

Female sexual identity in gothic literature

Literature



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

Introduction

Gothic Literature, originating in the late 18th century, coalesces the rhythmical language and vivid imagery of Romance novels with the dark and terrific supernatural beings, gloomy settings and fiends of classic Horror. Much like horror novels Gothic literature was created to evoke feelings of terror and in the words of Mary Shelley 'curdle the blood, and quicken the beatings of the heart' of audience who was predominantly female. Gothic literature of this era was generally written by women, homosexual men and marketed at a female audience. The appeal for contemporary women was believed to be that Gothic literature would 'allay their doubts about what it takes to be a desirable, beloved woman, and to reassure them that their husbands are not dangerous' as Gothic tends to have a handsome, magnetic suitor or husband who may or may not be a lunatic and/or murderer. The audience expectation of Gothic literature was often based around the setting, language, traditional character roles, supernatural beings and classic horrific entrapment scenarios.

General roles within Gothic literature include a heroic character and villainous beings. Yet it is specifically the female characters within these fictitious novels that are interesting as they are often portrayed as 'selfless, innocent and virtuous' women. However, in certain instances their role is subverted or enhanced in some way, and with the likes of more modern gothic fiction and media texts like Stephanie Meyer's *Twilight*, Ann Rice's *The Vampire Chronicles* and Anthony Shaffer *The Wicker Man* it is clear that this genre and its traditions have evolved through the centuries. It is widely believed that Horace Walpole's *Castle of Otranto* was the original Gothic

<https://assignbuster.com/female-sexual-identity-in-gothic-literature/>

fiction novel, and rightly so as it incorporated each classic element, set the foundations of attitudes towards women which continued into the 19th Century and furthered with works such as Shelley's Frankenstein, Samuel Coleridge's Christabel and Poe's short stories.

In early Gothic, women were often portrayed as weak, selfless and innocent as clearly shown here in Walpole's 'Castle of Otranto' "she would not only acquiesce with patience to divorce, but would obey, if it was his pleasure," This not only shows how women like 'Hippolita' lacked social power, but how they were subjected to male oppression and forced to obey the words of their husbands simply because they were their husbands. However, this marital obedience is subverted in Mary Shelley's Frankenstein in which it is Victor who obeys his wife Elizabeth, when told to come home. It is rather humorous that throughout the novel, although all the women are placed in the traditional role, it is Victor, the heroic protagonist, who from the beginning instead of trying to deal with the problem of his monster, faints or falls into a fever. He strangely continues to adopt stereotypical feminine traits such as physical weakness, fainting and illness: "his body dreadfully emaciated by fatigue and suffering. I never saw a man in so wretched a condition". The constant description throughout of his meek appearance helps to sustain his femininity.

One could argue that another questionable decision made by Shelley was how every female character within the book apart from Mrs Saville died or were murdered. Caroline Beaufort is a selfless mother who dies taking care of her adopted daughter; Justine is executed for murder, regardless of her innocence; the creation of the female monster is disregarded by Victor

<https://assignbuster.com/female-sexual-identity-in-gothic-literature/>

because he fears being unable to control her actions once she is animated; Elizabeth waits, impatient but helpless, for Victor to return to her, and she is eventually murdered by the monster. Seeing as Shelley was the daughter of highly respected advocate for women rights and feminism it was striking to the contemporary and modern audiences to see how she effortlessly disregards the lives of the women in the novel firstly, by killing them off. Whilst also eradicating the natural role of women as child bearers when Frankenstein, a male, creates life without the need for a woman and when given the opportunity to create a female he destroys it, for fear of the consequences it could entail. In light of the knowledge that 'Percy Shelley laid a heavy editorial hand' on the first manuscript of Frankenstein, one might argue that Percy often 'seriously misrepresented Mary's intentions', and characters and only portrayed the women in such a way that would be acceptable and a true representation of contemporary women of the era. However, it could be argued that as a classic example of society within the 19th century, Mary Shelley was only depicting real life and demonstrating that 'their model behaviour lowers their resistance to the forces that kill them.' Implying that their soft and submissive nature will ultimately kill them if they do not retrieve self-empowerment and subvert the traditional role of women.

Nevertheless, the women within 'Frankenstein' are still portrayed in a selfless light and they each have small yet significant roles within Frankenstein. Caroline Beaufort, in my opinion is the most selfless and embodies the classic portrayal a woman within this novel. Caroline, 'possessed a mind of an uncommon mould, and her courage rose to support

her in her adversity' In light of this quote, I noticed that she is, for the most part, mentioned to be helping people whether it be her sick father, Victor or Elizabeth. Mother of both Victor and Elizabeth she died from Scarlet Fever which she contracted whilst nursing Elizabeth back to health, ' when she heard that the life of her favourite was menaced, she could no longer control her anxiety. She attended her sick bed after knowing the severity of its contagiousness; ' her watchful attentions triumphed over the malignity of the distemper'. Even on her death bed the fortitude of her good nature takes over as she wishes Victor and Elizabeth' firmest hopes of future happiness'

Elizabeth Lavenza is the adopted daughter of The Frankenstein's, despite this, she and Victor later marry and she takes on the role as the devoted wife and waits patiently for Victor's return from Ingolstadt. ' She was docile and good tempered, possessed an attractive softness.' Elizabeth is beautiful, so, by Victor Frankenstein's judgement, she must be a good and honourable person. Much as the monster is defined by his ugliness, Elizabeth is defined by her attractiveness which was a classic element of a gothic female, one being beautiful whilst lacking personality and a sense of worth. However, throughout the novel there are glimpses of a different side Elizabeth's character who although she ' does not share Frankenstein's alchemical interests, she is educated with him', like Ligeia character. Elizabeth writes regularly, and it falls to her to describe Justine's background, and uses her education to assist Justine in her trial when all others believed her to be guilty over the murder of William.

Justine Moritz, William's nanny, is the final female who isn't portrayed as ' innocent' within the novel but still embodies the traditional depiction of a

<https://assignbuster.com/female-sexual-identity-in-gothic-literature/>

submissive gothic woman and ultimately meets her inevitable death when hung for the murder of William Frankenstein. When wrongly accused of the murder instead of fighting against the injustice of the circumstantial evidence against her, she fall apart and feels guilty for the death. Believing she should have protected William, as his maternal figure, she confesses, I did confess; but I confessed a lie. I confessed, that I might obtain absolution;'. In the end she falls under the oppression of the male dominated legal system and is hung. Although considered a minor character and is only mentioned briefly she creates a large impression on both Elizabeth and Victor as all throughout the trial he is troubled and wallows in guilt because he knows Justine is innocent and convicted because of crimes of his creature yet he allows her to take the blame.

In addition, to the awareness of male oppression and writers, I often questioned why so many iconic male Gothic authors such as Walpole, William Beckford and M. G Lewis were suspected of homosexuality, as Gothic was traditionally romantic and marketed at female audiences. Some would say that creating strong independent women were a way for the males to channel their unspeakable desires that were suppressed by Sodomy laws which up until 1967 ' prohibited gross indecency between males, or in more daring cases, to create an underlying confession ' Ah father, how willingly would I unveil to you my heart! How willingly would I declare the secret which bows me down with its weight! But oh! I fear, I fear-'" That you should abhor me for my weakness;..." father!" continued he in faltering accents, " I am a woman!"

Despite the male oppression of the 19th century authors continued to create characters like Ligeia who dominate the story and Poe dedicates the majority of the narrative to her description, one paragraph in particular is solely describing her eyes ' hue of the orbs, far larger than the ordinary eyes. The obsessive nature of Poe's narrator could also suggest that the power and pure intelligence of Ligeia has driven him insane creating what some might argue was a drug induced hallucination of his the late Ligeia as he was an avid opium user. The narrator's obsessive nature and mental breakdown is another classic character motif which runs throughout early Gothic fiction and the strength of Ligeia is really shown when she appears to be able to reincarnate in some way in place of Rowena. Regardless of whether it actually happened Poe reflected her ' stern passion' and power well as even after he remarries Rowena ' the successor of the unforgotten Ligeia' the narrator is unable put thoughts of Ligeia out of his mind, ' there is one dear topic, on which my memory falls me not'.

Coleridge's Christabel is another classic gothic novel which broke the mould of modern literature way before its time. His female characters, Christabel and Geraldine, are a far cry from the traditional underdeveloped female protagonists who often wade through the novel ' menaced by fiends in a gloomy castle', but rather plays on the sadistic nature of women and its female readers who ' enjoy the sensation' of fearfulness. Christabel's character itself reflects these women who appears to enjoy the thrill of the spell that's she is under, ' Yea, she doth smile, and she doth weep Sadism is a theme that has been adopted by many modern Gothic texts and Horror films. Characters of the likes of Amanda Young, from the Saw cult movies,

<https://assignbuster.com/female-sexual-identity-in-gothic-literature/>

pretends to be a victim of the sadistic killer Jigsaw and it comes to light that she enjoys playing the part as she helps to kidnap other victims and has her significant reveal scene at the end of the film allowing her to revel in what she has done. This suggestion of enjoying pain and distress is a revolutionary idea; Coleridge took Gothic heroines to a whole new level in his era as he allowed his audience to delve into the psychological side of his characters. Mental illness and breakdown was not a new subject within Gothic literature but the psychosis often affected male characters, except this level of psychology created new and more interesting female protagonists and subverted the traditional depiction of level headed and innocent women.

Nonetheless, the reader sees that Christabel is not as innocent as she is portrayed at face value, as a young woman held under a spell. But her behaviour from the beginning of the tale suggests otherwise as I first wondered why she was out so late within the castle grounds praying alone and then the narrator mentions that " She had dreams all yesternight / Of her own betrothed knight" we are not given anymore information on these dreams but they can be seen as innocent or suspicious as she has not seen him for a while. Once Geraldine is inside Christabel's room, before she is spellbound Christabel offers her wine and " O weary lady, Geraldine, / I pray you, drink this cordial wine! / It is a wine of virtuous powers" Then, Christabel undresses, sits down, " And on her elbow did recline / To look at the lady Geraldine" as she undresses. This interest in watching Geraldine undress seems quite uncharacteristic of Christabel or of an innocent and naive young damsel. This is merely a suspicion of Christabel's innocence but once the story is reread her action and innocence become questionable and takes us back to the

sadistic side of her character and suggests that whilst Geraldine is manipulating the other characters, Christabel is manipulating her audience.

Furthermore Geraldine's character in Christabel is rather interesting as she was the first female character that I had come across who had so much power over all characters and became the supernatural being within the novel instead of a ghost or hideous creature created in Frankenstein. Firstly her power and influence over the other characters alone contrasts to the stereotypical role of women in traditional Gothic literature. Essentially a witch she casts a spell over Christabel and later she takes Geraldine back into her room and Geraldine undresses, the narrator yells " O shield her! shield sweet Christabel!" , who doesn't want Christabel look at Geraldine's body, perhaps in fear of corrupting her innocence. Geraldine is also able to manipulate the male characters as the Baron is smitten with her and hangs on her every word portraying her strong sense of empowerment much like Ligeia who is said to have been smarter than most men.

Conclusion

Another female presented in Gothic literature is the force of nature which is often personified as a woman and a strong female principle. ' She' is frequently infiltrated by Gothic characters who brave her strong forces at climatic parts of the novel. Shelley uses stormy weather, darkness imagery and the desolate arctic to provide the perfect ambience for Frankenstein, specifically the epic chase between Victor and The Creature in the middle of the Russian arctic. ' The abrupt sides of vast mountains were before me; the icy wall of the glacier overhung me, I was cursed by some devil'. Yet

although sometimes seen as a curse Victor also describes his recovery from grave illness through his affinity with nature. Although nursed back to health by his closest friends, it is the breathing of the air that finally gives him strength “ we passed a fortnight in these perambulations: my health and spirits had long been restored, and they gained additional strength from the salubrious air I breathed, the natural incidents of our progress“. Thus showing another powerful side of the women in gothic who, although shows maternal and mothering qualities by essentially making Victor better, Mother Nature undoubtedly make several strong appearances which also help to present the Gothic nature of the novel. ‘ a flash of lightning illuminated the object and discovered its shape plainly to me; its gigantic stature, and the deformity of its aspect, more hideous than belongs to humanity, instantly informed me that it was the wretch, the filthy demon to whom he had given life’.