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HAUNTED HEROINES: AN EXAMINATION OF THE COMPLICATION OF THE GOTHIC HEROINE

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Haunted Heroines: An Examination of the Complication of the Gothic Heroine

Gothic Origins

Since their birth in 1764, the Gothic and its heroines have undergone significant evolution. Officially originating with Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* (1764) and solidifying through the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in such popular works as Ann Radcliffe's *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794) and Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818), the Gothic heroine has been a key, though not always central, figure in the genre. Although the readership of the Gothic novel was largely feminine, the corresponding female protagonists were not always as complex as their male counterparts, or as interesting as the plots that happened to them. Two authors in particular, Jane Austen in her 1817 satire *Northanger Abbey* and Charlotte Brontë in her Victorian bildungsroman *Jane Eyre* (1847), trouble Walpole's original, simplistic model of the Gothic heroine. They will later render the figure more realistic and complex by deepening their internal lives, while at the same time making significant innovations in the genre of the Gothic, stretching it to the bounds of its capabilities to explore the human psyche.

The origins of the Gothic genre[1] stem in part from an eighteenth-century pushback against Enlightenment classicalism and the rigid aesthetic forms that emerged from it. The

[1] There are, of course, different looks that the Gothic takes on based on nationality The German Gothic, for example, has a slightly different set of origins and themes it takes up, tending to be even darker and grimmer than the English. However, this paper will focus on the specifics of the heroine figure within the English Gothic.

classical, concerned with regularity, reason, linearity, and clarity, was the dominant aesthetic of the culture. In contrast, Gothic themes of monstrosity, perversion, ruin, and wild emotion were out of vogue, the very term "gothic" historically meaning "not Roman." The Gothic was illogical, featuring folkloric creatures from pre-Enlightenment stories, supernatural occurrences that could not be explained by empirical science, and a lean toward the hyper-sentimental. This countercultural aesthetic form and the artists who developed it attracted significant criticism that echoed well into the nineteenth century and beyond; Gothic stories even now carry a connotation of the forbidden. The first Gothic novel, Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto*, is uniquely politically situated in this historical landscape. Walpole was the son of noted Whig politician Robert Walpole, Horace himself being likewise highly progressive. Nick Groom, in his Introduction to the Oxford World's Classics edition of *Otranto*, notes the ways in which the early English Gothic "offered a Whiggish alternative to Tory neoclassicism," and "celebrated English history as progressive, Protestant, and parliamentarian" (xv).

The rise of the Gothic occurred in the wake of that of the novel, fictional narratives becoming less fantastical and moving closer to realism. Paired with the heightened emotion of the persisting supernatural elements, the achieved effect of the Gothic novel on the reader was one of simultaneous realism and fantasy, leading to a sense of heightened suspense, unease, and fear that its popular audience found delicious.

The Gothic was also, in part, an artistic response to the building anxieties of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Britain, observing the bloodbath of the French Revolution across the English Channel, was casting a wary eye on its own political systems. The

epistemological constructions of the Enlightenment and the religious shifts of the Protestant Reformation rumbled the foundations of the Church. As artfully laid out by Fred Botting in his theory primer, *Gothic*,

> Enlightenment rationalism displaced religion as the authoritative mode of explaining the universe and altered conceptions between individuals and natural, supernatural, and social worlds. Gothic works and their disturbing ambivalence can thus be seen as effects of fear and anxiety, as attempts to account for or deal with the uncertainty of these shifts. (22)

Thus, the Gothic novel emerges in a world of tumult, one that was struggling to deal with its increasingly unsettled society. These anxieties sharpen in the mid-nineteenth century, with the Industrial Revolution in full swing and the subsequent liquification of the social strata disturbing the Victorian notion of self. The rapidly shifting economic landscape meant that one's social status at birth no longer dictated one's place for the rest of one's life—wealth and status could suddenly and drastically change within a matter of months. Many Victorian authors turned to the Gothic mode to render those anxieties, exemplified in such famous stories as Dickens' *Bleak House* (1852) and Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890).

Published in 1764, Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* provides the framework for which the genre of the Gothic novel rests. It tells of the fall of the lineage of Manfred, the prince of Otranto, as a new generation rises from mysterious obscured families. The heroine of the novel—the first "official" Gothic heroine—is Isabella, the betrothed of Manfred's sickly son Conrad, who within the novel's first two pages is "dashed to pieces, and almost buried under an enormous helmet, an hundred times more large than any casque ever made for human being, and shaded with a proportionable quantity of black feathers" (18). As a result, Isabella is romantically (read: sexually) pursued by her would-be father-in-law Manfred, who is already

married. Within the first chapter of *Otranto*, one of the most fundamental problems facing a Gothic heroine is born: being pursued by an older, quasi-related man with unclear, likely insidious intentions. The Gothic underpinning here is the inclination of the Gothic to twist (or to highlight the preexisting twistedness) of classical institutions such as arranged marriages and the drive to preserve family lineages at all costs. This is partly in the service of the goal of heightened sentiment, of the augmentation of a semi-realistic scenario by bringing it about via supernatural events such as the falling of a mysterious and impossibly large helmet. The truth of the situation, however, remains that this would not have been an entirely unrecognizable scenario. Walpole, in his "Whiggish" rebellion against "Tory neoclassicism," highlights the disturbing absurdity of this ancient plight of young noble women.

Because she is the first in the lineage of Gothic heroines, it is fundamental to examine Isabella's defining traits, as they become the blueprint for subsequent heroines. She is the daughter of a neighboring noble, the marquis of Vicenza, but was raised at Otranto, never familiar with her parents. She is beautiful, naturally curious, easily overcome with emotion, and plagued with tragedy that has the effect of making her kinder than she already was. While a first-time reader may assume that Isabella is a flat, one-dimensional character, Avril Horner points out in his entry in *The Handbook to Gothic Literature* that she "demonstrates a passive courage in the face of danger" (119). The most key aspect to Walpole's construction of the first Gothic heroine is its naturalization. Isabella's main traits are ones that are inherent to her, not learned. She is beautiful but unaware of it, or at the very least immensely humble and unwilling to admit her beauty. She is sentimental, her pity and gentleness easily inspired. She is set apart from other women, played against the other women in *Otranto,* naturally placed on a higher level of

goodness than Manfred's daughter Matilda by virtue of her virtue. She is the object of the perverted sexual desire of older men, above all representing the innocence and purity that the men are themselves negations of.

There is undoubtedly potential for Walpole to achieve something interesting in *Otranto* with a feminist angle, but Isabella remains a relatively simple and passive figure, *Otranto* having other aims than rendering a full, complex portrait of the Gothic feminine. The intelligence of *Otranto* lies in its Gothic foundational work, using character archetypes that draw from the Romances preceding the novel: the chivalric young hero, the noble lady, the twisted father, et cetera. Walpole's characters are little more than Romance stock figures put into a new, Gothic situation. It was up to later authors to innovate those characters to follow Walpole's innovation of genre.

The ways that Walpole does set up the foundation for the figure of the Gothic heroine is by establishing some of the machinery of the Gothic itself. One of the major themes that the Gothic deals with is that of "the past encroaching somehow on the present," in the words of Jamieson Ridenhour in his article, "'In That Boney Light:' The Bakhtinian Gothic of *Our Mutual Friend*" (164). The Gothic, in its counter-cultural pushback against the "modern" Enlightenment model of the universe, begs the question, "what if the ancient refused to die?" This question lies at the very heart of the Gothic and gives rise to such elements as the undead (beings who transgress the boundary of life and death), ancient monasteries and castles fallen to ruin (decaying artifacts of the past that entomb secrets long buried), and revived folk mythology (including beasts such as werewolves and vampires that tradition refuses to allow to be explained

away by empirical evidence). Walpole's very act of drawing elements from the genre of the Romance can be seen as the past threatening the present, resurrecting the archetypes and fantastic elements of an older genre.

Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey*

For a more complicated use of character, one need look no further than Jane Austen. Her infamous wit and incisive insight on the personalities and systemic structures of the Regency era paired with the Gothic mode result in *Northanger Abbey* (1817), one of the most prominent examples of both the Gothic's critiques and its successes. *Northanger Abbey* follows the unremarkable young Catherine Morland as she embarks on her first venture into society on a trip to Bath, where she is introduced by her new friend, Isabella Thorpe,[2] to Gothic novels for the first time—namely Ann Radcliffe's popular 1794 novel *The Mysteries of Udolpho*. She is then brought by her love interest Henry Tilney to his family home, the titular Northanger Abbey, where Catherine expects to experience everything that her new Gothic novel has told her happens in old abbeys with the mysterious families that live there. Much to her chagrin, they do not. Northanger turns out to be a normal home, recently renovated and lacking the ancient feel Catherine was hoping for, and the reader gets to poke fun at Catherine for getting so swept up in the whirlwinds of Gothic sensibility.

[2] Note Austen's name choice here: the same name for Catherine's new friend who introduces her to the Gothic novel as Walpole's original heroine.

But Austen doesn't simply make fun of silly Catherine for her fandom of Gothic novels by characterizing her as flat and ridiculous. Catherine is decidedly dimensional, and the reader feels they can empathize with her as their protagonist. She feels awkward at parties where she doesn't know anyone, the narration revealing that "when [she] at last arrived in the tea-room, she felt yet more the awkwardness of having no party to join, no acquaintance to claim, no gentleman to assist them. —They saw nothing of Mr. Allen; and after looking about them in vain for a more eligible situation, were obliged to sit down at the end of a table, at which a large party were already placed, without having any thing to do there, or any body to speak to, except each other" (40). She is smart but not exceedingly clever, able to hold her own in conversation but not easily outwitting her opponent like some of Austen's other protagonists. The most remarkable thing about Catherine, though, is her un-remarkableness. Austen distinctly excludes Catherine from the category of "heroine" in the novel's opening line, "No one who had ever seen Catherine Morland in her infancy, would have supposed her born to be an heroine" (4). Through the entirety of the first chapter, Austen notes her awkwardness, her early unattractiveness, her lack of quick wit, and inclination towards "boy's plays" like cricket (6).

She is not naturally heroic, but one of Austen's most significant innovations in the Gothic genre here is that she makes Catherine a heroine later in the chapter. Starting with the sentimental poetry Catherine reads in her late adolescence and continuing with the opportunity to meet charming young men with carefully concealed parentage in Bath, Austen puts Catherine "in training for a heroine," boldly positing that heroines can be created rather than simply born (14). This removes the wall between "regular" women and Gothic heroines, implying that there need not always be a naturalized peculiarity about a woman that makes her a heroine; they can be

trained from "normal," unremarkable girls. Austen completely disturbs Walpole's naturalized quality of the heroine by adamantly refusing to give Catherine those inherent qualities. Thus Austen moves the heroine from the extraordinary to the ordinary.

Another innovation that Austen brings to the Gothic novel in *Northanger Abbey* is her clever displaying of the way the Gothic works in "real time." In her satirizing of the Gothic novel and its heroine, Austen sets up the reader to be able to see what Catherine sees in her Gothic environment. Though Catherine is wrong about the Gothic nature of Northanger Abbey and the Tilneys, the reader can't ignore the fact that Austen sets Catherine up to believe otherwise, then swiftly takes the wind out of her sails. Like when Catherine surveys her guest-apartment at the Abbey in Chapter VI of Volume II:

> …her eye suddenly fell on a large high chest, standing back in a deep recess on one side of the fire-place. The sight of it made her start; and, forgetting every thing else, she stood gazing on it in motionless wonder, while these thoughts crossed her:—
>
> "This is strange indeed! I did not expect such a sight as this! — An immense heavy chest! — What can it hold? — Why should it be placed here? — Pushed back too, as if meant to be out of sight! — I will look into it — cost me what it may, I will look into it — and directly too — by day-light. — If I stay till evening my candle may go out." She advanced and examined it closely: it was of cedar, curiously inlaid with some darker wood, and raised, about a foot from the ground, on a carved stand of the same. The lock was silver, though tarnished from age; at each end were the imperfect remains of handles also of silver, broken perhaps prematurely by some strange violence; and, on the centre of the lid, was a mysterious cypher, in the same metal. …
>
> Her fearful curiosity was every moment growing greater; and seizing, with trembling hands, the hasp of the lock, she resolved at all hazards to satisfy herself

> at least as to its contents. With difficulty, for something seemed to resist her efforts, she raised the lid a few inches; but at that moment a sudden knocking at the door of the room made her, starting, quit her hold, and the lid closed with alarming violence. …One moment surely might be spared; and, so desperate should be the exertion of her strength, that, unless secured by supernatural means, the lid in one moment should be thrown back. With this spirit she sprang forward, and her confidence did not deceive her. Her resolute effort threw back the lid, and gave to her astonished eyes the view of a white cotton [bedsheet], properly folded, reposing at one end of the chest in undisputed possession! (333-334)

Austen uses in this passage numerous elements of unmistakably Gothic machinery to draw Catherine down the path of assuming there is something special and spooky about the chest: its tucked-away location in the room, the cedar wood, matching stand, and silver hardware suggesting age and value, the cryptic cypher on the lid, the "supernatural means" that seem to want to keep the chest closed. Though it is revealed to be nothing more than a linen chest, the reader can't fault Catherine for her assumption otherwise. In this and other scenes that take place at Northanger, Austen exposes the Gothic machinery at work and punctures their effects like a balloon, the reader experiencing a degree of disappointment along with Catherine. This too results in the figure of the heroine being drawn closer to the reader, disturbing and complicating Walpole's naturalized, removed model.

Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*

Thirty years after the publication of *Northanger Abbey*, Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* was published under the pseudonym "Currer Bell." It is a bildungsroman, a novel telling of the early life and upbringing of its titular character, notable in the genre not only for its Gothic mode but

its female lead. It takes the reader through Jane's abusive childhood at Gateshead Hall, with her domineering aunt, Mrs. Reed, and her bullying cousins, to her education at the underfunded Lowood Institution, to her position as a governess for the ward of Edward Rochester, the brooding master of Thornfield Hall. The narration reveals Jane's early wild emotion and the process of her maturing, and her tumultuous romance with Mr. Rochester as they spar with their wits and grapple with his betrayal of her trust, all pulled through the established Gothic devices but made more complex in the hands of Brontë.

Perhaps one of the most recognizable qualities of *Jane Eyre* is its first-person familiar style of narration. The story is told by Jane herself, remembering moments from her personal history and drawing from her own memories. She speaks as if the reader is her own companion (the iconic line "Reader, I married him" being a perfect example), and editorializing as though she is fully aware of how she may be critiqued upon her story's reception ("Anybody may blame me who likes, when I add further that…") (676, 160). This hyper-familiar mode of narration works doubly to further Austen's project of drawing the reader and the heroine closer to each other, blurring the boundary lines of the figure of the Gothic heroine, and "passing the pen" to the heroine herself. Of course, this is not the first time that the reader is allowed access to the thoughts of the heroine; even in the excerpted passage above from *Northanger Abbey*, Catherine's thoughts about the mysterious chest in her room are featured. However, Brontë is doing more than just narrating Jane's thoughts for her—the entire story is pulled not only through Jane's perspective, but through her very experience. When Jane recounts being punished by Mrs. Reed by being locked in the "red-room" in which her husband (Jane's biological uncle) died, she narrates both her past and present selves:

> Superstition was with me at that moment; but it was not yet her hour for complete victory: my blood was still warm; the mood of the revolted slave was still bracing me with its bitter vigour; I had to stem a rapid rush of retrospective thought before I quailed to the dismal present.
>
> All John Reed's violent tyrannies, all his sisters' proud indifference, all his mother's aversion, all the servants' partiality, turned up in my disturbed mind like a dark deposit in a turbid well. Why was I always suffering, always brow-beaten, always accused, for ever condemned? …
>
> What a consternation of soul was mine that dreary afternoon! How all my brain was in tumult, and all my heart in insurrection! Yet in what darkness, what dense ignorance, was the mental battle fought! I could not answer the ceaseless inward question—*why* I thus suffered; now, at the distance of—I will not say how many years, I see it clearly. (15, 16).

The reader sees child-Jane through adult-Jane's eyes and memory, her narration folding both her experience and her reflection of that experience into one narrative process. The entire narrative is dependent upon Jane and her mind. This is far more internal access than the readers of Gothic novels have thus been allowed to their heroines, and furthermore entails the assumption that Jane is a real, living person, possessing real memories and experiences that she relates to her audience. Not only has Brontë given her heroine the pen, but she has also given her a realism, a life, that had since been unprecedented in the history of the Gothic heroine.

Though she is more complex and realistic than her predecessors, Jane Eyre herself still fits the primary characterizations of the Gothic heroine. She is a penniless orphan, both parents having died when she was too young to remember them, setting her up both for an exciting reveal of familial connection towards the end of the novel, and for the bildungsroman coming-of-age genre in her societal positioning as a sort of "blank slate." She is, famously, "poor, obscure, plain, and little," classically not traits of Walpole's naturalized heroine, but a furthering of

Austen's project of a more ordinary one (378). She is passionate, spending much of the novel wrestling with the strength of her sentiment. Brontë additionally compounds Austen's innovations in *Northanger Abbey* by combining the realism of her heroine with a profoundly Gothic environment. Thornfield Hall in particular is the Gothic manor Catherine longed for; Jane narrates,

> …the large front chambers I thought especially grand; and some of the third story rooms, though dark and low, were interesting from their air of antiquity. The furniture once appropriated to the lower apartments had from time to time been removed here, as fashions changed: and the imperfect light entering by their narrow casements showed bedsteads of a hundred years old; chests in oak or walnut, looking, with their strange carvings of palm branches and cherubs' heads, like types of the Hebrew ark; rows of venerable chairs, high-backed and narrow; stools still more antiquated, on whose cushioned tops were yet apparent traces of half-effaced embroideries, wrought by fingers that for two generations had been coffin-dust. All these relics have to the third story of Thornfield Hall the aspect of a home of the past: a shrine of memory. I liked the hush, the gloom, the quaintness of these retreats in the day; but I by no means coveted a night's repose on one of those wide and heavy beds: shut in, some of them with doors of oak; shaded, others with wrought old English hangings crusted with thick work, portraying effigies of strange flowers, and stranger birds, and strangest human beings,—all of which would have looked strange, indeed, by the pallid gleam of moonlight. (154-155)

Thornfield also features its very own "ghost," whom Jane sometimes hears laughing in the third-floor chambers and whom the staff all insist is one of their own, more mentally unstable, members.

Brontë in *Jane Eyre* puts her "ordinary" heroine into Gothic settings and situations like Austen does hers in *Northanger Abbey*, but Brontë gives Jane (and the reader) the satisfaction of

it being true. The most significant evolution of this combination of the realistic heroine and her Gothic environment is Jane's recounting to Rochester on the morning of their wedding the dark figure she saw in her room the previous night. She describes to him how "a form emerged from the closet," "a woman, tall and large, with thick and dark hair hanging long down her back," who takes Jane's wedding veil from the closet, puts it on, and looks at Jane in the mirror before tearing the veil in two and putting a candle right up to Jane's face and blowing it out under her eyes (423-425). There is a significant amount of innovation in this scene both for the heroine and for the Gothic as a genre, the first being that this moment is told not directly to the reader, as the red-room memory is in Chapter Two. Jane's narration of this memory is veiled through another: the conversation about that night with Rochester the next morning. Jane here shields her reader from a moment that was so intensely frightful that she herself "became insensible from terror" (425). This displays a carefulness of narration that gives the effect of Jane's concern for her reader, further heightening the sense of the bond between them, while preserving the Gothic terror of the moment—indeed, this is one of the novel's most chilling scenes, further heightened by its position in the dialogue's past.

The other hugely significant element of this scene is Brontë's introduction of the Gothic double. The woman who emerges from the closet and tears Jane's wedding veil is revealed to be Bertha Mason, the wife of Mr. Rochester who has been locked in the third-floor chambers for years. Bertha in countless ways serves as Jane's dark double, feminist theorists Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar describing her as Jane's "own secret self" (348). Jane and Bertha are paralleled and contrasted in their dispositions, their domesticity and wildness, even their statures, as a device that reveals Jane's suppressed emotions, desires, and fears. This is a massive leap in

the evolution of the heroine, and one that preserves its Gothic bend in its sense of uncanniness. Brontë catapults the heroine into the realm of the psychological, using this figure of the double to, as Botting writes, “represent a limit that cannot be overcome, the representation of an internal and irreparable division in the individual psyche” (85). Jane never makes this connection for her reader, indicating that this psychic split is one that she herself cannot overcome, but is one that the critical reader sees happening independent of Jane’s narration. Brontë uses the vehicle of the Gothic, and specifically the uncanny double, to render the Victorian anxiety of a lack of stable sense of selfhood, supported on the shoulders of the Gothic heroine, now sturdy enough to carry such complexity.

Conclusion

Austen and Brontë disturb and complicate Walpole’s naturalized, simplistic model of the Gothic heroine in their dissolving of the bounds between the heroine and the reader, their exposing of the Gothic machinery and how it works on the heroine, and by giving them complexity that pushes even the boundaries of their own narration. They turn the Gothic heroine from a figure that is a simple descendent of another stock figure to one that can be used to examine the breakdown of the self that haunted the Victorian era. This does the apologetic rhetorical work of advocating for the largely feminine readership of the Gothic novel, preserving the heightened sentimentality and thrill of the story and using it to examine the validity of the way it operates and to tease apart underlying anxieties of selfhood.

Appendix

Presented at Honors Symposium May 21st, 2022

The battle between the rational and the irrational is a central tension in the human experience. The push and pull between what we feel and what we know, what we've experienced and how to make sense of it, is an engine that drives much of human creativity, innovation, and intellectual evolution. Furthering this tension is the experience of the individual and where it aligns with that of the collective. The connections drawn between the two create webs, frameworks of understanding that help us to situate our individual experience within the larger human one. We use these rational frameworks to help us understand the things that confuse us, delight us, further us, and frighten us. Our panel will examine three different rational frameworks, each addressing and operating within our respective fields of study. We will analyze how those frameworks are created, how they work, and where they are limited.

My field is that of English literature, specifically British literature of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. While the literary act of storytelling is itself a type of framework that we use to make sense of our world, there are myriad smaller frameworks within literature that can be used to further pick apart the experiences created within it. Some popular schools of literary frameworks are queer theory, Marxist theory, and psychoanalytical theory. These theoretical frameworks provide methods of analysis that allow readers to critically examine literary worlds and what they mean for our own experience. One more niche school of theory, the one that I have researched in over the past year, is Gothic theory.

Before we get into Gothic theory, however, let's start by clarifying what the field of literature means by "Gothic." The Gothic is not simply "horror," though the element of fear is certainly one of the moving parts of the Gothic machine. Historically, the term "gothic" came from the "barbaric" tribes and clans outside of the Roman empire during its height and expansion. "Gothic" came to mean, essentially, "not-Roman." When the Enlightenment took on the classical Roman aesthetic forms, concerned with regularity, reason, linearity, and clarity, it followed that Gothic aesthetics were the opposite, dealing with monstrosity, perversion, ruin, and wild emotion. The Gothic was illogical, featuring folkloric creatures from pre-enlightenment fairy tales, supernatural occurrences that could not be explained by empirical science, and a lean towards the hyper-sentimental. This counter-cultural aesthetic form, and the seventeenth-and-eighteenth-century artists who developed it, attracted significant criticism that echoed well into the nineteenth century; Gothic stories even today carry a connotation of the forbidden. The Gothic is, inherently, a rebellion against how things "should" be, a pulling back of the tapestry of propriety that hides the rotting societal infrastructure beneath.

The Gothic genre gained popularity in the wake of the rise of the novel itself, combining the fantasy of the medieval Romance with a dose of realism, which resulted in a sense of heightened suspense, unease, and fear. The English Gothic in particular was, in part, an artistic response to the building anxieties of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Britain, observing the bloodbath of the French Revolution across the English Channel, was casting a wary eye on its own political systems. The epistemological constructions of the Enlightenment and the

religious shifts of the Protestant Reformation rumbled the foundations of the Church. As laid out by Fred Botting in his theory primer, *Gothic*,

> Enlightenment rationalism displaced religion as the authoritative mode of explaining the universe and altered conceptions between individuals and natural, supernatural, and social worlds. Gothic works and their disturbing ambivalence can thus be seen as effects of fear and anxiety, as attempts to account for or deal with the uncertainty of these shifts. (22)

Thus, the Gothic framework for storytelling emerges in a world of tumult, one that was struggling to deal with its increasingly unsettled society. These anxieties sharpen in the mid-nineteenth century, with the Industrial Revolution in full swing and the subsequent liquification of the social strata disturbing the Victorian notion of self. The rapidly shifting economic landscape meant that one's social status at birth no longer dictated one's place for the rest of one's life—wealth and status could suddenly and drastically change within a matter of months. Many Victorian authors turned to the Gothic framework to render those anxieties, exemplified in such famous stories as Charles Dickens' *Bleak House* (1852) and Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890).

One of the key figures in the Gothic genre, and one that has inspired her own fractal of literary theory, is the Gothic heroine. Born in 1764 with the publication of the first Gothic novel, the Gothic heroine began as a relatively simplistic figure, representing purity, innocence, and beauty in contrast to the monstrous and debauched villains that are also central to the Gothic mode. In my research, I have examined and highlighted some of the ways that two Gothic authors, Jane Austen and Charlotte Brontë, complicate and deepen Walpole's original model of the Gothic heroine and create a complex, realistic figure that is able to carry the weight of the Gothic framework, utilizing it to a fuller extent.

First, we must start at the foundations for the figure of the heroine. *The Castle of Otranto*, written by Horace Walpole and published in 1764, is considered to be the first Gothic novel. It tells of the fall of the lineage of Manfred, the prince of Otranto, as a new generation rises from mysterious obscured families. The heroine of the novel—the first "official" Gothic heroine—is Isabella. Her defining traits are fundamental for the examination of the evolution of the heroine, as they become the blueprint for the subsequent iterations. She is the daughter of a neighboring noble but was raised at Otranto, never familiar with her parents. She is beautiful, naturally curious, easily overcome with emotion, and plagued with tragedy that has the effect of making her kinder than she already was. While a first-time reader may assume that Isabella is a flat, one-dimensional character, Avril Horner points out in his entry in *The Handbook to Gothic Literature* that she "demonstrates a passive courage in the face of danger" (119). The most key aspect to Walpole's construction of the first Gothic heroine is her naturalization. Isabella's main traits are ones that are inherent to her, not learned. She is beautiful but unaware of it, or at the very least immensely humble and unwilling to admit her beauty. She is sentimental, her pity and gentleness easily inspired. She is set apart from other women, played against the other female characters in *Otranto,* naturally placed on a higher level of goodness by virtue of her virtue. She is the object of the perverted sexual desire of older men, above all representing the innocence and purity that the men are themselves negations of.

Though comparatively simplistic, Isabella as our first heroine sets up a precedent for the heroine figure to be a representation of the duality that shoots through the Gothic. Classically, the heroine is the natural "good" that is opposed and hunted by the twisted "bad." This places the

Gothic in a situation of stark contrast, one where it is easy to see the push and pull between the two forces as they play their game of cat-and-mouse. The proto-heroine helps to set up the Gothic framework for understanding the monstrous, but the lines between the two will blur as the heroine becomes more complex.

Jane Austen's infamous wit and incisive insight on the personalities and systemic structures of the Regency era paired with the Gothic mode result in *Northanger Abbey* (1817), one of the most prominent examples of both the Gothic's critiques and its successes. *Northanger Abbey* follows the unremarkable young Catherine Morland as she embarks on her first venture into society on a trip to Bath, where she is introduced to Gothic novels for the first time. She is then brought by her love interest Henry Tilney to his family home, the titular Northanger Abbey, where Catherine expects to experience everything that her new Gothic novel has told her happens in old abbeys with the mysterious families that live there. Much to her chagrin, they do not. Northanger turns out to be a normal home, recently renovated and lacking the ancient feel Catherine was hoping for, and the reader gets to poke fun at Catherine for getting so swept up in the whirlwinds of Gothic sensibility.

One of Austen's most remarkable innovations of the heroine figure is her decision to make Catherine unremarkable. Austen distinctly excludes Catherine from the category of "heroine" in the novel's opening line, "No one who had ever seen Catherine Morland in her infancy, would have supposed her born to be an heroine" (4). Through the entirety of the first chapter, Austen notes her awkwardness, her early unattractiveness, her lack of quick wit, and inclination towards "boy's plays" like cricket (6). She is not naturally heroic, but Austen puts

Catherine "in training for a heroine," boldly positing that heroines can be created rather than simply born (14). This removes the wall between "regular" women and Gothic heroines, implying that there need not always be a naturalized peculiarity about a woman that makes her a heroine; they can be trained from "normal," unremarkable girls. Austen completely disturbs Walpole's naturalized quality of the heroine by adamantly refusing to give Catherine those inherent qualities. Thus Austen moves the heroine from the extraordinary to the ordinary.

Austen also evolves the Gothic heroine through the use of satire. She utilizes numerous elements of unmistakably Gothic machinery to draw Catherine down the path of assuming there is something special and spooky about the Abbey. Austen exposes the Gothic machinery at work and punctures their effects like a balloon, the reader experiencing a degree of disappointment along with Catherine. This too results in the figure of the heroine being drawn closer to the reader, disturbing and complicating Walpole's naturalized, removed model.

Thirty years after the publication of *Northanger Abbey*, Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* was published It is a bildungsroman, a novel telling of the early life and upbringing of its titular character, notable in the genre not only for its Gothic mode but its female lead. It takes the reader through Jane's abusive childhood at Gateshead Hall, with her domineering aunt, Mrs. Reed, and her bullying cousins, to her education at the underfunded Lowood Institution, to her position as a governess for the ward of Edward Rochester, the brooding master of Thornfield Hall. The narration reveals Jane's early wild emotion, the process of her maturing, and her tumultuous romance with Mr. Rochester as they spar with their wits and grapple with his betrayal of her

trust, all pulled through the established Gothic devices but made more complex in the hands of Brontë.

Perhaps one of the most recognizable qualities of *Jane Eyre* is its first-person familiar style of narration. The story is told by Jane herself, remembering moments from her personal history and drawing from her own memories. She speaks as if the reader is her own companion (the iconic line “Reader, I married him” being a perfect example), and editorializing as though she is fully aware of how she may be critiqued upon her story’s reception. This hyper-familiar mode of narration works doubly to further Austen’s project of drawing the reader and the heroine closer to each other, blurring the boundary lines of the figure of the Gothic heroine, and “passing the pen” to the heroine herself. The entire story is pulled not only through Jane’s perspective, but through her very experience. The reader sees child-Jane through adult-Jane’s eyes and memory, her narration folding both her experience and her reflection on that experience into one narrative process. The entire narrative is dependent upon Jane and her mind. This is far more internal access than the readers of Gothic novels have thus been allowed to their heroines, and furthermore entails the assumption that Jane is a real, living person, possessing real memories and experiences that she relates to her audience. Not only has Brontë given her heroine the pen, but she has also given her a realism, a life that had since been unprecedented in the history of the Gothic heroine.

Brontë also utilizes the Gothic mechanism of the double to complicate her heroine. The character of Bertha Mason, the madwoman locked in the attic of Thornfield Hall and Rochester’s first wife, acts as Jane’s dark double, feminist theorists Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar

describing her as Jane's "own secret self" (348). Jane and Bertha are paralleled and contrasted in their dispositions, their domesticity and wildness, even their statures, as a device that reveals Jane's suppressed emotions, desires, and fears. This is a massive leap in the evolution of the heroine, and one that preserves its Gothic bend in its sense of uncanniness. Brontë catapults the heroine into the realm of the psychological, using this figure of the double to, as Botting writes, "represent a limit that cannot be overcome, the representation of an internal and irreparable division in the individual psyche" (85). Brontë uses the vehicle of the Gothic, and specifically the uncanny double, to render the Victorian anxiety of a lack of stable sense of selfhood, supported on the shoulders of the Gothic heroine, now sturdy enough to carry such complexity.

The figure of the heroine, in her evolving complexity from a stock figure to a realistic and psychologically interesting character, demonstrates within herself the tensions between the chaos and the order of human life, between societal distance and emotional intimacy, and the internal and external self. Pulled through the literary framework of the Gothic, Austen and Brontë help their readers understand those real-life tensions as they have their heroines encounter them.

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