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Women in Gothic Fiction and Their Critics

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A thesis submitted to the Department of English and Modern Languages in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Bachelor of Arts in English Literature

Department of English and Modern Languages

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Declaration

It is hereby declared that:

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Table of Contents

Abstract 2

Introduction 2

What Critics Say 5

Women and the Domestic 9

Women's Agency and the Gothic 14

Conclusion 18

References 20

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Women in Gothic Fiction and Their Critics

Abstract

Gothic novels have developed a reputation of featuring a certain stereotype of women to the extent that the "damsel in distress" is considered a Gothic trope. In this paper, I re-assess the fairness of that analysis by examining two Gothic classics- Emily Bronte's *Wuthering Heights* and Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*- and one that satirises and comments on Gothic fiction and its audience- Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey*. By discrediting women in classic Gothic fiction, critics of Gothic fiction also undermine the women who have written these pieces. In this thesis, I use feminist theory, psychoanalysis and narratology to reframe this idea. Delving into the narratives presented in the Gothic novels listed, one finds complex female characters who display strength and intelligence even within their significant confines. I show that women in Gothic novels push the boundaries of the domestic and challenge the idea often associated with the Gothic that women who venture out of doors suffer greatly for it.

Introduction

The Gothic genre was invented by a woman and therefore somewhat inevitably fell into the "women's work" category of fiction. This was not helped by the fact that novels, when they were first becoming popular, were largely read by women. Jane Austen touches on this in her satirical take on the genre, *Northanger Abbey,* where she discusses the perceived frivolity of

novel-reading that prompted one to cast aside their novel and say "Oh, it's just a novel" (Austen, 12) when asked what they were reading.

The first Gothic novel, Mary Shelley's Frankenstein, provides something of a blueprint for writers who came later and is, therefore, worth looking at again and again, as critics have done. However, some of the nuances that Shelley included have gotten lost in translation or perhaps been ignored for the sake of the larger point being made- the perils of trying to play God. There is, in fact, no shortage of female characters in Frankenstein and at least half of them do not fall into the tropes assigned to the Gothic, as I will later demonstrate. Emily Brontë's Wuthering Heights does serve as a solid example of a Gothic author who understands where Shelley was going with making her women the way she did and therefore, holds its own when arguing against critics who would devalue the genre as male-centric or anti-feminist.

The Gothic is most often compared to the horror genre as it contains elements commonly attributed to the latter (such as supernatural beings and characters with "unnatural" predispositions) and can be a tad outlandish. For this reason, it is often not taken seriously. However, from the genre's inception, critics noted the catharsis readers experience from a genre that takes emotions, actions and even plausibility to the extreme. The women in the works themselves were treated less kindly, both within the pages and outside of them. They suffer as much as, and sometimes on behalf of, their male counterparts. I argue that this is done purposefully by the authors, and not as an attempt at cheap thrills or gratification.

Furthermore, the depictions themselves prove a feminist point more than they hurt the movement in general, considering the fact that it not only takes away the women's choice to stand by their male counterparts for better or worse, it misses the point being made that anger towards other men often translates as violence towards women they associate with. As I will

argue in this paper, women characters in Gothic novels, and their representation, reflect the views of feminist theorists such as Mary Wollstonecraft, Virginia Woolf, and Simone de Beauvoir, who wrote about the relationship between women's agency and the domestic sphere. Wollstonecraft, in her seminal essay "A Vindication of the Rights of Women" argues that women should exercise their agency and calls for "representatives" (Wollstonecraft, 18) for women in government so they can do more than just be "arbitrarily governed" (18): a revolutionary idea for the time. Woolf, in a similar vein, asks that women have their own money and a "room of one's own" (Woolf, 4) so they can think and write as they please. Furthermore, she highlights the limitations women face in being limited to the domestic and that they need to "escape a little from the common sitting room" (10). Simone de Beauvoir famously opposes Sartre's reflections on freedom and choice, stating that women in certain positions "there is simply no possibility of choice" (de Beauvoir, 37). These feminist thinkers assert, therefore, that women ought to have agency whether they choose to stay inside or venture out because it must be simply that: a choice.

In the novels I have selected, female characters and their struggles are rendered with more subtlety than in modern texts. Moreover, what Shelley, Brontë, and even Austen have to say about their women and women in society as a whole is very largely propped up by what happens to their female characters and how. Therefore, narratological elements go a long way in demonstrating the authors' points. All three authors' women are thinking women. They ponder and play with words more than they actively rebel or venture out of the ordinary but one gets a more vivid picture of these women than initially advertised by analyzing how they think, what they say or even when they choose to say something. They connive (Austen's Isabella), pine (Brontë's Catherine and Shelley's Elizabeth), self-destruct (both Catherines, Morland and

Earnshaw) and sacrifice (all three heroines and most female secondary characters). They make choices, just like their male counterparts do, and are punished for it, but "holding a mirror up to nature" is not condoning it and the very placement of women who *do* and *think* in a world which is not happy about it is, in itself, feminist.

In this paper, I argue that we need to reevaluate the place of classic Gothic fiction in the literary-critical space, as it seems to me that the Gothic novel offers more than one-dimensional romantic interests and perfect victims. One can certainly find such stereotypes, most infamously in the writing of Ann Radcliffe, who suffers quite a bit at the hands of Jane Austen in *Northanger Abbey.* However, classic Gothic fiction is diverse enough for the "damsel-in-distress" trope to perhaps finally retire. Shelley, Brontë, and authors like them who choose the Gothic genre as their medium to reflect on the position of women in society should not be dismissed as authors of simplistic ghost stories, thrillers or romance. They don't subjugate their women and keep them within the limits that would have been acceptable in their time in order to be accepted as legitimate authors. This, in turn, earns them their positions as greats of their genres as their works stand the test of time. They have not set aside their position in society to make their art worthwhile or palatable but instead have used their art to comment on the inequalities they were very much aware of. This is the case this paper intends to make by drawing on the displays of agency and complexity in the novels selected.

What the Critics Say

In her satirical novel *Northanger Abbey,* Jane Austen offers a critique of the Gothic genre, and while her arguments are complex and multi-faceted, as I will discuss in a later section, she does lend some credence to the claim that the genre is inherently un- or even anti-feminist.

Austen, through her novel, sums up what many of her contemporary critics thought of the Gothic and even prepares the ground for future critics of the genre. To round out our understanding of the genre's reception, I turn in this section to critical papers and articles that highlight the dismissal of the Gothic novel; a dismissal that Austen discusses and, to an extent, echoes.

Austen is being sardonic in her description of the trivialization of the novel in general and the Gothic novel in particular, but many critics, especially of her time, would unironically adopt this view. In her overview of the Gothic genre, Irina Rata writes about its "controversial" (Rata, 1) nature and how it was once considered to have "ended in the nineteenth century" (1) and therefore not worth a second look. This view of the Gothic as frivolous indulgence could also be attributed to Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, which is considered the first true Gothic novel, and was first written for a competition among her and her writer friends on writing a good "ghost story" in a given amount of time. Thus, since its very inception, the Gothic genre has been associated with triviality; it is no surprise that these novels will be received as such, whether or not they have something real to offer. This trivialisation of the genre is taken a step further by modern critics, many of whom stopped seeing Austen's original critique as ironic and began to view it more as a failure of the genre itself.

Elizabeth Napier presents a nuanced view of this approach to the genre, suggesting that criticisms of the Gothic themselves lead the genre off a cliff, contributing to their narrative "instability" (Napier, 1) with their leaps of logic and feelings that are too consuming to be relatable. To this end, Napier argues that there is a self-fulfilling prophecy at work here: if the genre is not to be taken seriously, there is no requirement to have it follow any logic or to infuse it with nuance. This makes a certain amount of sense in that a genre seen as mere entertainment

would attract authors not looking to write anything serious and discourage those who would want the genre to do more.

In a similar vein, Jaqueline Howard, in her study of the technicalities of the Gothic also attributes the delayed discussions of the genre to its treatment as "inferior" in form and structure. While these more sympathetic critics contribute to multifaceted discussions, they unfailingly note the tendency of their fellow critics (J. M. S. Tompkin, for example, who regards the Gothic as "tenth-rate fiction" (Tompkin, 4) that can only contribute to understanding its better counterparts) to turn their noses up at the Gothic.

A new problem arises with modern critics. While older critics dismissed the genre as simply something written "by women for women" (Coda, 183), newer critics internalise these same trivialisations and refuse to look deeper at all. This stalls the branching out of research in a different direction, either by the assumption that an idea held for so long must be correct or through the marginalisation of critics who may hold differing opinions. Austen's digs at Ann Radcliffe's over-the-top narrative, while not nasty, contribute to a larger issue. If an entire genre has been dismissed as derivative and formulaic, why look further into it? In a genre characterised by rogues and damsels-in-distress who invite trouble simply by existing (74), as wryly pointed out by Austen as she points out how "adventures will not befall" (2) a young woman simply staying at home, who would go looking for feminism, especially since Austen's brand of feminism was shrouded in satire. For example, her naive heroine touts "teachability" (77) as the most desirable quality in a woman in *Northanger Abbey*. However, one must note that said heroine is only seventeen and turns out to be wrong about almost everything, including who her true friends are.

between her mother's wildness and her father's domestic sensibility. She falls for Heathcliff 's charms as they all have but in ruling his house with the iron hand that she does, she lessens his influence and so, breaks a chain created by her grandfather and uncle and carried forward by Heathcliff. Nell bears the burden of all those who live through traumatic experiences and as the only one left alive from where it all started, she is undoubtedly scarred. Given her role, is the least equipped to break social bounds in the first place. However, Brontë has her live vicariously through Cathy, Heathcliff and the Lintons by having her be the only female narrator in the novel and later taking Lockwood, who she tells the story to, along with her. She has the characters' implicit trust and some invisibility in her very domestic role. Therefore, she can speak for the Lintons and Earnshaws and provide an accurate account even after they are no longer there to corroborate. Therefore, the climax of their stories and the catharsis to follow comes from Nell, making her far more important a character than one may expect.

Mary Shelley's women venture out in much smaller ways than Brontë's but as she is Wollstonecraft's pupil, she leaves little doubt that her women are more than what society and even the characters in her own narrative assign them to be. Elizabeth is something of an archetype for later Gothic heroines but what many writers and critics miss about her lies in subtle but purposeful details. We get to see little of Elizabeth outside of what she means to Frankenstein and because he has declared her "mine to protect", she inevitably has to die (Shelley, 21). Elizabeth is not only domestic herself, but she represents all that "home" means to Victor. She is often associated with images of warmth and light- she is a "saintly soul" (23), the "brightest living being" (23) around; so for Victor's destruction to be complete, he has to lose her. However, the only time Elizabeth does venture out, both physically and metaphorically, she

shines. This is entirely deliberate on Shelley's part because there is only so much Elizabeth can do inside Victor's head.

When Elizabth stands up in an open court, it is in defense of another woman, and she is so eloquent that the gallery falls silent. Even Victor, who is preoccupied with his own role in the disaster, is caught up in her eloquence and courage. Her voice adds little to the actual outcome, but it highlights her ability to be more than what others see her as and what she could be if society simply allowed it. The woman she speaks for, Justine, is rudely dragged out of her prescribed role, rather than being allowed to choose to leave it. As the Frankensteins' housemaid, she is what all women of her class have to be: domestic but for a different household. Her domesticity is her means of earning a living, an arguably "unfeminine" endeavour. She is beautiful, gentle and kind, and therefore the perfect victim. However, in her final moments it is her strength that Shelley highlights.

The boldest and most unconventional of all the characters is Safie, a Turkish runaway who leaves behind her life for the love of a foreigner. Shelley makes clear through her testimonies that Safie would not be living her life as she wished but she would be comfortable had she stayed in Turkey and denounced her father. Instead, she follows her disgraced father and conspires with the man who would later become her husband to get herself out if she cannot save her father. She chooses domestic life with Felix but her journey towards it is anything but traditional or limited. This falls perfectly in line with Wollstonecraft's sarcastic declaration that she hopes women in general would excuse her consideration of them as "thinking beings" who can choose their paths for themselves (20).

Shelley's mother's influence is made clearer through Victor's mother's influence, for it is her painful death that spurs on his experiments. Therefore, despite having set off the dead mother

stereotype (and for good reason, as Victor describes her corpse as having had a "loving" look (23) despite having died a bloody and painful death), she has considerable impact on the narrative. Robert Walton's sister is perhaps the most interesting case because there is nothing to suggest she does anything unusual for a woman in her time and station but in her closeness with her brother, she is almost carried along with him. He treats her almost as he would a comrade, making her his confidante, and asking her things like "do you know what it's like" (1) to feel the Arctic wind knowing full well the answer.

Austen, who has been criticised before for being too domestic herself (Forsythe, 313) keeps her characters indoors as expected. However, this does not mean she keeps them within their bounds. Her main issue with the Gothic seems to be how unrealistic it is and therefore, her answer is to have her women push boundaries without damning themselves. Here, we may note that she uses narrative to differentiate between what she believes to be sensible rule-breaking and the kind of rule-breaking that sets women back. Hence, the key to properly understanding Austen is to see where her women end up. Catherine, an "unlikely" (1) candidate to have any adventures at all, is allowed to leave her provincial life to explore high society. She is chaperoned and conducts herself very well; she still gets to do something a woman of her station or with her looks would rarely get to do. Isabella operates very much within the domestic circle but she does so to achieve her own ends. She uses her charms and looks to seduce whoever she thinks will secure her a comfortable life, all the while flirting with the men she finds attractive. This behaviour is not glamourised but it is also made abundantly clear that she doesn't have her pick of men under any circumstances. A match with her is simply not profitable enough, her station is too low for that. Eleanor, on the other hand, is well positioned and the perfect lady (even Isabella remarks on how "spectacular" (53) she is) but even she is loath to do what she is

told. She falls in love with a family friend and defies her father to marry him. Austen's stance, therefore, is what it has always been: realistic rebellion.

The Gothic genre, therefore, has been challenging the roles of women since it first came to be and this spirit is not difficult to recognise in such pieces if only one digs a little deeper.

Women's Agency and the Gothic

The main issue with the "damsel in distress" trope is that it does not give the damsels in question any agency. Feminist philosopher Hilde Lindemann argues specifically for female agency through storytelling and the shaping of narratives. Through her idea of "counterstories", which are narratives that essentially go against the grain to make a point about society at large Lindeman argues that narrative itself can be a statement (Lindeman, 2). This principle can be seen applied in all three novels, though admittedly more subtly than Lindeman herself would perhaps have intended. The painting of the Gothic genre and Gothic stories as a whole with a male-centrist brush, therefore, makes it appear un-feminist. The characters in Brontë and Shelley's pieces, I would argue, are given as much agency by their authors as possible during times in which women writing was in itself a revolt.

Shelley, with the oldest novel of the bunch, arguably has to be the most traditional but she does not shy away from providing as much of a variation in her female characters as she possibly can for such a short novel. Giving Elizabeth her moment to speak her mind in defense of Justine when Victor could have done it just as easily speaks to Shelley's absolute refusal to let her heroine only be a romantic stereotype. Elizabeth is sensible and level-headed, always addressing her letters "dear Victor" (37), even when he spurns her. Victor only thinks of her when he knows he has made a grave mistake and wishes to go back. Elizabeth, in this way,

stands in for Victor 's superego (the part of the human psyche that internalises social norms) and therefore, her speech becomes all the more essential for readers to see her as a fully formed individual. It is, in fact, set up quite neatly that this is what she will be when Victor's dying mother asks that she "supply [her] place" to the Frankenstein children not yet grown (22). Victor sees Elizabeth do this with grace and internalises it to the extent that whenever he makes a mistake (creating the monster for example), he thinks of Elizabeth and at one point, even sees "death's hue" upon her because of her proximity to him (55).

Safie, being the most unconventional of the lot, has the most agency to exercise, especially since her "sweet foreigner" (122)status grants her freedoms local women wouldn 't have. Her letters, the "feminist core" (Zanana,1) of the novel, are also the only form of proof any of the narrators have, granting her a crucial bit of power. This power through testimonial is tied to Walton's sister as well, because after Safie, she is the only one with written corroboration of the event, made even more potent by the fact that Robert deeply cares to let her know its legitimacy. Even Justine, who is doomed from the start, displays a great amount of dignity right up to the moment she is hanged. This could have easily been Shelley's moment to display the histrionics that Gothic novels would later be known for but this would cheapen Justine 's tragedy and Shelley clearly has no interest in that.

True to form, Brontë's women, Cathy in particular, are a lot more obvious in asserting their agency. Cathy takes pride in her agency, "boasting" about placing her own body between Heathcliff and her brother's abuse. Her id is just as strong as Heathcliff's and exercised almost as often, which is likely why the characters feel so strongly about each other in the first place. Furthermore, it is made clear that Cathy "freely" (118) chooses to marry Linton because she and her father both wish it, a clear reversal of gender roles, painting Cathy as the one with final say

in the relationship. Isabella also asserts her agency by both running away with Heathcliff and running away from him. Her choices lead her astray, but Brontë allows her to make those choices for herself, for better or for worse, holding her to the same standards to which she holds her men. Nell, as the only working-class woman in the novel, might be expected to have the least amount of agency. However, having raised Cathy and Heathcliff, she is granted many licenses by people who are several social classes above her. For example, while discussing Cathy's love for two men, she tells her mistress outright that she is going to hell (120). She provides the superego to the two main characters' ids, holding up the ideology of those around her, but this does not mean she minces her words much more than Cathy herself would even if it is to chastise rather than empower.

The younger Cathy, on the other hand, almost *has to* exercise her agency as the only woman left alive besides Nell. With a husband who is passive and father-in-law who is depressed and prone to rage, she is forced to take control of her household. Her habit of taking control has reached such an extent by the time the readers meet her that she snaps at a man genuinely offering help, telling him "I can get it myself" (5). Brontë, through her characters, appears to speak to the same sentiment that Simone de Beauvoir would voice much later, which both decries the tendency to restrict women and reprimands them should they lack initiative or competence in the same breath. This argument forms a part of her demonstration of "othering" women while seeing men as "the absolute" (Joseph).

While Austen is moderate in her position, she is mostly in agreement with the Gothic authors when it comes to agency. Her characters, like those of Shelley and Bronte, go out of their way to exercise what agency they have and sometimes even snatch it from men when necessary. Catherine Morland, although "no heroine" (1) is also no pushover. She wishes to fit in, first with

Isabella and later with the Tilneys, but upon being bullied or spoken to harshly, she shows an impressive degree of self-possession by pushing back, especially for one so young and sheltered. Eleanor, although more collected and diplomatic in her approach, does something similar. She appeases her father when she can, especially when he asks her to avoid her mother 's bedroom, but in more pertinent decisions like who she loves, she stands her ground. Granted, she must elope and deceive in order to do this, but her father bends to her will and does not disown her.

Isabella, on the other hand, is almost impulsive with her agency. She flirts openly with General Tilney while engaged to James Morland. Even Catherine admits that her brother is not particularly handsome so the implication is that Isabella assumed he would not leave her no matter what she did. Of course, the implication could also be that she feels trapped by family pressure to marry rich (Isabella and her mother share a look when the minuscule allowance for the couple is revealed) and therefore uses what power she does have to feel desired. Whichever theory one subscribes to, there is no denying that Isabella uses her agency and at the same time exposes the social need for women to have more. Austen's women, therefore, align with those of Shelley and Brontë' in this respect, even if they stay true to their author's distaste for the dramatic. To claim, therefore, that women in Gothic classics lack agency deprives of credit the authors of these early works who were quite clearly advocating for a more equal playing field.

Conclusion

Both Mary Shelly and Emily Brontë crafted their female characters with the same forethought and care as they gave to their male counterparts. Jane Austen's novel, through its commentary, pinpoints and reflects some of the very elements the two authors adapt using a humorous and realistic lens while also criticising certain aspects of the Gothic.

As I have tried to demonstrate, there is significant scope for further research into women in the Gothic, specifically the classic Gothic novel. There are works noted in this paper that touch on the subtly feminist nature of the classic Gothic and I have confidence that delving deeper will reveal more scholarship that highlights this point. Considering the popularity of the Gothic genre, it is not unlikely that should this perspective be buried under works which continue to deem Gothic literature less than, the condescension around the genre will continue to exist.

This paper was intended to encourage the viewing of the Gothic genre in a different light and center female characters who get overlooked in favour of their male counterparts, even by feminist critics. The authors I have highlighted here served to not only strengthen my argument but inform the views I myself started out with. Therefore, it appears to me even more imperative than ever that the women of classic Gothic- characters and authors alike- are not overlooked or trivialised.

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