

Psychological Approaches of Gothic Literature in Contemporary America

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Abstract

The following article is a testimony of the widely spread Gothic literature which has gradually evolved, clustering day by day more styles, themes and narrative threads. Suffice is to say that the American authors' digging deep in human consciousness has materialized into a primary focus for the Gothic researchers.

New psychological areas have opened to the so called 'psychological Gothic'. Bearing in mind the fact that certain behavior and attitudes influence dramatically and sometimes irreversibly our mind, we understand the necessity of a 'psychological discussion' about this topic. Therefore, this article aims at literary concreteness and at a better understanding of Gothic anxieties projected back into barbaric times that seemed to be more appropriate for this type of psychology.

Keywords: *Gothic, literature, approach, American, psychology.*

Introduction

Nowadays, it is no surprise that psychological approaches can be applied to everything that a Gothic text may signify. From the very beginning of the Gothic, authors have demonstrated a great proclivity for this genre and greater interest to valorize its conventions. The American combination between Gothic and Psychology started with Edgar Allan Poe and reached its highest with contemporary authors, such as Anne Rice, Stephanie Meyer, Joyce Carol Oates, and Stephen King. Beyond the scare that you may get when reading a Gothic story, there will be always the paradox that it keeps your senses activated and, shortly, it keeps you alive. Then, there are the Gothic moralizing teachings as we are introduced down in the netherworld and taught to come out to the light. This is somehow a metaphorical expression, due to its psychological implications: as we sink into the darkness and hopeless land of sin, neither are we aware of our crimes- nor do we try to repent for them. But, when fighting with evil, we struggle to survive, and only then do we find out our limits and resources. The Gothic introspection relies on the basic fundamentals of Psychology: psychodynamics, behaviorism, cognitivism, humanism, and biologic. It is acknowledged that feelings, perceptions, and sensations are strongly connected to behavior and actions. The Gothic characters fall under the rules of a cruel society disturbed

by the reprehensible deeds of their succumbed sense of morality. As the characters are at a loss, the consciousness becomes a leitmotif and the reader cannot trust in a proper judgment. The fact is that one becomes more powerful when it comes to harm a community he denies and where he feels expelled from. Psychological Gothic approaches, as referred in this article, try to explain all these attitudes and actions, even if this supposes a large journey into the human psyche and an incessant work

Materials and Methods

By combining the investigative and analytical method, I have explored the content and discourse analysis forms. The investigation relied on psychological inquiries in abnormal issues, such as the horrific transformations of Stephen King's IT in multiple creatures that came from the protagonists' immanent vulnerabilities, exploiting to paroxysm their fears and weaknesses.

My purpose was to bring forth important issues, such as the control that bad people managed to impose in the world, and the manipulation and extermination of mankind through hunger, disease, and wars.

The materials I have used were the electronic books provided by the quoted sources. The information was disseminated carefully, and the details were linked to the topic. Significant publications in

the field of Psychology were also consulted. I have used personal deductions based on theories and logical arguments.

Psychology and Gothic, the lurid variables of the twenty-first century

The psychological factor is dominant when speaking about American Gothic literature. Mental illness, bipolar disorder, excessive sensibility, and lack of judgment are only a few elements that 'shape' the Gothic characters. The Gothic writings can be seen as observational and motivational tales that warn people about the chaos, anarchy, and inhumanity that install in a society. Fear, panic, and excessive irascibility generate mental deviations; such common themes define one literature and put 'an emphasis on the grotesque, the macabre and, very often, the violent, investigating madness, decay and despair, and the continuing pressures of the past upon the present'.¹

Without a clear understanding of the psychopath, we cannot delineate the Gothic psychological profile. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary* definition this means 'a personality disorder characterized by persistent impulsive, irresponsible, antisocial, and often violent or aggressive behaviour, often accompanied by an inability to form normal relationships with others.'²

This complex character was related to the Darwinist evolutionist theories and, therefore people's investigations about the pluralities of worlds and their parallelism with our own become inevitable. Thus, scholars' attention was drawn to creatures from other worlds, mostly to the differences and similarities with human beings. All this was enwrapped in a phantasmagorical cloak and strange things much above the human perception and total control of man's behavior came out. From this tendency, already given by the British authors, to the depiction of the characters' immanence, there was only one step.

In the nineteenth century, the Gothic phenomenon reached America and made its way among the great writers of the time. Charles Brockden Brown was the first to write in this new language and then followed writers like Edgar Allan Poe, Washington Irving, and many others. Their message was the depiction of human life and society's faults. But, most of all, they presented human nature as irreversibly forced by some unknown forces to commit murders and other devilish deeds. The forensic exploration of the human mind and motivation reveals the darkness of the Gothic character, materialized in something 'which ought to have been kept concealed but which has nevertheless come to light.'³

¹ David Punter and Glennis Byron. 2004. *The Gothic*. Malden, MA, and Oxford: Blackwell.,116-17;

² J. Simpson and E. Weiner, eds, *The Oxford English Dictionary: Second Edition* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1989).

³ https://www.researchgate.net/publication/326394754_Forensic_Psychology_and_the_New_Gothic

American and British Gothic present great differences between them. Gothic has been always a constant in British culture- from the graveyard poetry and the barbarian Lonelich to Horace Walpole, Anne Radcliffe, Mary Shelley, and Bram Stoker. They emphasized the supernatural, the uncanny, the incomprehensible of the Universe, those things that only the satanic legions can understand, and people that passed away a long time ago in the Valley of the Shadows. On the other hand, the Americans turn these things into psychological things, giving human beings more liberty to choose between good and evil. Nonetheless, the character is delineated by the author's mind, thinking, and spiritual mood. As a reader, you can try to do your analysis in the character's psycho, because 'nothing that the genre's monsters are impure or unclean. They are putrid or mouldering things or they hail from oozing places or they are of dead or rotting flesh...or are associated with vermin, disease.'⁴

Freud's investigations and representations of the psychological processes are the basis for a scrupulous analysis of the human character. His dreams (story, play, and painting) are 'the royal road to the unconscious.' The road from the obvious meaning to the invisible, hidden content could be realized through *condensation*, *displacement*, and *symbolism*.⁵

Freud's research about the ego, super ego, and id became role models much above conscious and unconscious because they 'introduce a sense of dynamism' in humans.

Kant also emphasizes this idea and focuses on the individual consciousness and introspection into the subject's mind. But, this cannot be realized so easily.

Burke divided the emotions into *sublime*, *astonishment*, *fear*, and *terror* where 'aesthetics don't have to be associated only with beauty, but also with something called terror' and all the motions of the soul 'are suspended with some degree of horror'.⁶

Burke's essay and Kant's ideas were extremely inspiring for the literature beyond the Ocean. The American writers focused on human psychology and revealed that the human being is the offspring of terrible hide-and-peek between life and death, a creation that becomes irrational when it is forced to choose between good and evil. As already claimed, Death's project is neatly sustained by its faithful slaves: Wasting, Sickness, Pain, and Decay.⁷

Fashion was also impregnated with Gothic flavour and painted with suggestive colours, as well; *black* is everywhere- the colour of mourning, darkness, and bitterness of the human soul. The style – expressed through dark clothing, hair, nails even lipstick and

⁴ Noel Carroll, *Philosophy of Horror* quoted. In Jack Morgan, *The Biology of Horror*, p.28)

⁵ Bob Rope, *Theoretical Positions and Practical Approaches*, Second Edition, Routledge,2002, p. 98

⁶ Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origins of Our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful*, 1757

⁷ Jack Morgan, *The Biology of Horror –Gothic Literature and Film*, Southern Illinois U. Press, Carbondale ,2002,16

eyeliner used equally by women and men- recalls the Victorian and Elizabethan Ages. The clothing is the main element to recognize the Gothic style; it is 'the profusion of black velvets, lace, fishnets, and leather tinged with scarlet or purple, accessorized with tightly laced corsets, gloves, precarious stilettos and silver jewellery depicting religious or occult themes'⁸. All of these are inspired by Gothic literature whose reading is 'an atavistic experience.'⁹

Around the mid-nineteenth century, Andrew Jackson Downing and Alexander Jackson Davis promoted the Gothic revival style and preferred it mostly in cottages or country homes. The new asymmetrical shapes with their intersected barrel vaults, flying buttresses, and extrusion of curves marked the dawn of the new Romantic Era.

Willkie Collins and Edgar Allan Poe were the founders the detective fiction, Hawthorne taught us to discern purity from sin, Anne Rice embodied the feminine vampire in a romance while the Southern Gothic authors (Faulkner, Harper Lee, Flannery O'Connor) wrote about the decline of the aristocracy, grotesque, tensions among the human races, and especially about the moral perdition associated with the collapse of the American dream.

Criticism argues that in the twentieth century, Gothic is nowhere and everywhere. Moreover, it was considered that perversity and darkness of the male characters would be irreversibly attractive for women, and this way, the latter would irremediably slip into sin and guilt. The mysterious charming gentleman, in fact, the offspring of Satan himself- exercised upon the feminine gender an unexplainable sexual desire, passion, and excitement.

In Anne Rice's *Chronicles*, the vampire is humanized as she turned the characteristics of the vampire figure from the eighteenth century into a modern version having as clear purpose the transformation of the vampire 'from an objectification of metaphysical evil into simply another image of ourselves seen in a distorting mirror'¹⁰.

Moreover, Rice's biographer, Katherine Ramsland characterizes as androgynous the author vampires from *Interview with a Vampire*, *The Vampire Lestat*, and *Queen of the Damned*. This is sustained by Rice's own words about the perfect and ideal androgynous figure also perceived by critics as a political metaphor. The characters present a strong psychological constitution as they can discern between the human life and the vampire's life, fighting to understand them better while surpassing the crises of their personalities, loss of their identity, and risking the similitude with some hilarious creatures.

⁸ Ted Polhemus, *Streetstyle: from Sidewalk to Catwalk*, 1994, Thames and Hudson, p.97

⁹ Valdine Clemens, *The Return of the Repressed :Gothic Horror from The Castle of Otranto to Alien*, The National Library of Canada, 1994, p.2-3;

¹⁰ Zanger, Jules. "Metaphor into Metonymy: The Vampire Next Door." *Blood Read: The Vampire as Metaphor in Contemporary Culture*. Eds. Joan Gordon and Veronica Hollinger. Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 1997. 17-26.

Unlike Stoker's classic blood-thirsty vampire, Rice's vampires lose much of their diabolic nature, interacting with humans and adopting a 'domestic' behavior. This is the modern vampire designed so that the reader could observe that even a vampire can create, even feel and practise the art. Thus, the vampire Lestat is a rock celebrity and the vampire Armand loves literature and theatre.

Rice puts a high price on the family relationship, sometimes using her own experience and lived moments. The interest in paranormal, occult forces, and what cannot be explained materialized in short stories where the Gothic spirit is employed through the use of the uncanny, supernatural, and ghosts. Therefore, as a New York Times writer appreciates 'Anne Rice has what may be described as a Gothic imagination crossed with a campy taste for the decadent and bizarre'.¹¹

The Gothic conventions were used to reveal the dark side of the human soul with its antisocial behavior, reprehensible deeds, and other things meant to destroy the social order and break society's rules. She created multi-layered literature in a universe of parallel worlds where the reader is caught in a labyrinth and his only way out is hanging up with the real, present, and life itself.

Bob Rope in his *Psychological Approach* argues that contemporary authors have socialized and historicized the psychological aspect of the Gothic conventions. Psychological repression is related to political oppression and systematic annihilation of the liberty of thinking and speaking. All kinds of differences and unlimited boundaries of the self is the object of contemporary psychology.

'Terror, horror, and revulsion' and himself declared in some interviews are defining for Stephen King's psychological thrillers. His novels and short stories are full of suspense, adrenaline, and occult practices. King's great contribution to the Gothic style was achieved by lots of imagination and creativity, never haunting the words, but always looking carefully deep insight into the human soul.

Such works as *Salem's Lot*, *Carrie*, *It*, *Misery*, *Shawshank Redemption*, *The Shining*, *Pet Sematary* are just a few examples of more than forty years of a prodigious literary carrier; the characters are people with physical instability, tumultuous past, and bleeding wounds of the soul. They are placed in an American town, so much different from the old manors of Poe or the old English castles that the reader was accustomed to. Many times, the town is overwhelming and destructive for the hero: a corrosive society that does not understand the people's needs and rejects those who are different torturing them with abuses, isolation, stereotypes, and discrimination.

The readers are captivated by King's stories; once you've begun to read one of his books, you can't put it down until you finish it. Its impact and intensity keep vividly in your mind the thrill of the action that makes your heart tremble and your imagination flow over. Undoubtedly, this is the purpose. Terrifying the man is an art and that's the way you can identify with the character and

¹¹ Michiko Kakutani, *Books of the Times; Vampire for Out Times*, The New York Times, 1985, p.16

experience his emotions. The purpose is 'to simply delight the reader, isn't it?'¹² But this purpose leads to confusion, even if horror is not the only legacy of King. One of his advocates concludes: 'Indeed, the horror genre has always been plagued by its fascination with the grotesque... I have attempted to show more reasons for King's popularity than the visceral.'¹³

King employs different points of view around his sympathetic characters, delivering a detailed physical and psychological characterization because he knows these characters and knows exactly how to transmit the information to the reader so that it generates interconnectivity and a multidimensional universe.

Reality and lifetime experience were the basis for the work of Joyce Carol Oates who unpretentiously claims that 'My own fantasies, however intriguing, simply don't seem substantial enough for me to formalize into art...twisting your experience with your talent becomes not only unique and universal, but it illuminates the experiences of others, transcends the finite and it's a value for other people.'¹⁴

The fiction of Joyce Carol Oates is the juxtaposition of fantasy and 'psychological realism' where the latter is 'the establishment of a central consciousness through whose perspective a story is narrated or unfolds; our involvement in the story depends largely upon the plausibility and worth of this central consciousness.'¹⁵

Oates is a versatile writer whose facility to juggle with a range of forms and artistic conventions must not surprise at all. Amid her novels, the best representatives of her style, there are *Bellefleur*, *A Bloodsmoor Romance*, *Mysteries of Winterhurn*, *My Herat Laid Bare*, *The Accursed*. For her Gothic is not the escape from reality, but its prolongation; she is 'using pop literature to unmask pop literature – subverting the conventions of feminine fiction to reveal how those conventions shrouded the true appetites of women in layers of silk and fluff.'¹⁶

The detective genre emerged more after Gothic did, yet they developed in the same direction. Psychological suspense is the thrill that involves the reader in the subject and keeps him in a permanent state of tension. As the author might have seen, 'the key themes of the best suspense fiction — the ineluctable agony of

desire, the psychic thrall of criminality and violence — have been at the core of her work from the beginning'¹⁷.

Nevertheless, every novelist tends to make his story plausible and give it a sense of reality. This term is argued by Wayne Booth who explains that Realist authors are always 'interested in whether the subject matter does justice to reality outside the book.'¹⁸

Gothic is one of our best teachers. It does not mean only horror, phantasmagorical creations, and other devilish apparitions, nor is it the loneliness or coldness of the strange man under the bloody moon ... it is far beyond our possibilities to comprehend the impossible. Even the domesticated character that has no fear of Christian signs and dares to mock them can understand that this Universe reigns by a terrible force; this force controls everybody and everything and the only plausible alternative for the mortals is to accept their destiny and never try to fight against the uncanny, abnormal or supernatural.

Yet, we all must hope for the better and that someday somebody will teach us that life and death coexist and that living is our chance to understand their true sense. Or, as Andy Dufresne would say you have to get busy living or get busy dying, as 'hope is a good thing, maybe the best of things and no good thing ever dies.'¹⁹

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¹⁷ <https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/the-ineluctable-agon-of-desire-joyce-carol-oates-suspense-fiction/>

¹⁸ Wayne, C. Boots, *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, 1961, 2nd edition, Chicago, The Univ. of Chicago Press, 1983.

¹⁹ Stephen King, *Rita Hayworth and Shawshank Redemption*, page 106, https://mschappell.weebly.com/uploads/1/0/1/8/10189451/shawshank_full_text.pdf

¹², Stephen King, *Danse Macabre*. 1981. London: Futura, 1982, p.20

¹³ Heidi Strengell, *Dissecting Stephen King: From the Gothic to Literary Naturalism*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2005, p.264

¹⁴ Joyce Carol Oates, Essay for *The Writer Magazine*, 1973

¹⁵ Joyce Carol Oates, *Introduction, Best New American Voices 2003*, Eds. Joyce Carol Oates, John Kulka and Natalie Danford, New York, Harcourt Inc. 2002, IX-XV

¹⁶ James Wolcott, "Stop Me Before I Write Again: Six Hundred More Pages by Joyce Carol Oates." Rev. of *A Bloodsmoor Romance*, by Joyce Carol Oates. Harper's September 1982:p.68

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