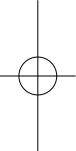


Contemporary Fiction: Postmodern Gothic

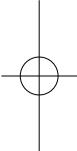
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In the twentieth century the term ‘Gothic’ tends to become replaced with ‘Horror,’ at least where popular literature is concerned. In part such a change in nomenclature is a recognition that the various associations that ‘Gothic’ has with formulaic plots involving aristocratic villains amid ruined castles, set within sublime landscapes, are not the stock-in-trade of writers such as Stephen King, James Herbert, John Saul, Dean Koontz, or Shaun Hutson, amongst many others.

The post-war boom in mass-produced pulp fiction (so called because of the poor quality of paper on which they were printed in the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s) is not confined to horror. The post-war era was also characterised in both text- and non-text -based media by other popular modes, most notably science fiction and detective fiction.

The popularity of these novels should not detract from the fact that, in keeping with the Gothic tradition, they still address cultural anxieties. In America the Southern Gothic of the 1940s and 1950s, of writers such as Carson McCullers and Flannery O’Connor, reworks themes about region, murder, and insanity which arguably have their roots in the Gothic of Edgar Allan Poe.¹ In addition, Stephen King’s novels repeatedly dwell on social problems generated within small American towns where the social limitations of such an environment become emblematic of wider issues relating to social and moral obligations. His novel *Carrie* (1974), for example, concerns the failure of family, peers, and schools to protect the vulnerable, and consequently it takes some delight in destroying much of the small town where it is set.² A figure of comparable standing in Britain is James Herbert, and his novel *The Rats* (1974) can, at one



level, be read as a tale about inner city decay.³ Such a popular form is not without examples of intellectual complexity. Clive Barker's work, for example, takes its place within a horror tradition but also explores a set of complex postmodern ideas about the nature of representation. His collection of tales, *Books of Bloods*, includes 'Son of Celluloid' (1988), which centres on an escaped prisoner, Barberio, who is suffering from cancer. He is mortally wounded in a shoot-out with the police, and hides in a cinema behind the screen, where he dies of his wounds; however, the cancer takes on a life of its own as it searches for new victims, and does so by taking on the form of various film stars such as John Wayne, Marilyn Monroe, Peter Lorre, and Greta Garbo (thus suggesting that an apparently pristine Hollywood golden age was not as pure as it seemed).⁴ Barker's novel *Weaveworld* (1988) also, as the title implies, looks at how worlds are artistically constructed through the bringing together of various forms of representation.⁵

Barker's writings mentioned here can be regarded as exercises in postmodernism. Whilst modernism focused on the fragmented nature of subjectivity (and so exploited the Gothic fascination with fractured selves), postmodernism represents a scepticism about the grand narratives (such as religion, for example) which once provided social and moral norms. In a contemporary, postmodern age one can no longer believe in coherent, universal, claims to truth which, so the argument goes, are replaced by moral relativism. Such a world is defined by the absence of absolute meaning, and in literature this becomes manifested through stylistic play in which narrative forms are run together to create synthetic worlds which foreground issues about representation above any moral or metaphysical concerns. In other words, postmodernism seems to be peculiarly suited to the Gothic because it questions the notion that one inhabits a coherent or otherwise abstractly rational world. As we shall see, some authors who have written in the Gothic mode and appear to incorporate elements of the postmodern, such as Angela Carter and Toni Morrison, are in fact sceptical about postmodernism or certain aspects of it. Carter and Toni Morrison are not 'horror' writers in the way that King and Herbert are. Their self-conscious literary qualities distance them from such writers, even though their texts discussed here do refer back to an earlier Gothic tradition. To what extent there exists a postmodern Gothic is

the issue addressed in this section. One writer whose work has been described as a forerunner to postmodernism, Shirley Jackson, helps us to see how the issues of the older Gothic are reworked within new models of 'horror' that appear to anticipate the postmodern.

Jackson's *The Haunting of Hill House* (1959) reworks Gothic tropes which are familiar from the Female Gothic. The tale is focalised by the 32-year-old Eleanor Vance, whose mother has recently died. Eleanor had nursed her mother for eleven years and her death provokes feelings of guilt over her new-found freedoms. Eleanor, as a child, had been involved in some seemingly paranormal experience when the family house was showered by stones. Dr Montague, a paranormal investigator, contacts Eleanor in an attempt to form a team of psychically sensitive individuals to take to Hill House, a renowned haunted house, in order to examine if their psychically receptive natures would help him to explore any supernatural experiences that they might encounter there. Eleanor agrees to participate in this experiment, which initially revolves around her, Dr Montague, Theodora (for whom Eleanor has implied sexual feelings), and Luke (who stands to inherit the house). This theme of the absent mother is given a twist by Jackson as she uses it to address the tensions between Eleanor's feelings of loss and her sense that such loss will enable her to forge a new identity. This becomes clear in Eleanor's initial feelings that Hill House can help her to develop an independent identity (that is, an identity that is independent of her mother's influence). She notes at one point, 'what a complete and separate thing I am, [...] going from my red toes to the top of my head, individually an I, possessed of attributes belonging only to me'.⁶ However, this emerging sense of self is compromised by the ghostly activities within the house, which are either due to the presence of a malevolent entity or are a projection of Eleanor's highly ambivalent feelings of belonging (ones which depend on the guilty rejection of her mother) .

The ghost in the house, at one level, implies the lingering presence of Eleanor's mother. Eleanor refuses to go into the library because its mustiness reminds her of her. After one terrifying visitation a chalked message is found on a wall: 'HELP ELEANOR COME HOME' (p.146). This creates some suspicion,

with Theodora accusing Eleanor of having written it herself. Later some other letters appear above Theodora's bed, 'HELP ELEANOR COME HOME ELEANOR' (p.155), and in another scene Eleanor seems to hear her name being called. Eleanor's highly precarious sense of self is suggested in these peculiar moments of projection which imply that she has not separated herself from her mother. Haunting in that respect looks like selfhaunting within a context (the house) which restages Freud's debate about the uncanny. As in the 'Uncanny', Eleanor is confronted by her fears in what appears to be a neurotically developed encounter with a double (her projected 'mother'). However, it is important to consider what is 'neurotic' about Eleanor's behaviour, because interpreted in more political (rather than psychological) terms the novel reads as a Female Gothic challenge to notions of domesticity. Eleanor's inability to escape from her mother's domestic tyranny can thus be read as a critique of the limitations imposed on women by a strict adherence to conventional, gendered, domestic roles. Darryl Hattenhauer, however, notes that the fundamental ambivalence of the novel is that 'Domestic ideology makes her believe she is free when in fact she is trapped'.⁷ Eleanor thus fails to trust her initial instincts which tell her that 'Hill House is vile, it is diseased; get away from here at once' (p.33). Eleanor is eventually forced out of the house by the others. This leaves her with nowhere to go (literally and psychologically) and she commits suicide by crashing her car in the grounds of Hill House. Her final thoughts articulate both her estrangement and her fragile grasp on her motivation: 'Why am I doing this? Why am I doing this? Why don't they stop me?' (p.246). Such a desperate plea for help can also be related to an earlier image of estrangement which is associated with writing.

There are repeated references to Dr Montague's leisure reading, which includes Samuel Richardson's *Pamela* (1740), a novel in which the eponymous heroine is sexually pursued by the rakish Lord B. This emphasises a theme in Jackson's novel concerning women who are placed in danger by patriarchal men, as Eleanor is in Dr Montague's experiment. The reference to texts and the dangers they refer to is further underlined in Montague's claim that the best place to try to manifest a spirit is in the library (the stale atmosphere of which Eleanor had previously associated with her mother) because 'materializations are often best

produced in rooms where there are books' (p.186). It is in the library that Eleanor, seemingly overwhelmed by the atmosphere, endangers herself by climbing a precarious staircase from which she has to be rescued. However, it is revealing that this moment of danger is staged in the library, which for Eleanor is the place in the house which she cannot enter: 'I can't go in there; I'm not allowed in there' (p.228). Hattenhauer has noted that this foregrounding of fictionality is reflected in the many different modes of writing employed in the novel, including 'the Gothic, fantastic, fabulist, allegorical, tragic, darkly comic, and grotesque', which means that the novel anticipates 'postmodernism's writing about writing' (p.5). In other words, the knowing use of literary references (which includes jokes about Count Dracula) foreshadows postmodernism's model of moral emptiness in which style triumphs over content. *The Haunting of Hill House* can thus be read as a complex latter-day example of the Female Gothic which stylistically cultivates a literary ambience which anticipates postmodernism's version of emptiness (which also explains Eleanor's implicit association of books with 'death'). The relationship between postmodernism and the Gothic is particularly relevant to a reading of Angela Carter's rewriting of fairy tales in *The Bloody Chamber* (1979).

Angela Carter, as well as rewriting fairy tales, also edited two collections of them for Virago Press (in 1990 and 1992), which included tales collected by Charles Perrault in the 1690s. Perrault rewrote and sanitised the order, darker, oral tales in order to use them to make moral points about the conduct of middle-class children.⁸ The issue of textual ownership of such tales is a key element in their transformation (from oral tales generated within predominantly peasant cultures, to their sanitising by Perrault). In *The Bloody Chamber* Carter attempts to reclaim these tales from their seventeenth-century recompositions in order to draw out their covert gender implications. The tales also rework elements familiar from the Female Gothic concerning absent mothers and how their presence promises salvation to their daughters. 'The Bloody Chamber' is a version of the Bluebeard story in which a vulnerable young wife recounts finding the bodies of her husband's murdered former wives in a room that she has been forbidden to enter. The tale concludes with the arrival of her mother, summoned by 'maternal

telepathy' (reworking Radcliffe's heroines' unconscious pursuits of their mothers), who 'took aim and put a single, irreproachable bullet through my husband's head' leaving her, in an echo of *Jane Eyre*, to form a more equitable relationship with a blind piano teacher.⁹ Carter has been criticised in feminist circles because her heroines often appear complicit in – because at some level they appear to find pleasurable – the dangers that they are ostensibly threatened by. Merja Makinen has argued that such an approach overlooks the playful nature of Carter's rewritings which mock notions of misogynistic complicity, and moves beyond it by challenging the whole idea of a binary gender divide.¹⁰ Indeed, Carter rewrites such tales so that the typical female victims are able to gain some rapprochement with their supposed aggressors (with the obvious exception of Bluebeard). In 'The Company of Wolves' (a reworking of 'Little Red Riding Hood'), for example, the girl resists the sexual threat posed by the werewolf. When he restates the familiar refrain that his large teeth are 'All the better to eat you with', she 'burst out laughing; she knew she was nobody's meat.'¹¹ The tale closes on an implied post-coital moment in which 'sweet and sound she sleeps in granny's bed, between the paws of the tender wolf' (p.159). These reworkings of older narrative forms suggest an engagement with postmodernism, but in one key respect they compromise such an association – their attempt to establish alternative models of rationality.

Aidan Day has claimed that Carter was a rationalist who deliberately worked against Enlightenment theories of reason indebted to the work of René Descartes. Descartes's famous dictum 'I think therefore I am' emphasised a binary between inner consciousness and the outer material world (or between self and other).¹² This binary opposition underpins such pairings as conscious/unconscious, rational/irrational, and masculine/feminine, the kinds of pairings which the Gothic, in its more radical guises, challenges. Carter breaks down what she regards as an artificial distinction between masculine/feminine. For Day, the roots of Carter's thinking on this are to be found in her critique of the Marquis de Sade in *The Sadeian Woman* (1979) that she was working on at the same time as *The Bloody Chamber*. There she argues that Sade reworks Descartes's objectifying dictum as 'I fuck therefore I am', which articulates a clear gender/power relationship of

men over women (conceived of in Sade's penetrative terms) which she is working against.¹³ For Day, Carter 'wants a model for the relationship between people that is based on the principle of reciprocity rather than self-definition by exclusion' (p.101), a view captured in the image of the girl asleep between the paws of the wolf (an image of 'manliness') at the end of 'The Company of Wolves'. Carter's work thus challenges the view that postmodernism can be reduced to linguistic or representational play. Within her 'play' (and Carter's critique of patriarchy is fundamentally comic) there is an attempt to both rebut the claims of a postmodern relativism whilst establishing a model of identity politics which exists beyond the old Enlightenment dualisms. The issue of postmodernism has also played a role in shaping the perception of another novel that uses elements of the Gothic: Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987). *Beloved* is based on the true story of Margaret Garner, a slave working in Ohio, who with her four children and others attempted to escape from their owner in 1855. The group was recaptured but not before Margaret Garner had killed one of her infant children and attacked the others. Garner said she had killed her child because this seemed a preferable fate than the slow death inflicted by slavery. Her actions also indicated that she claimed ownership of the children as hers, rather than acknowledging them as slaves that belonged to the slave owner. In Morrison's novel, which is set eighteen years after the killing, the role of the mother is taken by Sethe, who lives with her eighteen-year-old daughter Denver (two sons ran away when they were in their teens).¹⁴ The house is haunted by the ghost of 'Beloved', the baby whom Sethe had killed. On the arrival of an old companion, Paul D, a former slave (the novel is set in the post-slavery era but refers back to it), he and Sethe begin an affair and he scares away the ghost. Shortly afterwards a stranger called 'Beloved' who would have been the same age as Sethe's first daughter appears and becomes like a sister to Denver and a daughter to Sethe, and drives Paul D out of the house. The ghostly presence of Beloved refers to many different histories, not only Sethe's personal history but also the history of slavery and therefore the history of America.

The novel moves backwards and forwards between the present and the past in order to examine the formative experiences in the lives of the principal

characters. There is a deliberate ambivalence about Beloved, who can be read as either the return of Sethe's daughter, or as someone whose account of the past suggests that she experienced the journey on the slave ships used to transport Africans to America. Morrison creates this ambivalence by indicating that Beloved can be related to personal and political pasts because personal pasts are determined by political acts (such as Sethe's claim of 'ownership' over the infant Beloved by killing her). The novel uses ghosting as a complex allegory for the reclamation of the past which requires a process of rememory. The complicated stylistics of the novel might appear to emulate the type of literary play which characterises postmodernism but, as in Carter, postmodernist ideas of absence are challenged. The novel suggests tensions between absence (as in the use of the ghost) and presence (as in what that ghost represents, what past it keeps alive). The presence of the ghost (the presence of an absence, as it were) breaks down the boundaries between the living and the dead in order to generate an allegory about African Americans' experience in which as a group they are there but not there, powerfully present but culturally and economically marginalised. Rafael Pérez-Torres notes that this constitutes a highly politicised critique of the postmodern because it challenges the notion of 'absence' by using it as a conceit for historical and cultural invisibility, so that 'while Morrison's narrative shares affinities with other postmodern texts, it also suggests a connection between its narrative strategies and the sociohistorical conditions of Africans in the Americas', which means that the apparent postmodern 'narrative pastiche' in the novel is used 'to contest history as a master narrative', because it asks questions about who produces 'history'.¹⁵ Jackson, Carter, and Morrison are writing within different contexts, but all of them focus on issues about representation and motherhood. They all explore the meaning of absence (mothers, children, histories) as a critique of the type of empty representation that defines one version of the postmodern.

Notes

1. See A. Robert Lee on 'Southern Gothic' in *The Handbook to Gothic Literature*. ed. Marie Mulvey-Roberts (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1998), pp. 217-20, where

he makes this link with Poe.

2. Stephen King, *Carrie* (London: New English Library, 1974).
3. James Herbert, *The Rats* (London: New English Library, 1974).
4. Clive Barker, 'Son of Celluloid', in *Clive Barker's Books of Blood*, vol.3 (London: Sphere, 1988), pp. 1-35.
5. Clive Barker, *Weaveworld* (Glasgow: Collins, 1988). See Andrew Smith, 'Worlds That Creep Up on You: Postmodern Illusions in the Work of Clive Barker', in *Creepers: British Horror and Fantasy in the Twentieth Century*, ed. Clive Bloom (London: Pluto, 1993), pp. 176-86.
6. Shirley Jackson, *The haunting of Hill House* (London: Constable, [1959] 1999), p.83. All subsequent references in the text are to this edition.
7. Darryl Hattenhaur, *Shirley Jackson's American Gothic* (New York; State University of New York, 1999), pp. 160-1. All subsequent references in the text are to this edition.
8. For an extended analysis of Perrault's 'Little Red Riding Hood' see Jack Zipes, *The Trials Tribulations of Little Red Riding Hood* (London: Routledge, 1993).
9. Angela Carter, 'The Bloody Chamber', in *The Bloody Chamber* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1979), pp. 7-52, p.51.
10. Merja Makinen, 'Angela Carter's *The Bloody Chamber* and the decolonisation of feminine sexuality', in *Angela Carter: New Casebooks*, ed. Alison Easton (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2000), pp. 20-36.
11. Angela Carter, 'The Company of Wolves', in *The Bloody Chamber* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1979), pp. 148-59, p.158. All subsequent references in the text are to this edition.
12. Aidan Day, *Angela Carter: The Rational Glass* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1998), see pp. 91-106. All subsequent references in the text are to this edition.
13. Angela Carter, *The Sadeian Woman* (London: Virago, 1979), p.26, cited in Day, *Angela Carter*, p. 97.
14. See Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (London: Vintage, 1987).
15. Rafael Pérez-Torres, 'Between Presence and Absence: *Beloved*, Postmodernism and Blackness', in *Beloved: A Casebook*, ed. William L. Andrews and Nellie Y. McKay (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), pp. 179-201, p. 184, p. 194.

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