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GOTHICIZING DOMESTICITY – THE CASE OF CHARLOTTE PERKINS GILMAN AND EDGAR ALLAN POE

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Abstract: *It is critical common knowledge that domestic narratives and the structure of traditional domesticity are subverted in Gothic fiction (Smith 2013). The household and its apparent security are threatened from within by unknown supernatural forces. What seems familiar becomes upsetting, strange and ‘unfamiliar’. Both Charlotte Perkins Gilman in “The Yellow Wall-Paper” and Edgar Allan Poe in “The Black Cat” give comparable views on American domesticity, both questioning two important aspects of domestic life (family and a blissful household). The two writers create a mad discourse in which the inexplicable and the uncanny infiltrate into reality and the sentimental domestic narrative is undermined.*

Keywords: *domesticity, female Gothic, male Gothic, uncanny*

1. Domesticity and the Gothic

From its onset, in the 18th century, the Gothic novel had an ambivalent relationship with the Enlightenment. By tackling themes such as madness, taboos, dreams and hallucinations, the Gothic seems to challenge Enlightenment beliefs in “independent or ‘objective’ reality that can be rationally comprehended” (Smith 2013:3). However, under close scrutiny, the Gothic highlights of the 18th century, the initiators of the trend – Horace Walpole, Ann Radcliffe and Matthew Gregory Lewis – do not appear to be entirely anti-Enlightenment. They write a bourgeois literature that addresses the fears and concerns of the middle-class; thus, casting the early Gothic as the antagonist of the Enlightenment means ‘romanticizing’ the former. All these writers shared a Protestant scepticism about Catholicism, all criticising rather too directly Catholic superstitions. Evil and *otherness* were both external, coming from a distant, feudal past as it is the case of *The Castle of Otranto*, or a present that resembles the much-stigmatized Middle Ages. These intentional anachronisms were, according to Baldick and Mighall (2012:278), meant to stress the modernity of the main heroes and heroines, their belonging to a different, more enlightened age. But, even though the main characters win the battle against these anachronistic forces and common sense prevails, one cannot but wonder what this proliferation of violent images, rape, incest, murder, violations of reason and socially accepted boundaries may stand for. Rosemary Jackson (2008:175) calls these fantasies “vicarious wish fulfilment”, which she compares to pornography, as “it functioned to supply an object of desire, to imagine social and sexual transgression”. Therefore, initially, this bourgeois literature both promoted the values of Enlightenment and unconsciously undermined them.

However, the Gothic is a versatile genre that has changed to accommodate various literary movements from Romanticism and Victorianism to postmodernism, infiltrating easily into other popular genres, such as domestic fiction. If originally the preferred setting of a Gothic novel was somehow ‘exotic’, thus outside the familiarity of the bourgeois lodging, i.e. medieval castles, ruins and monasteries, later, it tampered with the safety of middle-class houses and neighbourhoods. The Gothic featured “outlandish castles and maze-like mansions”, which conveyed a feeling of “discomfort, coldness, extravagance, unclear boundaries between the

inside and the outside” to undermine the very idea of a comfortable bourgeois house (Cavallaro 2002:86).

The Gothic was domesticated or better said the domestic was gothicised, especially in America, where in the absence of the usual Gothic paraphernalia, the Gothic found home in the most unexpected place, the bourgeois household. “[The] domestication of Gothic figures, spaces and themes [as] horrors become explicitly located within the world of the contemporary reader” (Punter and Byron 2004:26). Supernatural tyrannical invaders always threatened defenceless people, especially women, but this time the Gothic undermines the very ideals of domesticity (privacy and security), the dangers coming from within. For Clive Bloom, “the gothic speaks to the dark side of domestic fiction: erotic, violent, perverse, bizarre and obsessively connected with contemporary fears” (quoted in Cavallaro 2002:11). If domestic or sentimental fiction praises the pillars of domesticity: family, security, understanding, mutual help and the values of Christianity, the gothicized domestic speaks of the reverse, the dangers lurking behind familiarity and comfort.

To better understand the connection between the domestic and the Gothic, one should resort to the psychoanalytic criticism of the latter which, though speculative at times, provides one with a most useful term: “the uncanny” – *unheimlich* – “unhomely” – the opposite of “familiar”, “native”, “belonging to the home” (Freud 1998:154). At the very root of the word *unheimlich* resides the word “home”, i.e. the house where one should feel more comfortable, safe from intruders and external threats. If *heimlich* refers to domesticity and security, *unheimlich* is related to the dangers lurking beneath the veneer of domesticity. What creates anxiety is the tension existing between the two. “In uncanny phenomena, the familiar becomes unfamiliar and then the circle is closed again as the unfamiliar reveals itself as the open secret of that with which we had felt most at home” (Punter 2012:253). This is the paradox of *heimlich*; its propensity to turn into its opposite or the fact that it already contains the seeds of uncanniness. For Jackson (2008:4), the relationship between anxiety and desire manifests itself through what is hidden, “the unsaid and the unseen ... that which has been silenced, made invisible, covered over and made ‘absent’.” The same goes for uncanniness; what is silenced or hidden behind the veil of comfort and safety takes monstrous proportions. The domestic sphere can become both literally and metaphorically a place of confinement, “a cold touch in the midst of the familiar” (King quoted in Cavallaro 2002:94). It’s a place of trauma where characters try to heal themselves by re-enactment, by repeating hurtful events or by developing unhealthy attachments.

2. Challenging Domesticity: *The Black Cat* and *The Yellow Wall-Paper*

Both Edgar Allan Poe and Charlotte Perkins Gilman have been discussed comparatively; however, most studies focused more on their differences than their similarities (Fetterley 1986, Kolodny 1980). One such similarity, which, as expected, was not overlooked, was the presence of the two mad narrators, a feature encountered in many European stories (e.g. E.T.A. Hoffmann’s *The Sandman* and Guy de Maupassant’s *The Horla*). However, the similar way in which they both treat domesticity was most often overlooked. One explanation could be that only recently has criticism debated Poe’s ambiguous relation with domesticity. For example, Bonita Rhoads (2009) in *Poe’s Genre Crossing: From Domesticity to Detection* discusses how domestic fiction and the detective genre merge in *The Murders in the Rue Morgue*. For Heidi Hanrahan (2012), Poe questions the nineteenth-century American domesticity by creating a narrator whose acts resist the promises of a healthy family life. As it was expected, Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s *The Yellow Wall-Paper* received more critical attention as an example of ‘gothic domesticity’ than Edgar Allan Poe’s short stories. It has all the necessary ingredients: an all-controlling husband, who happens to be her physician too, another female authority, the narrator’s sister, ‘imprisonment’ in an old mansion, claustrophobia and propensity for violence. Also, when it comes to the domestic Gothic, the critical attention given to the ‘female Gothic’ overshadows the wicked ‘male Gothic’. Ann Williams (1995:138) describes good female Gothic texts as

constructive, empowering and, most importantly, revolutionary. The female Gothic, though initially quite repetitive and stereotypical, allowed many women writers to find their own literary voice different from the so-called patriarchal voice of Realism. Domestic literature or sentimental literature was also viewed as 'feminine', without the dark undertones of the Gothic. When writing about domesticity in 19th century America, Bonita Rhoads (2009:17) stresses that more recent scholarship views the former "as a pervasive cultural ideology ... promoting the feminized household as a spiritual retreat" from the public sphere dominated by men. Conversely, for the female Gothic, the same feminized household, "hypocritically dubbed as a celebration of woman's maternal and matrimonial authority" (Cavallaro 2002:144), is seen as oppressive, confining and meant to infantilize women. However, both readings centre upon the same dichotomy: female vs. male that extends to a more spatial approach to gender roles, that is the private vs. public sphere.

But what happens when inevitably both genders occupy the same space? For both Rhoads (2009) and Person (2001), the domestic realm in Poe's stories becomes a battleground, a place of hostility and unresolved issues. According to the former, Poe moves from domesticity to detection to create a space for male characters outside the feminized household. Paradoxically, much of Dupin's detection takes place indoors, but it is a de-feminized space, outside middle-class models of domesticity, marriage or maternity. In fact, when it comes to the Gothic, domesticity is seen as repressive for both parties, but female writers were probably more vocal and had more complaints to file than their male counterparts. Poe, though he seldom placed his narrators in the role of the victims, is an exception due to his description of the domestic realm as a nightmarish site with a great propensity for violence. No wonder, Bloom (2006:1) calls Poe "our hysteria, our uncanny unanimity in our repressions", while Emerson is "the mind of America". If we were to use the well-known stereotypes about femininity, Poe is given the negative attributes of the gender, thus 'feminized'.

Both Charlotte Perkins Gilman in *The Yellow Wall-Paper* and Edgar Allan Poe in *The Black Cat* offer two similar perspectives on American domesticity, even though they come from a female and a male standpoint, respectively. They both challenge the pillars of domesticity (family and a blissful household) by adopting a mad discourse in which the supernatural overtakes reality and the placid domestic narrative is subverted. The two short-stories become the meeting point between 'female' and 'male' Gothic. Since a blissful domestic life is taken for granted and considered 'normal' and to be expected, everything that breaks the pattern is deemed as madness. Therefore, the narrators strive to convince us that they are completely sane, while their narratives contradict them. In fact, they both construct their stories as testimonies of their sanity. For Poe's narrator, his story is a 'confession' – a way of declaring his innocence; for Gilman's female narrator, it could be also a way of exorcising 'her demons' and normalizing her experience.

A happy, fulfilled domestic life is in most cases a myth, a utopian fantasy propagated by sentimental literature and Christian rhetoric. Haynes (1998:XI) argues that the most important historical and social events shaping the nineteenth century America (from its imperialistic drives to the rise of the bourgeoisie) are based on two discourses: "manifest destiny and domesticity", with the latter heralding the values of purity, piety and devotion.

But the reality was different: poverty, disease, inequality and abuse were conspicuously present in everyday life. Poe's domestic life was punctuated by many tragedies. His parents' and his foster mother's untimely deaths, his wife's disease and subsequent death, all contributed to his rather gloomy view on life. After paying a visit to Poe in his Fordham cottage, Mary Gove Nichols (quoted in Hanrahan 2012:40), the American writer and women's rights activist, depicted a touching scene: the writer's young wife, Virginia, was lying on a straw bed, shivering, covered only by Poe's coat and with a big cat keeping her warm.

The Black Cat, one of Poe's most 'unholy' short stories, starts as the narrative of a couple that leads a normal, bourgeois life and ends with the complete annihilation of this

'normality'. From the very beginning, the narrator describes his story as "the most wild yet most homely narrative", "a series of mere household events" (Poe 2004:61). The contradiction between "most wild", "homely" and "mere household events" is consistent with the Gothicized domestic – violence and deviant behaviour are the norm, both carefully hidden under the veneer of comfort and security. The narrator's acts are more and more terrifying, all directed at the members of his household (pets and finally wife). It all starts with Pluto, the first black cat that finds shelter in the narrator's house and quickly becomes his favourite pet. Gradually and inexplicably, his feelings change from love to pure hatred, at the same time, his disposition getting more and more aggressive. He can offer no logical explanation for his acts, he starts "to do wrong for the wrong's sake only", "committing a vile or a stupid action, for no other reason than because he knows he should not" (Poe 2004:63). Eventually, he hangs Pluto and later, he tries to kill the second cat that resembles his first beloved pet with an axe. His descent into madness is paralleled by his increased cruelty and sadism:

The moodiness of my usual temper increased to hatred of all things and of all mankind; while from the sudden, frequent, and ungovernable outbursts of a fury to which I now blindly abandoned myself, my uncomplaining wife, alas, was the most usual and the most patient of sufferers. (Poe 2004:66)

All culminates with the accidental killing of the "uncomplaining wife", the angel in the house, who is walled up in the basement. If his discourse up until he murdered his wife is the proof of a tortured and remorseful mind, after he "buried the axe in her brain", it becomes meticulous, methodical, practical without melodramatic effusions. There is no mention of the wife, all he feels is "the deep, the blissful sense of relief which the absence of the detested creature occasioned in my bosom" (Poe 2004:66).

A supernatural interpretation comes in handy and is in tune with a Gothic story. The black cat is traditionally associated with evil and evil doings, but such a reading may prove facile and reductive. What if Pluto is not a malevolent agent of destiny, but just a pet, a marker of domesticity? Heidi Hanrahan offers a more realistic interpretation of Poe's story by contextualizing it. In the 19th century America, middle-class families were encouraged to take pets that will "teach kindness and discourage cruelty". They were part of the family and mistreating them was a sign of a "deficiency in character, a troubled and perhaps damned soul" (Hanrahan 2012:45). The same qualities – kindness, patience, love and beauty – were advertised as the main ingredients of a domestic life. It is when viewed in this light that the political or ideological dimension of the story becomes more evident. The narrator is not possessed by a demonic creature, the cat being but the projection of his fears and feelings of entrapment in a domestic life, which must be by all means comfortable, loving, pious and pure.

The Black Cat is also a narrative about guilt, self-hatred and self-destruction, since he knows he commits a condemnable act. "I hung it because I knew that it had loved me, and because I felt it had given me no reason of offence" (Poe 2004:63). His wife and pets seem to suffer because they love him. Benfey (1992:41-42) talks about the "unbearable intimacy" the narrator has to put up with in spite of his reluctance to do so. A sense of perversity and masochism pervades the story. If for the domestic plot, going back to accepted normality is the main purpose (Rhoads 2009), for the gothicized domestic, the end point becomes the violent dissolution of the traditional household. In *The Black Cat*, the Gothic undermines and rejects the feminized household as described by sentimental literature, madness overtaking the placid reality of the domestic realm. Though the narrator seldom mentions his wife, who seems the passive target of his abuse, she comes out as the embodiment of 'the angel in the house'. She is loving, protective, forgiving, all enduring and, as said, completely passive and helpless. Just like the cat, she appears to love him unconditionally. Somehow, though, along the way, all the negative connotations associated with the black cat are bestowed upon the wife.

Domestic rhetoric casts women into the roles of ‘angels in the house’ and moral icons (Armstrong 1987:124). They are the absolute mistresses of the private domain, but they are “not only domestic, they were domesticators” (Kimmel 1996:60). Thus, excessive drinking, madness, violence and, finally, murder are ways of escaping what Armstrong (1987:124) calls “domestic surveillance” and the “domesticator”. By murdering the angel in the house, Poe strikes at the very heart of domesticity. When the police arrive alerted by the disappearance of the wife, in an act of bravado verging on self-destructiveness, the narrator hits the wall behind which he hid his wife with a cane. A noise betrays him: “a voice from within the tomb... a cry, at first muffled and broken, like the sobbing of a child, and then quickly swelling into one long, loud, and continuous scream, utterly anomalous and inhuman—a howl” (Poe 2004:68). The police tear down the wall to discover the wife’s decaying body on which there stood the cat. In the narrator’s opinion, the cat alone bears all the blame for his transgressions.

Tearing down the wall becomes a symbolic act which stands for destroying the false veneer of domesticity. Behind the wall, there lies the inexplicable, uncanny truth – the woman literally confined to the domestic prison. But both husband and wife are victims of the domestic rhetoric and of the unrealistic values it promotes. The “[n]arrator’s metamorphosis not only occurs within the domestic sphere but also seems a product of that sphere and its claustrophobic limitations” (Person 2001:134). Abuse, passivity, guilt and desire to conform are concealed behind the veil of bourgeois comfort and stability. Domestic relations in general and marriages in particular are difficult to break – Poe’s female characters are stubborn; their spectre haunts his male characters after death. Since no grave can contain them, from *Ligeia* to the *The Black Cat*, Poe’s female characters find ways to come back and haunt male protagonists. The narrator’s wife is ‘resurrected’ in front of his eyes and indirectly punishes him. Her ‘resurrection’ renders him powerless and speechless, much like the husband in *The Yellow Wall-Paper*, who sees his wife crawling and creeping on the floor after having torn apart the yellow wallpaper to metaphorically free herself.

Clearly inspired by Poe’s authorial strategies – she makes references and analogies to the dark Romantic writer in her autobiography (Hume 2002) –, Charlotte Perkins Gilman wrote this challenging female Gothic story to undermine sentimental, domestic fiction. This original mixture between feminist writing – with a clear political agenda –, Gothic fiction, and pre-modernist introspective account of one’s mental breakdown is partly autobiographical. As she herself asserts in *Why I Wrote the Yellow Wall-Paper*, the story is based on her own battle with melancholia or with what now is called post-partum depression:

For many years I suffered from a severe and continuous nervous breakdown tending to melancholia--and beyond. During about the third year of this trouble I went, in devout faith and some faint stir of hope, to a noted specialist in nervous diseases, the best known in the country. This wise man put me to bed and applied the rest cure, to which a still good physique responded so promptly that he concluded there was nothing much the matter with me, and sent me home with the solemn advice to ‘live as domestic a life as far as possible,’ to ‘have but two hours intellectual life a day,’ and ‘never to touch pen, brush or pencil again as long as I lived.’ This was in 1887. (Gilman in Hume 2002)

Judging after Gilman’s detailed confession, *The Yellow Wall-Paper* goes against the self-sufficient medical discourse, all too ready to diagnose as hysteria or madness any ‘female’ nervous breakdown. This is what happens to the main character and narrator of *The Yellow Wall-Paper*. Her husband, who happens to be her physician, decides to keep her isolated in an upstairs room of a house they rented for a short period of time. She is denied any intellectual activity and, thus, has to hide her diary from him. All these somehow extreme measures are taken so that she can recover from a “temporary nervous depression – a slight hysterical tendency” (Gilman 2009:249), as her husband calls her disease. Hysteria was the common diagnose given to all women who experience various nervous breakdowns or did not comply with what was expected of them. Though she tries to obey her husband, she “personally” – she repeats the word twice –

disagrees with his method. Therefore, the narrator is caught up between her desire to respect her husband's wishes and advice, which ensures her a quiet domestic life, and her powerful wish to be free of her plight. As a response to this inner pressure, she decides to write down her story and to keep the diary of her struggle, which becomes the account of her gradual fall into psychosis.

Almost like an 18th century Gothic heroine, she is imprisoned in an isolated "colonial mansion, a hereditary estate" (Gilman 2009:249). She is kept there for her own good by her protective husband, now cast in the role of the Gothic villain. The room she spends most of her time in is a former playroom and was chosen by her husband: "the windows are barred [...] and there are rings and things in the walls", the floor is "scratched and gouged and splintered, the plaster itself is dug out here and there, and this heavy bed which is all we found in the room, looks as if it had been through wars" (Gilman 2009:250-251). By specifically picking out this partly prison, partly nursery room for his wife, the physician-husband infantilizes her. His patronizing attitude, ironically depicted by the wife as "loving" and "careful", is in tune with sentimental literature, which casts women into the role of innocent children: "I have a schedule prescription for each hour in the day; he takes all care from me, and so I feel basely ungrateful not to value it more" (Gilman 2009:250); "he took me in his arms and called me *a blessed little goose*" (Gilman 2009:251, my emphasis).

All her ambivalent feelings for her family are projected unto the house which is deemed as beautiful, but queer and haunted. Slowly, her attention turns to the yellow wallpaper that covers the walls of her prison-room. As she starts writing, thus fictionalizing her experience, the wallpaper comes gradually to life. If initially she observed it with critical detachment: "one of those sprawling flamboyant patterns committing every artistic sin... pronounced enough to constantly irritate and provoke study" (Gilman 2009:251), later her interest turns pathological. Under close scrutiny, the wallpaper metamorphoses from a decorative item into a many-headed creature. Both the pet and the wallpaper are markers of domesticity, the former standing for the "unbearable intimacy", thus love, while the latter for a claustrophobic household. "Room and domestic space is often charged with political meanings" (Wang 2012). According to Gan (2009:23), domestic space is also "an instrument of power and ideology, it produce[s] disciplined subjects, in particular, though not exclusively, women". While in the traditional Gothic the female character's space is invaded by an external intruder, here the domestic space itself embodies 'the evil'. The rhetoric of domesticity bestowed godly attributes upon women: faithful wives, devoted daughters and loving mothers, all these roles to be performed within the boundaries of the domestic realm (Haynes 1998:XI). The narrator is constantly kept under surveillance by her family – her husband and his sister, Jennie. Even when she is alone, the wallpaper seems to watch her with "absurd, unblinking eyes" that are everywhere (Gilman 2009:253). Its pattern of never-ending curves, circles, loops that seem to follow no logic is indicative of her predicament – caught up in a vicious circle offering no way out.

While she is fictionalizing her experience, the wallpaper becomes her own text or story, the testimony of her painful experience. She slowly inserts in it the shape of a woman "a strange, provoking, formless sort of figure, that seems to skulk about behind that silly and conspicuous front design" (Gilman 2009:253) that strives to break through the tangled patterns. Since the yellow wallpaper, both homely and unhomely, stands for her domestic entrapment, the female trapped inside is a projection of herself, a prisoner of her domestic role. By extension, the yellow wallpaper is indirectly associated with her husband and baby, for whom she shares the same ambivalent feelings of love, fear and abhorrence. When she talks about her baby, never called by his name, her anxiety is evident: "Such a dear baby! And yet I cannot be with him, it makes me so nervous" (Gilman 2009:251). By disobeying her husband/physician, starting up a diary and avoiding spending time with her "dear baby", the narrator refuses to play the role of the angel in the house. More than that, she symbolically kills the angel by writing down her thoughts in privacy. This could be taken as a declaration of intellectual independence that destroys the veneer of domesticity, thus freeing her Other-self.

Hume (2002) interprets Gilman's narrator's final acts – ripping the wallpaper off and freeing the imaginary woman held captive – as a desperate act destined to fail. Her subsequent creeping and crawling is a passive revolt, “a grotesque delusion” symptomatic of her situation. However, I argue that her actions of tearing, creeping, crawling over her unconscious husband are far from passive and show a propensity for rage and revolt that equals Poe's narrator: “‘I've got out at last,’ said I, ‘in spite of you and Jane? And I've pulled off most of the paper, so you can't put me back!’” (Gilman 2009:263)

3. Conclusion

In both *The Black Cat* and *The Yellow Wall-Paper* what should have been a domestic tale turns into a Gothic narrative, the homely becomes unhomely, and seemingly inexplicable happenings subvert the placid domestic life; hence both stories are politically and ideologically charged. The storytellers' actions, though not so extreme in the case of Gilman's narrator, raise questions about the whole idea of domestic bliss, as it was propagated by the rhetoric of the time. Also, the analysis of the two stories allowed us to see how both the 'female' and 'male' gothic converge and share a common ground.

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