and contact while working on creating his own virtual games. His relocation is in itself uncanny, both at home yet not at home in the *unheimlich* of remote removal from familiar society. Crucially, from his very first encounter with Luke, Richard is detached from home, since 'The first time I met him? [...] It was the day I left home' (79). Further, they meet on a train, a chronotopic trope that *transports* them in time and space to an altogether queerly different location, where they can act out alternative selves. The train allows them to reach a transitory space of transformation, where queer alternate acts occur: Richard and Luke transfer sexually – *transexually* – through Lucy's body, her female body sacrificed as a vessel for their gothic pleasure.

However, with the arrival of Stephanie and, later, her friend Loren, he is not permitted to remain severed from his past but, instead, must face his demons (interestingly, the three characters' initials are RLS, paying homage to the Victorian master of Scottish gothic, Robert Louis Stevenson). Richard and Stephanie 'passed the ruins of the crofts opposite the beach' (142), and their ghostly imprints allow Richard to articulate the uncanny affect of the Highland Clearances as 'Kind of sad, I always think [...] So many people lived here, once. There was a whole community, shifted to the coast by the clearances' (142). Stephanie's response that 'It must've been hellish' locates this historical traumatic memory within the parameters of gothic torment, while Richard emphasises the uncanny displacement and relocation of home, 'Yes. And then I guess some of them emigrated, in the end. Or were forced to emigrate' (142). These historical evictions, with people dispossessed from their homeland, epitomise the *unheimlich* and situate Scotland's cartography within a gothic backdrop. Haunted by the ghost of the Clearances, Richard and Stephanie witness a neo-colonialism of the Highlands which serve as a playground for affluent English tourists. The wild landscape becomes uncanny, subject to disneyfication as holidaymakers in 'people carriers, bicycles strapped to the roof' (78) reductively package it into a short break in an adventure playground theme park. Notably, Richard observes 'the large and grumbling English family whose Scottish adventure seemed to have already disintegrated amidst tug-o-wars over burgers and chips' (206). In a bid to signify the authenticity of the town for the benefit of tourism, 'Some misspelling had delayed the partner sign that would offer the Gaelic translation, prompting a volley of letters to the editor of the local paper, all of them expressing their outrage in perfect English' (211) The neo-colonial "owning" of Gaelic for tourist purposes is satirically acknowledged through Richard's focalised thoughts that 'Still, it was nice that someone originally from Buckinghamshire should feel such a connection with the language' (211).

The ten year gap between Richard's retrospective first person narrative of his misspent student days with Luke and the omniscient commentary upon his current life is a common literary device. For instance, in Frances Hodgson Burnett's *The Secret Garden* (1911), gothic secrets are interrupted after ten years with the arrival of Mary; in Homer's *The Odyssey*, it takes Odysseus a decade to reach his wife and home following the Greek/Trojan War; or in J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone* (1997), the infant Harry spends ten years with his abusive surrogate family before entering the fantasy realm of Hogwarts. The indication, then, is that Richard will not continue in his isolation but that it will be interrupted. The story that he has been concealing will out, remapping forbidden territory of trauma and desire that is located geographically as well as psychologically at a spatiotemporal distance. Thus, 'Romance "is the story of an *elsewhere*' [...] hiding guilty secrets [...] repressed wishes and desires return'.(24) It is that elsewhere that the past narrative returns us and Richard to, dogging his footsteps no matter how fast he tries to run away from it until, ultimately, he must journey back to the skeletons of his geographical past. Strachan's title, *Ever Fallen in Love*, encapsulates the concept of gothic romance, with the acknowledgement that the novel will address themes of love and desire, but equally, 'fallen' signifies a gothic propensity for something sinfully darker. This is reinforced with the echo of the Buzzcocks's 1978 song 'Ever Fallen in Love (With Someone You Shouldn't've)' which, in turn, was inspired by the film version of *Guys and Dolls*, with the long suffering Adelaide's dialogue that addresses the inevitability of falling 'in love with someone you shouldn't have'. Loving the wrong person enduringly despite its detrimental impact upon the self is a major theme in Strachan's text in the depiction of Richard's unrequited love for Luke. In an interview she states, 'we're all fascinated by desperate, doomed love affairs and most of us have fallen in love with someone we shouldn't have fallen in love with'.(25) In turn, 1978 is only one year prior to the dawn of Britain's love/hate relationship with Thatcherism: Scotland, in essence, was forced into that relationship against its will and led to a dislocation from Westminster politics that ultimately fuelled the campaign for devolution.

From the outset, the novel hints at the unsuitability of Luke as Richard's love interest, as he recalls that 'You wouldn't think that there were still women who could be ruined. Perhaps there aren't any more, but back then, in that university town by the sea, there were. It was quite an old-fashioned place. Luke was quite old-fashioned too. Cast himself as a latter day Dorian or Valmont, sinned the old sins' (1). Immediately, the first person retrospective narration alludes to the downfall of Lucy as a 'ruined' woman coupled with the sinful associations of Luke who has self-fashioned himself according to the sinister decadent literary figures of Oscar Wilde's Victorian character Dorian Gray or Vicomte Sébastien de Valmont in Choderlos de Laclos's *Les Liaisons Dangereuses* (1782). Luke seeks 'old-fashioned' inspiration from 'old sins' in the gothic fiction of the 18th and 19th century fin de siècle, associated with sexual 'sins'. To recall Botting's earlier comment in terms of gothic romance, then, there is something 'elsewhere' about Luke's old worldly otherworldliness of depravity, drawn from other literary texts. The chronotopic train has *transported* them to an 'elsewhere', suggesting that contemporary time structures have been queered, just as Jonathan Harker's 'watch was still unwound' when in the Transylvanian 'sort of sanctuary' of Dracula's castle which, apparently, protects him against 'those awful women'.(26) The past is an indelible mark on the present, where even the university is described as 'an old-fashioned place'. Its gothic architecture and remote northern location superimposes upon their, then, contemporary attendance in the 1990s, as present and past are interwoven. Richard recalls that 'We were sitting on the windowsill of the pool room in the Union [...] a girl who was celebrating her lucky, winning shot [...] Better she'd lost, kept quiet. Her taste for games was unlikely to match his' (1). By linking Lucy's pool game to Luke's 'taste for games', who has already been associated with sexual sins, it is clear that Lucy will be manipulated into a dangerous liaison, just as Richard is too. The scene describing Lucy's sexual degradation mirrors the 'old fashioned' gothic tale of Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897), when Lucy, depicted as a loose (Loosy) woman, is impaled by Arthur who is encouraged by Van Helsing, 'driving deeper and

deeper the mercy-bearing stake [...] his breath came in broken gasps'.(27) Just as Richard and Luke share an erotic gaze that erases Lucy, so too does Arthur and avenging males engage in homoerotic bonding, where 'For a few minutes we were so taken up with him that we did not look towards the coffin'.(28) Richard's name is a near anagram of Dracula – Drac Hir – and he certainly participates in the vampiric feeding of hir/her to satiate his own queer taste. Richard's initial befriending of Luke is fraught with foreboding, for 'He seemed to be sneering as he turned and looked back towards me but maybe it was just the light because then he said: "Got any plans for later?"' (16). But, given his developing attraction, Richard blinds himself to Luke and 'so we arranged to go for a drink around six, the nervy lad from the ex-mining town and the prickly youth from the city scheme' (16). Their queer friendship is secured in the other wordly place of a gothic mansion, described as 'a mixture of castle and country house, built from grey stone' (51). It is a disused dead space, left vacant and resembling cemetery gravestones with its 'grey stone'. A chronotopic decayed past imposed upon the present, it aptly serves as the place where these friends share the ghostly stories of their past until Luke sets it alight. Self-fashioning themselves as lords of the manor, their ghostly presence suggests a pseudo affluent lifestyle forged in the embers of privilege, as Richard notes that

The mirrors above the fireplaces showed rooms within rooms and I caught myself staring deep into the reflection, as if I might catch sight of ladies in fine dresses and the men in sleek suits [...] I pictured a 1930s heyday, the 50s and 60s spent clinging to the past, then a slow decline into final demands from creditors and shutting off rooms. (60)

The landscape is depicted uncannily, as ' swathes of white mist began rolling down from the fields onto the road. It seemed magical, as if we were in another world'. (154) Hardly surprisingly it is associated with spectres – 'Do you believe in ghosts [...] This looks spooky' (155) – as Richard's wordplay associates Luke with look and spook. But even their gothic haunt is displaced by capitalist tourism, redesigned as 'They rebuilt the castle, you know. Turned it into luxury apartments for posh golfers' (257). Being 'the same, but not the same' it is defamiliarised upon Luke's return, where 'He must have wanted to remember, to touch the past, rub it between his fingertips and feel it once more. It's over, he'd said all those years ago, and yet he'd gone back anyway' (257).

While acknowledging that 'The uncanny *is* queer. And the queer is uncanny'(29), Royle considers Freud's discussion of looking as an integral aspect of the uncanny, where 'the double and "déjà vu" are all most immediately associated with seeing'.(30) Strachan's novel emphasises this association in the tense looks between Richard and Luke, since 'The gaze between men has long been a sexually loaded sign'.(31) Rigby's discussion of Charles Maturin's *Melmoth the Wanderer* (1820) notes that, 'while Melmoth does not look peculiar, his "look" is peculiar' since 'it is the "expression of his eyes", in other words his gaze, which makes him dangerous'.(32) Citing D.A. Miller, she advocates that 'perhaps the most salient index to male homosexuality, socially speaking, consists precisely in how a man looks at other men'.(33) In Strachan's text Richard and Luke exchange many lingering looks, for 'he kept his gaze wrapped around mine for long enough that I hadn't been sure if he was flirting or not. Until he laughed and said, Well. I prefer girls' (40). Denied the rapture of a lovers' embrace, Richard is 'wrapped' in a sexually charged gaze that is enveloped in the codes of cultural and literary discourse, including the sinister queer spectacle of *Dorian Gray*. Thus, 'at nine minutes past six he appeared, and I'm not sure if it's just hindsight that makes me think he'd changed in some subtle way, hardened just a touch' (18). The associations between the neo-Victorian Luke and *Dorian Gray* are reinforced immediately prior to this scene when Richard is unpacking in his student accommodation, for 'I placed my prized Oscar Wilde on a bedside table charred along the edges by forgotten cigarettes, as a sign to anyone who might come back for coffee' (17). This also secures Richard to Luke because Wilde is 'a [visible] sign' of Richard's homosexuality, whereas

Luke is associated with the character Dorian Gray. Wilde's Irish otherness and his gothic novel were used against him in his sodomy trials given its homosexual euphemisms and themes of double lives, just as Richard and Luke are doubles of each other, being gay/straight but bound by the queer gothic common denominator of Wilde's text, Richard's sexual desire for Luke, and the latter's manipulation of their queer relationship. Geographically, Richard's Western Scottish roots lie in rural working-class Ayrshire, while vampiric Luke is from the East – Edinburgh – and also working class; Richard is Protestant while Luke is Catholic; Richard is gay and Luke is straight. As doubles, they have binary differences, but shared similarities like class and ethnicity secure their queer relationship.

While Dorian's doppelganger picture is concealed from view in his attic, Luke and Richard live in attic rooms in the more down at heel Herrick House, their university Halls of residence, for 'Here the Ychs were diluted by people who, like me, had a vaguely apologetic tone to their voice [...] who, like me, received full grants' (16). Marginalised by common denominators, such as sexuality, ethnicity and class, they act out the "sins" that respectable society conceals as Luke uncannily brings to light a sinister part of Richard that ought to have remained hidden (34). To repeat Strachan's own observation 'The novel explores the difference between the person Richard was at eighteen and who he is now, whether he was actively corrupted by the person he fell in love with or whether the relationship simply awakened intrinsic parts of his character, the existence of which he would rather not acknowledge'.(35) As Botting argues, gothic romance humanises the monster that is part of ourselves, so that they become 'figures of identification'.(36) As such, Luke is the sinister embodied manifestation of Richard's unleashed desires brought to light after a stifling upbringing in a homophobic Ayrshire town, where 'There wasn't much living to be done there, in that stultifying place, so I was poised and eager to make up for the lost time later on. I just needed someone to help show me the way' (138). Regarded as monstrous by heteronormative society, Richard allows himself to act out gothic atrocities under the veil of romantic love for a so-called "normal" citizen who is actually monstrous. Strachan's text brings to light endemic social problems like homophobia, sexism, poverty, alcohol and drug dependency, violence and misogyny which Scotland suppresses. Luke's trade in drugs mirrors recent reports, with 'Scotland shown as having the world's highest percentage of people using cocaine at 3.9%', or 'with a rate of heroin use twice that of the rest of the United Kingdom'(37), while 'Scotland's long legacy of problem drug misuse remained unacceptably high'.(38)

Even Richard's weekend job as a teenager suggests a buried Gothic depth: he works at the local cemetery, cementing the queer uncanny link between homosexuality and the Gothic, for 'I lay awake in my bed that night, turning the combined mileage of poof and gravedigger, grave robber, ghoul over and over in my mind. It could run and run' (113). For Rigby, 'it is not simply the case that the Gothic is always already queer; queer theory is also always already Gothic' (39), while George E. Haggerty concedes that 'Transgressive social-sexual relations are the most basic common denominator of gothic writing'.(40) *Ever Fallen in Love* pays homage to this association in its portrayal of repression and sexual transgression under the surface of heteronormative conventions. Thus, in the stifling homophobia of an ex-mining town in Ayrshire, Richard discloses the difficulties of coming out of the entombing closet, dreaming of 'a pure love. But no one was gay, or if they were they kept it quiet, haunted by the memory of the man who was lynched in the town down the valley because he loved other men. This in the 1980s, mind' (92). Uncannily, even as recently as October 2011, 18 year old Ryan Esquierdo was arrested for the murder of 28 year old Stuart Walker, a gay barman, whose most gothic of murders allegedly involved being tied to a lamppost and his body burned in the ex-mining Ayrshire town of Cumnock. As though stuck in a time-warp, Strachan portrays the aggressive homophobia still extant in Scotland which is replete with repression and forced double lives of simulated masquerade. While in a Glasgow pub, Richard encounters a terrified man whose 'wife thought he was working' but is instead waiting for his aggressively abusive

male lover who ‘punched him in the face’ (88), or the young Richard’s first sexual experience is in the local public toilet with the closeted self-loathing ‘Mr Sim from the miner’s cottages’ (93) who, after receiving oral sex, warns him, ‘If ye open yer gub about this, ah’ll throttle ye, ye wee pervert’ (94). Ostracised and suppressed by hegemonic culture, homosexual encounters are forced underground to the abject unsanitary space of cottaging. Notably, Richard’s career as a game developer is embedded in his recollection of Mr Sim, as *The Sims* is a life-simulation game.

Further entwining Luke with his literary double Dorian is their respective unhappy childhoods: Dorian’s mother was said to be beautiful but rejected any rich marriage and instead ran away with a penniless man for love who was then killed in a duel. Upon his mother’s death soon afterwards, Dorian’s childhood was spent being mistreated by his grandfather who had disapproved of their love and thus resented the child. Psychologically, Luke appears to blame his “fallen” single mother for his unhappiness: ‘Parent. Only got one. Maybe she’d have liked me to stay at home’ (20). Upon meeting her, Richard thought that ‘She’d seemed fun, knocking back her double vodka and coke and laughing with them in a way that he couldn’t imagine from his own mother. But Luke’s mother had been younger, with her ponytail and bright top, her jeans and her Caterpillar boots’ (236). The fun takes a more sinister turn ‘as her laugh grew louder and her words slurred and the barman started to cast glances in their direction, Luke had given her money for the cigarette machine and she’d come back with no change and Marlboro Lights rather than her usual, cheaper brand’ (236). Inevitably, ‘then they had a row. She touched his hair and said it was like his father’s, and he went mental. Shouted at her’ (236). Clearly blaming his mother for the absence of his father, Luke sees his mother as a loose woman, ‘muttering something under his breath that had shocked Richard. Stupid whore, that might have been it, and then they’d offered to walk her to the bus stop but she’d made excuses about fresh air and so they’d left her outside and gone to get their own bus home’ (236). Luke’s mother encompasses the M/Other status of Angel/Whore, signifying a duality of desire and abjection for her body experienced as a psychosexual rupture. This abject fascination/revulsion meets its climax in the destruction of Lucy.

According to Julia Kristeva, the anxiety experienced at this severance from the mother can lead to a fixation with one’s image, as ‘narcissism is a defence against the emptiness of separation’.(41) Luke is certainly narcissistic in his mistreatment of women and abuse of Richard’s feelings, for ‘He was going to have sex with her, I was sure, and I couldn’t help being jealous [...] he looked over her shoulder at me and smiled as if to say: look what I can do’ (43). Richard is ensnared once again in the double vision of having to look at Luke and to reconcile his amorous feelings with knowledge that the object of his desire is unworthy. In a discussion about storing Luke’s drugs until his return from a trip to Edinburgh, Richard notes, ‘I wonder if that’s when I noticed that with a casual phrase, a change of tone, he could cut me to the quick’ (167). The inability to love is not so much narcissism as ‘auto-eroticism’, since ‘The auto-erotic person cannot allow himself to be “loved” (no more than he can let himself be loveable), except by a maternal substitute who would cling to his body like a poultice – a reassuring balm’.(42) Fixated upon self-satisfaction, ‘He is indifferent to love [...] he discovers objects, but they are objects of hatred [...] The auto-erotic person who complains or boasts of being unable to love is afraid of going mad – schizophrenia or catatonia’.(43) Luke’s ‘poultice’ or ‘reassuring balm’ is the Catholic girl Aimee whom he dates but, crucially, does not fuck, since ‘she goes to Mass every Sunday’ (178) and ‘She’s not a slut’ (179). In the discursive hegemonic bipolarity of Woman, she encapsulates the Virgin and, appealing to Luke’s latent Catholicism, the Madonna and Child, thus offering him an idealised idolatry figure. His attitude to other females is based purely on his desire to disempower them and gratify his own twisted self-indulged pleasure.

It struck me that first evening how greedy he was, which shouldn't seem attractive but was. One packet of crisps wasn't enough, he needed two and peanuts as well, though he didn't look as if he had a scrap of fat on him. He had to buy more cigarettes, he smoked so many, and he always finished his drink before me. I hadn't yet admitted to myself that I fancied him, but it was sneaking up on me, that's for sure. He had very dark eyelashes and a more direct gaze than I was used to, and you could see inside his mouth more than seemed usual; his tongue, his teeth. His lips were dry. (20)

There is something vampiric in this description, with Luke as the *vagina dentata* who disempowers both Richard (Dick) and his feminine other, Lucy. Interestingly, given their association with Herrick House, is the echo of William Herrick, a Victorian British vampire living in contemporary society in Toby Whithouse's television drama *Being Human*. Just as Luke and Richard share a bond that involves destroying women, 'Mitchell and Herrick grew close to one another after Mitchell had been recruited. They worked as a team, attracting women to come with them to a private place where they would murder them and feed. This went on for decades, until Mitchell began to reconsider his lifestyle choice'.(44) Like Mitchell, Richard too reconsiders his lifestyle choice and attempts to evade his past, while Luke is a young man but 'old-fashioned' (1) and associated with the Gothic predators of Victorian fiction. Mitchell discovers Herrick feeding on dying World War I soldiers and allows himself to be recruited as a vampire to save them, while Richard's homoerotic computer game is set amidst 'the Great War' (13).

It is not only on psychosexual ground that Luke's drama unfolds; it is also predicated upon class and ethnic tensions. Richard concedes that 'Class bound us together, me and Luke' (15), since 'it was still a case of us against them' (145), their outsider status cemented by economic disenfranchisement, for 'Unlike so many of my peers I was emphatically working class. And so was Luke' (1). Thus,

Parents in country tweeds unloaded boxes from Land Rovers and Beemers [...] We queued for matriculation behind Torquil and Timmy, registered for Freshers' Week alongside Jilly and Jocasta, and it was scant consolation to overhear that for most of them coming here was second best. (15)

Luke's sense of marginalisation from the 'Yahs' (14, 110) harbours a desire for revenge – 'Is it wrong of me, he said, to really, really want to punch these people?' (30) – signalling that he will act on this resentment. As well as class, though, both feel ostracised within their own nation by a cartographical English dominance. Haunted by 18th Century and Victorian Gothic fiction, *Ever Fallen in Love* mirrors the historical dogged footsteps of Scotland by its imperial neighbour that is echoed in the present tense narrative set in the Highlands. When Richard speaks to a female student at a party, he is ostracised by her class and national status when she tells him, 'My parents live in Chichester [...] my mother has family in Scotland [...] They live in Perthshire. Is that posh? I've heard it's posh' (39). Meanwhile, 'Guy from Philosophy [...] he's actually like, in line to the throne [...] His family have a massive house in London and an estate in Oxfordshire' (42). For Richard and Luke, University life is itself uncanny, full of 'the rigger buggers' with 'English accents of course, and that ridiculously full-mouthed Scottish [...] the tones of confidence and good schooling' (101). Even though Richard is gaining a Scottish education, his geographical and class dialect are alien in this privileged environment of Standard English enunciation, for 'My Ayrshire accent was slipping [...] I tried to be understood in tutorials' (125). Even the omniscient present tense narrative situates Scotland at an awkward angle with itself, evicted and rendered *unheimlich* by its English double, for which it serves as a playground of Anglo wealth. Again, employing gothic haunting, Strachan voices the injustice of affluent English dominance and impoverished suffering, for 'As we shivered through the graveyard I thought of how exclusive it had seemed [...] Cambridge-born professors [...] They'd matured well, compared to the miners and the sons of miners back home' (201).

Rather than challenging their marginalisation constructively, however, Richard and Luke disempower Lucy as the female other. With his dangerous resentful gaze, ‘Look at them all, Luke said [...] With their flats and their cars and their fucking easy fucking lives’, as Richard observes that ‘I thought I saw the angry sparkle of moisture in his eyes’ (122). The approaching debasement of Lucy is building like a crescendo with Luke’s increasing resentment, believing that ‘They’re all the fucking same [...] Every last fucking one of them [...] I hate them’ (147). His sexual conquests escalate and become increasingly misogynistic – ‘I love these public school girls [...] Must be that all the public school boys are shirtlifters, he said. Turns them into nymphos’ (164) – the more he feels enraged and emasculated by the Anglo-patriarchal dominance of himself and Scotland. Women serve as simulacra upon which he can vent his anger and dispossession by owning and abusing their bodies: Lucy’s body is thus imperially ‘conquered’. Strachan argues that ‘There exist many androcentric places in literature where women still appear as simulacra for Scotland and bear the brunt of masculine frustration at its own intransigent Scottishness’.(45) Looking at Luke during a male bonding game of football, Richard observes that his working-class heterosexual misogyny is queerly homoerotic: ‘Admit it, I said to him. You prefer the company of men to the company of women’ and ‘Look how well you got on with those boys’ while, ‘You get it on with women, that’s a different thing altogether’ (177). The female voice in the novel is silenced by drowning after being subjected to male sexual dominance in order to counter and repress their hegemonic emasculation. Lucy’s dependence upon anti-depressants echoes a female malady induced by patriarchal society, her demise through drowning similar to the madness of Shakespeare’s Ophelia. Throughout the novel, Strachan demonstrates that ‘there is a collective will to repress how aspects of our social life (violence, poverty and abuse, for example) allow and even encourage the traumatization of women, people of color, and gays’.(46) Marginalised as a female queer Scottish writer, Strachan haunts the margins of this narrative that focuses predominantly upon two male characters, but ultimately offers a female commentary with Stephie’s ‘colonisation’ (63) of Richard’s hideaway. According to Rigby, ‘The lesbian is never with us, it seems, but always somewhere else: in the shadows, in the margins, hidden from history, out of sight, out of mind, a wanderer in the dark’.(47) Lesbianism, or queer female Scottishness lurks as an absent presence that reminds us of the entrenched masculinist ‘lesbophobic narratives’(48) at the heart of phallographic Scottish literary history in which such females are written out and rendered invisible while it is constantly on the look out to repress and punish any visible signs of homosexuality. Strachan’s queer double vision portrays traumatised others who must resist being subsumed by heteronormative narratives and revise their own scripts. Like the murder of Stuart Walker, Strachan reminds us that contemporary Scotland is repeatedly repressing others in its perpetual reassertion of heteropatriarchy and its fear/loathing is haunted by the fear of the others’ return. For Jeanette Winterson, society perpetuates a cycle of abuse and recurrent mistakes – ‘A repeating world – same old story’ (49) – without learning and moving forward towards ethical equality. Strachan utilises the trope of Scottish Gothic fiction to illustrate the horrifying consequences of such repetition but queries the ‘same old story’ through a queer lens, suggesting an alternative outcome.

Strachan’s utilisation of the return of the repressed triggering a compulsion towards repetition is perpetuated through a series of returns in the narrative which culminate in Richard’s, perhaps inevitable, return to the University town at the core of his repressed memory to face his demons. As though attempting to reawaken the ghosts of their former selves that have haunted them, he and Luke’s reunion is associated, aptly, with the graveyard, for ‘now here Richard was, sitting overlooking the cemetery’ (245). Revisiting old haunts, ‘Richard walked past his old flat, the one he’d shared with Luke’, where ‘Although the day was mild, he felt a slight shiver as he moved out of the sunlight and into the shade of the building. Now that he was alone, without Stephie beside him, the past was lagging round him, thick and airless’ (243). Just as the house in Stevenson’s *Jekyll and Hyde* (1886) is associated with the gothic narrative events, so too does Strachan emphasise the uncanny aspect of the shaded building that invokes ‘a slight

shiver' of someone walking over Richard's grave. Like a returning corpse, Luke embodies the uncanny, for 'Although he recognised Luke straight away – his slimness, his close-fitting jeans – he was unfamiliar too' (252). Trying to reconcile past and present, 'A double Luke emerged, like a distortion in a hall of mirrors' (73). As multiple selves uncannily imbricate, 'he felt already as if he was straddling past and present' (254), with the narrative threads entwined in a chronotopic return, 'Richard caught his own reflection behind the gantry, distorted behind rows of glasses like something in a hall of mirrors [...] he stared at the fragments of his face, trying to catch sight of something that he'd recognise as his past self' (255-6). In a repetition of their past life they go for a drink in the pub, completing the destructive cycle which began the narrative, for 'He met Richard's eye, his gaze direct below his long eyelashes' (255), the dangerously charged exchange answered by a physical reawakening: 'An image darted through his mind and he tried to chase it away, but felt an answering kick in his body just the same. After all this time, he thought. It's still there' (255).

Richard acknowledges that he may still fall prey to Luke's manipulation as the novel makes a cyclical return at its close, just as Richard and Luke have returned to the scene of their crime and returned to the haunts of their past lives. A cornucopia of Gothic traditions, *Ever Fallen in Love* leaves an unsettling open ending in a book that fluidly refuses to settle but forever oscillates and repeats, just as Richard uncannily 'felt disembodied, as though part of him was elsewhere' (258). As queer Gothic Scottish fiction, the text remains evasive and elusive, with the thrilling uncertainty of 'a hope so fierce that the sins of the past were cleansed' (258) and the possibility, by confronting rather than burying your past, of a different story in the future. Stephe texts Richard, saying '*Stay out. I have date with SATC reruns*' (257). Watching *Sex and the City* reruns symbolises the repetition of Richard and Luke's return to the city where they had sex. Just as Stephe views their queer relationship by listening to Richard's tale unfold, she has accompanied him on his return and is simultaneously watching *SATC*, while advising her gay brother to 'stay out'. The repetition of returning to one's old haunt becomes necessary, then, in order to give voice to the repressed and healingly move forward to a different destination. What remains are 'Transitory moments, replete with the sheer and not-quite-certain potential of what was to come' (258).

- 1 George E.Haggerty, *Queer Gothic* (USA: University of Illinois Press, 2006) p.14.
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- 3 Fred Botting, *Gothic Romanced: Consumption, Gender and Technology in Contemporary Fictions* (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2008) p.1
- 4 Nicholas Royle, *The Uncanny* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003) p.2
- 5 Kirsty Macdonald, 'Anti-heroes and Androgynes: Gothic Masculinities in Contemporary Scottish Men's Fiction' in *The Irish Journal of Gothic and Horror Stories* (Issue 3, November 2007) available at <http://irishgothic horrorjournal.homestead.com/ScottishGothicMasculinities.html> [Accessed 20 December 2011]
- 6 'Ever Fallen in Love Interview: Zoe Strachan' available at <http://www.booksfromscotland.com/Authors/Zoe-Strachan/Ever-Fallen-In-Love-Interview> [Accessed [20 December 2011]
- 7 *Gothic Romanced*, pp.1-2
- 8 *Gothic Romanced*, p.4
- 9 Mair Rigby, 'Uncanny Recognition: Queer Theory's Debt to the Gothic' in *Gothic Studies* (Manchester University Press: Issue 1, Vol. 11, May 2009) p.50
- 10 Ibid.
- 11 Paulina Palmer, 'Lesbian Gothic: Genre, Transformation, Transgression' in *Gothic Studies* (Manchester University Press: Issue 1, Vol. 6, August 2004) p.120
- 12 Kirsty Macdonald, 2007
- 13 Ibid.
- 14 Catherine Spooner, *Contemporary Gothic* (London: Reaktion Books, 2006) pp.27-28
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- 16 Ibid.
- 17 *The Uncanny*, p.6
- 18 Laurie Vickroy, *Trauma and Survival in Contemporary Fiction* (USA: University of Virginia Press, 2002) p.10
- 19 Paulina Palmer, p.119
- 20 David Punter, 'Scottish and Irish Gothic' in Jerrold E. Hogle (ed) *Gothic Fiction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002) p.106
- 21 Ibid.
- 22 *The Uncanny*, p.12
- 23 Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein* (London: Penguin Popular Classics, 1994 [1818]) p.154
- 24 *Gothic Romanced*, pp.9-10
- 25 Available at [http://www.sandstonepress.com/blogs/sandstonepress/11/2011/zoe\\_strachan\\_interviewed\\_by\\_the\\_london\\_festival\\_fringe/](http://www.sandstonepress.com/blogs/sandstonepress/11/2011/zoe_strachan_interviewed_by_the_london_festival_fringe/) [Accessed 20 December 2011]
- 26 Bram Stoker, *Dracula* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2008 [1897]) p.40
- 27 *Dracula*, p.216
- 28 Ibid.
- 29 *The Uncanny*, p.43
- 30 *The Uncanny*, p.45
- 31 Mair Rigby, p.50
- 32 Ibid.
- 33 Ibid.
- 34 *The Uncanny*, p.51
- 35 Available at <http://zoestrachan.com/category/ever-fallen-in-love/> [Accessed 21 December 2011]

- 36 *Gothic Romanced*, p.4
- 37 Reevel Alderson, 'Scotland Tops World Cocaine Use' available at <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-scotland-13898046> [Accessed 21 December 2011]
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- 41 Julia Kristeva 'Freud and Love: Treatment and Its Discontents' in Toril Moi (ed.) *The Kristeva Reader* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1997 [1986] p.257
- 42 *The Kristeva Reader*, p.251
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- 44 Available at [http://beinghuman.wikia.com/wiki/William\\_Herrick](http://beinghuman.wikia.com/wiki/William_Herrick) [Accessed 27 December 2011]
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- 46 *Trauma and Survival in Contemporary Fiction*, p.14
- 47 Mair Rigby, p.48
- 48 Ibid.
- 49 Jeanette Winterson, *The Stone Gods* (London and New York: Penguin 2008 [2007]) p.8