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1-1-2014

Mystery of the Black Convent [supplemental materials]

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The Mystery of the Black Convent, by an unknown author.

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MLA Citation

The Mystery of the Black Convent: An Interesting Spanish Tale of the Eleventh Century.
London: A. Neil. c. 1805. Print.

MLA Citation from the Gothic Archive

The Mystery of the Black Convent: An Interesting Spanish Tale of the Eleventh Century.
Published 1802. E-Publications Marquette. The Gothic Archive, Marquette University,
Wisconsin.

http://epublications.marquette.edu/english_gothic/18/. Accessed 9/16/13. Web.

Full Title

The Mystery of the Black Convent: An Interesting Spanish Tale of the Eleventh Century.

Summary

In the year 1140, St. Alme entered the monastery of the Carthusians in the Spanish city of Castile, known St. Lawrence or the Black Convent. After three of outstanding example in virtue and holiness, Fr. Fernando, the abbot, noticed a significant change in the behavior of St. Alme. Since, he could not extract satisfactory explanation from St. Alme himself concerning his gloomy disposition, Fernando employed Fr. Martinez to look into the matter.

After a few days of intense spying, Fr. Martinez discovered that St. Alme was, actually, a woman disguised as a monk. The next night, Martinez saw Alme the sepulcher in the churchyard and go down. Martinez followed her, only to hear her shriek and faint on seeing a moving human form. Hurriedly, Martinez locked up the gate of the sepulcher, and gathered all the monks who quickly arrested the woman and the ghostly figure. He was none other than Anselm, an old friar.

The next day, Alme, revealed herself to Fr. Fernando, as Beatrice, the daughter of Anselm who was, actually, the noble man Raymond de Spalanza. Fernando forgave her when she explained how she was forced to enter the monastery in disguise in search of her ailing father who had joined the monastery for a quiet death. Meanwhile, Alphonso, the lover of Beatrice, also reached the monastery in search of her. It was explained that he could not marry Beatrice because he was incarcerated on a trumped-up charge by his own father. With Raymond's assent, Fr. Fernando united the lovers in holy matrimony in the chapel of the Black Convent and lived happily ever after.

Constellation of Knowledge/Historical Context

The work of an unknown author, *The Mystery of Mystery of the Black Convent* is a surprisingly non-anti-Catholic chapbook! Its depiction of the twelfth-century Carthusian monastery and the benign characterization of the monks might tempt some critics to even propose it as evidence for 'pro-Catholic' Gothic literature in English! It is difficult to fit this chapbook in an ideological tradition, but it would be safe to consider it an exception to the anti-Catholic Gothic ideology. Needless to say, there are not many chapbooks abounding in such geniality towards the ancient-Catholic-Spanish-aristocratic and religious traditions.

Key Words

Boundaries

See pages 8,10,12,13,17,29. Anne Williams in her book *The Art of Darkness: A Poetics of Gothic* suggests that Gothic literature is "pervasively organized around anxieties about boundaries (and boundary transgressions)" (Williams 16). Gothic literature, however, deals not only with boundaries (and transgressions) of "self and other"; it attempts also to show the problematic nature of boundaries in the first place. Social boundaries, for example, define what is correct, but at the same time repress the individual. Boundaries in Gothic fiction are often blurred, and things are never as clearly defined as they seem.

The establishment of the boundary between the self and other is important in Gothic fiction for everything that the Self is not is projected onto the Other. In Shelley's *Frankenstein*, Frankenstein's monster is clearly the Other for he, at least physically, has come to represent everything that the other normal looking characters are not. The idea of "self and other" extends also to geographical boundaries, where everything within the boundary of civilized world is good and everything beyond it is either seen as exotic or dangerous. In Stoker's *Dracula*, London is seen as civilized and safe (at least prior the arrival of Dracula) and everything in Romania is considered to be dark, ominous and dangerous.

Boundaries create distinction, but they are also repressive in nature. Society lays down certain norms (boundaries) that individuals cannot transgress or risk being termed the 'Other'. People in attempting to stay within these boundaries naturally have to repress any desires that may transgress these socially placed boundaries. It can be argued that Dr. Jekyll's creation Mr. Hyde is an attempt to remain respectable at all times, as defined by the societal boundaries.

Lastly, boundaries can be blurred as we see in *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*, for is it really possible to create a boundary within oneself? The fact the Jekyll goes to bed as himself and wakes up as Hyde suggests that not only are boundaries problematic, it can also be easily blurred. Dracula too, represents a blurring of the boundaries between the living and the dead, He is not dead, but he is not alive as well, hence he is called the "Un-Dead", which is really an oxymoron.

Boundaries are endless in Gothic fiction; they constantly attempt to define what is correct, known and approved, but at the same time create more problems by their very act of categorization.

Source: Ivan Ang. "Gothic Keywords."

<http://courses.nus.edu.sg/course/ellgohbh/gothickeywords.html>. Last Updated 2006. Last Accessed 9/16/2013. Web.

Dungeon

Pages 5, 16, 19. Description forthcoming.

Eerie

See page 5. Description forthcoming.

Letters

See pages 21, 34. Letters to a phantom sister, wills, transcript, journal entries, newspaper entries; Gothic narratives are punctuated with embedded writings in the form of letters and entries that are both a pastiche and fragmented, the sum total of which makes up the complete text. Letters while seemingly presenting objectivity on one level through the assumed tone of factuality, are also simultaneously open and subject to interpretation. It is linked to a reading of words as well as a misreading. There are letters that are not replied in *Frankenstein*, letters that may not have reached their destination, letters of secrecy in

Jekyll and Hyde, letters that chronicle events—these letters attempt to present to us an understanding of what happened, reiterated with the supposed advantage of retrospect and an over-arching perspective that is allowed by the passing of time. However, as the paths of these letters are always dubious, it calls to attention its own in-authenticity and hence the potential for a misreading since we are never always sure if what we are reading is accurately represented. In other words, what has happened is always fragmented and there can be no complete reading of events.

These fragments also call to attention the reliability of information in an age where information is becoming increasingly available, as seen from the inclusion of newspaper reports in *Dracula* and the fact that distance is no longer a barrier to words. Some letters and entries, instead of being handwritten, are now type-written which displaces the personal touch of the writer from the reader and handwriting can no longer be a measure of authenticity. Anything, including words, can be reproduced. This links the idea of letters to modern communication and technology. The use of problematic embedded narratives illustrates an anxiety about the increasing ease of communication and whether more information really means knowing more. Narratives within narratives draw to attention its own artificiality and the question of whether there can be an original sequence of events behind what is narrated. At the same time, letters are also clearly letters of the alphabet which cues the reader in to the notion that all that is being read is a construct of “letters”. Perhaps over-determined, but letters open the doors to the multitude of readings and misreadings in the Gothic world. (Felicia Chan, 2006)

Source: Chan, Felicia. "Gothic Keywords."

<http://courses.nus.edu.sg/course/ellgohbh/gothickeywords.html>. Last Updated 2006. Last Accessed 9/16/2013. Web.

Nature

See page 26. Nature, in the Gothic, is often the symbol for that which is sublime and, accordingly, that which is transcendental and extraordinary. The symbol is underscored in the absence of God, faith, and religion and its institutions from the text. Repetitive and descriptive use of Nature in the text appears to recall a more ancient religion, pantheism, particularly in light of the stark absence of a Christian God. In Shelley's *Frankenstein*, there are many instances where the word “Nature” can be seen as taking the place of “God”, such as when Frankenstein said “[the learned philosopher] might dissect, anatomise, and give names... but causes in their secondary and tertiary grades were utterly unknown to him”. In the age of rapid scientific progress, much of Nature is still unknown to man, despite his best attempts to master it. This, coupled with Frankenstein's disastrous attempt at mastering Nature, ultimately interrogates the scientific project and the futility of having mastery over that which he cannot fully or even adequately comprehend. There is, however, a repeated emphasis on Man's nearness to Nature in the text through his admiration of it; even the monster is not immune to its ineffable beauty. There is a sense of order in the world through Man's “oneness” with Nature, as the instance of Frankenstein's self-inscribed seclusion while creating the monster suggests—his “[insensibility] to the

charms of nature” coincides with his undertaking of the project that goes against the laws of Nature and therefore disturbs this sense of ordering.

The stark absence of God and Christian faith in the text and the various descriptions of Nature in God-like terms highlight the way in which the Gothic indirectly interrogates the relevance of a Christian faith in an increasingly secularized society. In place of Christianity, it seems to suggest a throwback to an ancient pantheistic view of the world, ironically—even as science and technology supposedly enable society to “progress” at even more rapid rates—as a more coherent way of ordering the world.

Source: Denise Li. "Gothic Keywords."

<http://courses.nus.edu.sg/course/ellgohbh/gothickeywords.html>. Last Updated 2006. Last Accessed 9/16/2013. Web.

Secret

See pages 8, 10, 12, 13, 17, 29. Secrets, namely that which is ‘unspeakable’ is a distinctive gothic trope. In literary novels, secrets are knowledge deliberately concealed from the readers and/or from the characters involved. In gothic literature, secrets aid in creating a sense of suspense, hinging on a scandal or mystery and subsequently lead to a shocking revelation at the end. Often, a foreboding shadow is cast upon those who withhold secrets, be it a dark family history or a Faustian pact as exemplified by Shelley’s *Frankenstein* and Stevenson’s *Dr Jekyll* who are both possessors of an ‘unspeakable’ knowledge which allows them to transcend the limits and abilities of man but eventually at the expense of their sanity, friends and lives.

The secrecy of identity and sexuality is also prevalent in Gothic literature where the ambiguity and anonymity of informers and correspondents add to the overarching mystery. There are also suggestions that the seemingly upright life led by Victorian men in the day is coupled with a lurid ‘secret’ life at night where at times even their heterosexual preferences are called into question. Although not overtly articulated, novels such as *Dr Jekyll* and *Mr Hyde* reveal a generally homosocial society whereby the fast bonding of the men hints at something more than platonic friendship.

Secrets as a form of concealment also connote darkness and acts as a means of subversion against the façade of the hypocritical Victorian society which boasts a well-policed state with brightly-lit streets at night, claiming the honourability of well-clothed individuals and the safety of the private self, all which the gothic trope seeks to challenge.

Source: Kong Yuqi, "Gothic Keywords."

<http://courses.nus.edu.sg/course/ellgohbh/gothickeywords.html>. Last Updated 2006. Last Accessed 9/16/2013. Web.

Transgression

See pages 8, 10, 12, 13, 17, 29. Transgression is central to the Gothic because it serves as a means for writers to interrogate existing categories, limits and anxieties within nineteenth century English society. By transgressing social limits the Gothic “reinforces the values and necessity of restoring or defining limits” through the presentment of the horrific outcomes of transgression. Most often, these transgressions reflect and refract current anxieties of the age as a way to deal and contain them. Anxieties regarding the dissolution of gender differences, due to the emergence of the New Woman and the aesthete; regarding the

possibility of devolution and degeneration in man; and regarding fears of the working class - a repercussion of the French Revolution- are dealt with singly or in overlapping ways. Consider how in *Dracula* sexual differences are “ef(face)ed” by the trope of the vampiric mouth which is both “penetrator” and “orifice”; which is further complicated by the essentially male act of penetration to the neck by male and female vampires alike. The New woman (who is gender ambiguous in being biologically female, yet desiring masculinity) seems to be parodied horrifically here. The New Woman is further parodied in the vampiric Lucy whose maternal instincts are reversed (with her feeding on children, instead), promiscuous (with multiple husband’s whose bloods are coursing through her) and blatant sexuality (in seducing Arthur). The threatening figure of the New Woman as Lucy, and the sexual ambiguity represented by all the vampires, are subdued and destroyed, vicariously for the reader. However such overt aims are problematised by the numerous Gothic works that lack reassuring closures, presenting their own narrators as unreliable and questionable, and revealing the covert monstrosity in mainstream society and the aristocrats (- that leaves the reader more insecure than not. The Gothic writers themselves seem to be unlikely proponents to restore societal limits and boundaries – since they, very often, were transgressors of those very boundaries (e.g. Shelley, Wilde, etc.). Thus, although Gothic transgression did interrogate current issues, its aims and intended effects were ambivalent.

Source: Grace Dong Enping. "Gothic Keywords."

<http://courses.nus.edu.sg/course/ellgohbh/gothickeywords.html>. Last Updated 2006. Last Accessed 9/16/2013. Web.

Uncanny

Description forthcoming.

Bibliography of Related Information

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Weiss, Harry. *A Book about Chapbooks*. Hatboro, P.A.: Folklore Associates, Inc, 1969. Print. (54-55)