Terror and the notification of anxiety in postmodern gothic

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Abstract

There was a virtual explosion in the last two decades in academic and scholarly works of Gothic. In this way, there have been various critics to codify the features and history of Gothic and its correlated genres in literature. The architecture of Gothic literature has been evolving on the production of culture and symbolic formations dealing with conflicting beliefs and cultural anxiety. This issue focuses on the cross-generic dynamism in the Gothic in different literary eras that has made it so transformable to suit changing times. An expansion in studies of the Gothic in all its various forms that greatly extended what the Gothic was seen to encompass and opened up a wide range of critical approaches that collectively made the Gothic come alive. Gothic literature has tried to juxtapose itself among other interdisciplinary studies in postmodernism. There is an analogous articulation of the psychological and philosophical implications of terror in postmodernist literature, to the terror of the Gothic novel, uncovering the significance of postmodern recurrences of the Gothic, and identifying new historical and philosophical aspects of the genre. This article concentrating on the rich history of Gothic in different eras focuses on the issue of terror in postmodern Gothic.

Keywords: Gothic, Postmodernism; Terror; Anxiety; Literature

1. Introduction

Observing the gradual development of the history of the novel, the issue of change has been a fundamental consideration to this genre. Having met different types as picaresque, adventurous and social novels, toward the end of the seventeenth century in England, a new territory for novelistic events is constituted and reinforced in the so-called 'Gothic' or 'black' novel. This type of fiction in comparison with earlier romance does not have any striking and exotic setting and involves in itself atmospheres in

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affinity with gloom and anxiety, terror and horror. The narratives generally deal with supernatural, mysterious or ghostly events in which the character experiences terror in the anticipation of some dreaded event; the character experiences a horror when the event really happens. The typical story focuses on an innocent heroine who is under suffrage made by a cruel and lustful a rogue character. Other characteristics relevant to Gothic novel are plentiful use of ghosts, mysterious disappearances, and other sensational occurrences.

Concentrating on the history of Gothic, one can make a sense of original Gothic in Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* (1764), Ann Radcliffe's *The Mystery of Adolpho* (1794), and Gregory Lewis's *The Monk* (1798) in the late seventeen century. Later in eighteen century Mary Shalley's *Frankenstein* (1818) presented a different form of Gothic, which was accounting on Victorian literature in the works of Charles Dickens (1812-1870) can be regarded as Gothic, because they have characteristics as "the prevalence of claustrophobia, the foreclosure of escape and location" (Punter 1). However, what are they, they are under the category of Dickensian literature. Toward the beginning of the twentieth century and the outbreak of Modernism, Gothic classics as Robert Louis Stevenson *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1886), H.G. Well's *Island of Dr. Moreau* (1890) and Oscar Wilde *Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890) have been subjects to various interpretations because they had modernism qualities as fragmentation and suspense. Following the time, postmodernism has seen further dealings with terror than previous ages.

2. Gothic and Literature

Literary genres are essentially literary institutions, or social contracts between a writer and a specific public, whose function is to specify the proper use of a particular cultural artifact. In this way, in recent studies psychological critical theory has presented to Gothic in order to examine this kind of novel based on psychological approaches and psychological play in the text.

Gothic literature focusing on decay, terror and chaos privileges irrationality and passion over rationality and reason. "The principal aim of such novels [was] to evoke chilling terror by exploiting mystery and a variety of horrors, usually they fictionalized the realm of irrational and preserve impulses and nightmarish terrors that lie beneath the orderly surface of the civilized mind" (Abrams 137). This implication in the Gothic literature guideline demonstrates the change from the surface of the novel to deep inside the inner condition of the protagonists and emphasis on the role of the reader and "in the abject body and corporatization in general" (Wolfrays 47).

3. Gothic and Postmodernism

Terror as the fundamental concept in Gothic is defined in *Oxford Advanced Dictionary of Learners* (2003) as "a feeling of extreme fear"(1342). The definition of terror concerning recent studies as postmodernism is basically, 'a personal experience'. To be terrified is 'to be in a state of hesitation or suspension'. Therefore, terror can be defined then as an experience that affects a changed state of consciousness. In this way, not only a person can deal with terror but also a society can be influenced by it.
Postmodern studies have recently focused on terror, terrorism, anxiety and death as sources of fear in society and many of the contemporary artists express their ideas of fear symbolically and in relation to society and ourselves. Therefore, terror can be an interdisciplinary notion among various discourses in modern mediums, especially media.

Focusing on the postmodern literature and the reflection of the Gothic Literature, the combination of these two movements is unavoidable. The paradigm of postmodern literature can be regarded as an experimental, radical and often metafictional literature, which problematises the relationship between reality and fiction, on the one hand, and reader and text, on the other hand. By defining the genre, Gothic-postmodernism links a tie between Gothic and the postmodern in literary and cultural terms and declares Gothic as the clearest mode of expression of terrors in post modernity; Gothic-postmodernism, presents an expression of the psychological and philosophical implications of terror in postmodernist literature, comparable to the terror of early Gothic works.

4. Postmodern critics on Gothic

Maria Beville in *Gothic-Postmodernism, Voicing Terrors of Postmodernity* (2009), defines Gothic-postmodernism "as an amplification of the Gothic language of terror to encompass the more recent terrors of our postmodern age and also the theories of terror that have been put forward as part of the enterprise of postmodern cultural theory"(9). The idea of defining Gothic-postmodernism is inherently bound up in defining the Gothic. It seeks to put forward a definition of Gothic postmodernism as a hybrid mode that emerges from the dialogic interaction of Gothic and postmodernist characteristics in a given text.

Concentrating on the issue of terror and anxiety in postmodern literature one can refer to the importance of its existence, which paves the way for theories and theoreticians to step in this realm of literature. Jean Baudrillard’s 'spirit of terror' and 'cities of death', which are seen as closely linked to Jacques Derrida’s 'hauntology', Fredric Jameson calling of Gothic as a class fantasy, and Jean Francois Lyotard’s theories on the postmodern sublime. Following these theoreticians and their ideas, one can observe the multi-sided nature of Gothic, which can be applied variously but at the same time delivering the same outcome. In fact, postmodern Gothic helps to interrogate our own unconscious fears, terrors and anxieties and new ways to represent them. As far as the postmodernists try to habitualise their effect, their primary task is to construct a route to the unknown, unrepresentable aspects of self and reality. The outcome of the interaction of Gothic and postmodernism is as follow:

"the blurring of the borders that exist between the real and the fictional, which results in narrative self-consciousness and an interplay between the supernatural and the metafictional; a concern with the sublime effects of terror and the unrepresentable aspects of reality and subjectivity; specific Gothic thematic devices of haunting, the *doppelgänger*, and a dualistic philosophy of good and evil; an atmosphere of mystery and suspense and a counter-narrative function"(Beville 15).
Based on the purpose of the implementation of Gothic by postmodern approaches, postmodernism as an experimental science tries to search reality, which lack of it is prevalent in Today's world. This reality can be perceived in the presence of unreal and supernatural phenomena as ghosts, specters, and 'other' things, which are different from what has been accepted as real by science and reason. So, the aim of postmodernism is to evaluate fiction and fantasy over reality.

Fredric Jameson in *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (1991) declares, the Gothic is a mere 'class fantasy (or nightmare) in which the dialectic of privilege and shelter is exercised' (289). He calls Gothic as a 'boring and exhausted paradigm' because postmodern is terrifying in itself; it is boring in his point of view because both of them, Gothic and Postmodernism, inspire anxiety and fear.

Jean Francois Lyotard conception of postmodernism focuses on his theories on terror and postmodern sublime or unrepresentable. Lyotard focuses on the idea of sublime which was stated by Edmund Burke (1729-1797) in his philosophical *Inquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of Sublime and Beautiful* (1757) asserts that 'pain' and 'impending death' beside 'beauty', can be regarded as pleasure making elements. There is mutual relationship between pain in body and soul. It means that when there is a reaction from soul to the body in a way that soul has been encountered a pain and reflects it to the body. According to Burke, this 'spiritual passion' is called terror. Lyotard asserts that "this terror in order to be mingled with pleasure and produces the feeling of sublime, it is necessary that terror causing threat to be suspended" (Lyotard 99). The sublime aspects of terror give us the sense of reality through the symbolic event of terror. This reality can be range from the reality of self, 'being' and the reality of infinite.

Simply presenting, Jameson asserts that postmodern is terrifying in itself and Lyotard characterizes postmodern as a reassuring response to terror and terror might be located in discourse of certainty. He believes that we have taken more than sufficient terror in the previous centuries and "We have paid a high enough price for the nostalgia of the whole and the one, for the reconciliation of the concept and the sensible, of the transparent and the communicable experience" (Lyotard xxiv).

Focusing on Lyotards and the function of terror in literature, enunciating aspects of the sublime effects of terror is the primary function of Gothic literature in postmodernism. Jean Francois Lyotard’s theory of 'the unrepresentable’ establishes the concept that an encounter with the unrepresentable, or unimaginable, results in the interruption of subjective action and a split between rationality and imagination (Lyotard 1991, 210). For him terror is a 'negative pleasure', and the purpose of this pleasure is making the reader understand reality through the realization of fantasy.

'The spirit of terror' has been involved in the culture of terror in recent context, "which is the manifestation of our subjective desire for its return and for discourse to open unto the darker side of our known 'realities'" (Beville 24). He believes that we will consciously response to the terrors haunting our culture and society. Because in his view terror as an object of desire exists everywhere and is needed for perceiving reality. Gothic-postmodernism is all about terror. In principle, it alludes to the unimaginable, the 'unrepresentable' through terror. A spirit of terror that seeks to achieve the dismantling of the modernist and realist enterprises too embodies it. From a postmodernist perspective, we all exist in a world where we have limited access to 'the real', and accordingly, to the unreal, to the finite or the
infinite. In a similar way, the sublime aspects of terror explored in Gothic-postmodernist texts have the effect of giving us as readers a sense of our own reality through the creation of the symbolic event of terror; a sense also of the reality of self, or ‘being’ and by extension of the infinite. This can be interpreted as a symbolic representation of the loss of self in the context of a postmodern world in which existence ‘means’ guilt; transience; evanescence; fragmentation, and the deconstruction of individual, cultural, and moral standards. It is the presentation of a profound personal reality.

5. Conclusion

Finally, and quite importantly, throughout this definition, the Gothic aspects of postmodern theories will be utilized in literary analysis. In this way, a distinctive postmodern perspective and theoretical approach to the genre, will be offered in support of the inherent links that exist between the Gothic and postmodern paradigms. Significantly, the theories outlined in this definition all bear undercurrents that are definitively Gothic while being inspired by Gothic themes of terror and death. We can thus conclude that terror, from the very earliest stages of philosophical and literary analysis, was regarded as sublime: as a unique, timeless and unquantifiable emotion. It was regarded as a totalizing experience, in which one could potentially encounter self in its most basic of ‘knowable’ forms through imagination Lyotard’s approach to the postmodern sublime, which can be seen as directly related to terror will be of primary relevance to the identification of terror in a literary text, especially in validating real by presenting the unrepresentable.

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