

Reason's triumph over emotion in gothic literature

Literature



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‘ In Gothic literature, reason always triumphs over emotion’. Evaluate this view.

Stoker composed ‘ Dracula’ in 1897, following a century dominated by a new focus on rationalism and the use of science and technology to transform society, known as the Enlightenment era, meaning that the novel is very much shaped by its legacy. In this period of transition, dominated by a clash between the prevalence of intellectual disciplines of knowledge and wisdom, and the anti-rational responses to this, including the Romantic movement, it is inevitable that Stoker’s writing should stage a battle between emotion and reason. Buzwell best expresses this struggle, asserting that in ‘ Dracula,’ ‘ scientific rationality is set against folklore and superstition,’ highlighting the juxtaposition between these two preeminent intellectual movements.

Meanwhile, Carter composed her collection of short stories, ‘ The Bloody Chamber’ in 1979, in a more progressive era where scientific breakthroughs, though still numerous, were arguably less of a focal point for society than, for example, when Darwin championed his ideas on evolution in his 1859 publication ‘ On the Origin of Species.’ In her writing, Carter instead sought to explore and interrogate contemporary attitudes towards sex and gender, in what was still an overwhelmingly patriarchal society. Her writing is concerned primarily with sensibility and the study of human relationships, exemplified by the fact that the potent emotional responses of lust and violence are present in every one of her short stories. The Gothic genre is often seen as ‘ the challenge to Enlightenment notions of rationality’ (Hughes), and Gothic writers began to depict stories which primarily focussed on the invocation of terror, through implausible or fantastical

elements. These could include, in 'Dracula,' the supernatural presence of Count Dracula himself, and his three dangerously- seductive brides, or in 'The Bloody Chamber,' the sensational recreations of fairytale characters, such as the werewolves in the three wolf stories, or beasts such as the Erl King. Therefore, it would be inaccurate to contend that reason always triumphs over emotion in Gothic literature, and instead, perhaps it should be acknowledged that these two components are omnipresent within the genre, and it is their conflicting nature which is so typical of Gothic writing. Part of the appeal of the Gothic is to shock the reader with the delineation of 'things beyond reason and explanation...and inexplicable and profound events' (Bowen), and thus it must be concluded that whilst reason is prevalent within these texts, the emergence of emotion and human relationships is equally, if not more, crucial to the establishment of this genre, proven by the way in which Gothic literature is commonly regarded as a response to rationalism, through the sentimental driving force of the narrative, and the often emotive melodrama present. Stoker's writing, as a direct result of its completion being in comparatively-close proximity to the period of Enlightenment, places more emphasis on reason than emotion, than is exhibited in Carter's short stories, which instead aim to address sexual imbalance within society.

In Carter's short stories, reason is often exhibited as a defence against the supernatural or irrational elements present, in a conflict that aids her portrayal of the 'complexity of human relations' (Atwood), and the interplay between reason and emotion which together form human interactions. For example, in 'The Lady of the House of Love,' the young soldier rides a

bicycle, ' the most rational mode of transport in the world,' and this depicts progression and modernity, in striking contrast with the ' intense, rambling,' archetypal Gothic castle. Travelling on this object described as ' the product of pure reason applied to motion,' the unwitting target of the Countess is suspended in the liminal place between his enlightened foundations, exemplified by the bicycle, and the ' timeless Gothic eternity of the vampires,' highlighting the clash here between innovation and antiquity. Failing to eventually fall victim to the vampiric countess, the soldier can be seen to be protected by his prudent level headedness, shown in his choice of transport, and his ' fundamental disbelief,' in the palpable existence of the dark horrors of his childhood fairytales. In this particular tale, the soldier's resolute mindset and his composure, obtained from the foundations of an upbringing in rational and forward-thinking western Europe, allow him to transgress the typical Gothic reactions to his situation such as extreme melodrama, or an overwhelming, sense of impending doom. Instead, his ' lack of imagination gives his heroism to the hero,' showing how adopting a more logical and stoic countenance and trusting in the ability of reason to overcome emotion, the soldier is able to survive his eastern European experience in the ' realm of imagination and desire' (Frayling). Also, in the first wolf story, ' The Werewolf,' the young protagonist emotionlessly murders her grandmother, a far cry from the traditional trope of the melodramatic, inherently hysterical Gothic female. The ' chillingly laconic' (Simpson) tone of the short story entails that the girl ' lived in her grandmother's house; she prospered,' which is indicative of the fact that this story is emotionally-detached and thus ' less concerned with sexuality than with survival' (Simpson). This is similar to the following dialogue between the <https://assignbuster.com/reasons-triumph-over-emotion-in-gothic-literature/>

Marquise and her mother in 'The Bloody Chamber' title story: 'are you sure you love him?' 'I'm sure I want to marry him.' Here, the Marquise's dispassionate response to her mother's concerned question reveals that she is aware that this marriage will financially benefit her, and hence her choice must be considered as the product of a calculating, rational decision, rather than that of a passionate romance.

Similarly, in 'Dracula,' Stoker's characters often rely upon reason in order to make sense of the irrational and supernatural, in order to avoid becoming overwhelmed by the sheer 'otherness' and terror of the events they have become immersed in. Science and technology give Harker, Van Helsing and Dr Seward, among others, a medium through which they are able to interrogate and try to comprehend the elusive Count Dracula, and there is plenty of evidence of these key figures attempting to restore a sense of order and logic as a coping mechanism against the chaos of their predicament. Harker's classification, and factual approach is shown through the rigorous detail of his journey to Transylvania, 'left Munich at 8. 35pm on 1st May...should have arrived at 6. 46, but the train was late,' and appreciation of schedules and order, such as the train departure times and reliance on forms of western sophistication, 'our own Ordnance Survey maps.' Furthermore, the epistolary form of the novel, a common Gothic narrative form also utilised in 'Frankenstein,' means that events are reported in a sequential, very methodical way, as if carefully noting the necessary steps of an experiment. This is pertinent before the novel even begins, as the epigraph expresses the careful, methodical nature of the narrative, through words from the semantic field of science and logic such as

' sequence,' ' eliminated,' ' records' and ' knowledge.' Through this, it is clear from the outset that the novel is intrinsically linked with a desire to obtain a kind of serene, systematic approach to storytelling, in stark contrast to the blatantly supernatural action that will later take place. Newspaper articles, the use of phonographs and telegrams, the inclusion of the relatively-new medical technique of blood transfusions, and Dr Seward's observation of Renfield, ' I questioned him more fully...with a view to making myself master of the facts of his hallucination,' also contribute to the notion of rationality.

However, despite this, the novel at its core ' asks readers to wrestle with ideas of knowing, through reason and faith comingled' (Newcomb), illustrating the omnipresence of both reason and emotion. At times, they work in opposition, cast against each other in bitter conflict, such as through the desperate efforts of the men to restore Lucy to her full health through the blood transfusions, against the triumphant, dark forces of Count Dracula. At others, they are able to cooperate in harmony, and even Van Helsing himself argues ' it is the fault of our science that it wants to explain all; and if it explain not, then it says there is nothing to explain.' In arguing for his team to have more open minds, and for them to understand the importance of faith alongside science in their endeavour, he demonstrates a very progressive attitude: embodying the values of Kant's Enlightenment essay ' Dare to Know,' whilst also applying the traits of devotion and ' self-sacrifice' to achieve his goals. Jann even goes as far as saying that the novel overtly endorses the concept that the spiritual and supernatural are ' superior to

what can be proved,' highlighting a championing of faith and emotion over science.

Emotion, in particular with regards to lust and violence, manifests itself in a plethora of Gothic texts, in circumstances within the narrative whereby atrocities are committed, driven by either rage or passion, purely as a result of uncontrollable human urges, without a second thought given to rationality or order. For instance, in 'The Wasp Factory,' the protagonist, Frank, murders three relatives, including his own younger brother, without showing any palpable trace of remorse. Like Frankenstein, his former innocence is transformed into violence, through the discovery of man's treachery, and in Frank's case, an unconventional childhood which has shaped him into the ruthless killer he became. Endorsing violent passions is also present in 'The Picture of Dorian Gray,' where yet again, mankind is shown to be capable of committing atrocities, purely driven by their own compulsion, rather than due to any pre-calculated motives, and a debauched Dorian spirals into a life of crime in inner-city London. Similarly, Count Dracula himself has been described as 'a strangely alluring representation of...potent sexuality' (Buzwell) as he is the embodiment of sexual desire, which would have been shocking to a Victorian audience, particularly with the way he presents a 'scandalous challenge to socially normative constructions of the individual' (Holden). He undermines Harker's heterosexuality, and through him, homoerotic desire is insinuated, greatly disputing Harker's masculinity. In seducing male and female characters alike, Dracula threatens conventional, rational British society, which is why his presence becomes all the more alarming when it is on English soil; on popular, seemingly safe ground such

as 'Hampstead Heath.' Instances of further sexual licentiousness and seduction include the scene with the three brides, who acted with a 'deliberate voluptuousness which was both thrilling and repulsive.' The paradoxical nature of this description is indicative of the confusion and overwhelming surge of emotions felt by Harker, who up until this point had spoken with a very simple vernacular, composed of blunt, factual sentences and lacking in any excess of emotion. He allows himself to be enthralled in the experience, allowing himself to become fully at the mercy of these women who 'refute the conventional assumption of female passivity' (Craft). Sentence structures within his diary entry become elliptical and almost incoherent, as they are so infused with his evident pleasure and bewilderment, portraying how the emotional aspect of this pivotal event takes precedence over any reasonable approach to it. Comparable scenes of tantalising allurements exist within many of Carter's short stories, though of course given the fact that they were written almost 100 years after Stoker's novel, the frequency and intensity of such displays of human lust and desire should be expected to have increased, in this more open and sexually dynamic society. In 'The Company of Wolves,' the virginal heroine undresses herself before her potential murderer and 'freely gave the kiss she owed him,' safe in her belief that 'she was nobody's meat.' Rather than taking on the role of a passive observer, or even victim in the scene, the heroine subverts this archetypal Gothic convention, and therefore Carter, through her writing has constructed 'tales that prey upon the restrictive enclosures of fairy-tale formulae' (Armistead). The emotional confidence the heroine possesses, due to the fact she is protected within 'the invisible pentacle of her own virginity,' allows her to liberally embrace her situation, <https://assignbuster.com/reasons-triumph-over-emotion-in-gothic-literature/>

rather than reverting to the powers of reason and knowledge, which would surely inform her that she is in grave danger, and instead she calmly, assuredly determines her own fate, driven predominantly by her emotional maturity and faith.

To conclude, Gothic literature is heavily influenced by the complex interplay between reason and emotion, which can either be portrayed as antagonistic to each other, as in many of Carter's short stories, or as necessary together in order to fight against a supernatural presence in Stoker's 'Dracula.' Holden argues that 'rationality enabled the control of nature and the liberation for humankind from myth,' implying that the two must be mutually exclusive, but in 'Dracula,' it eventually becomes apparent that the opposite is true. While Van Helsing, Dr Seward and the other key proponents of reason appear to be victorious at the end of the novel, this comes with the price of accepting the reality of the dark forces of evil, and harbouring a new respect for the supernatural and its capabilities, allied with logic, rather than just logic and technology alone. Thus, it would be incorrect to allege that reason always triumphs over emotion, as this statement is too much of a sweeping generalisation and fails to take into account the ways in which they can coexist together. Instead, the relative strengths and weaknesses of each have been explored in both Carter and Stoker's fiction, and these texts' importance in displaying one of humanity's greatest debates: the 'reason versus emotion,' or 'science versus faith' conundrum is one of many reasons for why the two texts are still as influential today as they were at their time of publication.