

THE ALLEGORY OF THE TRIPLE GODDESS IN *HEREDITARY* AND *RELIC*: FEMALE AGING, FAMILY GENERATIONS, AND THE FIGURE OF THE CRONE

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ABSTRACT

Ari Aster's *Hereditary* (2018) and Natalie Erika James's *Relic* (2020) are contemporary horror films which present significant intertextualities revolving around triads of female characters and draw particular attention to the figure of the older woman. This article aims to provide an analysis of aging femininities in these two films taking into consideration Robert Graves's mythical archetype of the Triple Goddess, which refers to three distinct mythical figures that join in one single entity and emphasize three different, but inextricably related, phases of life. Since the archetype of the Triple Goddess is paradigmatic of different mythical triads in the classical Greek tradition, it will be taken as an allegory in order to interpret images of aging in these two films, since their female characters are portrayed as members of a triad, but they symbolically represent the same female figure at different life stages along her aging process.

Keywords: Triple Goddess; Greek mythology; aging; generations; life cycle; crone.

INTRODUCTION

Contemporary horror films like Ari Aster's *Hereditary* (2018) and Natalie Erika James's *Relic* (2020) explore the ambivalent figure of the crone in domestic dramas which tackle the collapse and renewal of life as revolving around three different generations of women. In Aster's film, the death of the grandmother, Ellen, reveals a series of family secrets involving her daughter, Annie, and her granddaughter, Charlie, and exposes the grandmother's pivotal influence on her younger female successors. Analogously, in James's film, when Edna goes missing—apparently as a result of a degenerative illness in old age—her daughter, Kay, and her granddaughter, Sam, move to live in the grandmother's household where they discover that Edna's condition will inevitably affect their lives. Given the allegorical undertones that the two films present, as representatives of the mythical figure of the crone, Ellen and Edna are portrayed in ambivalent ways, insofar as they are depicted as complex characters that evoke female

empowerment and strength in old age, but also arise as a source of fear and anxiety even for their own relatives. Besides, both films focus on families comprising three female members at different life stages, metaphorically calling to mind a mythical triad that turns into one single entity.

Given the intertextual connections that can be established between *Hereditary* and *Relic*, particularly in terms of their respective three main female characters, this article aims to approach them through the classic trope of the Triple Goddess. As Carl Jung and Carl Kerényi (1978) argue, and Erich Neumann (2015) also puts forward, the Triple Goddess is an archetype that evokes a classic pattern of triads whereby deities have been recurrently arranged in cultural manifestations. By means of a mythical approach, in both films, the female characters belonging to different generations—and, respectively, representing maidenhood, womanhood, and old age—will be interpreted as members of a mythical triad and as individuals whose identities symbolically blend in one another. Considering that the trope of the Triple Goddess not only introduces the figure of the crone into the picture, but also reveals her inherent ties to different generations of female figures, it turns into a particularly appropriate trope to approach horror narratives with mythical undertones that address women's cycle of aging.

In the context of age studies, Kathleen Woodward (1999) argues that the classic Freudian model of development is limited to two generations and consists in the separation of the parent from the child (149). Alternatively, as Woodward further explains, Julia Kristeva devises a model based on the premise that motherhood triggers the psychic identification of the younger mother with the older mother (151). In contrast with the Freudian dominant model of two generations in competition with each other, Kristeva's developmental model paves the way for the possibility of psychically inhabiting different generations simultaneously. Henceforth, Woodward (1995) claims that, in order to foster generational models that favor continuity, the figure of the older woman must acquire fundamental relevance, thus stating, "turning our attention to the figure of the other woman, the older woman, as the third term is precisely the way of moving forward, of thinking prospectively rather than retrospectively" (86). It is thus

argued that it becomes necessary to favor a tripartite model of development that comprises three generations of women and encompasses the figure of the older woman.

Dovetailing this claim, there has been a proliferation of contemporary horror films revolving around the trope of female aging that focus on older women as catalysts for younger generations of women in families, as is the case of Ellen in Ari Aster's *Hereditary* and of Edna in Erika James's *Relic*. Critics like Barbara Walker (1985) draw attention to the need to restore older women to the honored place they possessed in ancient matriarchal communities as endowers of life. More recently, Dawn Keetley (2019) refers to the narratological purpose of the character of the older woman, describing her as a "narrative strategy which ruptures the classical narrative arc" (60), which has usually privileged other life stages. Bearing in mind Kristeva's notion of blurring different family generations of women and Woodward's claim to defend the presence of the older woman, Robert Graves's classic archetype of the Triple Goddess, devised in 1948, amalgamates these notions insofar as it comprises three female generations, including the older woman, thus featuring as a particularly suitable trope to approach female aging from a mythical perspective. Drawing on Graves's premise, the Triple Goddess materializes in three characters, as goddess of the sky, the earth, and the underworld, each deity representing a particular stage of progression. As Graves (2013) explains, "as Goddess of the Underworld she was concerned with Birth, Procreation and Death," then "as Goddess of the Earth she was concerned with the three seasons of Spring, Summer and Winter," and finally, "as Goddess of the Sky she was the Moon, in her three phases of New Moon, Full Moon, and Waning Moon" (377). Graves draws on examples from Greek mythology in which the figure of each single goddess is represented by three aspects, while the three figures together turn into a triple goddess. As regards female aging, Graves connects each of the three phases in nature's cycle that every goddess represents with a stage within women's life that encompasses youth, adulthood, and old age. Accordingly, the Triple Goddess is represented as a maiden when she is connected with birth as goddess of the underworld, with spring as goddess of the earth, and with the new moon as goddess of the sky. Subsequently, she is portrayed as an adult woman at the stage of procreation as goddess of the underworld,

at summer as goddess of the earth, and at full moon as goddess of the sky. Finally, she is pictured as a crone when she is associated with death as goddess of the underworld, with winter as goddess of the earth, and with the waning moon as goddess of the sky. The Triple Goddess embodies the female cycle of life along the stages of maidenhood, womanhood and female old age, in which not only does the old woman play a central role, but she also exerts unparalleled influence on her younger counterparts.

In contemporary horror films, the third manifestation of the Triple Goddess, embodied in the figure of the crone—a grotesque female figure, to use Mary Russo's term (1995, 1)—is often characterized as a source of empowerment as well as a cause of oppression. In the context of film studies, Peter Shelley (2009) argues that the figure of the crone often fulfills this dual role as either a “mentally unstable antagonist or as the woman in peril protagonist” (8). This ambiguous characterization influences the way in which the crone joins in with the rest of female members in the triad and the way they approach the figure of the older woman. In this respect, the prevalence of the crone paves the way for establishing another stage in the development of female Gothic as established by Ellen Moers (1976, 90), which coincides with different turning points along the course of women's lives. If a first stage of development explores female anxieties about marriage and sexuality, and a second phase tackles the fears involved in motherhood, in addition to the figures of the maiden and the mother as representative of these stages, contemporary narratives of female Gothic are drawing attention to the third aspect of the Triple Goddess, the crone, thus contributing to giving visibility to women's old age.

Drawing on the trope of the Triple Goddess, it can be argued that the three female characters in Aster's film *Hereditary*—comprising the grandmother Ellen, the mother Annie, and the granddaughter Charlie—and in James's film *Relic*—encompassing the grandmother Edna, the mother Kay, and the granddaughter Sam—evoke the goddesses of the sky, the earth and the underworld, insofar as they are associated with a series of elements that call to mind these female deities. In relation to the goddess of the sky and its moon phases, all the female characters in the films indulge in artistic creativity, although this creative genius is also tainted by the haunting menace

| *The Allegory of the Triple Goddess in Hereditary and Relic* of mental disorders. With regard to the goddess of the earth and its seasons, the female representatives of different family generations present an inherent connection with the landscape, which is related to their ancestors, while the symbolic layers of the land resemble the blurring process of memories. Finally, in relation to the goddess of the underworld and its life stages, the female members of these families make their way across rooms and passages in the family household, at the same time as the house replicates their bodies and their eventual physical decline. In the films that will be analyzed, the elements with which these female characters are associated recall positive mythological triads, like the Charites, the Horae and the Moirai, and negative counterparts, such as the Graeae, the Erinyes and the Gorgons.

THE GODDESS OF THE SKY: THE INFLUENCE OF THE MOON AND THE FEMALE CYCLE

As one of the materializations of the Triple Goddess, the different phases of the moon represented by the goddess of the sky are analogous, according to Juan-Eduardo Cirlot (2001), to the life cycle that goes through youth, maturity, and old age (215), and, in particular, to the physiological cycle of women (214), which the three female characters in *Hereditary* and *Relic* enact. Besides, the influence that the lunar cycle may exert on artistic creativity is also represented by the female triads in both films given their artistic skills, but also the mental condition associated with their respective female genealogies. Given its ambiguous qualities, as Cirlot contends, the moon has conventionally been considered as both celestial and infernal owing to its dual role as Diana and Hecate (216). This ambivalence is also highlighted in the portrayal of the female triads in *Hereditary* and *Relic*, since, on the one hand, they are evocative of the mythical triad of the Charites in relation to their fondness for the arts, but also of the Graeae in connection with their interrelated mental condition as represented by their symbolic shared mind's eye.

THE AGING FEMALE ARTIST AND HER ARTISTIC GENEALOGY

The three women embodying different family generations in *Hereditary* and *Relic* devote themselves to different artistic vocations that manifest their individual creativity. Correspondingly, their shared fondness for the arts establishes an inherent connection that binds them together and contributes to founding the symbolic paradigm of the Triple Goddess in relation to the goddess of the sky and the different phases of the moon that they represent. Insofar as they constitute a trinity metaphorically allied through art, the three female generations of women in the films bring to mind the mythic triad of the Charites or Graces, who comprised Euphrosyne, Aglaia, and Thalia. This triad was worshipped as goddesses of human creativity, who were also associated with the Muses.

As female artists, the figures of the grandmother, the mother, and the granddaughter in both films establish links among them as they grow older and inherit their artistry from their female predecessors. Nonetheless, it is the grandmother who establishes an artistic legacy that perpetuates itself in the family along its female lineage in order to reach future generations of women. In both films, the character of the older woman—Ellen in *Hereditary* and Edna in *Relic*—reveals her fondness for music, as Ellen's daughter looks at photographs in which her mother is dancing and celebrating, and Edna dances with her granddaughter, as she also used to do with her daughter when she was a child, thus bringing to mind the mythical figure of Euphrosyne, considered the goddess of music and merriment in the mythical triad of the Charites, and often represented as a dancer.

In Aster's film *Hereditary*, the female members of the Graham family display a shared talent for different artistic skills. Ellen, the grandmother, stitches and decorates doorstep mats with the names of their recipients, which she places at the threshold of the house, as if separating two different dimensions. In doing so, Ellen's artistic inclination symbolically unveils her role as a spiritual mediator between reality and artistry, but also between the living and the dead. Ellen's daughter, Annie, works as a professional artist who makes a living out of constructing dollhouse miniatures and dioramas, which often replicate the daily lives of her family members, as she makes figurines that represent her own relatives performing domestic tasks in the household.

As an architectural storyteller, Annie duplicates the structures of her abode, so that her dollhouse reproduces her family home as an architectural double that symbolically turns its inhabitants into actors subjected to the will of a mysterious all-powerful force. Annie's daughter, Charlie, designs homemade toys with domestic utensils and elements from nature, which she envisions as dolls, but also as magic tokens. Charlie also keeps a notebook with her drawings, as she is constantly scribbling down and portraying members of her own family, thus establishing a magical synergy between actual individuals and their artistic projections, insofar as the drawings in the notebook find reflection in real life. In correspondence with the Platonic premise about the mimetic quality of art, the artistic tokens that each family member reproduces replicate their individual assets and their relationships with the rest of the women in the family. Ellen's doorstep mats explicitly mark the transition between two dimensions, Annie's dioramas reproduce the architectural structures of the family house, and Charlie's makeshift toys and drawings duplicate her next of kin. Their respective artistic manifestations disclose the pervasive connections that bind them together based on their mutual fondness for the arts.

In analogy, the three generations of women portrayed in *Relic* also display artistic vocations which establish a bond of artistry among them that extends beyond that of kin. The grandmother, Edna, possesses a higher number of artistic gifts in comparison with her daughter, Kay, and her granddaughter, Sam. Edna's home is decorated with colored wax candles which she carves with a knife to replicate natural ornaments. As the pillar who sets the foundations of this artistic creativity, the older woman is exposed as a source of inspiration and as an artistic mentor, who complies with Anne Wyatt-Brown's (1993) models of late-life creativity (8), whereby women experience a late revival of their creativity in old age. When Kay and Sam arrive at Edna's home after a long absence, they discover Edna's old sketchbooks through which the artistic vein of the family matriarch is unveiled. Besides, as Kay is sitting at the piano, it is revealed that Edna taught both her daughter and her granddaughter music lessons, while Sam proved to be a more skilled apprentice than her mother. As music resonates across the rooms

in the family household, it is suggested that a latent artistic genealogy blurs the boundaries among the different family generations that each woman represents.

Each female member in these respective families exhibits her artistic skills, which replicate the creative genius of her elder predecessor, hence establishing an artistic genealogy that binds them together as an incarnation of the Triple Goddess represented by the goddess of the sky and the moon as its emblem. The different phases of the moon as exerting influence on the female cycle also evoke the phases of creativity of this triad of women artists, with a particular focus on the older woman, who is personified by the characters of Ellen and Edna. Nonetheless, the creative genius that each family member inherits as legacy of the older woman also involves the haunting suspicion that the degenerative disorders befalling the grandmother will also prevail in future generations of women in the family, thus reaching out to her younger successors.

THE MIND'S EYE: FEMALE AGING, COGNITIVE DISORDERS, BLURRED IDENTITIES

The older women in both films, Ellen and Edna, suffer the effects of illnesses related to old age, such as dementia and senility. The classical mythical triad of the Graeae—which comprises three sisters called Deino, Enyo, and Pemphredo—takes the form of three elderly women whose inherent alliance is symbolized by the fact of sharing one single eye, while, at a figurative level, their mind's eye underpins their shared mental faculty, which contributes to blurring their respective identities. The degenerative illnesses that befall the older women in both films emphasize the intermittent sense of attachment and estrangement among the three generations of women as embodiments of the Triple Goddess in its incarnation of the goddess of the sky and the influence of the phases of the moon in connection with the obscure workings of the mind.

The eldest female member in both films suffers from a degenerative illness on account of her old age, and her condition progressively affects her relationship with her younger relatives. As Amelia DeFalco (2009) claims, dementia can become a most extreme display of ruptured selfhood inasmuch as it challenges the notion of identity (14), and analogously, Pamela Gravagne (2013) argues that illnesses like Alzheimer's

disease call into question personhood (132), thus bringing to the fore how identities become blurred by the effects of cognitive disorders in old age. As these films show, the feelings of the younger relatives towards their elders range from offering care and protection out of love and pity to experiencing fear and disaffection, since the younger generations feel at odds to identify the older woman as a family member because of her increasingly bizarre demeanor.

In *Hereditary*, when Annie joins a therapy group after her mother has passed away, she explains that Ellen “was old and she wasn’t all together at the end” (00:20:00) adding that she suffered from dissociative identity disorder, which was aggravated during the last years of her life, when she was also diagnosed with dementia. Annie admits that she was never on good terms with her mother and concedes that “not that she was even my mom at the end” (00:21:30) hence unveiling the increasing sense of alienation that Annie identified in her mother owing to the effects of her degenerative illness.

Correspondingly, in *Relic*, Kay believes that her mother’s disappearance is caused by the fact that “she forgets things” and that “she has started wandering” (00:36:21) As Kay explains, Edna had phoned her once to tell her that she suspected someone had broken into the house and that she was scared because she believed this stranger was still hiding inside. Edna abandons her abode and goes missing as a result of her disorientation and out of fear of this stranger. Following her return, she displays some peculiar behavior that becomes menacing to her relatives, but also to herself, as she mistakes her own fingers for wax candles when she is carving. As a result of her disorder, Edna gradually develops some hostility toward her younger relatives, since she believes they are not her relatives, but just pretending to be, thus exclaiming that she thinks they are “waiting for the day” and “hoping I’ll go to sleep and I won’t wake up” (00:50:48). Furthermore, after offering one of her old rings to her granddaughter, Sam, Edna accuses her of “trying to steal” (00:40:30), since, owing to her illness, she does not remember having given it to Sam as a present.

Analogously, as evocative of the Graeae and their iconic shared mind’s eye— which contributes to distorting their individual identities and emphasizing their

condition as a triad—in *Relic*, the blurred identity boundaries among the three women are signaled by means of either misidentifying or ignoring the appellatives whereby each family member is known to one another. Although Kay refers to Edna through her family appellation as Mother, Sam continually addresses her own mother as Kay, thus giving evidence of an ongoing process of attachment and estrangement. Besides, when Edna and Sam dance together, Edna is momentarily disoriented and mistakes her granddaughter's name for that of her own daughter. When Edna succumbs to illness and her ways become increasingly alienating, even on the verge of resorting to violence, Kay stops referring to her as Mother and, out of despair, she even makes a point of stating that, given her changed physique and character, "Mum is not her anymore" (01:14:09). Inasmuch as names and appellatives become blurred, the identities of the three female members are also mystified, thus establishing further connections amongst them and evoking the Graeae, whose shared eye symbolically underpins the inability to distinguish among their respective selves.

When the grandmother's sense of identity becomes destabilized owing to illness and old age, her younger female relatives also feel obliged to adjust their respective positions and roles within the family. In both films, grandmothers establish fonder bonds with their granddaughters than with their own daughters, as Ellen takes care of Charlie as if she were her own child in *Hereditary*, and Sam keeps good memories of her grandmother from her childhood and quarrels with her mother, Kay, when she considers taking Edna to a nursing home in *Relic*. Conversely, the mothers in both films, Annie and Kay, display some bitterness toward the figures of the grandmothers, which also conceals a latent sense of guilt for having deserted them in their later years. This pervasive resentment appears to underscore the dread of transforming into their own mothers, which Woodward (1999) describes as the ancestral fear prevailing across generations of women (158), which underscores their blurring identities.

In both films, as Annie and Kay attend to their mothers in their old age, the former exchange roles with the latter, since the aging daughters must take care of their elderly mothers, who in turn had nursed them as children. In doing so, Annie and Kay gradually replicate their mothers and symbolically replace them in their family role

along their aging process, whereas, owing to their degenerative illnesses, Ellen and Edna display stubborn and self-indulgent ways which are reminiscent of those of a child, and bring them closer to their own granddaughters, thus complying with Aristophanes's classical notion of envisioning old age as a second childhood. At a symbolic level, the mothers grow older and undergo a process of premature aging, as they turn into the mothers of their own mothers, whereas the grandmothers figuratively grow younger, as they turn into the children of their own daughters. As illustrative of this exchange of roles, in both films, Ellen and Edna encourage their daughters to engage in children's games, insofar as Ellen leaves posthumous messages to Annie, challenging her to unravel some clues in order to sort out a mysterious puzzle in *Hereditary*, whereas Edna asks Kay to check if there is anyone hiding under her bed in *Relic*, thus defying her to take part in a creepy hide-and-seek game as if she were reverting to childhood.

The incidence of mental disorders involves a progressive blurring of identities among the three women which evokes the manifestation of the Triple Goddess as the goddess of the sky along the different phases of the moon and, in particular, of the mythical triad of the Graeae. The inherent relationship that is established among them symbolically reflects their shared mental faculties, as the grandmother's degenerative illness urges her younger successors to adjust to her transforming cognitive abilities. As their minds collapse and their identities blur, these triads of women feel connected with one another by means of their attachment to nature and its rhythms, as the seasonal cycles reflect the women's transitional passage across diverse, but inextricably related, stages of life.

THE GODDESS OF THE EARTH: THE DOUBLE-EDGED COURSE OF AGING

The three female characters in the films also suggest the figure of the Triple Goddess in its incarnation of the goddess of the earth. As Cirlot (2001) claims, the change of seasons corresponds with the orbits of the sun (282), as one of the hemispheres of the earth represents the light (93), but at the same time it also reflects the phases of the moon (282), whereby one of the hemispheres of the earth is linked to the dark (93). The inherent relationship of the triads of women with nature in both films establishes a

connection between their aging progress and the cycle of seasons, which brings to mind the mythical triad of the Horae in relation to nature, but also the triad of the Erinyes as agents of punishment on behalf of the elders.

METAMORPHOSING INTO THE LANDSCAPE: THE SEASONAL CYCLE AND WOMEN'S LIFE STAGES

The symbolic connection established between the trinities of women and the landscape in the films is evocative of mythical triads of goddesses that embody the interaction between female aging and the cycle of seasons. As Catriona Mortimer-Sandilands (2008) claims, degenerative illnesses related to old age reveal how the mind ties together the body and the landscape (271). In particular, the three female characters in the films evoke the triad of the Horae, who were regarded as goddesses of nature and seasons, hence comprising Thallo as representative of spring, Anxo as symbolic of the summer, and Carpo as suggestive of autumn. Given their association with the annual cyclical progression, the Horae were also worshipped as goddesses of time and, by extension, of aging, thus reflecting the life stages of youth, adulthood, and old age.

The pervasive images of the landscape and its interaction with the female characters in *Hereditary* and *Relic* are enacted through a series of scenes picturing trees and motifs like medallions in the shape of a tree. These scenes underscore women's transition between life stages for each of the family members, but also, as they join in a single unity as the Triple Goddess in its manifestation as the goddess of the earth, they embody one single woman along her aging process in resemblance with the mythical triad of the Horae and the cycle of seasons.

Insofar as the aging process is recurrently evoked in the films and each woman represents a different generation, in addition to the myth of the Horae, their symbolic connection with nature conjures related mythical passages involving female figures and the seasonal cycle. In particular, the myth of Ceres and Persephone has conventionally explained the cycle of seasons, as Persephone's descent into the reign of Hades and her separation from her mother Ceres marks the beginning of winter. In *Relic*, as Kay and Sam look for Edna, they reverse the myth of Ceres and Persephone, which depicts Ceres

going into the underworld to retrieve her missing daughter Persephone, since, in the film, it is rather the grandmother's disappearance which signals the start of the cold season and it is the daughter who is in search of her aging mother. In the original myth, following the orders of Hades, Persephone is unable to abandon the underworld because she has ingested some pomegranate seeds. Likewise, in *Hereditary*, as Ellen is lying in her coffin, some seeds are placed on her lips, which symbolically mark her journey into the underworld. When Joan, Ellen's friend, invites Annie for tea, Annie removes traces of tea herbs from her lips after drinking, which evokes the seeds placed on Ellen's lips in the previous scene. Besides, when Charlie is at a party, she accidentally eats some cake containing nuts that cause her to suffer a severe allergic reaction which indirectly causes her death, thus suggesting another mythical journey into the underworld owing to having ingested some seeds. Inasmuch as these mythical references evoke the cycle of seasons, they are also indicative of female aging, since each female character represents a life stage, but the three of them configure an individual aging woman.

The close bond established between body and nature is visually represented in scenes in which the women's corporealities literally blend in with the landscape. In *Hereditary*, after she dies in a car accident, Charlie's head is covered with ants, as so is the family household, as if it were corrupted by the effect of a plague. Charlie constructs her own makeshift toys with limbs from birds, such as pigeons, and she develops a symbiotic interaction with them seeing that, after severing the head of a pigeon, Charlie eventually meets the same tragic end in a car accident. Analogously, in *Relic*, upon her return from the woods, Edna's feet are covered with moss, while her disheveled hair and stained limbs conjure the virtual image of a tree. In subsequent scenes, Edna's skin exhibits what looks like bruises, but are, in truth, layers of moss which gradually corrupt her body, as also happens with the house walls, and which will also eventually take hold of Edna's female descendants. Given their inherent connection with nature, and particularly, with trees, the female characters in *Hereditary* and *Relic* also bear resemblance with the Dryads, which were nymphs whose life force was connected with

the trees they resided in, and whose shapes amalgamated both human and natural features.

The connection between the female characters and trees becomes pervasive throughout both films. In *Hereditary*, at Ellen's funeral, as she is lying in her coffin, attention is drawn to her necklace, a golden pendant with interrelated shapes. At first sight, the symbol resembles the branches of a tree as a natural element, but it also evokes its genealogical counterpart as a family tree. Ellen's daughter, Annie, is wearing the same necklace with the pendant, which explicitly identifies her as her mother's successor in her absence. When Annie's daughter, Charlie, is killed in a car accident, the telephone pole into which she crashes bears the same emblem carved on Ellen's pendant, which signifies that Charlie also becomes the recipient of the family's necklace, following her predecessors, but also inheriting their tragic doom of cyclical decay and regeneration.

The link between each of the pieces that make up the necklace chain in *Hereditary*—which symbolically binds together the three female generations in the family—finds a counterpart in *Relic* through the pervasive presence of the trees in the family household and in the woods surrounding it, which evokes the cyclical course of seasons and the triad of the Horae. When Edna goes missing, her daughter Kay looks for Edna in the forest and, as she calls out Edna's name, the echo of her words reverberates across the landscape. At night, Edna's granddaughter, Sam, also goes out and calls her grandmother's name in the woods when she hears some noises, which reinstates the former reverberation and underscores the ancestral connection between nature and the female members in the family. Besides, the tree on the glass window at the house gate refers back to the shack where the family's grandfather perished as a result of a degenerative illness, which inevitably reverts back to Edna and the condition that is befalling her in old age. In both films, the emblem of the tree thus contributes to blurring boundaries between past and present as well as within different family generations, but also brings to the fore unresolved conflicts between the predecessors and their offspring.

The synergy established between the seasonal cycle and the aging process of these three female characters is evoked in scenes that accentuate the symbolic metamorphosis of the women with the landscape, thus creating a symbiosis as they reflect one another. Despite veiled intertextualities with myths that explicitly refer to the cycle of seasons, such as that of the Horae, these films draw more attention to the figure of the elderly woman. The presence of the older woman in both films also underscores a haunting sense of guilt, which is explicitly brought to the fore when it is unveiled that her successors might not have given her the importance she deserves, particularly in her later years.

IN FEAR AND RESPECT OF THE OLDER WOMAN: MEMORIES, PHOTOGRAPHS, MIRRORS

The lives of the younger female characters in *Hereditary* and *Relic* are influenced by the latent and pervasive presence of the totemic figure of the older woman. In *Hereditary*, the Grahams attend Ellen's funeral after the long illness that has caused her to grow detached from her relatives, whereas, in *Relic*, Kay and Sam move to the family home after a long absence to take care of Edna in her old age. Insofar as Annie must assemble the personal belongings of her late mother in *Hereditary*, and Kay and Sam return to the house where they spent their childhood in *Relic*, memories are stirred as younger relatives indulge in recollections of the family's matriarch. These moments of reflection highlight their relationship with their female predecessors and suggest some progressive estrangement, which appears to have increased in old age, as the older women's increasingly bizarre conduct turns them into alienating figures, even for their younger relatives. Nonetheless, as a result of the symbiotic connection that is established among the three female characters, the younger members gradually adjust to the uncanny influence that the elderly woman exerts on them, thus recalling the vindictive mythical triad of the Erinyes.

As a fearful mythical triad, the Erinyes or Furies comprise Alecto, Megnera and Tisiphone, who are particularly concerned to ensure that the youth should respect the elderly and, as guardians of old age, they are characterized as crones that punish those

descendants who neglect their elders. Insofar as the Erinyes eventually became known as the Eumenides and were identified as agents of justice, by means of compiling mementos and keepsakes from the past, the three female characters in these two films are evocative of this mythical triad, since the female members in this trinity concern themselves about the protection of the family unit and respect for the older predecessors, thus emulating the figure of the Triple Goddess in her manifestation as the goddess of earth, by means of motifs that evoke the passage of time and female aging, such as tokens and pictures.

The physical action of compiling mementos involves recovering events from the past so that the habit of collecting gifts spatially evokes the mental process of recollecting memories. These keepsakes remind their owners of their elders, particularly the matriarch in the family, in resemblance with the triad of the Erinyes owing to their concern to ensure that the family elders are revered with due respect. In *Hereditary*, following Ellen's death, her daughter Annie collects her mother's belongings in cardboard boxes which she compiles next to each other as visual memories that bespeak of different moments in her mother's life. Analogously, in *Relic*, when Kay and Sam arrive at Edna's abode, some of the rooms are packed with boxes that contain their personal belongings from childhood and youth and, in the living room, Edna's pottery and little decorative boxes also lie next to an urn presiding the mantelpiece, which function as reminders of the past struggling to stand the test of time. The spatial disposition of mementos from the different female members displays turning points in their lives that join together, as personal memories remain inextricably linked to those of other family members. The urn on the mantelpiece in *Relic* and Ellen's boxes in *Hereditary*, in mythical resemblance with Pandora's box, contain, but also conceal, memories which remain latent to be exposed and unravel the fate that awaits them as female descendants of the older women.

In relation to the triad of the Erinyes, the female characters in both *Hereditary* and *Relic* remain receptive to the presence of the older woman, which has the effect of vindicating her role as a member of the trinity. A sense of her perpetuity is enacted in *Hereditary*, when, following Ellen's death, Annie browses through her mother's family

albums and discovers photographs in which her mother appears dancing and celebrating while she is venerated as if she were a queen. These pictures seem to unveil an entirely unknown personality which differs from Ellen's apparently secretive nature, while they also document passages from Ellen's past which were unknown to her daughter and bestow a coveted status upon the eldest family member that extends beyond the limits of her earthly existence. In *Relic*, Kay witnesses Edna holding her family album and literally eating some of its collected photographs, as she is deeply wary that these pictures will eventually be destroyed, like anything else that her house enfolds. Edna's attachment to her old photographs implies that she considers them physical embodiments of her former self subjected to corruption and the passage of time, which she struggles to preserve by ingestion or interment. Edna thus establishes a symbiotic relationship with these photographs, insofar as she states that she wishes she could also bury herself in order to escape the corrupting force that threatens to destroy them, in what arises as a metaphor of aging which is also obliterating herself.

In the family households of *Hereditary* and *Relic*, since pictures of the grandmothers as younger women and recent pictures of their aging female descendants are placed next to each other, time is metaphorically brought to a halt and memories become blurred. In *Hereditary*, at Ellen's funeral, a recent picture of hers stands next to her coffin, thus juxtaposing her frozen image to her body liable to endure the effects of time. When Edna is reported to be missing in *Relic*, the police ask Kay to provide a recent picture of her mother, and Kay chooses a photograph of Edna's last birthday, which contrasts with her mother's lately gloomy appearance. Besides, in *Hereditary*, pictures of Ellen as a younger woman, as she was nursing her granddaughter Charlie when she was a baby, are pinned on the manor walls and, analogously, in *Relic*, in Edna's bedroom, her chest of drawers is decorated with photographs of her youth, standing next to photographs of Kay and Sam. Pictures work as alternate mirrors of imagined selves that perpetually preserve the youth of their beholders, particularly as photographs are hung on the looking glass, thus overlapping past images and current projections that distort the edges of aging.

In both films, the older women, Edna and Ellen, resort to their female descendants as rejuvenated mirror images which help them perpetuate themselves and subvert the dictates of time. In a scene from *Hereditary*, Ellen's figurine is positioned inside the doll's house while Annie stares at her, thus facing each other and creating a mirror effect, as Annie's younger face and Ellen's aging body are juxtaposed in the same frame. In *Relic*, Kay and Sam symbolically turn into Edna's younger mirror image, as a shot shows them standing next to one another and looking into the mirror as they are brushing their teeth, while this scene is juxtaposed to a replicating shot in which Edna is looking into her aged reflection in the mirror while she is also performing the same action. As opposed to Jacques Lacan's mirror stage whereby the infant embraces her unified mirror image as opposed to her still fragmentary inner self, drawing on Woodward's notion of the mirror of old age (1986), the aging subject becomes disaffected with the fragmentary image that the mirror reflects back and contrasts with her unified inner self in old age. In both films, the older woman reverses this premise by gazing at her younger successors as alternative mirrors that invoke the alluring image of her former self.

Tokens and photographs from the older woman turn into virtual mementos which elicit memories that coexist with her younger descendants, thus symbolically blurring their respective identities and the life stages that each woman physically represents, while emphasizing their status as a single entity. In spite of their initial estrangement with the aging matriarch, her female descendants gradually succumb to her pervasive influence, hence evoking the triad of the Erinyes and the importance bestowed upon paying tribute to the elders. As the trinity of women join together in the family household, their abode becomes a container of time and a place where its rooms and corridors reflect the aging process that befalls each of these three women, but also envisions them as an aging woman going through different life stages.

THE GODDESS OF THE UNDERWORLD: HOSTING AND ABJECTING THE AGING FEMALE BODY

As one of the manifestations of the Triple Goddess, the incarnation of the female cycle involving birth, procreation and death is embodied in the goddess of the underworld, and it is recreated by means of the aging process befalling the three female characters in *Hereditary* and *Relic*. According to Cirlot (2001), the region of the underworld acquires ambivalent connotations, inasmuch as it reverts back to the earthly mother as a source of existence and as a symbol of the original abode, but it also evokes the land of the dead (3), which brings to mind the burial ground and the termination of earthly life. Scenes portraying the women in these films conjure the mythical female triad of the Moirai as regards their symbolic transition across the household along their aging process, but also the triad of the Gorgons owing to the grotesque qualities that are conjured through images depicting their aging bodies and eventual death.

ARCHITECTURAL TRANSITIONS: ORGANIC HOUSES, CORPOREAL PASSAGES

The household arises as an extension of the family lineage in both *Hereditary* and *Relic*, insofar as the rooms evoke each of the family members and their different life stages. In addition, though, corridors and staircases relate to each other in analogy with the genealogical connection that is established among the different women in the family, which symbolically unifies them and reflects aging as a fluid process. The dynamics of separation and connection evoke the figure of the Triple Goddess and the tripartite manifestation of the goddess of the underworld moving along the stages of birth, procreation, and death. In resemblance with Ariadne's thread in the labyrinth of Daedalus, the female representatives of each family generation wander the different rooms and corridors of the house as suggestive of their passage across different life stages until they ultimately realize that the thread of life binds them together in front of a latent menace. In particular, in relation to the classic female trope of weaving and its connection with time, the mutual aging process befalling these women and their separate life stages calls to mind the mythological triad of Moirai or Fates, whose purpose was to ensure that all individuals lived their lives according to the fate that they had been assigned, which was represented by a thread spun from a spindle.

The Moirai arise as a trinity that reflects the passage of time, since Lachesis returns to the past, Clotho focuses on the present, and Atropos anticipates what is still to come. As representative of the passage of time, the triad of the Moirai are related to a symbolic and literal thread of life which also connects its three members, involving Lachesis as the measurer of the thread of life that each individual is allotted, Clotho as the spinner who twists the thread, and Atropos as the personification of the unavoidable fate that cuts the thread of life. As their respective life stages interweave, in resemblance with the rooms connected in the household, the three family generations in the films symbolically reflect the roles of the Moirai, whose symbolic threads representing the past, present, and future juxtapose with one another. In *Hereditary*, each female member possesses her own room and is associated with a particular life stage and place within the house—Ellen with the attic, Annie with her workshop, and Charlie with the tree house—and, in *Relic*, when Kay and Sam move to live in Edna’s house, they are also assigned their respective rooms. Although different parts of the house are associated with each of the three women and their specific life stages, these architectural boundaries become blurred, and so do the women’s life stages.

In analogy with the Moirai and their symbolic interrelation by means of the thread of life, in the films, the rooms are connected through corridors and staircases, while a series of trapped doors and hidden passages conceal a latent force that foretells the fate that is to befall the dwellers and that remains related to their aging process. In the gothic tradition, an inherent connection between family manors and their owners is suggested—for example, in Horace Walpole’s *The Castle of Otranto* (1764) and Edgar Allan Poe’s “The Fall of the House of Usher” (1839)—as the process of decay of the houses reflects the decline of the respective families. In *Hereditary*, the Grahams notice an increasingly fetid smell, while in *Relic*, the house walls are gradually covered with moss. Etymologically, the family name of the Grahams literally refers to “gray home,” thus underscoring the decaying atmosphere pervading the family manor. Furthermore, in the households portrayed in both films, there are particular locations which enclose this mysterious corruption: in *Hereditary*, the attic—which can only be accessed through an overhead door—and in *Relic*, the big wardrobe—concealing a secret door—

enclose a series of family secrets that threaten to disrupt the stability of the house. Besides, in spite of her actual absence, the presence of the grandmother haunts the household, thus revealing the inherent connection that binds the family house with the figure of the matriarch. In *Hereditary*, when the Graham family gathers around the dinner table, Ellen's recent loss becomes more noticeable, as she no longer occupies her seat at the table, whereas, in *Relic*, while Edna is missing, Kay catches sight of the armchair on which her mother used to sit, as its emptiness proclaims that she is missing, but also turns into a reminder of her presence. As the figure of the older woman remains latent, the trope of aging and the passage of time are intermittently brought to the fore across the rooms in the household.

The family home hosting the female dwellers symbolically becomes a container of time in the films. In *Hereditary*, Charlie's ghostly clicks of the tongue resonating in the house even after her death and, in *Relic*, Sam's bouncing knocks on the walls as she feels trapped in the labyrinthic passages of the house, denote the intervallic aging process of the female dwellers as if replicating the rhythmic sound of a clock. Moreover, images of aging are conjured architecturally as the family household finds its replica in miniatures lying next to each other as if imitating a series of Russian dolls. In *Hereditary*, the tree house next to the house replicates the family household and so do Annie's dioramas, which turn into doubles of her own abode. In *Relic*, the former shack resembles the family house insofar as the original window glass from the shack is transposed on the gate of the manor. Mirror effects, as houses replicate one another, and reverberating echoes, as sounds resonate across the manors, imitate the symbolic juxtaposition of life stages and the aging transitions that the women within these households undertake. In this respect, the houses resemble living organisms that turn into virtual doubles of their dwellers along their aging process.

The abodes blur the boundaries among generations and phases of life, since the houses acquire an organic condition that reflects the simultaneous aging process of their dwellers. The household also resembles a female organic entity, like a gigantic womb, going through different stages of pregnancy and awaiting the moment to give

birth to a new reality, in resemblance with the Moirai and the thread of life reflecting different stages of life from birth to death.

In *Relic*, as Sam enters the wardrobe in her grandmother's room, she discovers that, rather than a closet, it is a door that reveals a cavity which leads to a figurative labyrinthine womb, marking a transition from the room in which it originates towards an unknown territory. This claustrophobic passage grows bigger and smaller at intervals, hence symbolically giving evidence of its changing quality as a living entity. As Sam feels compelled to make her way along this intricate organic passage in order to escape, her progression resembles the process of labor preceding the moment of birth, when she must break through the wall to find her way back to the living room. As a female body, the house undergoes pregnancy and labor, as it gives birth to its female dwellers at different life stages, from youth to old age, thus engaging in an everlasting cyclical process from generation to generation, since life gives way to death, and death turns back to life in a perpetual process of regeneration.

Analogously, in *Hereditary*, Ellen's spectral presence presides over the family home and blurs the boundaries between life and death, and the physical boundaries of the rooms into which the household is divided. Besides, as Annie invokes the ghost of her deceased daughter on the ground floor of the house, she is eventually led to the attic to discover the remains of her own mother. As she dies a similar death to that of her daughter, Annie follows the same fate of her two female relatives to eventually join them and configure a spectral female trinity.

In both films, as the representatives of different generations make their way through its rooms and corridors in the family household, they symbolically move along different life stages, like the Moirai, while the house marks their transition along its cavities as if it were a reflection of the women's bodies which come together in the same abode.

THE AGING FEMALE BODY: ABJECT, UNCANNY, GROTESQUE

A latent sense of corruption appears to preside over the abodes in both films, thus evoking the invisible, but relentless, passage of time. In their characterization, the three

female characters in both films bear resemblance with the mythical triad of the Gorgons. In artistic manifestations, the Gorgons—which encompass Stheno, Eurycle, and Medusa—have often been portrayed as possessing hair made up of snakes, producing a guttural sound resembling the growling of a beast, and staring through a powerful gaze that turn all those who behold them into stone.

Along their aging process, the triad of women in these two films display instances of the Kristevan notion of the abject, which is defined (among other things) as the inability to distinguish between self and other at specific phases of life at which “meaning collapses” (Kristeva 1982, 2), such as, at birth, when the infant releases itself from the mother and, at death, when the body turns into a cadaver (3). As indicative of the concept of abjection, Kristeva refers to corporeal fluids, like urine and milk, which are suggestive of bodily processes that the aging process entails. Analogously, critics like Margrit Shildrick (2002) describe the circuit of bodily exchanges (105) that disclose the pervasive liminality attached to the aging body. In the films analyzed, the notion of abjection prevails insofar as the identities among the three female characters become blurred and arise as a source of anxiety, particularly at the advent of old age.

In *Hereditary*, one of Annie’s miniatures portrays a scene in which she is breastfeeding her daughter Charlie, while Ellen stands aloof and casts a rather intimidating gaze on them. Annie confesses that, shortly after her daughter’s birth, Ellen “immediately stabbed her hooks into” Charlie (00:21:21), mostly acting as if she were her real mother in spite of being Charlie’s grandmother. Symbolically, Ellen’s characterization on behalf of her daughter brings to mind Medusa and the biting snakes in her hair as an emblem of circularity, since, in her preternatural condition, Ellen nourishes on the young child, but previously, Ellen had nurtured her daughter and Annie had breastfed Charlie. These images endorse the cyclical nature of life and death, since, as DeFalco (2009) claims, aging reveals the illusion of boundaries (126), which are often blurred.

Similarly, in *Relic*, Kay becomes aware of her mother’s incontinence, which urges her to draw her mother to the bathroom so that she can take a bath; subsequently, Sam also bathes in the same bathtub, thus replicating her grandmother’s movements. The

act of sharing the same bathtub and the ritualistic action of taking a bath acquire connotations of pregnancy, as if Edna and Sam were surrounded by amniotic fluid which nourishes the body, but their growing process was also conditioned by a dormant presence that threatens to corrupt their bodies. As she is in the bathtub, Edna notices the darkish skin patches that are covering her body, whereas, when Sam is taking a bath, she becomes aware of a menacing shadow waiting outside the bathroom. In addition to evincing the liminality of the body, the concept of abjection underlines the overwhelming presence of the body and the related anxieties that the process of growing older brings about.

In addition to abjection, the figure of the older woman in both films also conjures the notion of the uncanny, as old age reveals itself as possessing familiar, but also, alienating qualities. As Woodward (1986) notes, Freud refers to the shock of recognition upon meeting his aged double as an experience of the uncanny, describing it “as something familiar that has been repressed” (107). In *Relic*, the corrupting force that pervades Edna’s body eventually turns her into an estranging figure and as the incarnation of the aging Other, to use Simone de Beauvoir’s term (1972), which prompts disaffection from her younger relatives, insofar as they are no longer able to identify her as their respective mother and grandmother. Correspondingly, as the older women in the families gaze at their younger counterparts and their identities become increasingly blurred, they metaphorically unleash an aging process that will also befall the younger generations in a reverberating mirror effect.

Given the symbolic link between the three female characters in *Hereditary*, which is evocative of the triad of the Gorgons, in one scene of the film, Annie and Charlie are sitting at their workshop table, with their backs turned. Their identities blur as their hair looks almost alike, which leads Annie to project the image of a child despite being an older woman, and makes Charlie look like an adult woman in spite of her blatant youth. Similarly, also with a special focus on the character’s hair, in one scene of *Relic*, Edna’s gaze emerges from behind her long grey hair, which is covering her face rather than her nape and it is disclosed that, instead of standing with her back turned, as the audience would expect, Edna is actually gazing at Kay without her noticing it. In these

two scenes, owing to their characterization, the female characters arise as a source of the uncanny, inasmuch as their familiar traits are repressed in favor of their alienating features. Besides, as they exchange glances, it is implied that the younger and older women become symbolic doubles of each other. As Otto Rank (1971) claims, the figure of the double becomes a forerunner of death as well as an agent of protection against impending dissolution (86), which is displayed as the younger female characters come to terms with the figure of the older woman, an embodiment of their aging self, which they manage to identify, but they also initially refuse to embrace.

As the bodies and identities of the female triads in the films become increasingly distorted, they evoke Russo's (1995) notion of the grotesque, defined as the "cavernous anatomical female body" (1), which is described as multiple and changing (8). In *Hereditary*, this distorting process of identities among the three female bodies is made effective as bodies are deprived of their individuality upon being beheaded, once more evoking the triad of the Gorgons through the myth of Medusa's decapitation. In a scene that bears resemblance with such myth, the granddaughter, Charlie, dies as a result of being decapitated in a car accident, while her brother, Peter, is staring at her in the rear window, in the same way as Perseus stared at Medusa's reflection in his shield to protect himself. Charlie's death is subsequently echoed when her grandmother's headless body is found in the attic of the house, while, in a spell of frenzy, the mother, Annie, also beheads herself in a final scene that acquires manifest mythical undertones. As their bodies become eventually reunited, their limbs symbolically join each other to converge in a single body which reassembles the different life stages that each woman in the family embodies as representative of their respective generations.

In analogy, in *Relic*, Kay stays in to nurse her mother and remove the remaining layers of dead skin from her body, thus exposing its darkish flesh, which Kay, as a daughter, finally conforms to embrace, hence blurring the physical boundaries that separate them and, symbolically, reverting back to pregnancy at the advent of the aging mother's death. As Edna emerges as a newly born being, leaving behind her former body and performing a process of regeneration as an ancestral monster, this scene calls to mind Ursula LeGuin's (1997) claim of the aging woman giving birth to her third self

(250). As LeGuin claims, “the woman who is willing to make that change must become pregnant with herself” and “must bear herself, her third self, her old age” (ibid.). Besides, while the three women lie next to each other in bed, Sam notices the dark circle growing on her mother’s nape, which foretells that the corrupting force that has debased her grandmother’s body is also beginning to act upon her mother’s frame.

The iconic final scene in *Relic* brings to mind Gravagne’s (2013) claim that degenerative illnesses in old age symbolically display the different layers of the self (151), blurring past, present and future, thus envisioning aging as a fluctuating experience (22) and as a process of becoming (19). In intertextual connection with Gustav Klimt’s painting “The Three Ages of Woman” (1905), this final scene in *Relic* ratifies the symbolic unity between the three women, as if they were a single female entity going through different stages of life simultaneously, while embracing the grotesque aging female body.

In both films, the symbolic fragmentation and eventual gathering of the female members to join a triad turn into an allegory of the cycle of female aging and its fears as represented by the triad of the Gorgons. As DeFalco (2009) argues, the process of growing old reveals that identity is relational (134), since the visual juxtaposition of the three female bodies displays how the contiguous life stages impinge on each other, thus revealing that the three aging women symbolically belong to the same aging body, which is defined as grotesque, abject and uncanny, but is also eventually acknowledged and embraced.

CONCLUSION

As contemporary horror films, *Hereditary* and *Relic* revolve around three women who belong to different family generations, but are inextricably linked to one another. They become paradigmatic in their use of the classical trope of the Triple Goddess and in their display of elements that associate the female characters with different mythical triads of goddesses. Feminist critics, such as Valerie Mantecon (1993), have argued that the figure of the crone in the Triple Goddess has often been endowed with negative connotations. Conversely, more recently, theorists like Jane Ellen Harrison (2012) have

related the archetype of the Triple Goddess to mythical triads that also acquire positive undertones. In the films analyzed, insofar as they illustrate the archetype of the Triple Goddess and give particular attention to the figure of the older woman, the three female characters in each film present intertextualities with mythical triads evoking fear as embodiments of ancestral dread, like the Graeae, the Erinyes and the Gorgons, but insofar as they are depicted as sources of female empowerment, the women in the films also bring to mind the classical triads of the Charites, the Horae and the Moirai.

The female triads of Ellen-Annie-Charlie in *Hereditary* and of Edna-Kay-Sam in *Relic* become paradigms of the archetype of the Triple Goddess insofar as they bridge the gap among the three members of the triad, as suggestive of the life stages along the course of women's aging process. In particular, the characterization of this triad privileges the figure of the crone, who is portrayed as a complex character that defies stereotypical depictions of female old age, and her presence acquires fundamental significance for the younger members of the triad. As Simone de Beauvoir (1972) claims, "if we do not know what we are going to be, we cannot know who we are: let us recognize ourselves in [...] that old woman" (14), thus bespeaking of the overlapping quality among life stages which prompts us to embrace the aged female Other as our own. The crone is no longer envisioned as an embodiment of termination, but she arises as the endorsement of the cyclical nature of existence, since life stages, as represented by the three women, are not only juxtaposed, but also mutually imbricated. By resorting to the trope of the Triple Goddess through its different female triads, *Hereditary* and *Relic* establish an inherent connection between the figure of the older woman and her younger counterparts, thus constituting a single entity that enacts the female cycle of life.

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