

The gothic elements of wuthering heights

[Literature](#), [British Literature](#)



How far would you agree with this view? Some would argue that the novel's setting is particularly important in establishing the novel's Gothic elements, in particular relations between past and present, the medieval and modernity. The contrast between the two houses, Wuthering Heights and Thrushcross Grange, for instance, which has been seen as carrying such metaphysical significance, is not left at a generalised level, but is grounded in specific details which reveal the time, place, and class of their opponents.

The house at Wuthering Heights is a functional place, marked by dogs, guns and oatcakes which are part of a feudal agricultural economy, while Thrushcross Grange is a place of leisure, distinctly Victorian aristocratic, characterised by products of other people's labour – carpets, chandeliers, sweet cakes, and lap dogs.

It is therefore possible to extract historical opposition between these two settings, with the Earnshaws, the yeomen farmers who work the land, being replaced by the genteel way of the Lintons who live off their rents.

This relationship with the past, which is juxtaposed with the 'new' world of Victorian decadence, is an important element of the Gothic which is brought to life by Brontë's description of these different abodes and their occupants.

The novel's narrators too, it could be argued, add credibility to the Gothic elements of horror and in particular the uncanny. As a modern, civilised narrator the character of Lockwood appears genuinely affected by his experiences in the heights. The first three chapters, in which he relies on his own observation, are a catalogue of mistakes, and we watch him move from a confident detachment to the bewilderment of a Gothic victim. When

Lockwood enters Wuthering Heights he tries to interpret what he sees but none of the signs prove readable. The ‘cats’ are dead rabbits, the dogs ‘four footed fiends’; Heathcliff is equally well described as ‘ gypsy’ and ‘ gentleman’; Hareton can be fitted into a category either as servant or master; Catherine does not seem to ‘ belong’ to anybody and does not perform as a hostess should.

His experiences in the ‘ Gothic Chamber’ are a continuation of those in the realist interior. It is not clear for instance, whether Catherine’s names, scratched on the window sill, are three names of one person or one name for three people; the confusion of singleness and multiplicity intensifies Lockwood’s disorientation until the letters become uncanny, ‘ a glare of white letters, as vivid as spectres – the air swarmed with Catherines.’ The ‘ intense horror of nightmare’ takes hold of him and he is shocked into one of the most violent acts of the novel; as Catherines child-ghost clings to him he rubs her wrists on the broken windowpane ‘till the blood ran down and soaked the bedclothes.’

This is not behaviour we would associate with the civilised man and so this adds credibility to Lockwood’s experiences. Although Nelly is better informed her narrative does not dispel the uncanny instability of Lockwood’s initial experiences. The geographical fixity of the novel, combined with its flash-back time structure, means that the past scenes which Nelly describes are superimposed on the scenes which we have already witnessed, in the very rooms which Lockwood had already described or where they now sit together. This doubleness is compounded by the fact that not only places,

but names, survive the passing of generations, to be inhabited by later occupants. The name Hareton Earnshaw' in the inscription is now 'occupied' by another Hareton Earnshaw, just as Catherine leaves her name to be occupied by her daughter. The result of this duplication inherent in Nelly's narrative is also uncanny, since we expect people to have single identities which persist through time.

The key Gothic themes of violence and revenge are for some critics made more implicit than explicit by the novels narrative structure. Rather than watching straight action the reader must piece together the violent struggle between the characters from fragments of events given to them by Nelly, Lockwood and others and the consequences which are described by the victims of these assaults, for instance Isabella's account of her relationship with Heathcliff.

This second hand action is significantly less credible than watching the events first hand and raises questions of the narrator's legitimacy. Indeed stage versions of the novel often omit the narrators in favour of more dramatic depictions of scenes; the Olivier film has Nelly but not Lockwood ; and in the Kosminsky film the story is told by the author, Emily Bronte in person. Academic critics, whilst recognising the importance of the narrators, still disagree fiercely about their significance.

In following this argument one could easily pick apart the inherent assumption in the view above; that it is solely the novels setting and narration that adds to the Gothic experience. Indeed perhaps the most memorable feature in novels which, by modern critics, are widely thought to

contain something of the Gothic, is the writer's use of characterisation, his creation of the Gothic protagonist.

The central character in Gothic stories is often an embodiment of the key elements that the Gothic itself seeks to address. Forbidden knowledge/power is often the Gothic protagonist's central goal which is linked with the Gothic motifs of repressed sexualities and the taboo. The Gothic "hero" questions the universe's ambiguous nature and tries to comprehend and control those supernatural powers that mortals cannot understand. He tries to overcome human limitations and make himself into a "god". Think Milton's Satan. This ambition usually leads to the hero's "fall" or destruction; however, Gothic tales of ambition sometimes paradoxically evoke our admiration because they picture individuals with the courage to defy fate and cosmic forces in an attempt to transcend the mundane to the eternal and sublime.

Consider again Faustus' quest for supernatural power and Frankenstein's quest for the secret of life. In this view, some critics have sought to make a comparison between this doomed quest and Cathy's idealised view of 'free love' in the novel. Her belief in her 'oneness' with Heathcliff makes her confident that he will not just understand her relationship with Edgar but 'comprehend (it) in his person – that is, incorporate it into himself. This dream cannot be realised however because her menfolk persist in what Carol Gilligan calls the masculine 'ethic of justice'. Edgar maintains the language of 'propriety' (i. e. ownership) and Heathcliff the language of revenge (i. e. expropriation) and ultimately Cathy's quest for mutual understanding ends in violence and death.

While the setting, narration and narrative structure does indeed credibility to the Gothic elements; namely a sense of the uncanny horror and the an innate fascination with the past, these are not the only factors in the vivid sense of the Gothic in Wuthering Heights. In particular the novels characterisation is important for setting up the themes of taboo and sexual demarcation as well as setting up the novels dismal destination.