The Gothic in

*The Hound of the Baskervilles*


The gothic a form that inherits from romance: extravagant & fanciful; blurs distinction supernatural and natural

Gothic rose in the 18th C, shadowing (ie darkening and following) the Enlightenment: darkness reclaiming its rights after having been dispelled by reason __ gloom and uncertainty

Also a different perception of natural scenery: mountains admirable bec of their irregular lines __ also idea of size and grandeur/vastness that exceeds human comprehension: what the eye cannot grasp, nor the mind; produces wonder and terror

1. Reader’s response & the sublime

Genre defined in terms of effects it elicits on its readership: thrilling suspense and uncertainty

One of the genres the most heavily criticized for its noxious influence: indulgence in transgression and sensation.

A form based on excitement: no restraint as to propriety, decency, reason or plausibility.

⇒ boundlessness

Sublime ie excess generating a mixture of pleasure and pain

Sublime landscape (see Burke’s catalog: asperity and infinity: the Alps)

Sus pense and the sublime

See *Burke’s A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful* (1757): awe aesthetic emotion ass w/the sublime

Prolonged suspense as pleasurable pain, tension: informed by theory of the sublime: solution is deferred

The suspense of the plot rather the disappointing solution is the focus of attention

Takes the form of digressions, embeddings, inserted poems, etc.

Terror

Mrs Radcliffe’s famous distinction terror/horror:

Terror and horror are in fact opposites, that the first expands the soul, and awakens the faculties to a high degree of life; the other contracts, freezes, and nearly annihilates them. (“ON the Supernatural in Poetry”, 1826)

Preference for terror implies rational return to normality: in Mrs R’s terms, “obscurity” v “confusion”: obscurity activates the mind while confusion only makes it passive

Activity of the mind makes escape possible and in turn allows the externalization of the threat (// detective fiction) __ threat cast away from field
of reason and domesticity (detective fiction a step further: cast away THANKS to reason)

Horror: negative sublime, ie mind frozen in contraction: the response to sth that cannot be transcended in fact has to do with incomplete or impossible externalization: evil cannot be totally expelled

More than hypocrisy or secrecy: involves the supernatural that cannot be reduced to rational explanation.

_Hound of the Baskervilles_: Interesting modulation of the two emotions

_ Stapelton’s strategy consists in generating horror in his victims ___ die of fright; cannot fight the curse ___ part of the identity of the family, what has been internalized

_ What is horror to the Baskervilles is terror to the rest of the characters: fear fought back thanks to reason, in the case of Holmes; in the case of Watson, terror stimulates his Romantic imagination and makes him receptive to invisible truths ___ responds emotionally to the landscape.

**Place**

Gloomy castles set in the middle of a jagged mountain and surrounded by a thick forest: seclusion

Presence of robbers (Hound) besides archetypal villain (aristocrat or monk) pursuing heroine ___ the gothic’s wide range of dangers announces vast array of suspects in detective fiction: In _Hound_, corresponds to the function of Selden.

Remoteness also in terms of time ___ ancient supersitions (Cath)

**Time**

**Horace Walpole’s Castle of Otranto:**

___ title ref to place

___ Place in turn associated w/ time: crossing between past and present; a story about genealogy and usurpation, rightful heirs to the estate being repossessed (very close to main spring of _Hound_)

_Mysteries of Udolpho_ by Mrs Radcliffe also revolves around a family secret buried in time

=> The Past in the Present

Gothic suggestion that the present can never detach itself from the past, with genealogy playing a part in plot (Walpole’s _Castle of Otranto_ first gothic) “sins of the fathers visited on their children”

Thus ties in with problematic of identity: self inherits psychological features / a curse from ancestors

**Character**

___ The victim

Subordination of character to place.

Csqc: human personality is depicted as essentially inconsistent; instability & fragmentation of personality because of the dispossession of the subject of his own home.

Focalization on the victim: her (gothic victim is generally female) perception accounts for terror (excessive sensibility) ___ generally leads to erroneous interpretation (Udolpfo): innocent letters thought to reveal a terrible family crime

_Hound_ is gothic because of Watson: he provides HIS distorted vision

___ The villain
Gothic novels and mysteries intersect in figure of the villain. In both cases, emphasis on contrast appearance/reality
Engaged in weaving webs of deceit: double-faced like mystery culprit:
eminent position (a noble man or a monk)
In both cases, emphasis on contrast appearance/reality
Suspicion mainspring of story // gothic – mysteries
A persona marked by hubris, challenging order and morals: Satanic
drives concealed under the cloak of respectability
Excess + secrecy
=> Puritan dichotomy (Stevenson’s *Dr Jekyll & Mr Hyde*)

2. Wilderness or containment?
A dynamic based on transgression and limits __ one cannot exist without the other
Forces of imagination unleashed throughout the narrative, to be stifled again at the end
Ending: reaffirmation of normalcy
// carnival effect, ie temporary release from constraint
Liberation followed by imprisonment: subversion of order leading to reaffirmation of norm
Also idea that after the experience of excess and terror, norm now is desirable. Rebellion followed by relief to be back in the realm of ordinariness
Definition of reason by depicting excesses of passion? A thin excuse for display of excesses of all sorts

A conservative, reactionary mode, or a revolutionary one?
Ambivalent affiliation:
__ old castles and nunneries: distrust of aristocracy and catholicism (ie implicit support of progress)
__ Yet also a fascination for all things ancient
Gothic: longing for the organic medieval community: a system based on the family and on analogy: tight interconnectedness
__ Reaction against mechanistic, atomistic view of society: Protestant
Anglo saxon individualism: individuals no relation to each other, engaged in purely mercantile relations: autonomy and competition
Relations not organic but mechanistic, based on scientific laws of cause and effect and self interest.
Gothic: logic pushed to its extreme, ie nightmarish vision of people pursuing their own selfish interests, obsessional predators that are alienated from others and ultimately from themselves (intense rationalism breeding madness)
\[\Rightarrow\] parallel Enlightenment leading to the French Revolution and to the Terror
Abstraction and mechanic logic breeding violence
*Hound* exhibits this concern for primitiveness, although not necessarily in a nostalgic way: Holmes the epitomy of modernity __ yet belief in science also undermined (ending)
Dichotomy corresponds to distinction male/female gothic (Mrs Radcliffe rational denouement v Lewis’s *The Monk* that ends in a supernatural extravaganza):

* _villain: satanic, transgressive, driven by a quest for autonomy=> revolutionary (the French Surrealists loved *The Monk*)_

* _female passive victim saved by marriage: relational identity: =>conservative_

Reconciliation between individual & society in female gothic, impossibility to reach a compromise in male gothic

* _Hound reschuffles the characters: female victim takes part in the conspiracy, hubristic villain is part of the family_

* _Incapacity to locate guilt “outside”: wilderness is internal_

3. Reason and superstition

A universe that dislocates boundaries fiction/fact, reality/fantasy

Distinction Walpole/Lewis v Radcliffe:

* supernatural v natural, irrationality v rationality,

* aristocratic values v middle class values,

* male v female authors

Gothic (like the fantastic) places the “real” under scrutiny: transforms the familiar (domesticity) into the unfamiliar (a prison house): creates otherness by displacing the boundaries of reality.

Common ground between mysteries/the fantastic: has to do with hermeneutics ie the activity of reading signs and providing interpretation

* “opens up” onto new dimension that can no longer be closed off: thus disturbing, subversive effect: truth no longer one and absolute.

Notion that disorder is irreversible (Pandora’s box of uncertainty)

* Traces a contrario the limits of what a given culture holds true – boundaries of the real: exposes this culture’s epistemological limits: for ex. Middle Age vision accepted wonders refused by secularized modern times

* _Hound: clash reason/science v superstition_

* _⇒ interplay limitation (culture) v opening (fantastic)_

**Todorov’s system of the fantastic:**

Introduction à la littérature fantastique (1970) isolates structure that defines the fantastic (not “theme(s)”) – the fantastic is based on the oscillation between two interpretations of the supernatural phenomenon

* Interpretative hesitation: marvellous or natural?

* Hesitation of reader duplicates that of the character

* Allegorical and poetical readings must be rejected

* 3 conditions very close to detective fiction constraints:

* Interpretative activity & difficulty to read signs

* Parallel detective / reader

* Interest in events themselves (no interpretation that transfers text onto another dimension, religious or poetic)

* Suspended revelation

One can also add:

* Space: confinement
Action: victimization + pursuit
Character: partition good  evil + (as already said) notion of disguise & transformation
Thematics: certainty or uncertainty abt the nature of the real
In *Hound*: this problematic illustrated by the central role of the curse: superstition or reality? A series of reversals to eventually debunk the curse as a stratagem used by a clever illusionist  yet suggestion that Stapleton, being a Baskerville, actually dies of the curse...

The relationship to “reality”
Difference: undecidability (fantastic) v truth (detective fiction)
Historically, fiction moved from the marvellous (belief in the supernatural) to the fantastic in the 19th century  (no explanation ) to the uncanny *(l'étrange* __strangeness generated by the Unconscious)*:
The fantastic is the experience of the limits of reason: hypothesis after hypothesis is tried until they become untenable , so that the fantastic introduces what remains, ie the impossible
In the 19th C, the fantastic proliferates in the shadow of positivism  idea that the real would be mastered and articulated, ie expressed in human terms: the world as a huge equation, translated into a mathematical language (Poe)
Thus the fantastic has to do with language: what cannot be said ; thus for Todorov, the fantastic is the most “literary” of forms as it lays bare pb of expressed “reality” in terms of “literature”  it is a self-reflexive form (like detective fiction which adresses the issue of story and plot)
The fantastic, like detective fiction, also concerned with VISION: importance of mirrors  in the fantastic things distorted or slightly out of focus; in detection not transformation of the familiar into the unfamiliar but rather reality into deceit (yet central importance of the family portrait in the diegesis: what allows H to locate the culprit)
  both testify to the fact that our culture identifies the visible with the real

Otherness as evil
The fantastic displays a shift in the definition of the demonic: difference or evil used to be located “out there” in romance; the devil incarnates this evil, seen as supernatural, outside the human sphere
The demonic increasingly located WITHIN : fantastic built on doubt as to whether evil is self-generated or external
  central concern of traditional “whodunits”: culprit is “least likely suspect” in that he seems to be “one of us”
In *Hound*: external/devilish “curse” is seen as superstition; it is external, the result of human agency (not psychological) but nevertheless a second reading reveals a problematic internalization as the culprit is a Baskerville and he is mad
Thus superstition is not totally “secularized”  the “curse” is true and not true

Freud’s definition of the Uncanny
As said above: the end of the 19th c was a period when otherness was perceived as internal  the Unconscious
Freud’s essay (“The Uncanny”), published in 1919, proposes a psychoanalytical reading of fantastic literature (esp Hoffman’s tales)
Freud’s stimulating opening: looks in dictionary for the meaning of term “heimlich” __ etymology yields two contradictory meanings
  __ what is familiar, comfortable, intimate
  __ but also what is unfamiliar, hidden, a secret
  ⇒ unheimlich ambivalent: uncovers what is secret, turning the familiar into the unfamiliar
  ⇒ reveal in fact concealed desire :
    Perceived as strange but in fact all too familiar : in fact what has been repressed and comes back with a vengeance

Freud’s essay also notes that, despite modernity’s thin veneer of rationality , a primitive, animist mode of thought is lurking in any one of us individually and in society at large, in culture.

The curse encapsulates this temptation in Doyle’s tale.