

Gothic Elements in Sir Walter Scott's "The Tapestry Chamber"

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Introduction: The Gothic Novel

Since Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* was first published in 1764 the Gothic novel has dominated English literature. From that time many writers were attracted to this new genre and began to cultivate it. In spite of its success, however, critics have considered the Gothic genre as un-academic, melodramatic, and sensational. Gothic novels represented a sudden rupture of the established order, a modern idea in an epoch when writers were seeking new ideas and trends. From a literary standpoint, the origins of the Gothic novel may reside in the translation of works such as *The Arabian Nights*, *Turkish Tales*, and *Persian Tales*. These works led people to imaginary exotic locations. The genre began to fade in 1815 with the publication of Charles Maturin's *Melmoth the Wanderer*. However, in England the Gothic novel as a genre lasted until 1840. Its effects developed in the Victorian Age where Edgar Allan Poe became the most popular Gothic writer with his ghost stories and macabre tales; and even Charles Dickens' *Christmas Carol*. By 1880 it was the time of Robert Louis Stevenson's *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* and Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. In 1897 Bram Stoker created Dracula, the most famous Gothic villain in literature, and from then on the Gothic genre mutated into horror fiction. Its influence is felt today in writers such as Anne Rice and Elizabeth Kostova. Eventually critics accepted this genre, and sometimes they approached it from an historical point of view. They were interested in its relation with the past, which had led to the creation of the English historical novel.

The common definition of Gothic in literature is connected with horror and darkness. The ‘machinery’ of Gothic novels includes terror, mystery, the supernatural, death, decay, old haunted buildings, madness, and hereditary curses. The ruins of Gothic buildings suggests these feelings and states of mind by indicating the inevitable decay and collapse of human creations; as do ruined churches, towers, and follies on English country estates as part of a picturesque and sublime landscape. On the other hand, the classical plot created by these stories includes mystery and an ancestral curse. The writer develops the plot in shadowy and gloomy places. The narrative contains castles, abbeys, and dark passages in order to create a feeling of horror in the reader. Nature is an important part of the novel: a leafy wood, ivy covering the walls of a castle, storms, and a full moon are clear examples. There are even elements taken from German literature such as gnomes and supernatural creatures. In conclusion, a wide range of elements are employed to create a feeling of terror in the reader.

Sir Walter Scott’s “The Tapestry Chamber”

Initially, Scott had intended that “The Tapestry Chamber”, “My Aunt Margaret’s Mirror” and “The Death of the Laird’s Jock” were to form part of the Second Series of the *Chronicles of The Canongate*. However, this idea was rejected by his publishers James Ballantyne and Robert Cadell. As Scott himself wrote in his Journal in January 1828, “... these rejected parts of the *Chronicles*, which Cadell and Ballantyne criticised so severely, which might well enough make up a trifle of this kind, and settle the few accompts which, will I nill I, have crept in upon this new year”. (Scott, 1998 : 474). Finally in 1829 the tales were diverted to Frederick Reynold’s yearly publication named “The Keepsake”. On the other hand, the Second Series of *Chronicles of The Canongate* was published a year before, including *The Fair Maid of Perth*. In the opinion of the

present writer there is insufficient information available about these short stories. It seems that they were not well regarded by editors, yet they are clear examples of Gothic literature. “The Tapestryed Chamber” is selected here because it contains all the elements outlined above and is Scott’s most Gothic tale.¹

Scott sets the plot of the “Tapestryed Chamber” in a castle dating from the English Wars of the Roses: “... the turrets of a castle, as old as the wars of York and Lancaster,...” (Scott 2004 : 1042). According to General Richard Browne, one of the two main characters in the tale, he was admitted by a porter who led him into “... a modern Gothic lodge, built in that style to correspond with the castle itself,...” (Scott 2004 : 1043). Castles, as explained in the introduction to this essay, were the perfect location for the plot of Gothic tales. Furthermore, Nature is present in the plot because the castle itself is surrounded by woods: “Delighted with the partial glimpses which he obtained of the castle through the woods and glades by which this ancient feudal fortress was surrounded,....” (Scott 2004 : 1043). The second character in the story is Lord Woodville, a childhood friend of General Browne and owner of the castle. He himself describes his own possession to Browne as follows: “I confess, that my present party [*of guests*] is pretty large, and the old house, like other places of the kind, does not possess so much accommodation as the extent of the outward walls appears to promise. But we can give you a comfortable old fashioned room,...” (Scott 2004 : 1044). This room is the tapestryed chamber of the title. When General Browne first enters the room he perceives a gloomy atmosphere and a melancholy aspect. Parenthetically, both ‘gloomy’ and ‘melancholy’ are adjectives very frequently used by Gothic writers to create a feeling of horror in the reader. The next morning General Browne’s appearance betrays that he has not slept:

1. The writer is aware of “Wandering Willie’s Tale” in *Redgauntlet* (1824); “My Aunt Margaret’s *Mirror*” (1828).

He looked fatigued and feverish. His hair, the powdering and arrangement of which was at the time one of the most important occupations of a man's whole day, and marked his fashion as much as, in the present time, the tying of a cravat, or the want of one, was dishevelled, uncurled, void of powder, and dank with dew. His clothes were huddled on with a careless negligence remarkable in a military man, whose real or supposed duties are usually held to include some attention to the toilet; and his looks were haggard and ghastly in a peculiar degree. (Scott 2004:1046).

The reason for this situation is that he had spent a horrible night, as he explains to Lord Woodville. Scott seeks to create a feeling of horror in the reader with his description of what had happened to General Browne. One of the most important elements in the Gothic genre is the one that now appears: "the ghost", and about which General Browne states the following:

"Ere I could draw the [*bed*]curtain to see what the matter was, the figure of a little woman passed between the bed and the fire. [...] Upon a face which wore the fixed features of a corpse, were imprinted the traces of the vilest and most hideous passions which had animated her while she lived. The body of some atrocious criminal seemed to have been given up from the grave,..." (Scott 2004 : 1048).

The conclusion the reader may reach here is that this strange figure is indeed a ghost. General Browne refers to her in a past time when she *lived*; and he also specifies that she seems to have left the *grave*. Both elements refer to her as a spectre or ghost who appears in the tapestried chamber. This element is very common in Gothic literature. For example, in Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*, Scrooge is visited by the spirit of his partner Marley, who announces the visit of the Christmas spirits. Finally General Browne describes her as a "horrible spectre".

This definition shows that Scott introduces a ghost in the plot to create horror or fear in the reader. And then Scott describes how Browne himself feels, and the element of insanity or madness is observed in the character. He says:

The current of my lifeblood ceased to flow, and I sank back in a swoon, as very a victim to panic terror as ever was a village girl or a child of ten years old. [...] I will not pretend to describe what hot and cold fever-fits tormented

me for the rest of the night, through broken sleep, weary vigils, and that dubious state which forms the neutral ground between them. (Scott 2004 : 1049).

After that General Browne decides not to spend a second night in the haunted room, in spite of Lord Woodville's wishes that he do so. There are two more elements of interest. The first is the role of the archetypal villain, which was introduced by the English author Ann Radcliffe in *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794).² In Scott's tale, Lord Woodville is a villain because he used his friend for an experiment: "I am the more sorry for your pain, my dear Browne, he continued, that it is the unhappy, though most unexpected, result of an experiment of my own". (Scott 2004 : 1050). The experiment was carried out owing to reports that the room was "disturbed by supernatural sights and noises". He confesses to his friend that "the opinion that the room was haunted very strongly prevailed among the domestics and was also known in the neighbourhood and too many of my friends". (Scott 2004 : 1050). By concealing the truth from his friend he has behaved like a villain.

The second element is the curse on the family, which is a basic element in these novels, as in Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto*. In Scott's "The Tapestry Chamber" Lord Woodville himself explains the history of the woman who inhabits the chamber:

That is the picture of a wretched ancestress of mine, of whose crimes a black and fearful catalogue is recorded in a family history in my charter-chest. The recital of them would be too horrible; it is enough to say, that in yon fatal apartment incest and unnatural murder were committed. (Scott 2004 : 1051).

Conclusion

Based on the elements it contains, the "Tapestry Chamber" may be considered an authentic Gothic tale. The purpose of this essay is to show one of Scott's Gothic stories, which is not as well-known as the Waverley Novels. Scott shows that he was able to write good ghost stories despite Ballantyne and Cadell's refusal to publish, as we have previously noted. The reason for

2. Ann Radcliffe (1764–1823) See Internet: *Ann Radcliffe*, http://academic.brooklyn.cuny.edu/english/melani/novel_18c/radcliffe/index.html (accessed 7 January 2010).

their refusal may have been that the Gothic genre was considered to be inferior and might, by association, have damaged Scott's reputation, although it was widespread in English literature. Later writers such as Dickens, Stevenson, Conan Doyle, and Wilde approached this new genre during their creative lives to write tales that nowadays are considered among their best works. Even today it is a genre cultivated by many writers such as Anne Rice, Elizabeth Kostova, and even Stephen King. To sum up, when writers decide to adopt this genre it is with the conviction that it is not as inferior as literary critics claim; and if Scott is among those writers, then the reader is assuredly going to enjoy an excellent tale.

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