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Influence of Booth Library on this Work

This research paper was a major portion of my English Senior Seminar "Literature and the City." Without the help of Booth Library staff and services, this paper would not have been possible.

Janice Dett and Deborah Fennema of the Reference department were invaluable in suggesting sources and helping me with the research. With the exception of the internet resources, every book I referenced was obtained from Booth Library. Many of the books had to be requested through Interlibrary Loan, and without that service I would not have had the breadth of sources available to me. Booth Library's subscription to JSTOR was also a wonderful tool for research and access to full-text journal articles.

A Dark Place of the Earth: London and the Roots of Urban Gothic

In the late Victorian era a new type of novel appeared. Dark and creepy, filled with supernatural creatures and twisted, sometimes violent plots, it resembled its Gothic predecessor of 200 years earlier. Building on the standard elements of the Gothic novel, this new fiction pierced the heart of the city. As the new genre brought the terror of Gothic fiction from isolated castles into the streets, it found its first home in the fog-shrouded city at the center of the Victorian age. Urban Gothic was rooted firmly in the soil of London.

In order to explore the genre of urban Gothic, it is necessary to understand its roots in the traditional Gothic form. Gothic fiction falls under the category of "fantastic" literature, described by Andrzej Zgorzelski as fiction which "consists in the breaching of the internal laws which are initially assumed in the text to govern the fictional world" (298). The authors of early Gothic works envisioned a world very much like their own, but a world also populated with vampires, demons and other supernatural beings. Fred Botting calls Gothic literature "a genre that has over the centuries consistently depicted the transgression of natural and moral laws, aesthetic rules and social taboos" (*Essays* 1).

M. H. Abrams states Gothic "opened up to fiction the realm of the irrational and of the perverse impulses and the nightmarish terrors that lie beneath the orderly surface of the civilized mind" (78). Traditional Gothic fiction challenges the mind by breaching the world of the familiar with the realm of the unknown and the unexpected. This creates distrust in the minds of the characters, which often grows from a sense of unease into abject terror. This gives Gothic its most easily recognizable traits, "a brooding atmosphere of gloom and terror" surrounding "events which are uncanny or macabre or melodramatically violent" (Abrams 78).

Traditional Gothic traces its beginnings to Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto: A Gothic Story* in 1764. It was followed by *Vathek* by William Beckford in 1786 and Ann Radcliffe's *The Mysteries of Udolpho* in 1794 (Abrams 78). Introduced in these novels were several elements which are now considered to be standard in Gothic literature. Donna Campbell's definition of Gothic elements includes "an atmosphere of gloom, terror, or mystery"; "elements of the uncanny . . . that challenge reality" and "an exotic setting isolated in time or space from contemporary life, often a ruined mansion or castle."

Urban Gothic is also marked by a gloomy atmosphere and the interplay of reality and non-reality that challenges the sanity of the characters. But the setting of the novel is the major difference between traditional Gothic and urban Gothic. "Gothic landscapes are desolate, alienating and full of menace. In the eighteenth century they were wild and mountainous locations. Later the modern city combined the natural and architectural components of Gothic

grandeur and wildness, its dark, labyrinthine streets suggesting the violence and menace of Gothic castle and forest" (Botting *Gothic* 2).

The traditional Gothic removes the characters from the relative safety and normality of the city and transplants them into the isolated castle. The urban Gothic brings forth its horrors in the middle of the city, isolating the characters in the very space where they should feel safe and surrounded by other people. It is the very nature of the city, its ability to provide isolation within its sheer mass of numbers, that provides the home the supernatural forces need.

The city becomes not just a setting for the terror but an integral part of the horror. As Phillips and Witchard state, "the city itself becomes implicated in the motives, desires, and conflicts of the characters"(2). The city—that vast patch of humanity and architecture—becomes almost a supernatural entity in its own right.

But just as in traditional Gothic literature, the city must have a suitable atmosphere to harbor the requisite terrors. Traditional Gothic demands a ruined castle or mansion, not a brand new split-level. Urban Gothic requires a city with the same dark atmosphere:

For Gothic *of* a city rather than just in a city, that city needs a concentration of memories and historical associations. Ideally these would be expressed in an extant architectural or topographical heritage, as these areas provide the natural home for ghostly presences of imagined/projected meanings. (Mighall 57)

London in the Victorian era was eminently suited as a hiding place for all manner of supernatural horrors. It was dirty, foggy, and hard to navigate. "By the early Victorian period, ideas of centre and margin were (ostensibly) overturned as London, the very epicentre of the civilized world, became also, and in time pre-eminently, one of the dark places of the earth" (Mighall 54).

By the time of Queen Victoria, London was already well over a thousand years old and its memory stretched back to Roman times and beyond. It had been attacked by Norse invaders, razed by fire and nearly wiped out by plague. Some of its architecture, like the Tower of London, held memories of blood and violence within its walls. By the late Victorian period Jack the Ripper was stalking its streets, driving terror into the hearts of London residents. Sprawling and seamy, London was an ideal home for urban Gothic.

The sinister atmosphere of Victorian London was due in large part to the fog. Exacerbated by the pollution from burning coal fires, London was dark even during the day. The fog lent a wonderful gloom to the early urban Gothic novels:

It was by this time about nine in the morning, and the first fog of the season. A great chocolate-coloured pall lowered over heaven...Mr. Utterson beheld a marvellous number of degrees and hues of twilight; for here it would be dark like the back-end of evening; and there would be a glow of a rich, lurid brown, like the light of some strange conflagration; and here, for a moment, the fog would be quite broken up, and a haggard shaft of daylight would glance in between the

swirling wreaths. (Stevenson 26; ch. 4)

Stoker's Dr. Seward describes "the wonderful smoky beauty of a sunset over London, with its lurid lights and inky shadows and all the marvelous tints that come on foul clouds even as on foul water" (134; ch. 9). The fog was so pervasive it even made its way into the houses. "The fire burned in the grate; a lamp was set lighted on the chimney shelf, for even in the houses the fog began to lie thickly" (Stevenson 29; ch. 5).

The fog-enhanced gloom of London allowed the Gothic creatures to roam freely in the city. It provided an ever-available hiding place, a hidden pocket of Gothic atmosphere wherever the author required it, as "the next moment the fog settled down again upon that part, as brown as umber, and cut him off from his blackguardly surroundings" (Stevenson 26; ch. 4).

The contrast between the fair and the foul districts of London also enhanced its Gothic gloom:

The dismal quarter of Soho seen under these changing glimpses, with its muddy ways, and slatternly passengers, and its lamps, which had never been extinguished or had been kindled afresh to combat this mournful reinvasion of darkness, seemed, in the lawyer's eyes, like a district of some city in a nightmare. (Stevenson 26; ch.4)

One might expect evil in such a setting, but the supernatural horrors of the urban Gothic did not confine themselves to the squalor of the poor neighborhoods. The horrors could creep into the solid middle-class homes of

London. Even into a lady's bedroom, as Mina Harker discovers, when she is pursued by Dracula:

I . . . found, to my surprise, that all was dim around. The gaslight which I had left lit for Jonathan, but turned down, came only like a tiny red spark through the fog, which had evidently grown thicker and poured into the room . . . The mist grew thicker and thicker and I could see now how it came in, for I could see it like smoke . . . pouring in, not through the window, but through the joinings of the door. (Stoker 295; ch. 19)

The gloom could also have an isolating effect. "The fog still slept on the wing above the drowned city, where the lamps glimmered like carbuncles; and through the muffle and smother of these fallen clouds, the procession of the town's life was still rolling in through the great arteries with a sound as of a mighty wind" (Stevenson 31-2; ch.5). One could be in the heart of London, surrounded by people, and yet suddenly feel very alone. "It was a fine dry night; frost in the air; the streets as clean as a ballroom floor; the lamps, unshaken by any wind, drawing a regular pattern of light and shadow. By ten o'clock, when the shops were closed, the bystreet was very solitary and in spite of the low growl of London from all round, very silent" (Stevenson 16; ch.2).

Isolation is key in the traditional Gothic novel, where the characters have stepped out of their ordinary lives and into a different realm. Their world has suddenly grown smaller, sometimes literally as well as figuratively. There is often an element of captivity or imprisonment involved. The characters are

unable to escape the isolated setting and return to the normal world. In the traditional Gothic novel, the city represents civilization and all that is normal.

In contrast, urban Gothic reverses the polarity of the settings. The city is no longer a place of sanctuary. "Urban gothic tales are set in the modern city, and derive a substantial part of their emotional power from the contrast between the materialistic beliefs of most of the characters and the supernatural marvels or horrors happening before their eyes" (Spencer 91). Urban Gothic removes the fear of isolation in a remote location. The characters are not displaced into a realm of supernatural isolation. Instead the terror is brought into a familiar setting, a large city, where there are thousands of people. The supernatural has come to them.

Mina Harker cannot even find words to express her horror when she realizes Count Dracula intends to take up residence in London. "That fearful Count was coming to London . . . If it should be, and he came to London, with its teeming millions . . . I shall be prepared" (Stoker 205; ch. 14).

"The supernatural terrors, the fantastic occurrences, derive much of their emotional power from the fact that they are happening here, now, next door, in the ordinary daily world—or a world that has always appeared to be ordinary—to people very like the readers themselves" Spencer asserts (95). This brings the horror home in a way the traditional Gothic does not. The characters are no longer imprisoned in a supernatural locale. They cannot escape back to civilization. There is no escape.

The new terror is now heightened by being surrounded by people who do not see or feel the horrors of the protagonist. The isolation of the traditional gothic is an external isolation. In the urban gothic genre the isolation is within the protagonist himself. He sees the ghost or the vampire, but the rest of the world does not. "Over and over the tales of the urban gothic repeat this message: surface appearances cannot be trusted" (Spencer 92).

Equally important is the psychological setting, for a great deal of the action in Gothic literature takes place inside the minds of the characters. The physical setting is a gateway to the horrors the mind conjures up.

The protagonists now find themselves alone despite the presence of others. Mr. Villiers, describing the sensation to one of his friends in *The Great God Pan*, says "It's a curious thing, Austin, to be alone in London at night, the gas-lamps stretching away in the perspective, and the dead silence, and then perhaps the rush and clatter of a hansom on the stones" (Machen 66; ch. 6). Stevenson expresses a similar sentiment in *Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*: "London hummed solemnly all around; but nearer at hand, the stillness was only broken by the sound of a footfall moving to and fro along the cabinet floor" (46; ch.8). The supernatural creatures, although taking advantage of the resources of the city, do not often choose to show themselves to the city at large.

The isolated protagonist now finds himself alone at the heart of a city that continues moving in its normal way despite the newfound terror within. Mr. Utterson, in searching for Mr. Hyde, finds "in the course of his nightly

patrols, he had long grown accustomed to the quaint effect with which the footfalls of a single person, while he is still a great way off, suddenly spring out distinct from the vast hum and clatter of the city" (Stevenson 16; ch.2). As Spencer points out:

The natural, reasonable, mundane world is only a thin film covering a realm of horrors which at any moment might break through to attack the unsuspecting, and it is the city, that indiscriminate, crowded, roiling mass of humanity, which creates a hospitable space in the modern world for such monsters, a place where they can hide unsuspected. (Spencer 92)

Feeling isolated, the characters counteract the grip of terror by seeking the presence of others. Mr. Utterson declares "never in his life had he been conscious of so sharp a wish to see and touch his fellow-creatures" (Stevenson 41; ch. 8). When he goes to call upon a friend, he "preferred to speak with Poole upon the doorstep and surrounded by the air and sounds of the open city, rather than to be admitted into that house of voluntary bondage" (Stevenson 37; ch. 6).

Added to the isolation are "elements of the uncanny that challenge reality" (Campbell). In this remote setting, unfamiliar to the characters, supernatural entities are found. The traditional Gothic "depicted what the city (civilisation) banished or refused to acknowledge" Mighall states (54).

Bram Stoker's *Dracula* shows a perfect reversal of the traditional Gothic formula to that of urban Gothic. The vampire Count Dracula leaves his remote

and ruined castle in Transylvania—the ideal setting for a traditional Gothic—for the dark metropolitan streets of London. The character Van Helsing, describing Dracula's plan, says in his inimitable accent, "What does he do? He find out the place of all the world most of promise for him" (Stoker 365-6; ch. 23). Dracula does not seek the isolation of the country, but the anonymity only a large city can provide. Again from Van Helsing, talking of Dracula's motivations: "Why not in this place so central, so quiet, where he come and go by the front or the back at all hour, when in the very vast of the traffic there is none to notice" (Stoker 334; ch. 22). In a city such as London, Dracula has the advantage. There are hundreds of places he can hide and a few murders among millions of people are scarcely noticed. Dracula has chosen all of London as his new hunting grounds. "The north and west were surely never meant to be left out of his diabolical scheme—let alone the City itself and the very heart of fashionable London in the south-west and west" (Stoker 299; ch. 20).

In a similar fashion, Helen, the half-breed demon in Arthur Machen's *The Great God Pan* chooses London as the setting for her misdeeds. Though she is a daughter of Pan, the god of fields and forests, it is within the city she finds an audience of men who will yield to her otherworldly charm. "She will come back to London, Austin; depend upon it, she will come back, and we shall hear more about her then. I don't think it will be very pleasant news" states one of the characters who is searching for her (Machen 55; ch. 5).

Just as the city of London draws creatures like Helen and Dracula, it also breeds a certain kind of man to oppose the monsters. These are good men,

employed in honorable professions, men of outstanding and upright character, such as Dr. Seward in *Dracula* and Mr. Utterson in *Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*. They are also, like Mr. Villiers in *The Great God Pan*, thoroughly familiar with London. "Villiers prided himself as a practiced explorer of such obscure mazes and byways of London life, and in this unprofitable pursuit he displayed an assiduity which was worthy of more serious employment" says Machen (27; ch.3). Villiers is also "famous for his intimate knowledge of London life, both in its tenebrous and luminous phases" (Machen 32; ch.3).

While they might be familiar with London, they are not prepared for the supernatural events that happen to them. "You...may think you know life, and London, and what goes on day and night in this dreadful city; for all I can say you may have heard the talk of the vilest, but I tell you you can have no conception of what I know" (Machen 29; ch.3) one of the characters tells Mr. Villiers.

Despite the psychological horrors that are suffered, the early urban Gothic is always neatly resolved in the end. No matter how gruesome the narrative has been, civilization wins out over the supernatural. Dracula leaves London to return to Transylvania, where he is destroyed. Helen is caught and forced to suffer the same death she has prompted in her followers. The evildoers are punished and the honorable characters are rewarded with the return of their sanity and their normal lives. As Oscar Wilde says in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, "Out of the unreal shadows of the night comes back the real life that we had known" (193; ch. 9).

But urban Gothic did not end with the Victorians. A little more than a century later, urban Gothic is showing a resurgence in popularity as the urban fantasy novel. In 2009, 28 of the top 50 fantasy best sellers were urban fantasy (Mathews 11). Comprised of the same elements as above, these dark children of urban Gothic are spreading the seeds of Gothic from London into cities throughout the world. The locales may be more widespread, but these novels have at their roots the same elements of the early urban Gothic: gloomy atmosphere, uncanny or paranormal elements, and the isolation of a single soul within the masses of a city turned upside down. Count Dracula would feel right at home in these modern versions of urban Gothic . . . and, indeed, he has found a home in these as well.

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