

Terror, Horror and Gothic in “*Wuthering Heights*”

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Abstract:

Wuthering Heights is now considered a classic of English literature, but contemporaneous reviews were polarized. It is characterized by an atmosphere of mystery and horror and having a pseudo-medieval setting. It moves in a tragic circle from relative peace and harmony to violence, destruction and intense suffering, and finally back into peace and harmony again. It is a work of extreme contrasts set in the wild moorland of Yorkshire, which is appropriate to the wild passions it describes between the two main characters, Cathy and Heathcliff.

Keywords: Terror, Horror, Gothic and Supernatural

Introduction

Emily Brontë's (1818-1848) *Wuthering Heights*, written under a pseudonym Ellis Bell in 1847, is considered one of the most perplexing novels of the Victorian era. Born and raised in West Yorkshire, mostly by their father due to their mother's early death, all three Brontë sisters, Charlotte, Emily and Anne, lived fairly secluded lives finding the company in their imaginations and each other. Their marginalization and relative isolation limited their experiences with the society and gave rise to desires and needs that fuel their creativity in writing. As highly educated introverts of poor wealth, they observed people and their personalities to create now timeless works of English literature. Emily Brontë's only novel *Wuthering Heights* was also published in 1847. It is a novel which contains a degree of emotional force and sophisticated narrative structure not seen previously in the history of the English novel. It is highly imaginative work of passion and hate set on the Yorkshire moors. *Wuthering Heights* is a cyclical novel in structure.

Terror, Horror and Gothic

“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 [...] and where lies the great difference between horror and terror but in the uncertainty and obscurity, that accompany the first, respecting the dreaded evil?”(1)

Radcliffe's *'On the Supernatural in Poetry'*. The distinction is best borne out by the alternative versions of the line in Coleridge's *'Christabel'*, Part I, when the body of Geraldine undressed is described. What we read today is that Geraldine's 'bosom and half her side' were *'A sight to dream of, not to tell'*. This is terror, and On the other hand ,it was read by Byron to Shelley which *'awakened'* the *'faculties'* of the latter .The alternative version, which Hazlitt is said to have preferred, is *'Hideous, deformed, and pale of hue'*. This is horror, which leaves nothing to the imagination. **"Wuthering Heights"** invoke terror and horror, and it is to be seen in what ways they do so.

Emily Bronte managed to make her only novel, *Wuthering Heights*, a Gothic one by creating wild and dark characters, creepy environment, uncanny plots and supernatural scenes, which are important elements in most Gothic novels. Gothic narrative novel involves the concepts of paranoia, the barbaric, and the taboo! Gothic fiction invariably involves a theme of persecution, often ambiguously rendered, with the victim of persecution being transformed into a persecutor, or vice versa. An undercurrent of insanity is a staple of any Gothic plot, with ambition or vengeance driving at least one character to the brink of madness.(Longmans ,1980,15).

Wuthering Heights

The first Gothic motif in *Wuthering Heights* is the eerie house itself and its master with the dark eyes. As pointed out by Sheila Smith, from his initial appearance, Heathcliff is associated with Satan

And at the end of it to be flighted to death!" he said..... though it's as dark almost as if it came from the devil. (29).

Nelly later admits to feeling that he 'possessed of something diabolical'. (51) The infatuated Isabella, who elopes with him, writes to Nelly after their honeymoon, asking whether he is mad, and, if not whether he is a devil. Eventually, Heathcliff seems to have supernatural powers of control.

Lockwood's entry into the house is followed by an encounter which brings to mind another Gothic motif: *the vampire*. Lying in the oak closet, Lockwood is disturbed by the noise made by the branch of a fir tree on the lattice:

Going by Radcliffe's distinction, this seems to be horror, particularly tactile horror with the *'little, ice-cold hand'*. However, the Gothic motif is introduced only to be given an unexpected twist. As Paula M. Krebs points out, rather than the ghost of Catherine, it is Lockwood who frightens us. We have previously seen his behavior with young Cathy which

Krebs describes as *'inappropriately, ridiculously courteous.'* (47) This makes his self-confessed cruelty to the child-ghost all the more shocking:

Terror made me cruel.....
.....
Grip, almost maddening me with fear.

It is the ghost which bleeds, not its purported human victim. To quote Krebs again, 'The ghost allows for human cruelty, which is substantially more dangerous than a moaning dead girl outside a window.' And this blood-stained horror is inflicted on the ghost by a human being! The pathos is intensified by Heathcliff's reaction, which allies him with the unfortunate paranormal being without:

"Come in! come in!" he sobbed. "Cathy, do come, Oh do – once more! Oh! My heart's darling, hear me this time – Catherine, at last!" (23; emphasis authors)

The ghost of Catherine, who harries Heathcliff and terrifies Lockwood. Not only by the shades of Heathcliff and Catherine (or Laurence Olivier and Merle Oberon) who set off toward Penistone Crag.

Lockwood tries to get rid of the ghost by slitting its wrists, a method most commonly associated with suicide, not assault. Lockwood tries to shut out this bleeding girl/woman/self by barricading the window with books, but her wailing continues to haunt him; books cannot block out this passion. And what Lockwood cannot block out with books isn't a girl at all; it is a ghost, which is something he, a good, middle-class English gentleman not living in a Horace Walpole novel, should never have seen. In order to understand what he had experienced, Lockwood must turn to Nelly, his connection to the Heights and the novel's connection between folklore and fiction. (48)

At the same time, Catherine is a revenant at this point. Earlier, Heathcliff behaves like a revenant when, after betraying her love, Catherine unleashes a demon she cannot control:

I want you to be aware that
.....your sister-in-law's secret: I
swear I'll make the most of it. (88)

At its core, Bronte's purposefully built to remind the reader *between love and hate, terror and the horrors* we can inflict on each other in the name of devotion. The two main characters of the novel, *Catherine and Heathcliff*, love each other with such passion that it eventually destroys them both, along with many of the people closest to them.

Horror relies on creating discomfort, and although *Wuthering Heights* features physical violence and only a passing nod to spirits and ghosts, the vulnerability that Catherine and Heathcliff's love creates leads to such intense emotional violence that it transcends

generations. Heathcliff's obsession with Catherine eventually drives him to marry another woman out of spite, then neglect her and the son she bears him. He kidnaps Catherine's daughter, forces her to marry his son under the pretense of securing more land as his own, and then confines Catherine's daughter to a life of mistreatment and psychological abuse. The reader is led to understand that Heathcliff's brutality originates from his intense adoration of Catherine and if that is not a message meant to disquiet the audience.

By emphasizing the abiding adoration between Heathcliff and Catherine, Brontë takes on a solid convention of horror, where the benign is revealed to be malevolent. She cautions the reader to beware of how love can skew our realities and our natures. Heathcliff wasn't always a savage brute who took joy in the psychological warfare of maltreatment, and Catherine wasn't always a narcissistic manipulator. Both transformed into their more grotesque selves after they became intensely connected, both emotionally and physically, to one another. And as Brontë so clearly details throughout her novel, it was Catherine and Heathcliff's love that eventually manifested their own private hell.

Conclusion

One is tempted to relate the two novels to two different traditions of the Gothic in English literature. Emily Bronte is a prime example of the Gothic genre. As stated above, the presence of the supernatural, isolated settings, and the drama surrounding the characters' entanglements are all present within the novel. *Wuthering Heights*, which leaves the paranormal hovering on the threshold between reality and fantasy, but never doubts or debunks it, seems to belong to the school of Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* and Matthew Gregory Lewis's *The Monk*. A trend established and championed by the novels of Mrs. Ann Radcliffe. However, with regard to terror and horror, Emily Brontë's novel has more of the former. The horror, when it comes, is given a novel twist, as seen in Lockwood's reaction to Catherine's ghost. Thus it is conventional in progressing from suggestive terror to explicit horror.

Reference

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