

Moral Criticism Behind the Gothic Elements in Wuthering Heights

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Abstract: This article aims at exploring the Gothic elements and how did them work to criticize the moral standard in Victorian era, in the novel, Wuthering heights. A Gothic novel includes creating wild and dark characters, creepy environment, uncanny plots and supernatural scenes, which are the typical features of the Gothic novel. And the indicating meaning behind Gothic elements expresses the criticism to the moral standard in Victorian era.

Keywords: Gothic Elements, Wuthering Heights, Emily Bronte, Revenge.

1. Introduction

The Gothic novel, as a genre, reached its peak in Emily Bronte's childhood and Emily was greatly influenced by Gothic novels. Victorian era was a period when the moral requirement is unprecedentedly high. So the author wrote the multi-generational Gothic and romantic novel in which characters all have imperfections in their internal heart in order to fight with the "perfection image". Wuthering Heights is famous for the depiction of the darkness in humanity, the unbelievable romance accompanied by revenge, and the uncanny plots and supernatural scenes which grasp every reader. And the exploration of Gothic elements will be illustrated in four aspects: characters, plot, setting and theme. These Gothic elements all contributes to the shaping of "imperfection" in novel.

2. Gothic Elements in Characters

As for the characters, there are diversities of characters in the novel, fragile women, imperious men, ghosts and innocent girls. The main character, Heathcliff, is the perfect Gothic villain. He is dark, mysterious, and rotten to the core. No one really knows where Heathcliff came from. He is depicted as both complex and highly sinister. The Gothic element in this character embodies in his personality, his paranoid delusions. His inner nature is much wilder than we thought. There is an expression in the book that perfectly illustrate his inner evilness. "His mouth watered to tear you with his teeth, because he is only half man-not so much and the-and the rest fiend!"(Lockwood, Wuthering Heights, 1847) This is exactly a perfect image of Gothic villain. After his Catherine's death, Heathcliff became mad and crazy. His life became aimless and hopeless, so he tortured Linton, robbed his estate, spoilt his daughter for joy of revenge. He even forced his child to marry an innocent girl, Catherine's daughter, only to get "Thrushcross Grange". The evil Heathcliff broke the "perfection image" in common romantic novel. The Gothic elements might not be lovely to the readers, but Emily Bronte characterize a realistic person, with bad emotions, misbehavior even evilness, which gave a violent shot the Victorian society's moral standard. That is the reason why Wuthering Heights drew tremendous criticism throughout Emily Bronte's life.

2.1. Gothic Elements in Catherine

Another main character is very unique. Differed from other novels, the other main character, Catherine, only existed in the diary and narrations. Another Gothic characterization in her ending. Died from dystocia, she continues to live in Heathcliff's memory, as the ghost. Here is the example.

The intense horror of nightmare came over me; I tried to draw back my arm, but the hand clung to it, and a most melancholy voice sobbed.

"Let me in-let me in!"

"Who are you? " I asked, struggling, meanwhile, to disengage myself.

"Catherine Linton," it replied shiveringly (why did I think of Linton? I had read Earnshaw twenty times for Linton). "I'm come home: I'd lost my way on the moor!"(Lockwood, Wuthering Heights, 1847)

Catherine is not a type of person with perfect image. The common image in Victorian period, females were ought to be fragile, gentle, and innocent. But the Gothic elements made Catherine "Gothic", too, like madness, insanity, which is indisputably against with the high moral standard in Victorian era. Also, the intention to marry Linton is not as innocent as the society advocated. In Christianity, marriage should be sacred and pure to each other. But Catherine's marriage was based on the vanity and cheat. Catherine didn't love Linton, but she is fond of Linton's wealth. Catherine still in deep love with Heathcliff. Carrying the vanity and cheat, Catherine married to Linton, which was violently criticized by the Victorian book critics. But these immoral thought made Catherine more realistic and authentic, making readers to relate to. By adding these Gothic elements into the characters' personalities, Emily Bronte could shape more realistic character to fight against the society.

3. Gothic Elements in Plot

As for the plot, when reading Gothic novels, readers may encounter ghosts, mysterious apparitions, and unexplainable sounds or events, which is quite thrilling. These Gothic elements usually pushes the story forward without requiring of explanation. Supernatural power seems to be a good reason to explain the Gothic plot, which makes whole story to be intriguing and attractive. There is a very typical example.

"In vapid listlessness I learned my head against the window, and continued spelling over Catherine Earnshaw-Heathcliff-

Linton, till my eyes closed; but they had not rested five minutes when a glare of white letters started from the dark, as vivid as spectres the air swarmed with Catherine; and rousing myself to dispel the obtrusive name, I discovered my candle wick reclining on one of the antique volumes, and perfuming the place with an odour of roasted calf-skin.”(Lockwood, *Wuthering Heights*, 1847)

Without the Gothic power here, the author needs to rationalize the behavior from meditation to looking for the diary, which will be much complex and also a needless burden to readers. So the Gothic power can be of help to push the plot forward and keep the climax on the right track.

Another Gothic element plays a significant role in displaying the dramatic effect in the novel. The Heathcliff’s death.

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Heathcliff knows exactly the coming death, and more dramatically is that, he died near the Catherine’s corpse, which is another typical Gothic terror that will give a violent shock to readers. The function of Gothic element here serves as an instructive lecture to the readers that the forgiveness is the best feedback to the revenge. Only then will the Heathcliff have a chance to a new born. The reason why Emily Bronte design this plot is to show the saving grace in this dark Gothic villain. To prove a villain also has something to cherish, to be learned from. Forgiveness is also a significant part of Doxies of Christianity, which undoubtedly match the moral standard in Victorian era. Sarcastically, the villain has virtue to learn.

4. Gothic Elements in Setting

As for the setting , the name ”Wuthering heights” puts a mysterious veil on the book. “Wuthering” refers to somewhere scary and fierce. The whole story happens on the harsh and uncultivated English moors, which is often depicted as dangerous and confusing. The grisly setting contributes to the dark mood of the novel and reinforces the dark tone of the novel. Here is an example.

“On that bleak hilltop the earth was hard with a black frost, and the air made me shiver through every limb. Being unable to remove the chain, I jumped over, and, running up the flagged causeway bordered with straggling gooseberry bushes, knocked vainly for admittance, till my knuckles tingled, and the dogs howled.”(Lockwood, *Wuthering Heights*, 1847)

This is an environmental description in the novel, which appeared in the first chapter. “black frost”, “bleak hilltop”, these word give a powerful gloomy reinforcement to readers representing an odd atmosphere which is called Gothic. It is beneficial to help readers to sink into the storyline.

“at least I distinguished a chatter of tongues, and a clatter of culinary utensils, deep within; and I observed no signs of roasting, boiling, or baking, about the huge fireplace; nor any glitter of copper saucepans and tin cullenders on the walls. One end, indeed, reflected splendidly both light and heat from ranks of immense pewter dishes, interspersed with silver jugs and tankards, towering row after row, on a vast oak dresser,

to the very roof. The latter had never been underdrawn: its entire anatomy lay bare to an inquiring eye, except where a frame of wood laden with oatcakes and clusters of legs of beef, mutton, and ham, concealed it.”(Lockwood, *Wuthering Heights*, 1847).

The strong house is like a castle or a dungeon which appears in most Gothic novels, and makes readers shiver before knowing what happen inside. This house is a place without hustle and bustle. No signs of cooking and glitters of fireplace, it’s like a haunted place with ghosts hanging around here, which represents Gothic elements in the book. Its function is to indicate readers the oddness and danger of Heathcliff. Readers would apply the weird sense shaped by setting to the characters. Emily Bronte described haunted setting in order to indicate the strangeness in Heathcliff, connecting his personality with the word “weird”, “odd”, etc. The setting significantly shapes the personalities of characters. Readers will not be surprised to see the strong emotions, the merciless revenges, and the uncanny behaviors in Heathcliff in the following chapters.

5. Conclusion

Gothic novels are called Gothic novels due to the features of Gothic Architecture, they are dark, terrifying, and mysterious, and provide unlimited horrible and thrilling imagination and excitement. What Emily Bronte wants to present to the reader, however, is much more complex than the Gothic elements used throughout the novel. Emily Bronte ingeniously uses the Gothic elements in shaping the characters’ personalities, which is intelligent for not only attracting readers but also add the authenticity in characters. And being realistic, also naturalistic, Emily is dedicated to telling a story with strong feelings and drawing resonance with the readers. Emily Bronte uses the elements of the old traditional Gothic novels yet depicts deeper feelings and strong emotions for a higher purpose, which is to depict realistic people. People who are imperfect. When the whole society advocate a higher degree of moral integrity to restrain humanity, Emily Bronte shaped imperfect characters to call for an end to the suppression of humanity. Every character has their imperfections, every characters are internally evil, but they are still intriguing, realistic, and instructive. That is what a human should be like.

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