

Patriarchal oppression in the industrial gothic



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American Gothic literature arose during the early years of America's founding, adopting some characteristics from the European tradition and establishing others in order to capture the turmoil and anxiety present in revolutionary America. As with any great literature, it changed with time, and these traditional tropes began to present themselves in new and unique ways that had to be interpreted by the reader. Two tropes that remained in Gothic texts but were utilized far differently than when the genre arose are the woman in distress and the dominating, tyrannical male.

In his short story, "The Tartarus of Maids," Herman Melville employs these characteristics of the Gothic in order to highlight the mistreatment of women in an industrialized society. In his work, Melville employs the Gothic trope of the woman in distress, and applies it to laboring women who have become slaves to the patriarchal forces that permeate society. Traditionally, the woman in distress is depicted as a powerless woman who lacks agency and control over her distress and physical reactions, often caused by a male (Hamilton 8/31/2016). In Melville's "Tartarus of Maids," the women lack agency because they are at the mercy of the mill owner, and therefore cannot act freely without fear of being removed from the factory. The paper mill is full of women who have become a part of the industrialized process, and are no longer valued as individuals, but as parts of a machine that can easily be replaced in order to keep the process moving. Within the mill, the women are stripped of their singularity, which is depicted when the narrator states, "At rows of blank-looking counters sat rows of blank-looking girls, with blank, white, folders in their blank hands, all blankly folding blank

paper,” completely lacking any features that distinguish one woman from another (Melville 5).

Furthermore, the women are stripped of their voices, whether from fatigue or from orders handed down by the owner is unclear. The narrator notes, “ Not a syllable was breathed. Nothing was heard but the low, steady, overruling hum of the iron animals. The human voice was banished from the spot” (6). The women’s silence within the factory places them in the position of women in distress because they do not have the agency to speak or act according to their will. Instead they must remain silent in order to remain employed, and this dilemma is representative of a larger silencing that takes place within society.

Throughout Melville’s text, the owner of the paper mill is emblematic of the Gothic’s tyrannical man, symbolizing the patriarchy as a whole. This Gothic trope is often used in regard to a male-female relationship in which the male is highly domineering and oppressive (Hamilton 8/31/2016). First and foremost, the mill owner is in a position of power over the women, automatically placing him into the Gothic trope of a dominating male character. He also asserts his dominance through his actions. He exercises complete control over his laborers, determining when they work, how often, and for how long: “ We want none but steady workers: twelve hours to the day, day after day, through the three hundred and sixty-five days, excepting Sundays, Thanksgiving, and Fast-days. That’s our rule” (Melville 13). The owner’s demands for intense labor productivity demonstrate the control he has over the women he employees, much like societal values established by

patriarchal forces dictate what is and is not acceptable behavior for women within the society.

Another way the owner demonstrates his authoritarian control of his employees is when he refers to the workers as girls, regardless of their age. The gentleman visiting the mill questions the owner's word choice and the owner explains his reasoning for his terminology: "' Oh! as to that—why, I suppose, the fact of their being generally unmarried—that's the reason [I call them girls], I should think. But it never struck me before. For our factory here, we will not have married women; they are apt to be off-and-on too much...And so, having no married women, what females we have are rightly enough called girls'" (13). The owner's explanation highlights two key points: a woman's title is determined by her relationship to a man, and that a woman's livelihood is dependent on her perceived value. By claiming unmarried females can never be considered women, the owner is infantilizing the workers, and therefore stripping them of their agency, as children are not considered to have agency of their own. Furthermore, by refusing to hire married women, the mill owner is indicating that a wed woman inherently has less value than a single one due to the obligations that come along with married life and child rearing. In this sense, married women are also stripped of their agency because they cannot seek their own employment, making all women, not just single or married women, victims of the patriarchal structures the mill owner represents.

Throughout his story " Tartarus of Maids," Herman Melville uses the gothic tropes of a tyrannical male character and the woman in distress to highlight the oppressive nature of industrialized society in relation to women. While

Melville's short story was written in 1855, the themes of male dominance and patriarchal oppression are still relevant in the twenty-first century. Most positions of power in both the private and public sectors are held by men, giving them the power to make decisions that directly affect women, such as maternity leave policies and laws that restrict access to safe abortions. While America may not be a highly industrial nation today, it is still a nation of dominating men and women in distress.

Works Cited

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