
Analysis of Gothic Literature on the Examples of Stoker and Carter

The Gothic is undeniably intertwined with transformative states, both literally, such as with the presentation of supernatural beings that lie between life and death, and also thematically, with the idea of transitional time periods and settings. One of the great contradictions of Gothic literature is how, while transformations are integral to the genre, there remains a divide between novels that use this to portray a transgressive message, and others that promote conformist morals. This contradiction becomes even more apparent when comparing Angela Carter's 20th century *The Bloody Chamber* with Bram Stoker's 19th Century work *Dracula*, as while both present transformations, the former uses this as a positive force whereas the latter can be viewed as cautionary and moralistic.

Both Carter and Stoker combine the gothic trope of the 'abhuman' with the idea of transformation to convey wildly different ideas on sexuality and gender. *Dracula* is perhaps most famous for its eponymous vampire, who acts as the main antagonist of the novel. The vampire itself can be seen as a being that is inherently transformative, anthropomorphic on the whole but with uncanny corpse-like differences such as "sharp, protruding teeth" and "pallid" complexions. Yet what makes the Victorian vampire so distinct – in opposition to the original folklore - is its sensuality and "voluptuousness", shown also through the vampire women and mid-way through the novel with the vampirisation of protagonist Lucy. Lucy's literal transformation from an innocent into a "bloodstained, voluptuous" creature with a complexion that resembles "Medusa's snakes", epitomises the role of the vampire in Stoker's novel. Earlier gothic novels often focused on individual vampires, such as Polidori's the 'Vampyre', and most significantly the lesbian vampire of *Carmilla*, from which Stoker borrowed heavily. However, what makes Stoker's vampires distinct is not the threat of a *Dracula* alone, but the threat of mass transformation – an anxiety that is undeniably intertwined with female sexuality. Even before her transformation Lucy showed signs of breaking Victorian sexual taboos, expressing a desire for polygamy when she proclaims "why can't a girl marry three men". Thus her transformation and extermination by her fiance who drives a phallic stake "deeper and deeper" into her can be read as a policing of female sexual expression, and some modern critics have even interpreted the sequence as a euphemized form of corrective rape.

In contrast, the transformation of Carter's protagonist in *The Tiger's Bride* can be read as an absolute rejection of traditional sexual morals. The protagonist of the story learns that to defy the patriarchal system – expressed through her father who "lost me (her) to the beast at cards" – "the lamb must learn to run with the tigers". Carter uses the tiger and lion as representations

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of men and women, and in the climax of the novel this biblical imagery becomes literal. In an almost magical realist manner the narrators skin is licked off by the beast, revealing a “nascent patina of shining hairs”. It is possible to view this as a Sadian approach to morality, with Carter appropriating the traditional Beauty and the Beast story to one where beauty becomes beast and escapes her sacrificial role as lamb or - as Carter calls it - “existing in the passive sense”. From a sex-positive feminist perspective, Carter, unlike Stoker, uses the gothic trope of transformation from human to abhuman to embrace female sexuality as a method of overcoming a system of oppression. In her novel *The Sadian Woman* she claims “it is eat or be eaten”, and the transformation of the Tiger’s bride is perhaps best read as a fictionalized version of this view. In the context of the 1970s this approach was radical, as even feminist opinion was divided upon Carter’s arguably sympathetic take on the original sadist Marquis de Sade. Therefore, unlike in *Dracula*, transformation is intentionally transgressive.

Another way both authors convey a sense of transformation through structure and perspective. Stoker uses the form of an epistolary novel to tell his story, constantly shifting perspectives to provide the reader with subjective accounts of the events. This technique is also used in Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* to similar effect, inducing a sense of verisimilitude, a common technique in gothic literature to give the story a sense of realism. Carter also uses structure to evoke transformation. Her stories can be seen as the literary equivalent of a “Chinese box”, as while they appear self-contained, some critics such as Sarah Gamble argue that taken together her narrators and protagonists become indistinguishable from one another. Therefore, it is no surprise that *The Erl King*, which acts as the midpoint, has a structure which reflects its transitional place in the collection; the tense goes from “the woods enclose” to “Erl King will do you grievous harm in the space” to “I walked through the wood” in a space of a few paragraphs. Through constantly shifting perspective and tense, Carter evokes a sense of transformation not only in her story but in the language itself. This is further supported by the oxymorons that pervade the piece, such as “grow enormously small”, that reflect the narrator’s contradictory feelings of repulsion and attraction to the Erl King.

It is impossible to ignore setting when addressing Gothic transformations in Stoker and Carter’s work. *Dracula* begins in pre industrialised Transylvania, in a “cornucopia” where “all superstitions in the world combine”. Stoker’s description of Transylvania distinguishes it as a world apart from the modernity of Victorian London, the former remaining a feudal system and the latter now dominated by the bourgeois middle classes. The clashing of the two settings and time periods is a typical feature of the gothic, and the genre has been read by critics as an expression of the anxieties of the demolition of the established order through social change. Indeed, the word “gothic” itself is derived from the original Goths who contributed to the fall of the Roman Empire. *Dracula* represents the fin-de-sicle strain of this anxiety, with the turn of century fears of declining morals feeding into much literature. For example Wilde’s – a friend of Stoker – *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, and the decadence movement that surrounded it.

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Moreover, some postcolonial critics have linked the fear of the “vampirisation” of London not only in a sexual light, but also as a representation of the collective unconscious: an invasion paranoia caused by Britain’s declining empire and world presence. Either way transformation is presented in a negative light.

In contrast, transformation of the established order is presented positively in Carter’s work *The Lady of the House of Love*. The setting of this story is also that of a gothic world which is externalized in the castle setting, and internalized in the female vampire who herself is “a cave full of echoes... a system of repetitions... a closed circuit.” Choosing to set her novel on the brink of the First World War, Carter possesses the benefit of 20th century hindsight that Stoker did not have. In the story, the lady of the house represents the last vestige of a patriarchal and mystical system that is on the brink of collapse. Carter’s final breaking of the repetitious lifestyle of the lady of the house caused by the “rational” soldier, can be read as supporting social transformation as opposed to Stoker’s fin-de-siècle anxieties towards it.

It is clear that transformation pervades the Gothic, as evidenced in *The Bloody Chamber* and *Dracula*, narratives in which transformation is evidenced both literally in the characters and settings and implicitly in the structure and subtext. However, what truly distinguishes the novels is how the authors chose to represent this transformation. While Stoker uses the concept to appeal to the contemporary fears of the Victorian reader, using literal transformation to reflect cultural changes such as the changing status of women and the decline of British imperialism, Carter uses it for an opposing motive. *The Bloody Chamber* can almost be read as a manifesto of sorts, which uses Gothic tropes to highlight the need and importance of transformations within society – particularly towards a feminist goal of female empowerment as opposed to repression. Thus, despite writing almost a century apart, Carter and Stoker represent one of the greatest paradoxes of Gothic literature, highlighting how on the one hand it can be deeply moralistic and on the other completely transgressive.

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