

Our Ladies of Sorrow

"Let us call them, therefore, Our Ladies of Sorrow. I know them thoroughly, and have walked in all their kingdoms. Three sisters they are, of one mysterious household; and their paths are wide apart; but of their dominion there is no end."

Thomas De Quincey, *Suspiria de Profundis*

Introduction

My ever-expanding watch list has recently been augmented with the addition of the original and famous **Dario Argento's** trilogy (**Suspiria**, **Inferno**, **Mother of Tears**). After that, while reviewing writings and commentaries, perplexity set in. Quickly, I was delving into the absorbing lore surrounding the myth of "**The Three Mothers**".

Just as quickly, I found myself playing the part of a principal character in a Lovecraft novel, who is (always and without hope) enthralled by some dangerous, forbidden research of cosmic proportions and unspeakable horror, all because of a single, foolish glimpse into the madness of that lime green abyss.

My investigation, notes, and strange correlations finally had the best of me, and I started to imagine myself as one of Lovecraft's doomed protagonists... maybe a modern William Dyer (of Miskatonic University, of course), that sublime narrator in "*At the Mountains of Madness*" (1936).

Well, that was a bit of an exaggeration, and good old H.P. Lovecraft really has nothing to do with this. **Just a poor excuse for all my writing and rambling.**

The Three Mothers

The first **written** tome that explicitly mentions "**The Three Mothers**" is the work of **Thomas De Quincey** — his "**Suspiria de Profundis**" (1845). Before that, it appears that there is no specific and direct reference to the concept.

And yet, De Quincey's work is evidently influenced by the common ideas of three powerful female figures, having many and deep roots in ancient mythology and folklore... for example: the Greek "**Moirai**" (the Fates, who control the threads of life), the Norse "**Norns**"

(who weave the fabric of destiny), the Celtic "**Triple Goddess**" (Maiden, Mother, Crone — symbolizing the cycles of life)... and so many more.

While all these mythological triads are always related to the concepts of life, death, and fate, their personification and characterization varies wildly.

During the Renaissance, feminine triads are often described as harbingers of doom, manipulators of fate for dark and mysterious motives. They are possibly, but not necessarily, "evil" - just as the famous **Three Witches in Shakespeare's Macbeth**.

De Quincey, suddenly, reinterprets and synthesizes these allegorical figures found in Renaissance literature, by molding the abstract concepts of sorrow, darkness, and tears into his unique and original vision of "The Three Mothers" — supernatural entities that he identifies with specific names: **Mater Suspiriorum**, **Mater Lachrymarum**, and **Mater Tenebrarum**.

Much later in time, the **Italian director Dario Argento**, reprising and building on De Quincey's work, imagines The Three Mothers as ancient, malevolent witches who wield immense supernatural power. In his films, the Three Mothers are not symbolic but **active antagonists**, who manipulate events and wreak havoc. And yes, Argento's witches are identified with the very same names used by De Quincey (Mater Suspiriorum, Mater Tenebrarum, and Mater Lachrymarum)... but this is where all similarities end.



Mater Suspiriorum



Mater Lachrymarum



Mater Tenebrarum

Divergence

Thomas De Quincey' "**Suspiria de Profundis**" (Latin for "**Sighs from the Depths**"), first published in 1845, is often described as one of the most distinctive works of that era. My reference for the original text is the one provided by **Standard EBooks** (<https://standardebooks.org/> - great source for open source and public domain e-books). If you are so inclined, find your copy here: <https://standardebooks.org/ebooks/thomas-de-quincey/suspiria-de-profundis>

Not an easy read by all accounts, and I confess that I skipped to the specific parts of interest (you can start at the heading **LEVANA AND OUR LADIES OF SORROW**).

After digesting the difficult style and language, the first surprise came from what appears to be an "error" in the "translation" of the Three Mother's Latin names into English. The second surprise was to realize that the "error" is, quite clearly, intentional.

Even accounting for the differences between English, Latin, and Italian languages, the translation and interpretation of the "Mater" title are directly related to the different intentions of the authors.

Let me use a table for a simple comparison:

Name of the Entity	Thomas De Quincey's Translation	Dario Argento's Translation
Mater Suspiriorum	Our Lady of Sighs	Mother of Sighs (Madre dei Sospiri)
Mater Tenebrarum	Our Lady of Darkness	Mother of Darkness (Madre delle Tenebre)
Mater Lachrymarum	Our Lady of Tears	Mother of Tears (Madre delle Lacrime)

Dario Argento's translation (both into English language and Italian) is appropriate and correct.

De Quincey's translation is technically invalid and semantically wrong. And yet, his rendition is the one that, conceptually, I like and appreciate the best—in any language.

The simple substitution of the term "Mother" with "Our Lady" is significant — and more representative of the concepts behind the allegoric representations scattered all over Renaissance literature. A simple title substitution that completely changes the personification of these abstract entities.

Words have power

As all ancient Mages warned, words have power, and they can (they eventually will) change reality. It seems that De Quincey is very much aware of the power of words.

Consider, for example, the meaning of the appellative "Mother of Tears". A mother gives birth to a child. It follows that "Mother of Tears" gives birth to "Tears". "Mother of Tears" is therefore the cause and the source of human tears. The literal translation from Latin to English will simply not do for our De Quincey.

Conversely, consider the meaning of the appellative "Our Lady of Tears". Where have we heard that honorific title before? Hasn't that title been in use since the early medieval period? Isn't that "Our Lady" title often used by Christian and Catholics to refer to Mary, the mother of Jesus Christ? if in doubt, check https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Our_Lady.

The attribution of the title "Our Lady of Tears" is then a profound conceptual shift: **the entity is not the cause of tears**. Instead, Our Lady of Tears is simply found wherever there are grieving and suffering men, women, children. Does she offer comfort? That, we do not know and can only hope.

De Quincey's work is introspective and philosophical: it explores the human condition through the lens of these abstract figures. Argento's films, on the other hand, are visceral and horror-driven, using the Three Mothers as central figures in a narrative of terror and destruction.

De Quincey's Mothers are ethereal and symbolic. Argento transforms them into corporeal witches with a direct impact on the world.

I can only infer that the shift from the original allegory into horror reflects the different medium and the intentions of the two authors. And yet, as much as I appreciate Argento's films... De Quincey's original rendition is the most moving, romantic, and comforting.

Seniority

Even more interesting is the different seniority of the Three Mothers:

	Thomas De Quincey	Dario Argento
Eldest	Mater Lachrymarum, Mother of Tears	Mater Suspiriorum, Mother of Sighs
Middle	Mater Suspiriorum, Mother of Sighs	Mater Lachrymarum, Mother of Tears
Youngest	Mater Tenebrarum, Mother of Darkness	Mater Tenebrarum, Mother of Darkness

While there is no apparent or specific reason for the difference in the seniority order of the Three Mothers between Thomas de Quincey's writings and Dario Argento's films... I submit that it stems from their distinct conceptual frameworks: the order represents their respective ideas of a path toward the supreme, inescapable, and final destination.

For De Quincey, the path takes you through pain (tears), to sadness or joy (sighs), to the final comfort of Rest or Death — darkness. His Three Mothers are three imagined, consequential companions of **Juno, the Roman Goddess of Childbirth**, and they represent De Quincey's vision of the natural, recurring condition of Human existence.

For Argento, the path runs through insecurity and anxiety (sighs), to fear and desperation (tears), to the awful and dark world of Death and Damnation — again, darkness. While Argento is inspired by De Quincey, he takes flight and transforms the narrative to mirror his vision of malignant, supernatural (and at the same time **physical**) influences torturing human existence.

Names have power

Argento's films trilogy creates a detailed lore - even using and/or inventing names and dates. The fantastic construction goes well beyond the mere supporting requirements for the movie's narrative framework and background. The details and the cohesiveness of events and locations are certainly not incidental: this is a determined effort to paint **a layer of reality over the author's fantastic** creation — because words have power and can change any reality, just as the mages of old believed.

And if words have power, then proper names are even more powerful constructs.

It is a story as old as time, a *credo* somehow quite common to many and diverse cultures. From the ancient Norwegian tale of Saint Olaf to the famous fairy tale of Rumpelstiltskin, to the beliefs of Native Americans, to the Harry Potter novels... Knowing someone's name or true name can grant power over them and even influence their abilities. By invoking an entity or person true name, Magicians of old could tap into another's strength and innate magic.

We also know that proper names are very much significant, in that they establish an individual's identity and ancestry. In many cultures, still today, your identity is connected to your elders. Think of the Icelandic naming system, or the Arabic naming traditions, the Russian and Slavic patronymics, Hebrew and Jewish naming customs, the Greek naming practices... so many diverse and unrelated culture where one's name clearly reference the proper name of one's father or mother.

And this is, very likely, the justification for Argento's decision: **he gives a proper name to the Eldest of his three sisters and only to her**. Argento's Mother of Sighs becomes known as **Helena Markos**. She is the oldest and more knowledgeable of the Three Mothers.

Her sisters, Mother of Tears and Mother of Darkness, have no proper names. This is an important choice in Argento's narrative: Helena Markos is the origin of the path to fear,

desperation, death, damnation. **Her sisters somehow descend from her, and only then they are "mothers" on their own.**

Argento's Three Mothers – The Lore

De Quincey's Three Mothers are never associated with specific, physical locations. His Mothers are supernatural entities, and are always found where tears, pain, darkness, and death are. Because, after all, his Three Mothers do not inflict pain and desperation and death: they are there to absorb and suffer, and witness, and even offer comfort in the end.

Argento's Mothers, instead, are physical entities that create and inflict pain, desperation, death, damnation. They are physical entities, and need physical, identifiable locations and residences. Because they are the source and origin of said afflictions, it follows that - as tradition demands - the implicit great evil of these entities inevitably infects their place of residence.

Rise of The Three Mothers

According to Argento's lore, the sisters' story begins in the **11th century**, somewhere on the coasts of the Black Sea. Many argue about the bit where Argento attributes the **origin of witchcraft** to the three sisters but, nevertheless, this is how Argento builds the myth. To paraphrase famous chef Emeril Lagasse ... *If you do not like it, make your own myth...*!

The three sisters travel all over the world, decade after decade and century after century. gaining unfathomable wealth and power, leaving only death and desperation behind... and gaining the moniker of "The Three Mothers".

Later, much **later, in the 19th century** the Three Mothers commission the renown **Italian architect E. Varelli**, based in London, to design and build three majestic residences. It is from these enchanted homes that the Three Mothers started to rule the world.

(We learn, in the film **Inferno**, that Varelli discovers the evil intentions and plans of the sisters, but only too late. He writes a memoir titled "The Three Mothers". He does not do this out of pride, recognition, or financial gains. Author credit goes, in fact, to an anonymous colleague and only six copies of the book are in existence. Although four go up in flames at the end of Inferno).

The fantastic residences, in time, become so corrupted by the evil of the residents... so much so that their corruption also infects the land on which they are built. **The land itself inherits the evil that the houses inherited from the occupants.**

The Residences

The myth tells us that **Helena Markos** (Mater Suspiriorum) establishes her residence just outside the Black Forest in Freiburg (Germany). Here, in 1895, she creates her infamous **School for Dance and the Occult Sciences** (you may be left wondering about the pairing of Dance and Occult Sciences). Later, the name transitions to **Tanz Akademie** (Dance Academy) - to avoid unwanted scrutiny.

To better understand the relation between Dance and Occult Sciences, Argento's first film in the "Three Mothers" trilogy, "Suspiria", is mandatory viewing. And, should you be foolish enough, you should also hunt down and check the 2018 wildly polarizing (and box office bomb) remake "Suspiria" — directed by Luca Guadagnino, screenplay by David Kajganich.

The true name of Mater Tenebrarum is never given by Argento, but we learn that her home, built in 1910, is in New York and the house number is **49**. Strangely, no street address is given or known, just the house number.

Also never given is the true name of Mater Lachrymarum. We just come to know that her house is in Rome (Italy), somewhere in the vicinity of the Abertny Foundation's Biblioteca Filosofica—in via Dei Bagni No. **49**.

The choice of the matching house **number 49** is a bit strange: according to my research and understanding, in magic, the number is considered a divine signal that points towards the end of a cycle and the beginning of a new chapter in your life. It represents transformation, renewal, and the invitation to release outdated beliefs and embrace new perspectives for personal evolution.

Leave it Dario Argento to complicate already complicated things. Yes, well, it certainly could have been worse. **It could have been 42!**

Argento's Three Mothers – The Films

Suspiria

It is not a surprise that the celebrated film **Suspiria** is dedicated to Argento's interpretation of Mater Suspiriorum, the Mother of Sighs. Interestingly enough, in this first movie, Dario Argento does not mention **Helena Markos** (also known as **The Black Queen**) as one of The Three Mothers. It is only in the follow up **Inferno** (three years later) that the connection is made.

In "Suspiria", Helena Markos is shown as incredibly malevolent witch, aged, feeble, and with much degraded magic powers – so much so that her attempts to kill the movie's

protagonist **Suzy Bannion** (Jessica Harper) fail quite dramatically. In a final confrontation she is killed by said Suzy Bannion and her home and coven are destroyed.

It is difficult, today, to understand if Dario Argento's interpretation of The Three Mothers as physical entities informs the plot of the film or if the needs of the film's plot require The Mother of Sighs to be a physical entity that can be conveniently disposed by the Heroine.

It is also very much unclear if **Suspiria** was indeed conceived as the first part of a trilogy, or if **Inferno** and **Mother of Tears** were later conceived and filmed as a logical addition to the myth based on De Quincey's work.

Be that as it may, the supernatural, horror film was received exceedingly well by critics and audiences, won a number of awards, and is recognized as one of the most influential films in the horror genre.

The soundtrack is by **Goblin**, an Italian progressive-rock band well known for their cooperation with any number of film makers. If you can, locate the album [Profondo Rosso](#) (Deep Red) – a wild success, probably their best work, and one more cooperation with Dario Argento.

Note: I will not dignify the 2018 remake of Suspiria with additional comments. And let's leave it at that.

Inferno

The actress **Veronica Lazăr** (1938-2014) achieved international fame for her role of **Mater Tenebrarum** in **Inferno** (1980).

In the film, our youngest, most bitter, brutal, bloodthirsty, and all-around homicidal maniac Mother turns out to have enslaved the architect E. Varelli—for rather strange and very much unexplained motives.

Once again, the witch's mortality is essential to the movie's climax: a maid is cruelly killed, and while trashing around she manages to set the house on fire. Mater Tenebrarum *maybe* saves herself by disappearing into a mirror... where she appears to be trapped... but she bursts out of it as **the skeletal personification of Death**, only to perish in the inferno of flames and under the debris of her home.

Some movie critics point to her cryptic remark that "*It's all going to burn down ... Just like before ...*" which is a possible reference to **Suspiria**'s finale – most likely an attempt to establish continuity between films.

The Mother of Tears

And we finally get to the last movie in the trilogy and to the most beautiful and powerful of the Three Mothers, The Mother of Tears—portrayed by Israeli actress **Moran Atias**.

After the death of her sisters, the **witch** has been hibernating for a while. She is awoken when **Sarah Mandy** (Asia Argento) unknowingly opens the urn containing **the witch's red tunic** — *obviously* a powerful relic.

While the witch hides in her mansion's catacombs to recover her strength, her minions create disorder and confusion in Rome ... for no clear reason at all.

The witch is finally defeated by Sarah, who discovers The Mother's underground refuge. Sarah prevails by ripping and burning the red tunic, which causes the mansion to collapse, which in turn causes an ornamental obelisk from the top of the building to crash into the witch's lair — impaling the Mother of Tears.

While *Suspiria* and *Inferno* received generally very positive reviews, response to **The Mother of Tears** was mixed ... a reaction to a very uneven script that underwent major revisions and changes ... by **Daria Nicolodi**, by Dario Argento himself, and later by **Jace Anderson** and **Adam Gierasch**.

The movie's most spectacular characteristic is the **color palette**: cool and subdued in the beginning, and progressively shifting into harsh red tones as the film progresses.

Should you be interested in watching the movie, make sure to obtain the original DVD release (2007): this is the version that contains all the “hard core” scenes that the Italian distributor *Medusa Film* required to be cut for theatrical release.

De Quincey's Three Mothers

The earliest vision of Our Ladies of Sorrow, in De Quincey' “*Suspiria de Profundis*” is so remarkably original, so much so that it is difficult to understand how Dario Argento managed to corrupt and twist the concept into horror tropes.

Our Lady of Tears

Mater Lachrymarum, Our Lady of Tears, is the most powerful and beautiful of Our Ladies of Sorrow. She travels over wind, swiftly moves from place to place, always attending those who suffer a sadness of the body or the soul. She sits with a king crying over his stillborn daughter, and she sits with a beggar who dreams of the joyful daughter he lost. She has a set of keys that open any lock. Wherever there are grieving or suffering men, women, or children, the Mother of Tears appears and, somehow, offers comfort.



Our Lady of Tears

"The eldest of the three is named Mater Lachrymarum, Our Lady of Tears. She it is that night and day raves and moans, calling for vanished faces. [...] She it was that stood in Bethlehem on the night when Herod's sword swept its nurseries of Innocents, and the little feet were stiffened forever, which, heard at times as they tottered along floors overhead, woke pulses of love in household hearts that were not unmarked in heaven. Her eyes are sweet and subtle, wild and sleepy, by turns; oftentimes rising to the clouds, oftentimes challenging the heavens. She wears a diadem round her head."

Thomas de Quincey, *Suspiria de Profundis*

Our Lady of Sighs

Mater Suspiriorum, Our Lady of Sighs, does not wear a diadem and wears a simple, old turban. She does not move with the wind, she walks from place to place with a heavy head, forever looking at the ground as she walks, and she constantly sighs.

She sighs with slaves, meek prisoners, disgraced, bastards, and all victims. And yet, no one dares look into her eyes: they are filled with all their dead dreams and their delirium. Is she the mirror that somehow constantly consumes their pain to allow them to survive?

She carries one key and with that key she gains access to the elite members of society. She frequently visit those that are completely confident, arrogant, having everything a man or woman could desire. She is also their companion, and she gifts them with the pain she has collected in her continuing travels through the world's downtrodden.



Our Lady of Sighs

"The second sister is called Mater Suspiriorum , Our Lady of Sighs. She never scales the clouds, nor walks abroad upon the winds. She wears no diadem. And her eyes, if they were ever seen, would be neither sweet nor subtle; no man could read their story; they would be found filled with perishing dreams, and with wrecks of forgotten delirium."

Thomas de Quincey, *Suspiria de Profundis*

Our Lady of Darkness

Mother Tenebrarum, Our Lady of Darkness, is the youngest of the three Mothers, and most would mistakenly say she is the most cruel. Some would say that she is the personification of Death, and what could be more cruel than Death? Is she not the challenger of God, who is Light? Is not Death inherently evil?

A superficial, initial reading of *Suspiria de Profundis* would bring you to believe that Our Lady of Darkness is indeed the Grim Reaper, more akin to a demon.



Our Lady of Darkness

But the third sister, who is also the youngest! Hush! whisper whilst we talk of her! Her kingdom is not large, or else no flesh should live; but within that kingdom all power is hers. Her head, turreted like that of Cybèle, rises almost beyond the reach of sight. She droops not; and her eyes rising so high might be hidden by distance. But, being what they are, they cannot be hidden; through the treble veil of crape which she wears, the fierce light of a blazing misery, that

*rests not for matins or for vespers, for noon of day or noon of night, for ebbing or for flowing tide, may be read from the very ground. She is the defier of God. [...]
And her name is Mater Tenebrarum, Our Lady of Darkness."*

Thomas de Quincey, *Suspiria de Profundis*

Why then the adoring appellative of **Our Lady of Darkness**?

Keep reading the *Suspiria* and you'll find subtle, important hints: if she is Death, is she also not the final, inescapable resting place? Is she by your side only to torment you, or to comfort you and assist you? Maybe it is not true that, in the end, we all die alone.

Some say that she carries no key because her realm on Earth is limited. Conversely, I submit that she carries no keys simply because she has no need of them. Her realm on Earth is completely unlimited. If Darkness is death or sleep or respite, she has no boundaries of any kind.

Novus Bestiary

I was just about ready to start editing this document and wrapping up the discussion, when I came across something completely unexpected.

An obscure reference to The Three Mothers lore directed me to the interesting and intriguing [Novus Bestiary](#) web site — which is (was?) being developed by a TTRPG fan with the goal of combining old mythologies with much newer ones, for the obvious benefits of authors, game masters, and fantastic zoologists (the “Dungeons & Dragons” connection is very explicit).

Browsing the (still very short) list of Monsters and Creatures, I found the entry for The Three Mothers ... alongside obvious evergreens such as **Striga**, **Troll**, and **Kelpie**.

Three Mothers 5e (Fifth Edition)

The Three Mothers creatures are flagged with the **5e** tag which, presumably, indicates they were introduced (or their stats were changed) with or for the **Dungeons & Dragons 5th Edition** rules set.

On this particular site, The Three Mothers are imagined as ancient witches of tremendous power. They are mortal because they are creatures that can be defeated in the game, and therefore they each have **Armor Class** and **Hit Points**.

Their description, on the site, mixes the concepts of De Quincey and Argento — with very little regard to each, occasionally and at the very same time twisting the words of the British writer and the visual imagery of the Italian director.

As Dungeons & Dragons characters, the three sisters are defined as **Medium fey, Neutral Evil**, with individual “stats” that – considering what we have learned about them - make very little sense. Their “**Condition Immunities**” and “**Damage Resistances**” are also a bit puzzling. Some of the assigned “skills”, it must be said, are quite imaginative and a bit overpowered. Even if they do not always seem to actually *relate* to the character: take for example one of the skills assigned to Mater Suspiriorum:

Wail of the Hopeless (Recharge 5-6). As an action, Mater Suspiriorum unleashes the screams of the souls she has fed upon, dealing 4d10 + 4 thunder damage to all creatures within 30ft.

All of a sudden, it is implied that Mater Suspiriorum (a mortal witch, albeit ancient witch) can feed on souls. Where does this come from?

I like the **Legendary Action** skill assigned to Mater Lachrymarum:

Mother's Disapproval (Costs 2 Actions). Mater Lachrymarum wails, invoking feelings of shame. All creatures within 30ft of her, that can hear her, must make a DC16 Charisma Saving Throw or be unable to take the attack action for 1d4 turns or until they take damage.

This I can definitely understand and, if we insist on realism (?) ... the skill definitely has merit and there is a connection.

Least we forget Mater Tenebrarum, here is a skill that - strangely enough and even if assigned to a Neutral Evil character – seems to appropriately belong to **Our Lady of Darkness**:

Mother's Caress. Mater Tenebrarum embraces her target, if they are blinded they must make a DC15 Charisma Saving Throw. On a failed save, they lose the blinded condition and are instead knocked unconscious for 1d4 hours or until they take damage.

All in all, we are looking at Dungeons & Dragons fantastic characters, based on a horror movie trilogy based on the writings of a laudanum, opium, and alcohol addict ... so I am not particularly concerned about consistency.

On the other hand, I wonder how many **Dungeons & Dragons players** actually try and learn more about the creatures in the ever expanding **D&D Bestiary**.

Conclusions

There is not much left to say about The Three Mothers — fantastic creatures out of countless myths, always reinterpreted as convenient ... even as mystical threats in Marvel's Doctor Strange!

If there is anything we might learn or deduce from this short dissertation is that Classic Literature, Modern Literature, Comic Books, Cinematography, Table Top Role Playing Games (**TTRPG**) and, to a lesser degree, Computer Role Playing Games (**CRPG**) and even so many **“story driven” video games** are important sources and teaching tools for the art of storytelling.

Yet, we should not forget that effective storytelling is born of knowledge and understanding of all characters involved, and the only effective storytelling is one that somehow passes on the tales of traditional folklore to younger generation.

Storytelling has a crucial role in human communication. It serves many purposes: sharing experiences, imparting lessons, and entertaining. It connects ideas to emotions, it makes complex information more relatable and understandable.

Storytelling also stimulates critical thinking, analysis, and analytical thinking. It guides the listener or the reader to further investigate and learn about the present and the past — if only for the purpose of entertainment. It may even expand your horizons, if only you open your mind a bit and if you manage to take your eyes off that TikTok feed.

How did I get here, starting from our beloved Three Mothers?

