

# Mergence of Gothic and Romantic Elements in Charlotte Bronte's Jane Eyre

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The word "Gothic" originally referred to a Germanic tribe but later on it came to refer to the medieval art and architecture that was characterized by the use of pointed arches and vaults (1). The Gothic style did not really vanish in England after the end of the medieval period. It was revived as an architectural style in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries that were the same flourishing time of novel writing (2).

Later on, some novels were called Gothic novels for the authors of such novels usually set their stories in the medieval period; often in gloomy castles furnished with dungeons, subterranean passages and dark corridors. They almost focused on the suffering imposed on an innocent heroine by a cruel and lustful villain and made generous use of ghosts, mysterious disappearances and other sensational and supernatural occurrences. The principal aim of such novels was to evoke chilling terror by exploiting mystery and variety of horrors. Examples of Gothic novels are Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* (1764), William Beckford's *Vathek* (1786), Ann Radcliffe's *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794), Mathew Gregory Lewis' *The Monk* (1796) and Jane Austen's *Nothanger Abbey* (1798) (3).

Then, the term "Gothic" has extended to a type of fiction which lacks the medieval setting; the dark castles and dungeons but develops an atmosphere of gloom and terror, introduces events which are uncanny, macabre or violent and often deals with aberrant psychological states. Accordingly,

the term Gothic novel can be applied to William Godwin's *Caleb Williams* (1794), Mary Shelly's *Frankenstein* (1817) and the novels and tales of terror by the German E.T.A Hoffmann. Still Gothic has been used to describe elements in later and rather romantic works such as Emily Bronte's *Wuthering Heights* (1847) and Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre* (1847) (4).

What is noteworthy in the latter novel is the mergence of the romantic and the Gothic style so this paper is devoted to trace the Gothic elements and how they go together with the romantic side of the novel.

II

As a novel, *Jane Eyre* is divided into three parts: the first part is about Jane's life as a child, whether at Gateshead Hall or Lowood Charity-School; the second part is about her life at Thornfield Hall and her relation with Mr. Rochester and the third part, except for the final chapters which are about Jane's marriage to Rochester, is about Jane's life at Marsh End and her relation with John Rivers. *Jane Eyre*, with its pilgrim heroine, contains some romantic elements: there are Jane's two lovers; the dark Rochester and the blond Rivers. There is the centrality of nature and the use of weather to symbolize psychological states. But there are some other elements which are Gothic in nature such as the Thornfield Hall, its dark Byronic owner and the mad wife in the attic. Beside that, dreams omens and supernatural events are made use of in the novel (5).

Alan Gilchrist comments:

*Jane Eyre* contains some recognizable, romantic portions... but much of it is sheer melodrama, using the ingredients of "Gothic" novel which was still popular during Charlotte's life. We have the sombre, mysterious man concealing his guilty secret behind locked doors; we have the atmosphere of horror; we have hideous shrieks, frightening violence, maiming and death. We even have the supernatural when Jane hears Rochester's voice calling her although he is many miles away (6).

The gloomy atmosphere is created early in the novel when Jane was introduced as a

penniless orphan who was left to the care of her aunt, Mrs. Reed. As she was a child without a protector, she was always hit and scorned by John, her cousin, who planted terror in her heart and whom she once dared to describe as a Roman murderer for he had knocked her down and hit her for no reason. Being angry for her son's anger to be described as such, Mrs. Reed ordered that Jane should be locked in the red room. Jane was terribly afraid of being locked in that room which, beside its darkness and gloominess, was the room where her uncle had died. Her heart sank to her feet when she remembered that her uncle had died in the chill, silent solemn room where she was now locked. Superstition was with her at that moment: she began to imagine the ghost of her uncle and see mysterious lights gleaming and quivering on the walls. Panic-stricken, she screamed to be let out, then, she lost consciousness.

Afterward, Mrs. Reed consigned little Jane to Lowood Asylum which was a charitable institution. Jane spent some miserable years there until she became a teacher. Then she passed to be a governess at Thornfield Hall to a little girl who was Mr. Rochester's daughter, a man of grim aspect and bad temper. During her residence in Thornfield Hall, Mr. Rochester's mansion itself with its three storeys was a mystery and Gothic incarnate to Jane. It always surprised Jane and frightened her to hear tragic and supernatural laughs at the dead hours of the night. She was convinced by Mrs. Fairfax, the housekeeper, as well as Mr. Rochester that the laughs and murmurs were Grace Poole's who was a servant lived in the third storey and was always visited by terrible dreams and nightmares. Then, a horrible event took place when Jane woke up in the middle of a night to see her master's room burning. Although she was frightened by the fire, she was courageous enough to save his life when she put out the fire after failing to wake him up.

Charlotte Bronte carefully described this Gothic scene when Mr. Rochester was about to be burnt in his room. Jane woke up to hear a strange murmuring noise that she could not understand. A little later, as the clock stroke two, she was aware that someone was trying to open her door. Her

fear was renewed when she heard weird demoniac laughter at her keyhole. She hastily bolted the door, then heard retreating footsteps. Jane left the room intending to go to Mrs. Fairfax. There was smoke in the gallery. She traced it to Mr. Rochester's room in which he was lying asleep on a bed already in flames. After putting out the fire, Mr. Rochester came to his senses. He left the room to seek an explanation. In an attempt to persuade Jane that Grace Poole was the one who waged the fire, Mr. Rochester said:

Just so, Grace Poole: you have guessed it. She is as you say, singular, very. Well, I shall reflect on the subject. Meantime, I am glad that you are the only person, besides myself, acquainted with the precise details of to-night's incident. You are no talking fool: say nothing about it. I will account for this state of affairs (pointing to the bed): and now return to your own room (7).

But still Jane could not stop herself from thinking of the mysterious thrills and Gothic acts of "Grace" especially when she used to see her in the mornings as a woman without deficiencies beside being phlegmatic and silent (8).

Meanwhile, a romantic love story between Jane and Mr. Rochester developed and grew hand in hand with the Gothic atmosphere of the novel. Rochester was fascinated by her outstanding wit and courageous spirit. After a period of time which was full of hard events, they fell in love with each other and decided to marry. Even during the period of her engagement to Mr. Rochester, Jane dreamt of Thornfield as a ruin and she was highly terrified to see a woman with unbrushed hair and red eyes entering her room and tearing her wedding veil in two and thus symbolically destroyed the planned marriage.

This was what happened later on when the supposed marriage was prevented by the declaration of Mr. Mason and Mr. Briggs, the lawyers, that Rochester had a wife who was still living. Then Mr. Rochester made the declaration himself and took Jane to see Mrs. Rochester, Bertha, a large lunatic woman, who, on her part, attacked her



husband. Jane realized that this woman was the one who spread terror at night, yelled, tore Jane's wedding veil and attempted to burn her husband.

Jane remembered that she saw this lunatic woman for the first time two nights before the planned wedding. During the night, she woke up and saw a figure entering her room. The woman was completely strange to her; a large dark woman with black hair, bloodshot eyes and savage face. She tried the veil, removed it, tore it in two and trampled on it. She then came to Jane and leaned over her, a thing which made her faint in terror. When she told Rochester about the story, he said it must have been Grace Poole but Jane's insistence that it was another woman made him say that the whole experience was a nightmare rather than a reality to Jane (9).

Not only did Mrs. Rochester, Bertha, try to hurt her husband but even Mr. Mason, her brother, was stabbed by her with a knife. This happened on the night after his arrival in a Gothic way as well. The silence of the night was suddenly broken by a terrifying scream and cries for "Help! Help! Help!", "Will no one come?", "Rochester! Rochester! for God's sake, come!" (p. 208). Rochester sent all the guests to bed and then asked Jane to help him. Mason was lying on a bed in the third storey, wounded. Through a gap in the tapestry came the sounds of a caged animal that was supposedly Grace Poole. Again, Jane went to nurse him while Mr. Rochester was out to bring him a surgeon (10).

Then, the third part of the novel began when Jane fled desperately from Thornfield Hall after learning that Mr. Rochester had a living wife that was kept in the attic because of her madness. Later on, she was taken and cared for by St. John Rivers and his sisters. Under the influence of Rivers, she nearly agreed to marry him and accompany him to India. But she was prevented by a telepathic appeal from Rochester so she set out for Thornfield Hall. There, she learned that the place was burnt down and that Rochester, in a vain attempt to save his wife from the flames, was blinded and maimed. She found him in utter dejection so she decided to become his wife (11).

Most of the actions of the novel were

incredible and supernatural to create a Gothic atmosphere. For instance, it was incredible that Rochester had hidden a mad wife on the top floor of Thornfield Hall so imperfectly that she constantly got loose and roamed yelling about the house without any of his many servants and guests suspecting anything. Even after her escape from Thornfield Hall, it was incredible that Jane collapsed on an unknown doorstep which turned to be the doorstep of her only surviving relations (12). During her residence there and when she was about to marry Rivers, Jane incredibly heard her name called three times by a voice that came from nowhere but it was a known, loved and well-remembered voice that of Rochester. It spoke in pain and woe and Jane answered "I am coming! Wait for me! Oh, I will come. Where are you?" (P. 425). But Jane, giving herself to Rochester in spite of his being maimed, created a romantic end of the novel after being filled with gloom, misery and darkness (13). David Cecil argues:

Charlotte Brontë's plots are full of sinister secrets and inexplicable happenings. And the lurid light of her vision does invest these with a weirdness beyond that of ordinary mundane horror. There is something supernaturally uncanny about the atmosphere of Thornfield Hall, with its locked doors and its ominous silent corridors startled sporadically by the mirthless laugh of Grace Poole ... The force of such scenes comes in great part from Charlotte Brontë's ability to express the emotion of terror (14).

Moreover, the novel contained some symbols which were themselves Gothic in nature. Mad Mrs. Rochester tearing the wedding veil of Jane in two symbolically destroyed the planned marriage of Jane and Rochester; Jane's dream of Thornfield with its image of a hand coming through a cloud in a place of the expected moon and destroying it symbolized the end of Thornfield as a ruin; Mr. Rochester moving to live in Ferndean, after the burning of Thornfield by his mad wife, which was surrounded by a roadless forest, was a

symbol of Rochester's being imprisoned in life; the end of Thornfield as a ruin symbolized a purification of Rochester's sin in which he was relieved of Bertha and the burden of his past (15).

Richard J. Dunn discusses Bronte's Jane Eyre saying:

In both *Villette* and *Jane Eyre* Gothic is used but characteristically is undercut... Charlotte almost habitually revives "old Gothic", the relatively crude mechanism of fear, with an infusion of the anti-Gothic. Aside from partial sterilization of banal Gothic by romanticism and humour, Charlotte goes on to make a more important; a radical revision of the mode in *Jane Eyre* from the other novels... This is the change from old Gothic to new Gothic (16).

### III

In her novel *Jane Eyre*, Charlotte Bronte employed Gothicism in a way that is combined with romanticism. As she was speaking about a love relation between Jane and Mr. Rochester, she concentrated on mysterious things and events. Jane herself did not discover the frightening and mysterious secrets of Thornfield Hall, its dark Mr. Rochester and the source of the mysterious thrills and events, Mrs. Bertha, till the day when she was supposed to be married to Mr. Rochester.

Charlotte's use of Gothicism in the novel was undercut. She did not refer to the dark castles and fortresses and she did not speak about a young girl who was kidnapped in mysterious circumstances and imprisoned. But she referred to Thornfield Hall with its three high storeys as a symbol of mystery. In this novel, it is noteworthy that the two parts, the Gothic and the romantic, are dependent on each other. For instance, although Mr. Rochester's palace seems to be frightening to Jane, it is her love to him that prevents her escape from the palace. Her same love pushes her again to the middle of the fire to save her lover when he has been asleep in the room. This horrible event contributes to create a romantic couple. This is almost echoed at the end when Jane appears as a self-sacrifice wife

to the maimed Mr. Rochester in the middle of the ruins of his palace.

### Notes

- 1- Martin Gray, *A Dictionary of Literary Terms* (Beirut: Longman York Press, 1984) p. 94.
  - 2- Richard J. Dunn, *Jane Eyre: An Authoritative Text Background Criticism* (New York: Longman Literature in English Series, 1977) p. 457.
  - 3- John Peck and Martin Coyle, *Literary Terms and Criticism* (London: Macmillan Education, 1984) p. 92.
  - 4- Dunn, p. 458.
  - 5- Ifor Evans, *A Short History of English Literature* (London: Penguin Books, 1970) p. 100.
  - 6- Ian Gilchrist, *Charlotte Bronte: Biography and Life* (Beirut: Librairie du Liban, 1970) p. 5.
  - 7- Charlotte Bronte, *Jane Eyre*, ed. by Margaret Smith (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987) p. 151.
- All the subsequent references to the novel will be taken from this edition and the pages will parenthetically be referred to within the text.
- 8- Winifred Gerin, *Charlotte Bronte: The Evaluation of Genius* (London: Oxford University Press, 1967) p. 62.
  - 9- Judith O'Neil et al. *Critics on Charlotte and Emily Bronte* (London: Oxford University Press, 1969) pp. 21-25.
  - 10- Barty Knight, *Notes on Jane Eyre* (London: Longman York Press, 1980) p. 62.
  - 11- Dorothy Eagle, *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of English Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986) p. 292.
  - 12- O'Neil, pp. 21-22.
  - 13- Dunn, p. 474.
  - 14- David Cecil, *Early Victorian Novelist, Essays in Revolution* (London: Penguin Books Harmondsworth Middlesex, 1948) pp. 107-08.
  - 15- O'Neil, p. 33.
  - 16- Ibid., p. 35.

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