

Gender Represented In the Gothic Novel

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Abstract: The genre of Gothic became one of the most popular of the late 18th and early 19th century, and the novel usually regarded as the first Gothic novel is Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto*, first published in 1764.¹ The first great practitioner of the Gothic novel, as well as the most popular novelist of the eighteenth century in England, was Ann Radcliffe.² She added suspense, painted evocative landscapes and moods or atmosphere, portrayed increasingly complex, fascinatingly-horrifying, evil villains, and focused on the heroine and her struggle with the male tyrant. Her work *The Italian* (1797) have the ability to thrill and enthrall readers. Inspired by Radcliffe, a more sensational type of Gothic romance, exploiting horror and violence, flourished in Germany and was introduced to England by Matthew Gregory Lewis with *The Monk* (1796). The novel follows the lust-driven monk Ambrosio from one abominable act to another - rape, incest, matricide, burial alive - to his death and well-deserved damnation. The different schools, which are Female Gothic represented by Radcliffe and Male Gothic represented by Lewis, are distinguished by some critics as novel of terror and novel of horror. Sometimes this same distinction is tied to gender, with female equated with terror Gothic, and with male being equated with horror Gothic because both female and male writers can produce female and male Gothic. In this paper, I will explain the characteristics of the Female Gothic and the Male Gothic and the difference between these genres, more specifically by focusing on the function of gender and the characterization of the main characters in Ann Radcliffe's *The Italian* and Matthew Lewis *The Monk*. This is followed by the conclusion, in which the findings of this research will be laid out.

Keywords; Male, Female, Gothic, Victim

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I. INTRODUCTION

The presentation of female identity is essential to Gothic literature. Presenting women in a particular light can often have a profound effect upon a text, completely altering a reader's interpretation. In the narrative poetry of John Keats, Angela Carter's 'The Bloody Chamber and Other Stories' and Bram Stoker's 'Dracula', women are presented as objects of desire, maternal figures, supernatural beings and are often defined by their biological roles. But it is the transition between these typecasts that is particularly interesting. By allowing female characters to break free of stereotypical constraints the writer is able to create obscurity and suspense within a plot.

There are two main female roles within Gothic literature; the 'predator' and the 'victim'. The first is dangerous yet powerfully attractive; she helps portray the pain/pleasure paradox that has come to be synonymous with Gothic literature. The latter is fragile and vulnerable, she gives the heroes something to rescue, and is often the prize for their brave endeavours.

Occasionally, however, Gothic writers seem to blur the lines between these stereotypical characters in order to add depth, uncertainty and suspense. This is particularly clear in Angela Carter's 'The Snow Child' in which we would expect the jealous Countess to be the predator and the child to be the victim. The view presented to us of the Snow Child and the Countess, however, lies within the reader's interpretation of the story. It depends on where our sympathies lie as to whether we see the Countess as the victim as her husband replaces her with a 'newer model', or we see the girl as the victim, created as both an object of the Count's lust and the Countess's hatred.

The Countess's jealousy is made clear from the moment the girl arrives in the blunt declarative 'the Countess hated her.' This could stem from the fact that the count had 'fathered' a child, yet she was not the mother. Where the child is often described in terms of her sexual maturity, the Countess is described using the bilabial alliterative 'bare bough' and the simile 'bare as a bone'. This could be seen to reflect the Countess's infertility that has come with age, and may explain her hatred towards the young and fertile girl. This presents women in an extremely negative light, adhering to the stereotype that all women are threatened by those younger and more beautiful than themselves.

This idea, of characters breaking out of their stereotypes, can also be seen through the role of 'Isabella' in Keats' 'Isabella and the Pot of Basil'. Throughout the poem we associate Isabella with vulnerability. Keats describes her in terms of her beauty and naivety using the adjectives, 'poor', 'fair' and 'simple'. He also characteristically uses a lexical field of birds, portraying Isabella as a helpless chick in her 'downy nest'. However, despite losing her lover, Isabella is left to mourn for just one stanza. She then stops

letting 'love's cousin' take hold of her, and decides to take action. Soon her heart is thronged with a 'richer zest', reflecting how she was strengthened by her love for Lorenzo.

In contrast, the 'Snow Child' seems to adhere to her victim-like stereotype. She is represented as an object of lust, and this is shown through her description. We see references to her sexual maturity throughout and it becomes the focus of her entire identity, in particular her beginnings as a 'hole in the snow' that is 'filled with blood'. Clearly, this could be a reference to female menstruation, symbolic of sexual maturity. This is furthered by the fact that she is presented to the Count completely naked; which could be interpreted as a symbol of her birth, or simply the result of an instantaneous manifestation of the Count's lust. After her creation she is lifted up and 'sat in front' of the Count; she has no means of escape. She is also never given a name or permitted to speak which leaves her open to psychoanalytical readings. We find ourselves asking whether or not her thoughts were motivated towards pleasing the count, or whether she would have escaped given the chance. In other Carter stories, 'The Bloody Chamber' for example, the victim is rescued from the male protagonist. The fact that the Snow Child is killed by the Countess could reflect the fleeting nature of youth and fertility.

Strictly adhering to their stereotypes even more so than the 'Snow Child' are the female roles portrayed in Bram Stoker's 'Dracula'. The Count's brides help to reinforce the idea of the typically Gothic pain/pleasure paradox by appearing to Jonathan Harker both physically attractive and repulsive. They are described initially as 'ladies by their dress and manner', but their descriptions turn to vivid juxtapositions, for example their 'honey-sweet' breath with a 'bitter offensiveness, as one smells in blood', and their 'deliberate voluptuousness that was both thrilling and repulsive'. The repetitive use of the colours white and red also help to reinforce this gothic paradox, white typically being associated with innocence and purity; red with wrath and passion. For example, the brides' white teeth like 'pearls' are contrasted against the 'ruby of their voluptuous lips'. The brides are overly sexualised yet appear frightfully dangerous. Literary critic Ben H Wright puts forward the view that 'the actions of the vampire women in their seduction of Jonathan Harker represent newfound anxieties about the emergence of the New Woman.' He describes the 'new woman' as women who challenged the 'prevailing notions of Victorian womanhood'¹. Perhaps Stoker was attempting to reflect the chaos that would emerge should this notion be forgotten or left behind.

Mina appears to adhere to the victim-like stereotype as she is portrayed as sexless, nurturing and motherly. She is described as having a 'man's brain' and is completely dismissive of the 'modern woman'. She is also seen as something to be protected, the men around her constantly attempting to shield her from their plans to keep her safe. However, at the time she is attacked by Dracula, Jonathan was sleeping soundly by her side, reflecting a complete failure on his behalf. To take a psychoanalytical approach, Mina could be demonstrating a desire to betray her husband with impunity. Mina also tends to break free of her vulnerable stereotype by demonstrating bravery, understanding the world around her and offering solutions where the male characters fall short. For example, her emotional awareness can be viewed as fairly innovative for her time, as she demonstrates an understanding of the need to vent one's problems, commenting how crying 'clears the air like the rain does'. She organises the group's transportation with her knowledge of train timetables, and not only suggests but insists upon the dangerous use of hypnotism, a new medical science to Victorian society, in order to track the Count's movements. However, even she becomes sexualised as she begins to transform into a vampire, likening herself to the Count's brides as she states that there are 'none safer in all the world from them' than she.

Lucy can be seen as a warning to female readers of the consequences of being flirtatious or promiscuous. She reflects the transition from the victim to the predator stereotype. By being bitten by Count Dracula, Lucy is educated as to her own sexuality; this is likely because transfusions at the time, or the swapping of bodily fluids in general, were often linked to sex, reflected as early as John Donne's 17th Century poem 'The Flea'. This is likely because blood transfusions were still a radical and foreign concept in the 19th Century, the first recorded successful case being performed by Dr James Blundell in 1818.² The foreign and unknown elements will have made the procedure seem dangerous but attractive. The scenes in which Lucy is given blood transfusions will have appealed to a female audience in the same way females to this day find vampires attractive. The elements of danger allow Lucy to absolve herself from moral blame, perhaps allowing her to secretly take pleasure in the act. The Victorian belief states that women had no sexual appetite, it is for this reason that 'Dracula' can be seen as an extremely subversive text for its age, by bringing forth strong images of female sexual desires.

II. THE FEMALE AND MALE GOTHIC GENRE

2.1 The Female Gothic

The term Female Gothic was first coined by Ellen Moers in her book *Literary Women* in 1976 she notes that with this term she refers to Gothic fiction written by women.³ According to this use, the Female Gothic would merely denote the (female) gender of the writer. However, this is not the only meaning of the Female Gothic. Ellen Moers also considers it "as a coded expression of women's fears of entrapment within the domestic and within the female body", which became a very significant perspective (Smith/Wallace 2004, 1). Women thus felt imprisoned in the household and in their own body, a feeling that they covertly tried to convey through female Gothic literature. Smith and Wallace state that in female Gothic novel, women also expressed their discontent towards patriarchy and its suppression of "the maternal" (Smith/Wallace 2004, 1). Different opinions have been formed about whether or not the Female Gothic can be called a genre on its own, distinct from the Gothic genre. Many different terms have been used: "women's Gothic", "feminine Gothic", "lesbian Gothic", even "Gothic feminism", which causes Smith and Wallace to claim that this indicates that the term of the Female Gothic, as it was used by Moers, is used too widely (Smith/Wallace 2004, 1).

The Female Gothic not only means that the text is written by a female author, but the literary genre also has its own conventions. Moers states that Radcliffe created a narrative with a female protagonist who is a heroine and a victim at the same time, which would become one of the typical characteristics of the Female Gothic.⁴ According to feminist critics it is also about a narrative about mothers and daughters, in which the orphaned heroine is in search of an absent mother who then discovers that she is not dead.⁵ In the beginning of the novel the heroine has a peaceful life and is "depicted [as] enjoying an idyllic and secluded life"⁶ but suddenly she is threatened with imprisonment in a castle or a great house under the control of a powerful male figure who gave her no chance to escape (Punter/Byron 2004, 279).

Consequently, the actual source of danger threatening the heroine in female Gothic texts is eighteenth-century patriarchal society, in which political, social and economic power lies with men. At the end all mysterious events and the supernatural will be explained by rational means.⁷ There is also the preference of a happy ending, in which the protagonist is reintegrated into community and acquires a new identity and a new life through marrying the man she loves (Punter/Byron 2004, 279).

2.2 The Male Gothic

In contrast to the Female Gothic, the term Male Gothic came into being. Many critics state that there are both Female and Male Gothic subgenres, "which differ in terms of narrative technique, plot, their assumptions about the supernatural, and their use of horror/terror".⁸ The Male Gothic is often regarded as "the true Gothic".⁹ It is considered more Gothic on many grounds: firstly, the supernatural is not clarified by an ordinary or natural cause, which causes the novels to end mysteriously (Miles 2009, 78). Secondly, in the Male Gothic, rape is shown more directly than in the Female Gothic. And thirdly, the story often takes place in a merciless universe and involves an insubordinate protagonist. The belief that the Male Gothic subgenre is "the true Gothic" has caused critics to view Female Gothic novelists as shy.

Ann Radcliffe was thought to be just embellishing the "old-fashioned eighteenth century sentimental novel with genteel terror tactics" such as "her unscathed heroines, explained mysteries and behind-the-times Burkean terror", while Horace Walpole's work was seen as more innovative (Miles 2009, 78). Another characteristic of the Male Gothic denoted by Robert Miles is that he describes the Male Gothic's negative representation of women:

In the male Gothic, woman is always on the verge [...] of appearing unnatural, a monster of artifice. Or rather, for the male observer prone to [...] lust, the fault is habitually projected onto woman, an accusation usually couched in terms of her lack of 'nature' [...] In male Gothic what one might call the 'deconstructive tendency of the carnivalesque' is kept in bounds by a psycho-sexual force, by a misogyny generally expressed as woman's monstrous otherness, her 'artificiality'. But in female Gothic the educative issues identified by Wollstonecraft, where woman's true self is thrown into question, exist usually as an implicit, but sometimes explicit, tension (Miles 2002, 81-82)

From this statement can be deduced that in Male Gothic fiction, women are seen as unnatural and artificial. Consequently, women are always presented in a negative way. This is of course in contrast with Female Gothic fiction, that mostly presents women as victims and questions their identity.

2.3 Terror vs. Horror: The distinction between the two gothic genres

Terror and horror are considered by some scholars as two different traditions into which gothic fiction is divided. This division finds its source in the stylistic differences between two late-eighteenth century writers, Matthew Gregory Lewis and Anne Radcliffe. The distinction between Terror and Horror was first characterized by Ann Radcliffe in her essay "On the Supernatural in Poetry" by drawing upon Edmund Burke in order to distinguish between terror and horror in literature:

[...] terror is characterized by ‘obscurity’ or indeterminacy in its treatment of potentially horrible events; it is this indeterminacy that leads the reader toward the sublime. Horror, in contrast, ‘nearly annihilates’ the reader’s responsive capacity with its unambiguous displays of atrocity. [...] Terror and horror are so far opposite, that the first expands the soul, and awakens the faculties to a high degree of life; the other contracts, freezes, and nearly annihilates them. I apprehend, that neither Shakespeare nor Milton by their fictions, nor Mr. Burke by his reasoning, anywhere looked to positive horror as a source of the sublime, though they all agree that terror is a very high one; and where lies the great difference between horror and terror, but in the uncertainty and obscurity, that accompany the first, respecting the dreaded evil? [...] (Radcliffe 1826, 150).

Radcliffe’s definition, in this sense, is based on the effects that terror and horror have on the senses, privileging the former in detriment of the latter. Based on this difference, some critics, as Melani states, classify Radcliffe’s and Lewis’s works in different traditions: terror gothic represented by Radcliffe, and horror gothic represented by Lewis.¹⁰

The distinction between Male and Female Gothic fiction has its source in personal struggles and stylistic contrasts between the two eighteenth century writers. Kari Winter argues that the distinctions between the gothic traditions originated from these authors accounts for the different experiences men and women have of fear. According to the author, the difference is that, while men fear “the Other” (women included), women fear “the terror of the familiar: the routine brutality and injustice of the patriarchal family, conventional religion, and classist social structures”.¹¹

III. CONCLUSION

To force one’s readers to look directly at the horrors depicted, rather than allowing them to become terrified by their own imaginations, is, of course, the technique of the horror-Gothic, as contrasted with the terror-Gothic. Identifying the horror-Gothic as a predominantly male affair comes as no surprise, and accords nicely with the critical tradition of identifying Lewis as the quintessential horror-Gothic writer.

However, it does not follow that the terror-Gothic must therefore be the province of women. Ann Radcliffe may have founded the terror-Gothic school, but women and men appear to have followed in her footsteps equally. Moreover, the existence of two opposing schools does not prove the equal footing of those schools; setting aside questions of gender to look at the relative prominence of various motifs, readers are vastly more likely to encounter the temporary terrors of abduction and confinement than the more permanent horrors of bones and corpses. Even death, which could reasonably appear in either school of novel despite its horrifying potential, is unexpectedly scarce compared to the widespread fainting.

In the wider context of the Gothic, then, it seems that the terror-Gothic and the Female Gothic are, in fact, simply the Gothic-- with the male horror-Gothic as the outlier subgenre in which an author’s writing has been shaped by his gender.

These results remain preliminary, at least until a sample can be assembled which involves more texts at fewer levels of mediation. However, they serve as a useful reminder that not all contrasts are necessarily perfect binaries. Research at a large scale provides a unique opportunity to compare the critical perception of a body of work to contemporary readers’ experience of that same body; here, it has focused only on one specific way of seeking gendered imagery, but future projects can easily expand to investigate plot structure or chronology, and in a few years perhaps even style. And in the mean time, those scholars of the Gothic who study deeply only a few texts at a time can discuss their observations regarding potential expressions of a male viewpoint without needing to seek its exact analogue among female writers.

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