

GOTHIC ELEMENTS IN CONTEMPORARY DETECTIVE STORY: MATTHEW GREGORY LEWIS AND MINETTE WALTERS COMPARED

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Abstract

One of the most shocking Gothic novels was written by Matthew Gregory Lewis in 1796. His Gothic novel *The Monk* contains all the typical Gothic elements such as a ruined castle, aggressive villain, women in distress, the atmosphere of terror and horror and a lot more. This article analyses and compares to what extent the Gothic elements of the late 18th century survived in the contemporary detective story *The Ice House* (1993) written by Minette Walters and how these elements have changed.

Today the detective story is very popular with readers searching for mystery, suspense and thrill because “it often begins with an unsolved crime of some sort” (Rzepka 2005: 9). The readers are challenged by the fact that nobody knows whodunit and they are sure they will beat the detective of the story and find the ‘doer’ before the detective does. But many fans are unaware of the fact that the origins of the detective story come from the late 18th century Gothic world of horror and terror.

The Gothic period started before the first Gothic novel appeared in 1764 when Horace Walpole wrote *The Castle of Otranto* and coincided with the period of Romanticism which started in the late 18th century (Frank 1987: xix). *The Monk* was not one of the first Gothic novels but definitely one of the most shocking ones because it was “inverted, parodied, or exaggerated the features it cannibalized” (Miles 2002: 53). Matthew Gregory Lewis wrote it when he was only nineteen years old. The novel was under “heavy fire from reviewers and critics” claiming that the book was indecent, a blasphemy, plagiarism, and a subversion but on the other hand exhibited “the irresistible energy of Genius” (Howard 1994: 225).

In *The Monk* Lewis exaggerated and condemned the development of different kinds of secret liberal and revolutionary societies before and after the French Revolution of 1789 and the revival of the Spanish Inquisition in 1768 (Hennesy 1978: 24). His novel contains all typical Gothic elements that represent the genre: a ruined castle, an aggressive villain, oppressed women, sudden apparitions, ancient prophecies creating an atmosphere of mystery and suspense, dead bodies, and juicy Gothic vocabulary making the reader shudder with feelings of terror and horror.

Matthew Gregory Lewis was born in London and educated at Westminster School and Christ Church, Oxford. He studied modern languages and in 1794 went to the Hague to the British Embassy where he produced, in ten weeks, his romance *Ambrosio*, or *The Monk*. Lewis also obtained a seat in the House of Commons as a Member of Parliament for Hindon in Wiltshire. After a few years he devoted his life fully to literature, and his plays (*The Castle Spectre*, *Alfonso, King of Castle*, *The Captive*, *The Wood Daemon*) enjoyed a long popularity on the stage. He wrote numerous operatic and tragic pieces (e.g. *The Bravo of Venice*). When his father died he left him with large fortune, and in 1815 he set off for the West Indies to visit his estates. A second visit to Jamaica was undertaken in 1817, in the hope of becoming more familiar with the condition of the slave population. Unfortunately he got ill with a fever which resulted in his death during the homeward voyage (Kiely 1979 : 98).

The story of *The Monk* concerns Ambrosio - a highly-respected monk in Spain who falls prey to temptation through his lust, pride, and inexperience. His ruin is caused by a demon in disguise of a beautiful woman, Matilda. She encourages him to follow his desires and by using magic spells helps him seduce the innocent Antonia. Antonia turns out to be his sister but that does not stop him from raping and killing her. Ambrosio is delivered into the hands of the Inquisition but he escapes by selling his soul to the devil. However, the devil has no mercy and the sinful monk awaits his prolonged torturous death. The subplot deals with the destiny of two lovers, Agnes and Raymond. Agnes is a nun and after being found pregnant she is accused of violating her vow of chastity. She is punished by being locked in the funeral vault and has to witness the decay of the body of her baby.

Out of the Gothic world comes the detective story. According to Scaggs (2005: 7) the literary criticism places the beginnings of the detective story in the hands of Edgar Allan Poe (1809 – 1849) who is characterized as the ‘father’ of the genre. Much later, in 1993 the detective story *The Ice House* was written by Minette Walters. Walters always wanted to be a writer. She used to read shunned girls’ story books when she was young. Her most popular authors were Biggles and Agatha Christie. She sent her plays to BBC radio but was rejected. Her efforts in magazine publishing were more successful and she was soon writing 30.000 word hospital romances. After having two children she turned her attention to crime fiction and wrote *The Sculptress*, *The Scold’s Bridle*, *The Ice House*, *The Shape of Snakes* and many others (Minnete Walters’ Official Site: Biography).

The Ice House is a detective story about three women living in a country house. On their property in the Streech Grange a faceless corpse of uncertain age is found in the ice house. Chief Inspector Walsh cannot wait to make a case of it. The lady of the manor is Phoebe Maybury and she is still haunted by Walsh’s investigation of her husband’s strange disappearance ten years ago. She and her two friends - a sensitive, charming artist Diana Goode and pretty Anne Cattrell, seem as surprised as the police. While Walsh strives to accuse Phoebe of murdering her husband, the sexy young Detective Sergeant McLoughlin turns his attention to the interesting and attractive Anne. In the end the body turns out to be a drunkard who died of natural causes.

The detective story has its own specific elements such as a detective, an unsolved mystery and an investigation by which the mystery is solved. According to Rzepka (2005: 10) there is another special element called ‘the puzzle-element’ – the mystery

is presented as an “ongoing problem for the reader to solve” and to engage his own reasoning abilities. But in the detective story there are many other elements that have their origins in the Gothic novel of terror and horror.

According to Botting (1996: 158) much of the writing linked to Gothic in the early part of the twentieth century was carried over from later nineteenth-century styles:

Objects of anxiety take their familiar forms from earlier manifestations: cities, houses, archaic and occult pasts, primitive energies, deranged individuals and scientific experimentation are the places from which awesome and inhuman terrors and horrors are loosed on an unsuspecting world. (Botting 1996: 158)

Many of the Gothic elements can still be found in the contemporary detective story while others have changed or even disappeared. The setting for example changed quite a lot. The Gothic action usually took place in an old, sometimes ruined castle which often contained secret passages, trap doors, dark staircases, hidden rooms and ruined parts of the castle. The caves near the castle created the feelings of claustrophobia and mystery (Williams 1995: 39).

The castle, which stood full in my sight, formed an object equally awful and picturesque. Its ponderous walls, tinged by the moon with solemn brightness, its old and partly ruined towers, lifting themselves into the clouds, and seeming to frown on the plains around them, its lofty battlements, overgrown with ivy, and folding gates, expanding in honour of the visionary inhabitant, made me sensible of a sad and reverential horror. (Lewis 1977: 165, 166)

The contemporary detective story usually places its characters into an old house, a mansion, or even into a new house and the feeling of claustrophobia and mystery arises from darkness, shadows, stormy weather and strange reflections of the light. In *The Ice House* the main characters live in a village cottage.

Streech Grange was a fine old Jacobean mansion built of grey stone, with mullioned, leaded windows and steep slate roofs. Two wings, later additions, extended out at either end of the main body of the house, embracing the sides of the flagged terrace where the women had taken their tea. Stud partitions inside made each of these wings self-contained, with unlocked doors on the ground floor giving access to and from them. (Walters 1993: 53)

Atmosphere of Gothic mystery and suspense came from the threatening feeling or fear enhanced by the unknown. Protagonists usually did not know their parents and could not say where they came from (Day 1985: 123). Cavallaro (2002: 150) claims that in the age of reason children were dismissed as “undeveloped adults, as irrational and only randomly sentient beings” whereas “Romanticism rehabilitated childhood as a time of metaphysical wisdom superior to the worldly knowledge available to the socialized self” (Cavallaro 2002: 150). In *The Monk* the unknown mysteries are the protagonist’s (Ambrosio’s) parents and why they had left him. Ambrosio does not know where he comes from but ever since he was found in front of the monastery as a small baby and raised by the monks, he was considered to be ‘a saint’.

In the detective story mystery and suspense are the consequences of a murder or a series of murders where nobody knows who the killer is and usually there is not just one but several suspects. Symons (1972: 12) explains that for Gerladine Pederson-Krag “the murder represents parental intercourse, the victim is the parent, and the clues are symbolic representations of mysterious nocturnal sounds, stains, incomprehensible adult jokes”. To satisfy infantile curiosity, the reader becomes the detective and tries to resolve “the inadequacy and anxious guilt unconsciously remembered from childhood” (Symons 1972: 13). Walters places murder in the ice house on the piece of land where the three women live and of course they are the first three suspects.

In the world of Gothicism many other inexplicable events may have happened. There was usually an ancient prophecy connected to the castle or its inhabitants. Lewis (1977: 44) created the legend of ‘the bleeding nun’ who came every night at one o’clock to scare people because she broke her monastic vows and killed her lover to be with his brother. The prophecy was confusing, partial and obscure and the protagonists were all terrified when they saw the prophecy realized (Harris 2008: 1).

In modern days there are no ancient prophecies but there are legends that are transmitted by word of mouth and do bring up an interest at the beginning but in the end they have no such power over readers as an ancient prophecy did. According to Botting (1996: 170) “Throughout Gothic fiction terror and horror have depended on things not being what they seem.” This is especially true in the case of the legend of Minette Walters’ *The Ice House*, which tells that one of the three women living in the cottage house was married to a man who disappeared 10 years ago and everybody is convinced that she murdered him and that she is a witch.

Just like dreams the Gothic world, too, combined reality and fantasy. Omens, portents and visions were never excluded from the Gothic novel. The statue of the lord of the manor fell over and signified his soon-to-come death. The lady of the castle had a terrible dream and no matter how hard she tried to avoid the situation the dream soon became reality. Lewis describes his apparition ‘the bleeding nun’ very precisely:

Her face was still veiled, but no longer held her lamp and dagger. She lifted up her veil slowly. What a sight presented itself to my startled eyes! I beheld before me an animated corpse. Her countenance was long and haggard; her cheeks and lips were bloodless; the paleness of death was spread over her features, and her eyeballs, fixed steadfastly upon me, were lustreless and hollow. (Lewis 1977: 170)

Today a character may see a shadowy figure stabbing another shadowy figure and explain to himself it was just a dream but in the end it turns out that the whole scene had been real. Visions have no place in the contemporary detective story. Their only ‘heir’ is an imitation of a vision (Harris 2008: 1).

Another element of the Gothic novel was the element of the supernatural. These were the most dramatic and amazing events that occurred in the novels. Ghosts were walking, talking and even bleeding just like Lewis’ ‘bleeding nun’. Giants appeared or a painting of a deceased fell of the wall just as the protagonist was trying to escape from a suit of armour suddenly coming to life. In *The Monk*, Ambrosio first strangles his own mother and then rapes and stabs his sister. Miles (2002: 53) explains that Lewis

included 'the explained' and 'the unexplained' supernatural, but by reversing their proper order. He makes a mockery of both: first there is a natural explanation (Agnes frightening the servants by dressing up as the ghost of the Bleeding Nun) and then comes the supernatural cause (the real Bleeding Nun turns up).

The element of the supernatural disappeared from most of today's detective stories. Sometimes it occurs but is soon given a logical explanation (Harris 2008: 1). To the reader this explanation is usually more of a disappointment than anything else.

The gothic world did not exist without high and overwrought emotions:

"Happy man!" he exclaimed in his romantic enthusiasm, "happy man, who is destined to possess the heart of that lovely girl! What delicacy in her features! What elegance in her form! How enchanting was the timid innocence of her eyes! And how different from the wanton expression, the wild luxurious fire, which sparkles in Matilda's! Oh! Sweeter must one kiss be, snatched from the rosy lips of the first, than all the full and lustful favours bestowed so freely by the second." (Lewis 1977: 54)

The narration was usually highly sentimental especially when women appeared but even men were allowed highly sentimental and uncontrollable emotions. Characters were often driven by anger, sorrow, surprise, and of course terror and horror. Their nerves were weak and they suffered from feelings of impending doom. Women often panicked, screamed and cried their eyes out, whereas men had frequent emotional speeches, kept running away from whatever haunted them, and were left breathless many times (Harris 2008: 1).

The contemporary detective is also surrounded by people with strong emotions which are not far from Gothic ones, but the detective represents ratio and the world in which emotions have no place because they cause distraction and disable the detective at doing his job properly. The detective solving the case in *The Ice House* is described as follows:

He was in his mid-thirties, of an age with the women, a dark, brooding man with cold eyes. In the twist of his lips, he had brought with him the irritability of the Police Station, concentrated, malignant. (Walters 1993: 13)

Gothic women were always in distress and the ones who appealed the pathos and sympathy of the reader. They fainted, were terrified, they screamed and they were often found sobbing because they were so lonely and miserable. The oppressed heroine was very passive and never did anything to prevent bad things from happening. She remained pensive and although she was the central figure of the novel she suffered more than any other character. She was often abandoned and had no one to protect her from the villain (Harris 2008: 1).

All this while Ambrosio was unconscious of the dreadful scenes which were passing so near. The execution of his designs upon Antonia employed his every thought. Hitherto he was satisfied with the success of his plans. Antonia had drunk the opiate, was buried in the vaults of St. Clare, and absolutely in his disposal. (Lewis 1977: 57)

In the detective story this situation changes. Women still do suffer under the reign of the man in power but modern women are never under so much pressure as their Gothic counterpart (for example Antonia) was. In the detective story the women have power to change things and act although they often fail after all. In *The Ice House* the women in distress are the three women who are accused of murdering the man who disappeared. Villagers attack them whenever they can, they rob their house, destroy furniture, and spread the gossip about the three women accusing them of being witches, lesbians and murderers.

According to Murch (1958: 84) the Gothic villain in England first turned into a convict hero and then to a detective. The revolution of the female character rose with the second-wave feminism of the 1970s which produced a significant new character of the detective story, namely the female private eye. It was supposed to be initiated in Britain by P. D. James with *An Unsuitable Job for a Woman* (1972). This female character emerged at its strongest in the United States in the 1980s, when protagonists such as Marcia Muller's Sharon McCone, Sara Paretsky's V. I. Warshawski, and Sue Grafton's Kinsey Millhone "took on the alienated, anti-system traits of the private eye to convey women's need to confront their exclusion from power with toughness and independence" (*Detective Story* 2008: 1).

The tyrannical male of the Gothic novel was usually the lord of the manor, a father or guardian, a monk or a king. He was the one in power and everybody had to listen to him, especially women. He forced them to do things they hated – they had to marry someone they did not care about, give up their baby right after it was born, go to a convent and never (again) enjoy the pleasures of flesh or even commit a crime (Day 1985: 18). In *The Monk*, Ambrosio threatens his sister:

You are imagined dead; society is for ever lost to you. I possess you here alone; you are absolutely in my power, and I burn with desires which I must either gratify or die: but I would owe my happiness to yourself. (Lewis 1977: 60)

Contemporary women in detective stories no longer have to do such drastic things but they are still often tyrannized by males either by their father, brother or most often their husband. They are weak but have more power to do something about it than the villain's victims in Gothic novel had. Walters goes even further with women being tyrannized by males. Her women characters are tyrannized by a male who disappeared ten years ago – somebody who is no longer in their lives still has power over them because everybody is convinced this body to be the missing man murdered by the three women.

The Gothic language was itself a special Gothic element and had great power to create mystery, danger and suspense. The Gothic metonymies could voice the supernatural without ever bringing it to real life. Just like today the word rain often stands for sorrow and is present at funerals so did Gothic words create the metonymies of gloom and horror. The most common Gothic phrases are for example howling wind often blowing out lights, heavy rain with thunder and lightning, doors grating on rusty hinges, approaching footsteps, sighs, moans, owls, eerie sounds, lights in abandoned rooms, clanking chains, characters trapped in rooms, ruins of buildings, crazed laughter,

doors suddenly slamming shut, howling of distant dogs or perhaps even wolves (Harris 2008: 1). The goal of using these words was to evoke the feelings of fear, unknown, terror and horror.

The walls were soon shaken by the devouring element. The columns gave way, the roofs came tumbling down upon the rioters, and crushed many of them beneath their weight. Nothing was to be heard but shrieks and groans. The convent was wrapped in flames, and the whole presented a scene of devastation and horror. (Lewis 1977: 345)

The detective story lost at least half of these metonymies because in the 'real world' murder itself is a horrifying action and needs no other elements to appear as such. Another reason for not using metonymies typical of Gothic novels is the fact that in the detective story everything needs a logical explanation and it is not easy to explain unbelievable things.

Even the individual words had an impact on creating the atmosphere of terror and horror. Mystery rose from words such as diabolical, enchantment, ghost, haunted, infernal, magic, magician, miracle, omens, ominous, portent, preternatural, prodigy, prophecy, secret, sorcerer, spectre, spirits, strangeness, talisman, vision. Fear, terror and sorrow were the consequences of using such words as afflicted, agony, anguish, apprehensions, commiseration, concern, despair, dismal, dismay, dread, dreaded, dreading, fearing, fright, frightened, furious, gigantic, grief, hopeless, horrid, horror, lamentable, melancholy, miserable, mournfully, panic, rage, sadly, scared, shrieks, sorrow, sympathy, tears, terrible, terrified, terror, unhappy, wretched. (Harris 2008: 1)

Many of these words remain in the contemporary detective story but only those which do not express the presence of the supernatural or inexplicable events. Even the words which describe extremely strong emotions are avoided.

The elements of death and murder were very usual in the Gothic novel and their main goal was to create the atmosphere of gloom, terror and horror.

Sometimes I felt the bloated toad, hideous and pampered with the poisonous vapours of the dungeon, dragging his loathsome length along my bosom. Sometimes the quick cold lizard roused me, leaving his slimy track upon my face, and entangling itself in the tresses of my wild and matted hair. Often have I at waking found my fingers ringed with the long worms which bred in the corrupted flesh of my infant. At such times I shrieked with terror and disgust; and while I shook off the reptile, trembled with all a woman's weakness. (Lewis 1977: 396)

Walters describes the dead body in a more scientific manner. She looks at it from the perspective of the detective's ratio. The detective must remain calm and focused. Walters gives attention to real facts rather than scary and terrifying emotions that would deeply shake everyone who has seen the body.

The head, still tethered to the upper torso by blackened sinew, was wedged in a gap in the top row of a neat stack of bricks. Dull grey hair, long enough to be a woman's, spilled out of the gap. Eyeless sockets,

showing bone underneath, and exposed upper and lower jaw bones gleamed white against the blackened musculature of the face. The chest area, anchored by the head against the vertical face of bricks, looked as if it had been skilfully filleted. The other half of the body lay unnaturally askew of its top half in a position that no living person, however supple, could have achieved. The abdominal region had all but disappeared though shreds lay about as mute witnesses that it had once existed. There were no genitals. The lower half of the left arm, propped on a smaller pile of bricks, was some four feet from the body, much of the flesh stripped away, but some sinews remaining to show it had been wrenched from its elbow. The right arm, pressed against the torso, had the same blackened quality as the head with patches of white bone showing through. Of the legs, only the calves and feet were immediately recognisable, but at a distance from each other in a grotesque parody of the splits and twisted upside down so that soles pointed at the icehouse roof. Of the thighs, only splintered bones remained. (Walters 1993: 28, 29)

One of the most highly valued capacities of the Gothic novel and its elements was the power to transform fears of terror and horror into pleasure. Due to the fact that “what we really want are those desires and objects that have been forbidden” there will always be a need for terror and horror in man’s life (Bruhm 2002: 263). In the detective story the closest to terror and horror are the elements of death and murder.

In analysing and comparing the Gothic elements found in the 18th century Gothic novel *The Monk* and elements in the contemporary detective story *The Ice House*. We have shown that some of the Gothic elements were transferred and are still used in the contemporary detective story while others changed and were adapted to the new circumstances. The article first discusses typical Gothic elements of the Gothic novel, and then presents similar elements found in the contemporary detective story. The comparison of both elements has been made on the basis of how often they occur, with what intensity and if or how they have changed. The setting in the detective story for example is still important, murders happen as frequently as before but they are no longer described in typical Gothic words. Whereas the Gothic novel challenged reader’s emotions, the detective novel challenges the reader’s ability to use logic and find the murderer. In the detective story women are allowed to have strong emotions whereas the detective presents ratio and often appears very ‘cold’. Omens, portents and visions no longer play a role in the modern detective story and supernatural or otherwise inexplicable events are always given a logical explanation. In the detective story women are still tyrannized by men but have more power to do something about the situation. Terror and horror are the leading elements in both genres and therefore inevitable and eternal. They are the ones that make the world keep turning, the brains working and the readers satisfied.

Many 18th century Gothic elements are present in the contemporary detective story but many of them have been adapted to the present situation. The elements of the detective story make sure that the story stands on solid ground and could have happened

whereas the Gothic elements created an implausible story where strong and excessive emotions were given all the freedom the readers needed to enjoy the novel.

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