

THE BRONTE SISTERS AND THEIR VERSION OF GOTHIC FICTION AND FEMINISM

TEENU TONY

Former Guest Faculty, Christ College (Autonomous), Irinjalakuda, Kerala, India
Email:teenuTony123@gmail.com



TEENU TONY

Article information
Received:18/10/2020
Accepted: 19/11/2020
Published online: 26/11/2020
doi: [10.33329/ijelr.7.4.80](https://doi.org/10.33329/ijelr.7.4.80)

ABSTRACT

The word 'Gothic' originally referred to the 'Goths', an early Germanic tribe then came to signify "Germanic", then "medieval". Gothic architecture, is characterised by the use of the high pointed arch and vault flying buttresses, and intricate recesses which spread through Western Europe during the twelfth and sixteenth centuries. Gothic novels were very much in vogue in the Victorian age. Emily, Charlotte and Anne (usually referred to as the Brontes) who lived in Victorian age, were also charmed by this genre of fantastic fiction. The sisters, Charlotte (1816-1855), Emily (1818-1848) and Anne (1820-1849), are well-known as poets and novelists. Like many contemporary female writers, they originally published their poems and novels under male pseudonyms: Currer, Ellis and Acton Bell.. Charlotte's *Jane Eyre* (1847) was the first to know success and Emily's *Wuthering Heights* (1847), Anne Bronte's *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* (1848) came to be accepted as masterpieces of literature. The Bronte sisters lived in the Victorian era, in this period, it was a widely held belief that women writers were inferior to male writers. It is for this reason that they had to use male pseudonyms at the beginning of their literary career. Because they lived in the highly restricted environment, they sought the freedom that they desired for through their literary works. In their imaginative world nothing constrained them. They flew high in the realm of imagination and surpassed all boundaries of reason and rationale. The three sisters who were very close to each other did share a common literary taste but each one of them had their own individual style. The novels of Charlotte, Emily and Anne are based on women in Victorian England and the difficulties that they faced, like, few employment opportunities, dependence on men in the families for support and social expectations. The Bronte's novels can be seen as expressions of early feminism where the protagonist struggles to gain independence and self-reliance. The three sisters were much inclined to employ the mode of Gothic fiction in their writings. The focus of study in this paper are the Bronte sisters and their endeavour to explore the elements of the Gothic and the way these elements were employed in their works of art.

Keywords: Gothic, Feminism, strong liberated women, Bronte sisters.

Ellen Moers has propounded a feminist theory that relates women writers in general and Emily Bronte in particular to the Gothic. Middle-class women who wanted to write were hampered by the conventional

image of ladies as submissive, pious, gentle, loving, serene, domestic angels. They had to overcome the conventional patronizing, smug, unempowering, contemptuous sentimentalizing of women by reviewers like George Henry Lewes, who looked down on women writers.

Ellen Moers identifies heroinism, a form of literary feminism, as one-way women circumvented this difficulty. Literary feminism and feminism may overlap but they are not the same, and a woman writer who adopts heroinism is not necessarily a feminist. Heroinism takes many forms, such as the intellectual or thinking heroine, the passionate or woman-in-love heroine, and the traveling heroine. Clearly all the Bronte sisters utilize the passionate heroine, whether knowingly or not, to express subversive values and taboo experiences covertly.

Moers sees subversion in Bronte's acceptance of the cruel as a normal, almost an energizing part of life and in her portrayal of the erotic in childhood. The cruelty connects this novel to the Gothic tradition, which has been associated with women writers since Anne Radcliffe.

The Gothic elements in *Wuthering Heights* can be labeled 'the eccentricities of woman's fantasy'. A more accurate word than eccentricities would be perversities. These perversities may have originated in 'fantasies derived from the night side of the Victorian nursery – a world where childish cruelty and childish sexuality come to the fore. Of particular importance for intellectual middle-class women who never matured sexually was the brother-sister relationship. In childhood, sisters were the equal of their brothers, played just as hard, and felt the same pleasures and pains; girls clung to this early freedom and equality, which their brothers outgrew, and displaced them into their writing.

Women writers of Gothic fantasies appear to testify that the physical teasing they received from their brothers – the pinching, mauling, and scratching we dismiss as the unimportant of children's games—took on outsize proportions and powerful erotic overtones in their adult imaginations. Again, the poverty of their physical experience may have caused these disproportions, for it was not only sexual play but any kind of physical play for middle-class women that fell under the Victorian ban. It is in this period that the Bronte sisters chose to write. They did it with a great poise and elegance due to which their works are truly one of a kind.

Wuthering Heights is Gothic in its essence, it is the Gothic elements which allow the novel to transcend the genre of tragic romance and make it unique. The spectre of Catherine haunts the tale from the very first chapters onwards, and fittingly, this eerie apparition is what makes this novel so eternally enduring, the sense that love and loss are sentiments that can defy even death is a palpable and evocative theme. The mysterious and untamable setting of *Wuthering Heights* provides the perfect backdrop for the terrible events of the narrative. And Heathcliff's inexorable quest for revenge through premeditated torture makes him arguably the classic Gothic anti-hero. Emily Bronte makes perfect use of Gothic elements in evoking within the readers' mind a powerful sense of dread, apprehension and pain.

Emily used the Gothic to explore her own creativity, but her novel reached new levels of originality. The book is filled with Gothic themes, but is not in the final analysis merely a Gothic novel. The sublime in *Wuthering Heights* is in Catherine's words, "Whatever our souls are made of, his and mine are the same" (342). It is this last and deepest mystery of character, finally inexpressible though it is, that Emily Bronte intimates through the sublime.

In *Wuthering Heights* there is "the romantic quest for identity". Catherine "ciphers but she cannot decipher; therefore, she must die" and Cathy "solves the riddle and lives" (19). The "romantic quest for identity" is to find one's identity within oneself, not in the relations with others. Heathcliff struggles to retain his identity, which depends upon the existence of Catherine, and Catherine forms her identity by thinking of Heathcliff as her perfect sympathiser. Catherine marries Edgar, believing that her identity has already been secured with Heathcliff, this is where she "ciphers" her own quest for identity, but she fails to "decipher" that of Heathcliff, who cannot rest content with the form of relationship she seeks to establish after her marriage. She tries to make her life more affluent with Edgar, but the effect is to drive Heathcliff mad with jealousy and

anger, and, as his identity must affect hers, the consequence is far from her ideal of a better life for them both. Instead, she loses her identity and so she feels she cannot live any longer. Thus Catherine works out the wrong solution to the “romantic quest of identity” and dies. As for Heathcliff, he attempts to keep Catherine to preserve his identity via her existence, but it is half gone with Catherine’s marriage, and then the rest is also lost when Catherine dies. Heathcliff’s quest never comes to an end in this world, though he makes a great effort to regain his identity. He also arrives at the wrong answer to the riddle of what he is, and dies Catherine and Heathcliff’s lives are survival games in the name of pursuit of identity, games which they both lose.

The female characters in the novel share positive sides but in some ways they are different and almost opposite to one another, and what we need to remark here is the differences themselves. Isabella, Cathy, and Catherine, and probably Frances, Hindley’s young wife, as ladies, perhaps unconsciously observe one another and identify themselves by recognising their differences. Each of them shows what others do not have, where they do not belong, what they cannot be, and what they should or should not do. In short, as an opposite or an incomprehensible example, each character helps others to identify themselves. They explore others to find themselves, and see others as distorted mirrors showing that they are not, conversely speaking, what they are.

In other words, the female figures in *Wuthering Heights* provide a counterbalance together, and present an overall picture of women together. This is also an example of doubling pairs that identify themselves with each other, and is one of the Gothic characteristics in *Wuthering Heights*. It would be better to describe them as conflicting doubles as they do not share many aspects, but taken together they create a unity. They are not literally fused into one, but as a group, they contribute to the novel’s obscure, less intense tension, as each female character throws the others into relief. This is the most significant characteristic of the female characters in *Wuthering Heights* and is the mark of Emily’s individual imaginative world. Rather than regarding these characters as realistic portraits of individual contemporary women’s experiences, or as examples of established literary types, we can take them as a whole, as offering a commentary on the female figure in Gothic fiction and so see how that figure was released by Emily Bronte’s creation from the narrow confines of the Gothic to take part in the more complex and ambiguous world of *Wuthering Heights*.

Charlotte Bronte was also mesmerized by this innovative genre in fiction. But she utilized Gothic fiction with a different idea in her mind. At first sight *Jane Eyre* may not look like a Gothic novel. However, it includes a lot of Gothic features that appear throughout the novel such as ghost, dark secrets and supernatural experiences. The Gothic elements in the novel have the function of developing the storyline as well as the characters. Importantly, the Gothic features affect the relationship between the two main characters both positively and negatively. The Gothic elements in the novel have a greater function than to frighten the reader. They do not only help develop the main character but they also show the reader Jane’s inner passions and desires.

The Gothic features are also central in developing Mr. Rochester’s character in the eyes of the reader, as they help illustrate his complicated background, as well as his growing closeness to Jane. The Gothic features are thus central to characterization, and ultimately crucial in building the relationship between the two main characters. Her purpose of using the Gothic features is therefore not to frighten the reader but rather to explore the inner feelings of the characters. They are not just there to frighten us but also help develop the storyline as well as the characters. Gothic elements show the reader the real desires and passions of the main character and also the development of the relationship between Jane and Mr. Rochester.

Jane Eyre uses many forms of the Gothic genre in order to create emotion and get an audience reaction. The most common Gothic form Bronte uses is Jane’s descriptions of Thornfield Hall, which creates Gothic paraphernalia, giving the audience an image of a Gothic castle, especially at the end after the fire when the image of a ruined castle is given. The use of supernatural is another Gothic element Bronte uses a lot in the book, although as discovered, she has put her own twist on the use of Gothic forms within the book and every supernatural event has an explanation. This is where Emily Bronte and Charlotte Bronte mark their differences. It should be stressed that Charlotte Bronte’s incorporation of supernatural phenomenon served more than the utilitarian purposes. Though they lived in the Victorian Age and published their novels in those years, the three

Bronte sisters share a great deal with the Romantic Age in their works: themes, literary devices and features, wild nature and tormented souls. For example, Charlotte's Mr. Rochester or Emily's Heathcliff embody the typical Byronic hero: moody, restless, wild in manners, tormented but so attractive. The heroes and the heroines in their novels tend to be atypical, anti-conformist, and unable to simply accept their duties. They are often led by feelings and passions. And all of that is not typically Victorian. The reading audience was shocked by Emily's *Wuthering Heights*.

The Tenant of Wildfell Hall has neither the archetypal resonance of *Jane Eyre*, nor the feverish intensity of *Wuthering Heights*, but, though Anne's voice is quieter than those of her sisters, it is an impressive voice, and the story it tells of an unhappy marriage on an unequal footing set the pattern for much that was to follow. It remains still an impressive achievement.

Certainly its wonderfully Gothic title owes a debt to the Gothic tradition. Wildfell Hall is a desolate residence in an isolated place. And this is already a typical Gothic setting. Then, Helen is surrounded by mystery in the first part. Nobody knows much about her and her past and her being self-possessed rather secluded and surrounded by secrecy makes her the victim of local slander.

In the second part, while we read Helen's diary with Gilbert Markham, the mystery of her past is revealed and we are plunged in a different atmosphere which is still Gothic. Helen and her son become the victims of dissolute Arthur Huntington, respectively her husband and his father. Their lives were spoilt and exposed to many risks, Arthur lost control and became a brute, especially when drunk.

This character is said to be inspired by Branwell Bronte, the Bronte family's spoilt son. So, we can conclude saying that *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* is Gothic particularly in its sense of mystery and in its portrayals of an aristocratic life of decadence and emotional brutality. When Charlotte's and Emily's works are more romantic and passionate in nature, Anne's characters live in dark creepy mansions in the country and have forbidden secrets but they still deal with real world problems, infidelity, divorce. It is almost as though Anne were saying, "this is what really would happen if Cathy had married Heathcliff and lived all her life in isolation".

To recognize Gothic features in Anne's *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* is less immediate. The confidence shown by young Anne courage at dealing with the theme of women's equality is commendable. Her Helen is not a silent victim, what the society of the time would have expected from her since conventions dictated submissiveness. This is why this novel is often considered the first feminist novel. But we have to focus on Gothic details. In *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* there are not so many. The setting of the novel is the most striking example of Gothic fiction. The Wildfell Hall and its desolate atmosphere itself haunts the reader. The description of the old mansion is spine chilling, especially for the fact that most of the times it was untenanted. Another important Gothic streak in the novel is the mystery that surrounds the characters. Helen is the most enigmatic character in the novel. She leads a life that is secretive and it is this, which drives Gilbert Markham enquire about her. Even though Anne's voice is not heard very clearly in the novel as Emily's or Charlotte's voices were, still her voice is sweet and impressive. Anne leans more towards a Realistic stance and hence she gives an explanation to all the mysterious things that takes place in the novel. If we had to enumerate the Gothic elements in the works of Bronte sisters, we can see that there is a different proportion of Gothic elements in each of them.

In Charlotte's *Jane Eyre* we can recognize many Gothic features such as Jane's childhood terrors in Lowood school, Thornfield's mysterious nocturnal incidents, a sense of supernatural, the gloomy atmosphere, Bertha's madness, Jane's apparently unrequited love etc . . . The same can be said for Emily's *Wuthering Heights* also, the atmosphere of the setting that is sinister and sublime because of the stormy, windy weather on the moors, Catherine's ghost, the dreams, the superstitions, the graves, the macabre details, the themes of death and revenge, Heathcliff as the villain who persecutes the naive women Isabella Linton, Cathy etc. . . Thus it can be inferred that all the three novels studied in this project have Gothic elements, but the most Gothic amongst the three is *Wuthering Heights*. There are innumerable instances where this fact is revealed. Both

Jane Eyre and *The Tenant of the Wildfell Hall* are indeed Gothic novels but only secondary to *Wuthering Heights*.

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