

Gender and sexuality in classical english literature essay

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



Representation is one of the broad areas of contestation in Feminist Criticism. The cautious patriarchal society has used texts and textuality to give authoritative pictures of themselves and derogatory and distorted images of others. The women writers, blamelessly entrapped by the male-dominated tradition of Enlightenment values, hardly dared to portray the empowerment of their own sex. The Feminist Criticism unlocks the major issues that play themselves out in the politics of being a female (writers, characters and readers) in the 18th century. Much of these gender politics are founded in the works of Radcliffe and Lewis. The heroines, in classical gothic, written by male authors or female authors, are always the repressed and dominated one - frail, blonde, silent, passive helpless and innocent. They are often shown fleeing a rapacious and predatory male. It is suggestive that they are only to explore sexual aggression and illicit desires that is objects of male fantasy. Typical examples include: Mina in Dracula, Elizabeth in Frankenstein, Ophelia in Hamlet, Fay Wray in King Kong. Beside this, The women writers, out of the dissatisfaction with the patriarchal society, used the gothic mode as a coded expression of their fear of entrapment within the domestic spaces and within the female body, most terrifyingly experienced in childbirth and to explore aspects of femininity and sexuality and also to challenge the gender hierarchy and values of a male-dominated culture. The points conclude as the absence and marginalization of women in gothic texts and women writers in the society. But now, as Robert Miles suggests, the term 'Female Gothic', first thought only to be written by the women writers as Ellen Moers suggested, had concretized into a category. Today, over 25 years later, partly as a result of

Poststructuralism's destabilizing of the categories of gender, the term is increasingly being qualified. It is now an umbrella term and includes in itself - ' Women's Gothic', ' Feminine Gothic', ' Gothic Feminism', ' Lesbian Gothic', ' Post-colonial Gothic', and ' Comic Female Gothic'. The re-reading of the classical gothic fictions by some scholars paves the way of the ' Female Gothic' to the center of female tradition, women writers to empowerment, and the very term to challenge the concept of gender itself. It offers a state-of-the-art snapshot which indicates some of the most important directions in which criticism of the Female Gothic would move in the ensuing decade. By this emancipating gothic mode, the before-dominated female genders are trying to come to the center of critical discussion. Dissatisfied, the women writers felt the urges and influenced the 1970s feminist revision of the canon that involved identifying, and reclaiming a ' her-story' of women's writing when they found the true meaning of Lockean, European Enlightenment, philosophy of ownership as cited by Lauren Fitzgerald in ' Female Gothic and the Institutionalization of Gothic Studies'. She also argues that Ellen Moer's account of the ' Female Gothic' has its root in this philosophy. Issues concerning the critical ownership of Ann Radcliffe, for example, illustrate how academic feminism has approached and developed the idea of what constitutes ' women's writing', whilst simultaneously indicating the extent to which Enlightenment ideas of ownership have shaped the Anglo-American feminist tradition. Angela Wright in her ' To Live the Life of Hopeless Recollection: Mourning and Melancholia in Female Gothic, 1780-1800' vividly explores how novels by Eliza Fenwick, Sophia Lee, Maria Roche, and Ann Radcliffe, via their fascination with portraiture, critique eighteenth century

consumerism. She argues that this engagement with image-making indicate late 18th century concerns with fashion, opulence and consumerism which become relocated in woman's gothic writing through the correlated issues of female insanity, desire and loss. While others see the Female Gothic as 'subversive' and even 'revolutionary', Diane Long Hoeveler argues in 'Gothic Feminism: The Professionalization of Gender from Charlotte Smith to the Brontes''(1998) that it was the originator of modern so-called 'victim feminism'. The heroines of Gothic novels, Hoeveler contends, masquerade as blameless victims of a corrupt and oppressive patriarchal society while utilizing passive-aggressive and masochistic strategies to triumph over the system. This ideology of female power through weak pretention is what Hoeveler calls 'gothic feminism'. Passive and weak Female Gothic heroine, unfortunately, is the product of the implicit adherence to the Enlightenment tradition. In 'The Construction of the Female Gothic Posture: Wollstonecraft's Mary and Gothic Feminism' Diane Long Hoeveler returns to the idea of the Enlightenment and argues that Wollstonecraft in 'Vindication of the Rights of Women' (1792) was working within a male-dominated tradition of Enlightenment values, and that consequently her views are coloured by an implicit adherence to this tradition. The result is the passive and weak heroine in 'Mary, A Fiction' (1788). Hoeveler argues that such a celebration of passivity has had a deleterious effect on feminism by encouraging women to see themselves as victims as a means, paradoxically, of empowerment. In 'Women's Gothic: from Clara Reeve to Mary Shelley' (2000), E. J. Clery provides a valuable new reading of women's Gothic texts grounded in original historical contextualization. She encounters the common picture of

women writers in the Romantic period as operating under unfavorable conditions of restraint, concealment and self-censorship, by highlighting their acknowledged status as professional writers, influenced and enabled by the powerful figure of Sarah Siddons as an ideal of female genius. Not caring of the psychoanalytical readings of these texts as parable of family relations typically associated with 'Female Gothic', she argues that their key concerns are 'the legitimation of visionary imagination in women writers, methods of representing the passions, the issue of arousing the reader and audience, and the profit motive'. Using ideas from Modleski and Irigaray, Diana Wallace, in her 'Uncanny Stories: the Ghost Story of Female Gothic' exploring 19th century ghost stories written by Elizabeth Gaskell and later tales by Mary Sinclair and Elizabeth Brown, projects that such tales explore how a patriarchal society represses and buries images of the maternal. She further argues that the ghost story pursued the women writers to evade the marriage plot which dominated the earlier Radcliffean Female Gothic, meaning that they could offer a more radical critique of male power, violence and predatory sexuality than was possible in other modes. For Wallace, the ghost story functions as the 'double' or the 'unconscious' of the novel, giving form to what has to be repressed in the longer, more 'respectable and decisive' form. Concentration should be paid to the use of Gothic modes by Modernist and inter-war women writers as diverse as Daphne du Maurier, Mary Sinclair and Stella Gibbons. A good example of a theoretically informed study of an ostensibly 'popular' writer, 'Daphne du Maurier: Writing, Identity and the Gothic Imagination'(1998) by Avril Horner and Sue Zlosnik, not only opens up her work but also shows the glimpse to the valid debates

around the Female Gothic itself. Female Gothic formula resisting on unhappy or ambiguous closure and explaining of the supernatural , as outlined by Anne Williams and earlier by Eugenia DeLamotte, for instance, does not fit du Maurier's works. Suzanne Becker in ' Gothic Form of Feminine Fiction'(1999), her study of English and Canadian women writers, most importantly Margaret Atwood's ' Lady Oracle'(1976), chose to use the gender of the speaking subject in the text rather than the gender of the author. It is Tabish Khair's contention in ' The Gothic, Post colonialism and Otherness: Ghosts from Elsewhere' (Palgrave Macmillan, 2009) that the works, say Horace Walpole's ' The Castle of Otranto' (1764), William Beckford's ' Vathek' (1786), Ann Radcliffe's novels, Lawrence Flammenberg's ' The Necromancer' (1794), William Godwin's ' The Adventures of Caleb Williams' (1794), M. G. Lewis's ' The Monk' (1796), are united by a ' simplistic fact'; they all revolve around ' various versions of the Other, as the Devil or as ghosts, as women, vampires, Jews, lunatics, murderers, non-European presences etc'. In theorizing ' otherness', Khair presents two opposing possibilities. The first is ' negative otherness' (or ' evil') and is manifest in such incomprehensible behavior as cannibalism, human sacrifice and superstition . The second is the otherness of the ' essential sameness', which is an ' illness' or ' a difference waiting to be remedied into the Self-same' through the civilizing mission which brings ' civilization, rationality, truth, religion'. The ' Other' is not just ' a negative image, or a shadow of the (European, colonial) Self', but is, rather, ' a conceptual sign, whose referent changes across time and space'. What interests Khair most is the particular location of Otherness. His concern is not with overseas (' the Imperial

Gothic') but with those texts in which ' Gothic otherness enters the heart of Britain/Europe, in a simple geographical sense, from the colonies and the Empire and disturbs notions of rationality, meaning, identity, truth, knowledge, power etc'- in other words, ' the ' colonial Gothic in a British setting'. An additional, although largely unexplored aspect of the Female Gothic, the issue of ' race', is explored in ' Collusions of the Mystery: Ideology and the Gothic in Hagar's Daughter' by Eugenia DeLamotte who examines the presentation of race in Pauline Hopkins' ' Hagar's Daughter'. She argued that the novel provides a revision of the Female Gothic and also exploits narrative device familiar from detective fiction. The solving of the ' mystery' that lies in the heart of the novel is one which explodes the ideological mystery, and the national crime of slavery, which separates Black and White, masculine and feminine, home and state, and African-American and Euro-American families. That 20th century Female Gothic heroines are more likely to be trapped in domestic spaces than semi-ruined castles is explored in ' Skin Chairs other Domestic Horrors: Barbara Comyns and the Female Gothic Tradition' in which Avril Horner and Sue Zlosnik explore the work of the English novelist Barbara Comyns . They focus on ' The Vet's Daughter' (1959) and ' The Skin Chairs' (1962) and explores how Comyns' use of parody, wit, and humour exposes the horrors of domestic life. For Horner and Zlosnik this constitutes a Female Comic Gothic which is grotesque and blackly comic in its critical assault on Patriarchal plots. Gina Wisker, in her ' Viciousness in Kitchen: Sylvia Plath's Gothic', using Freud's notion of the ' uncanny', suggests that Plath's poems present the ' uncanny' defamiliarization of the familiar roles and expectations of women's lives. In

his reading of Anne Radcliffe's 'A Sicilian Romance' (1790), Robert Miles explores a distinction between 'Female Gothic' and 'Male Gothic' concerning the 'plot'. In his 'Anne Radcliffe: The Great Enchantress' (1995), Miles make a lucid analysis of the Female Gothic narrative of the persecuted heroine in flight from a villainous father and in search of an absent mother. This is a typical plot belongs to the typical female writers while male writers tended towards a plot of masculine transgression of social taboos, exemplified by M. G. Lewis's 'The Monk' (1796). In her 'Art of Darkness: a Poetics of Gothic' (1995), another contributor, Anne Williams, argued for the 'male' and 'female' formulas, which differ in terms of narrative technique, plot, their assumption about the supernatural, and their use of horror/terror. As in the myth of Psyche and Eros, Female Gothic narrative are generally typified by happy ending, explained ghosts, and an adherence to terror, as opposed to the Oedipal myth which underpins the male version. Any simple correlation of plot with the author's gender, however, had already been broken down by Alison Milbank's 'Daughters of the House: Modes of the Gothic in Victorian Fiction' (1992) which analyses male writers' appropriation of Female Gothic and several essays in women writings, including her own. One of the characteristic of Female Gothic plot is its representation of romantic love. Andrew Smith in 'Love, Freud, and the Female Gothic: Bram Stoker's The Jewel of Seven Stars' explores how Stoker's novel raises some complex questions about love through its use of a male love-struck narrator, who appears to be caught in a Female Gothic plot which casts him as its hero. In the novel 'love' becomes increasingly 'sinister' as it turns into a destabilizing and dangerously irrational emotion that ultimately aligns love

with feelings of justified horrors. Poststructuralist reading of the novel, 'The Jewel of Seven Stars' thus develops a male reading of a Female Gothic plot in which the idea of female empowerment becomes defined as horrific and also questions against the gender identity. Paulina Palmer's 'Lesbian Gothic: Transgressive Fictions'(1999), following from the work of Terry Castle and deploying poststructuralist theory, is based on the understanding that 'Gothic' and 'queer' share a common emphasis on transgressive acts and subjectivities. The growth of the 'lesbian gothic' fiction over the past 25 years, she argued, developed out of a specific historical context- the feminist movement and the growth of lesbian/ queer studies, which in turn created a readership for texts which appropriated, reworked and parodied Gothic modes and motifs to articulate lesbian subjectivities. Arguably, Palmer's concept of 'lesbian Gothic' could be projected backwards to illuminate earlier texts. In 'Lesbian Gothic: Genre, Transformation, Transgression', Palmer discusses Cacia March's 'Between the Words' (1996) and Sarah Water's 'Affinity' (1999). According to her writers of lesbian fictions are drawn to the Gothic because it is a form which has traditionally given space to the representation of transgressive sexualities. Interrogation and problematising of mainstream versions of reality and so-called 'normal' values that are challenge against the representation of 'gender' can be achieved only when it is encapsulated in the Gothic mode. Interestingly, for instance, Rictor Norton's 'Mistress of Udolpho: The life of Anne Radcliffe'(1999), the first full-scale biography which offers the contextualization which has been missing for so long, reads the novels in terms of their 'lesbian subtext'. Ranita Chatterjee in 'Sapphic Subjectivity

and Gothic Desires in Eliza Fenwick's *Secresy*' discusses the representation of lesbian desire. She argues that Fenwick's 1795 novel uses images of lesbian desire in order to challenge the then prevailing models of gender. Fenwick's associations with such Jacobins as William Godwin, Mary Wollstonecraft, and Mary Hays underline her radical credentials, and Chatterjee argues that '*Secresy*' develops feminist ideas drawn from Wollstonecraft. However, she also shows that the novel's focus on same-sex desire challenges the whole notion of gender ascriptions in the period and so ultimately moves the debate beyond Wollstonecraft. Above all, perhaps, the 1990s has witnessed the move of the Female Gothic from the 'margin' into the 'mainstream'. It is included in the matter of course in Maggie Kilgour's '*The Rise of the Gothic Novel*' (1995), David Punter's seminal '*The Literature of Terror: A History of Gothic Fiction from 1765 to the Present Day*' (1980, 2nd edition 1996). Recent collections of essays, such as Andrew Smith, Diane Mason, and William Hughes's '*Fictions of Unease: The Gothic from Otranto to the X-files*' (2002), include reading of women texts alongside essays on Walpole, Stoker, Le Fanu and Collins. Struggling for sexual and political right and demonstrating suffering as source of erotic fascination and resembling to fairy tale and folklore, such readings, influenced by poststructuralist scepticism about essentialist gender categories, have nevertheless demonstrated the continuing centrality of the Gothic in postmodern and post colonial writings by women. For Clery, " Gothic Literature sees women writers at their most pushy and argumentative" as they turn to a new field of literary endeavor with " excitement, audacity and opportunism".