

The influence of gothic fiction upon pre 20th century

Literature



It is defined in The Oxford Reference Encyclopedia as a story of terror and suspense, usually set in a gloomy castle or monastery. The Oxford English Reference Dictionary mentions the atmosphere of mystery and horror with a pseudo-medieval setting popular in the 18th and early 19th century. The Chambers concise dictionary identifies the gloomy sinister backgrounds with psychological horror and The Cambridge Guide to Literature in English explains the word 'gothic' has come to mean 'wild', 'barbarous' and 'crude'.

Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* (1764) is clearly labelled the first of the gothic novels in three out of my four references. This set a precedent for future writers and had many of the stereotypical features associated with Gothic fiction. Walpole himself revived the movement in gothic architecture renovating his house 'Strawberry Hill' in Twickenham to a gothic castle.

It is the medieval castles, the dungeons, monasteries and mountainous landscapes that people relate to Gothic Architecture which has always been a major aspect of the horror of a Gothic novel, creating isolation and fear in an unknown and ominous setting. The influence of the revival of gothic fiction has had undeniable effects on authors work, not all are so obvious however. In this essay I will be discussing and comparing the gothic features obvious in Susan Hill's *I'm the King of the Castle*, H. G. Wells' *The Red Room* and Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre*.

These three works have all been influenced by gothic fiction in different ways with varying levels of subtlety and effect. *The Red Room* is a short story written by H. G. Wells in 1896. It is a very traditional form of gothic fiction with the characteristic gothic elements such as the winding staircases and

secret passages. It plays with the ideas of ghosts, darkness and silence creating an eerie atmosphere for the reader. *I'm the King of the Castle* is a novel written in 1970 by Susan Hill, it is the most recent of all three texts.

It has a more subtle use of gothic elements being much more psychological and emotional without the stereotypical demons and ghosts which are heavily present in *The Red Room*. *Jane Eyre* is a novel written by Charlotte Bronte in 1846, the oldest of the three texts. Having only studied the first two chapters, I can only discuss the Gothic techniques used in these first chapters and compare them with my other texts. It's subtlety of gothic elements lies between *The Red Room* and *I'm the King of the Castle* being both emotional and traditional.

In *The Red Room* the gothic elements are very obvious, for example the winding staircases and the secret passageways immediately force the reader to think of danger and sinister things in a grand medieval castle which are known to be the characteristic setting of gothic fiction in the 19th century. In the darkness, the character in *The Red Room* insists of going to the Red Room alone. Isolation is always a major aspect of gothic novels, it creates fear, the future becomes ominous when a person is alone in dangerous surroundings, they are helpless and vulnerable.

It is as if he tries to comfort himself by speaking out loud, 'By Jove! ', he cries. Jove is the Roman mythological ruler of the gods, so it is as if he was calling out for help from 'Jove' because he knew he was in danger. Unlike the emotions the reader goes through when reading *I'm the King of the Castle*, when reading *The Red Room* it is the supernatural powers that have most

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effect on the reader '.... omens and witches were credible, and ghosts beyond denying. ' These evil spirits are not confined to the 'Red Room' however, there is a mysterious movement in the corridor before entering the Red Room '... the candle in the alcove suddenly went out'.

The colour red is a strong theme in this short story and has very strong connotations with the devil, danger and death not just being mentioned due to the Red Room however, there are 'red eyes' and 'red reflections'. Death also has a large input to the eeriness of the story, the 'young duke' died in the Red Room which implies to the reader that history might repeat itself during the man's visit to the Red Room, maybe not death but some form of harm, which happens to be true.

A gun is also mentioned, which has obvious links with death, the reader may wonder if it will need to be used during the course of this short story. Wells' conjures images of ghouls and evil powers with words like 'decaying', 'withered', 'grotesque', 'monstrous', 'echoes' and 'ghostly'. These are all words that one would associate with inhuman beings and it is very effective. The first two chapters of Jane Eyre has similar elements of gothic techniques to The Red Room, the most noticeable link being the red room which is featured in all three texts.

As a young girl Jane is locked in the red room and her superstitious mind begins to wonder, she becomes frightened in an unknown environment, it is dark and she is imprisoned against her will. Darkness, as in The Red Room, is a major aspect of the creepy and ghostly atmosphere created by Bronte, in darkness everything becomes more daunting simply because you can no

longer see it in its true form, vision is distorted, the reader can empathise with Jane because everybody has experienced darkness and the unknowing which comes with it.

Similarly to The Red Room somebody died in the room, Mr Reed died in the 'self same chamber' which haunts Jane, '... it was in this chamber he breathed his last;'. The room was filled with mahogany and 'crimson cloth', the red carpet, the shades 'glared white' with a pale throne, the dark red of the room connotes with death as in The Red Room and in my opinion the mahogany seems gloomy and depressing. Jane's imprisonment as a child links later on in the book to the imprisonment of the mad Mrs Rochester so in this way Bronte's Red Room is more effective than Wells'.

It has more relevance associating 'mad-cat' Jane with the mad Mrs Rochester, the two wives of Mr Rochester. Unlike The Red Room, Jane Eyre, as well as concentrating on creating gothic images with the descriptions of the chilling, 'solemn' and 'dreary' red room concentrates on Jane's emotions and passions. This emphasises the gothic elements apparent in the red room because the reader is able to discover her feelings and share her fears which makes the gothic elements more relevant and effective.

In Wells' short story there isn't time to delve deep into the man's mind, only to describe the setting and discover only the surface of the man's feelings. The reader would empathise more with Jane than the man from The Red Room as Bronte takes the time to explain her situation in depth and create sympathy from the reader. Contrasting completely to both previous texts mentioned is I'm the King of the Castle. It is the most modern of the three

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which is shown in the style of writing, it is more subtle with the gothic elements and at first sight wouldn't be named a 'gothic novel'.

Hill concentrates on the psychological side of things producing a 'piercing fable of the brutality latent in childhood innocence' unlike to Wells who simply produces a short 'scary' tale for the average reader of a magazine. *I'm the King of the Castle* uses the contrast of the natural environment of fields, woods and the weather with the artificial presence of Warings to provide atmosphere and mystery. The setting affects and reflects the characters.

The gloom of Warings acts as a physical parallel for the lives of the Hoopers, the yew trees, with their suggestion of death deepen the morbid atmosphere in Warings. The Red Room with dark wooden panelling and staircases, the attic full of dead and rotting things are all aspects of the setting which have such a disastrous affect on Kingshaw. As in *The Red Room* and *Jane Eyre* the red room in *I'm the King of the Castle* is linked with death, the dead and rotting moths and Hooper's dead grandfather whose house it was originally and again has connotations with all things red, the devil, blood, and danger.

I'm the King of the Castle similarly deals with death which is obviously a major gothic technique used by all three authors, it opens with the death of Hooper's grandfather and ends with Kingshaw's suicide and contains many references to death with the fish, the rabbit and, as I have already mentioned, the moths. Unlike Wells and Bronte, Hill not only focuses on the inner surroundings of the house but also describes in vast detail the outer surroundings of Warings. Warings is a isolated and desolate 'ugly' house, a

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'rather tall and badly angled' house 'built of dark red brick' separated from the village of Derne.

The word 'separate' highlights the isolation in I'm the King of the Castle which is a key theme in all three texts but especially in Kingshaw's case. Warings is isolated from civilisation with only Hang wood as a near sanctuary for Kingshaw. He goes there to escape from Hooper but it only backfires as he follows him and heightens Kingshaw's vulnerability in an unknown surrounding. The Red Room and Jane Eyre also use unknown environments as a core element of fear. Kingshaw, Jane and the man in The Red Room all become helpless trapped in a red room or in Hooper's shed.

Hill also uses the forbidden to illustrate fear and mystery when Joseph Hooper prohibits Hooper to look in the Red Room which of course he defies and discover the 'decaying moths' in glass cabinets. Unlike Wells, Bronte and Hill use an evil character, eg. Jane's cousin John and Hooper. This is a very effective device increasing Jane and Kingshaw's helplessness in parts of the story. Hill makes more of this than Bronte creating a psychological power battle between Hooper and Kingshaw whereas Bronte simply uses John as a bully.

In conclusion all the texts I studied have gothic elements and have been influenced by the original 'gothic novel' and many factors are extremely similar, there are however many differences. I find I'm the King of the Castle a more disturbing and poignant tale where as The Red Room is a simple and typical horror story of its time with no real effect on the reader in modern

day, it only gave a short lived fright a hundred years ago and now, with today's sophisticated readers would have no effect.

I'm the King of the Castle uses the real fear of human immorality rather than the paranormal. *Jane Eyre* is very effective using a mixture of the two techniques, it creates emotions from the reader but also relies on the detailed description of the 'solemn' red room. It is less moving and poignant than *I'm the King of the Castle* because Hill has updated the gothic novel and modernised it to have real relevance today.