

Analysing Gothic Literature - Wuthering Heights

Gothic literature pictures the human condition as an ambiguous mixture of good and evil powers that cannot be understood fully by human reason. Thus, the gothic perspective conceives of the human condition as a paradox, a dilemma of duality, humans are divided in the conflict between opposing forces, in the world and in themselves.

- (1) A setting in space or time or both sufficiently removed from the reader of 1800 that there would be no intrusion of everyday standards of factual probability and morality. [...]
- (2) There is a moral norm present in the story. [...]
- (3) The action derives from a complex villain-hero. [...]
- (4) The confusion of evil and good which the Gothic novel reflects in its villain heroes produces a non-Christian or anticlerical feeling. (286-287)

Based on Hume's description, it can be determined that the primary goal of the gothic novel is to evoke emotional and questioning responses from the reader, often those of shock and fear.

Jeffrey Jerome Cohen's book, Monster Theory: Reading Culture

In the first chapter of his book, Cohen puts forth the idea that the monster is always a faction of our culture that we try to hide. "It is always a displacement, always inhabits the gap between the time of upheaval that created it and the moment into which it is received, to be born again" (4). The monster, or in this case, fear, exists as a part of our culture that we do not accept and often refuse to acknowledge. Therefore, even the classics of Gothic literature are often still scary, just in a different way than they once were.

Transgression and the sublime:

The terrors and horrors of transgression in Gothic writing become a powerful means to reassert the values of society, virtue and propriety: transgression, by crossing the social and aesthetic limits, serves to reinforce or underline their value and necessity, restoring or defining limits."

Botting goes on to argue that Gothic literature uses transgression not only to uphold the limits and reinforce the status quo, but also to lead to a questioning of these ideals. Gothic literature is not afraid to test the limits of cultural acceptability in its style, characters, or situations. It does so by forcing women into adventurous, or manly, positions in order to complete a task. The ideals of right and wrong are questioned, and with that comes the debate of whether to believe science or the church. Author and philosopher Edmund Burke, in his piece "Sublime and the Beautiful," suggests that pushing these limits is frightening to people and doing so forces them into the unknown, which leads to the sublime, or a feeling of being completely overwhelmed, but also leading to a moment of transcendence. (This is also deeply associated with Romanticism)

Transgression forces the reader to think about what would happen to the world if these existing boundaries were to be passed, and therefore, demolished.

Familiarity is safe, and by taking away the familiarity of the way that things are supposed to be, transgression leaves the reader or the characters in the novel feeling exposed and vulnerable to the unknown.

Likewise, monsters often point out a border not to be crossed. In my senior seminar we defined "monster" as the "embodiment of cultural fears in the form of a creature; the monster marks the border between the self and the other" (Huff).

In his book, **Monster Theory: Reading Culture**, Cohen states that the monster is feared for seven reasons:

- (1) the monster embodies the culture's anxieties, wants, and fears,
- (2) the monster always escapes,
- (3) the monster cannot be put into one category,
- (4) the monster represents everything that people do not want to be,
- (5) the monster illustrates what is possible,
- (6) the monster is actually representative of the culture's desires, and
- (7) the monster is on the line of being human and inhuman.

Cohen seems to be suggesting that while the monster is different from humans, it seems to still be very much like a human, just the parts of humanity that we wish to repress.

The "monster" does not have to be a monster as we often think of it today, with scary teeth, strength, and as some sort of mutant. The Gothic definition of "monster" would suggest that the "monster" is simply the return of what we are trying to hide from ourselves. Perhaps we are hiding our innermost desires, tempers, or hatred. Often, even in the Gothic, "monsters" tend to appear like the monsters that are commonly thought of as some other sort of being, but that is not always the case. The "monster" forces the reader to examine what it is that is being repressed and to confront the idea that we too are capable of horrible things.

In *Frankenstein*, the creature and Victor both provide readers with interesting discussion opportunities about monsters. Is the creature a monster or is the monster Victor? Why is the creature the way that he is? Could the tragic events of the novel have been prevented? Because the story is told from Victor's perspective can the reader believe what he says? This novel allows for students to explore in depth the term "monster" and to really examine what "monster" looks like in the Gothic.

Often transgression, as well as monsters, can lead to a pinnacle of fear that leads to clarity, otherwise known as the sublime. In Gothic stories, novels, or movies, characters are suddenly pushed into situations that seem so much bigger than themselves. Immanuel Kant, a well-known German philosopher, states:

The feeling of the sublime is, therefore, at once a feeling of displeasure, arising from the inadequacy of the imagination in the aesthetic estimation of magnitude to attain to its estimation by reason, and a simultaneously awakened pleasure, arising from this very judgment of inadequacy of the greatest faculty of sense being in accord with ideas of reason, so far as the effort to attain to these is for us law.

Author and philosopher Edmund Burke in his piece "Romanticism," states that there are nine different sources of the sublime: obscurity, nature, blinding light, difficulty, terror, power, vastness, infinity, and privation (1-20). In these scenarios characters are in the midst of a seemingly dreadful and inescapable place or state, or are stunned by what appears impossible until they reach this moment of ecstasy and clarity. However, it is the dark and overwhelming feeling prior to that clarity that causes great fear.

People seemed to be fascinated by things that they cannot fully understand.

How was Stonehenge able to be built, and still be standing to this day? How are phenomena such as tornadoes and earthquakes able to cause so much destruction?

How is someone capable of so much hate? These topics, issues, disasters elude us because they are so unfamiliar to us.

They fascinate us, but more than that the uncertainty frightens us. This is sublime.

It appears to me that there are five characteristics which are shared by the period of adolescence and the Gothic genre. The first one may be described as extremes of emotion; the second as the journey of self-revelation; third, the individual against the unknown; fourth, rebellion against authority; and, finally, sympathy with the outcast.

Monster (what makes a monster?), Transgression (Where is the line?), Sublime (What overwhelms you?)

Is Heathcliff the real monster or can we pose another candidate?