

THE ENGLISH GOTHIC NOVEL: A BRIEF OVERVIEW

The English Gothic novel began with Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* (1765), which was enormously popular and quickly imitated by other novelists and soon became a recognizable genre. To most modern readers, however, *The Castle of Otranto* is dull reading; except for the villain Manfred, the characters are insipid and flat; the action moves at a fast clip with no emphasis or suspense, despite the supernatural manifestations and a young maiden's flight through dark vaults. But contemporary readers found the novel electrifyingly original and thrillingly suspenseful, with its remote setting, its use of the supernatural, and its medieval trappings, all of which have been so frequently imitated and so poorly imitated that they have become stereotypes. The genre takes its name from *Otranto's* medieval—or Gothic—setting; early Gothic novelists tended to set their novels in remote times like the Middle Ages and in remote places like Italy (Matthew Lewis's *The Monk*, 1796) or the Middle East (William Beckford's *Vathek*, 1786).

What makes a work Gothic is a combination of at least some of these elements:

- * a castle, ruined or intact, haunted or not (the castle plays such a key role that it has been called the main character of the Gothic novel),
- * ruined buildings which are sinister or which arouse a pleasing sadness,
- * dungeons, underground passages, crypts, and catacombs which, in modern houses, become spooky basements or attics,
- * labyrinths, dark corridors, and winding stairs,
- * shadows, a beam of moonlight in the blackness, a flickering candle, or the only source of light failing (a candle blown out or, today, an electric failure),
- * extreme landscapes, like rugged mountains, thick forests, or icy wastes, and extreme weather,
- * omens and ancestral curses,
- * magic, supernatural manifestations, or the suggestion of the supernatural,
- * a passion-driven, wilful villain-hero or villain,
- * a curious heroine with a tendency to faint and a need to be rescued—frequently,
- * a hero whose true identity is revealed by the end of the novel,
- * horrifying (or terrifying) events or the threat of such happenings.

The Gothic creates feelings of gloom, mystery, and suspense and tends to the dramatic and the sensational, like incest, diabolism, necrophilia, and nameless terrors. It crosses boundaries, daylight and the dark, life and death, consciousness and unconsciousness. Sometimes covertly, sometimes explicitly, it presents transgression, taboos, and fears—fears of violation, of imprisonment, of social chaos, and of emotional collapse. Most of us immediately recognize the Gothic (even if we don't know the name) when we encounter it in novels, poetry, plays, movies, and TV series. For some of us—and I include myself—safely experiencing dread or horror is thrilling and enjoyable.

Elements of the Gothic have made their way into mainstream writing. They are found in Sir Walter Scott's novels, Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, and Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* and in Romantic poetry like Samuel Coleridge's "Christabel," Lord Byron's "The Giaour," and John Keats's "The Eve of St. Agnes." A tendency to the macabre and bizarre which appears in writers like William Faulkner, Truman Capote, and Flannery O'Connor has been called Southern Gothic.

THE GOTHIC AND *WUTHERING HEIGHTS*

Whether or not *Wuthering Heights* should be classified as a Gothic novel (certainly it is not merely a Gothic novel), it undeniably contains Gothic elements.

In true Gothic fashion, boundaries are trespassed, specifically love crossing the boundary between life and death and Heathcliff's transgressing social class and family ties. Brontë follows Walpole and Radcliffe in portraying the tyrannies of the father and the cruelties of the patriarchal family. Brontë has incorporated the Gothic trappings of imprisonment and escape, flight, the persecuted heroine, the heroine wooed by a dangerous and a good suitor, ghosts, necrophilia, a mysterious foundling, and revenge. The weather-buffed Wuthering Heights functions as the traditional castle, and Catherine resembles Ann Radcliffe's heroines in her appreciation of nature. Like the conventional Gothic hero-villain, Heathcliff is a mysterious figure who destroys the beautiful woman he pursues and who usurps inheritances, and with typical Gothic excess he batters his head against a tree repeatedly. There is the hint of necrophilia in Heathcliff's viewings of Catherine's corpse and his plans to be buried next to her, another hint of necrophilia in Edgar's lying by Catherine's grave, and a hint of incest in Catherine and Heathcliff's being raised as brother and sister (a few critics have suggested that Heathcliff is Catherine's illegitimate half-brother so that the incest would be literal).

A FEMINIST THEORY OF THE GOTHIC AND *WUTHERING HEIGHTS*

Ellen Moers has propounded a feminist theory that relates women writers in general and Emily Brontë in particular to the Gothic. She theorizes that middle-class women who wanted to write were hampered by the conventional image of ladies as submissive, pious, gentle, loving, serene, domestic angels; they had to overcome the conventional patronizing, smug, unempowering, contemptuous sentimentalizing of women by reviewers like George Henry Lewes, who looked down on women writers:

Women's proper sphere of activity is elsewhere [than writing]. Are there no husbands, lovers, brothers, friends to coddle and console? Are there no stockings to darn, no purses to make, no braces to embroider? My idea of a perfect woman is one who can write but won't. (1850)

Those women who overcame the limitations of their social roles and did write found it more difficult to challenge or reject society's assumptions and expectations than their male counterparts. Ellen Moers identifies heroinism, a form of literary feminism, as one way women circumvented this difficulty. (Literary feminism and feminism may overlap but they are not the same, and a woman writer who adopts heroinism is not necessarily a feminist.) Heroinism takes many forms, such as the intellectual or thinking heroine, the passionate or woman-in-love heroine, and the traveling heroine. Clearly all the Brontë sisters utilize the passionate heroine, whether knowingly or not, to express subversive values and taboo experiences covertly.

What subversive values and taboo experiences does Emily Brontë express with her passionate heroine Catherine? Moers sees subversion in Brontë's acceptance of the cruel as a normal, almost an energizing part of life and in her portrayal of the erotic in childhood. The cruelty connects this novel to the Gothic tradition, which has been associated with women writers since Anne Radcliffe. The connection was, in fact, recognized by Brontë's contemporaries; the *Athenaeum* reviewer labeled the Gothic elements in *Wuthering Heights* "the eccentricities of 'woman's fantasy'" (1847). Moers thinks a more accurate word than eccentricities would be perversities. These perversities may have originated in "fantasies derived from the night side of the Victorian nursery—a world where childish cruelty and childish sexuality come to the fore." Of particular importance for intellectual middle-class women who never matured sexually was the brother-sister relationship. In childhood, sisters were the equal of their brothers, played just as hard, and felt the same pleasures and pains; girls clung to this early freedom and equality, which their brothers outgrew, and displaced them into their writing; Moers explains:

Women writers of Gothic fantasies appear to testify that the physical teasing they received from their brothers—the pinching, mauling, and scratching we dismiss as the unimportant of children's games—took on outsize proportions and powerful erotic overtones in their adult imaginations. (Again, the poverty of their physical experience may have caused these disproportions, for it was not only sexual play but any kind of physical play for middle-class women that fell under the Victorian ban.)