

Kerstin Knopf

The Gothic Canadian Century

Unhomely Beginnings and Canada's Gothic Literature in English
1800-1900

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1. INTRODUCTION

Preface

"The Enlightenment, which produced the maxims and models of modern culture," argues Fred Botting, "also invented the Gothic" (2001, 3). Gothic literature is generally known as fiction that represents the dark side of Enlightenment freethinking, that explores extremes and forbidden excesses, terror and horror, insecurity and fear, insanity and fantasy, darkness and obscurity, oppression and repression, mysticism and the supernatural, as well as love and revenge, explains Allan Lloyd-Smith (2004a, 6). It does not deal directly with the darker side of modernity – coloniality – and the black side of modernity – enslavement – in the ways of critical thought on modernity that Walter D. Mignolo and Paul Gilroy put forward (Mignolo 2007; Gilroy 2004). These two critics, and many others after them, established the notion that European and transatlantic modernity developed out of European colonialism, enslavement, and neo/colonial exploitation of non-European lands and peoples in the seventeenth through twentieth centuries as well as the cultural-hierarchical mindset of European enlightenment. The central subject of liberating enlightenment thoughts was white and male – a well-established idea that the Gothic did not stir either. And yet, the Gothic literary tradition enabled writers to indirectly critique the quasi non-subject status of women, contextualize oppression and violence against women, and clandestinely write transgressive and liberating ideas into their plots, while the Native, Black, and other non-white subjects largely remained shadows and ghosts in the literary imagination of the Gothic.

The genre of the Gothic bespeaks a widespread rejection of neoclassical ideals of order and reason and a turn toward romantic ideals, emotion, and imagination (Hume 1969, 282). Terror, on a par with suspense or dread, is the *modus operandi* of classical gothic novels (285). Terror and horror are created for characters and readers through gloomy atmospheres, terrible plot turns, evil scheming of wicked tyrants and villainesses, violence, mysterious events, supernatural forces, demonic powers, haunting ghosts, and buried secrets. Classical gothic literature is located in European medievalist and Mediterranean settings and its desolate landscapes, impenetrable forests, or alpine mountains. The architecture and buildings of gothic pursuit and crime are usually haunted castles, ruined abbeys, or abandoned mansions, with one or the other lonely turret, dungeon, winding staircase, trap door, or subterranean passage. Gothic plots are driven by displaced memories and traumas, appropriation of titles and land, evil deeds in the past, the pursuit of innocent maidens by gothic villains, patriarchal oppression of women and children, as well as xenophobia and fear of miscegenation, which often bespeak deferred national, cultural, and social anxieties as well as anxieties about the human condition in general.

In eighteenth-century discourses the term "gothic" signified "barbarous," "medieval," and "supernatural" and was employed derogatorily for art, architecture, and writing

that digressed from the standards of neoclassical taste (Botting 2001, 3). Botting describes the historical background of the rise of the Gothic as follows:

The projection of the present onto a Gothic past occurred, however, as part of the wider processes of political, economic and social upheaval: emerging at a time of bourgeois and industrial revolution, a time of Enlightenment philosophy and increasingly secular views, the eighteenth-century Gothic fascination with a past of chivalry, violence, magical beings and malevolent aristocrats is bound up with the shifts from feudal to commercial practices in which notions of property, government and society were undergoing massive transformations. Along with these shifts, ideas about nature, art and subjectivity were also reassessed. 'Gothic' thus resonates as much with anxieties and fears concerning the crises and changes in the present as with any terrors of the past. (3)

Critics hold that it is nearly impossible to exactly define the Gothic (cf. Williams 1995, 15); rather, we must be content with agreeing upon core characteristics and correlated features that recur in texts that we term 'gothic.' Robert D. Hume, one of the earliest literary scholars of the Gothic, has given an overview of gothic varieties, narrative time and space, driving forces, concerns, ideologies, and other distinctive characteristics of the genre (1969). David Punter also lists a set of characteristics:

a particular attitude towards the recapture of history; a particular kind of literary style; a version of self-conscious un-realism; a mode of revealing the unconscious; connections with the primitive, the barbaric, the tabooed; [...]

an emphasis on portraying the terrifying, a common insistence on archaic settings, a prominent use of the supernatural, the presence of highly stereotyped characters and the attempt to deploy and perfect techniques of literary suspense are the most significant. Used in this sense, "Gothic" fiction is the fiction of the haunted castle, of heroines preyed on by unspeakable terrors, of the blackly lowering villain, of ghosts, vampires, monsters, and werewolves. (1980, 5; 1996, Vol. 1, 1)

He explains that gothic writing appears to be a relatively homogenous corpus of literature with similar styles, themes, and ideologies, but that it is, in essence, a very heterogeneous body of works (1996, Vol. 1, 7). Such heterogeneity is also implied by Ann Tracy's ten-page index to gothic motifs (1981, 196-205; cf. Williams 1995, 17-18). Gerry Turcotte holds that the Gothic expresses a sense of spiritual unease, isolation, entrapment, fear of pursuit, and fear of the unknown and that it emphasizes the horror, uncertainty, and desperation of the human experience (2009a, 18). According to him, it is preoccupied with the darker human side, with the split between the unconscious and the subconscious, and with the archetypal pull between the civilized and the barbaric (22). Anne Williams argues in this sense that the "Gothic systematically represents 'otherness,'" such 'otherness' being understood along the lines of Manichaeic dichotomies such as male/female, light/darkness, and good/evil (1995, 18-19). Maggie Kilgour maintains that the Gothic "seems also a confused and self-contradictory form, ambivalent and unsure about its own aims and implications" (1995, 5). She emphasizes the Gothic's "puzzling contradiction, denounced and now celebrated for its radical imaginative lawlessness, feared for its encouragement of readers to expect more from life than is realistic, and also for its inculcation of social obedience and passivity" (10). Turcotte even