

Gothic Fiction in American Children's Literature

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Abstract: This article brings forth a most sensitive issue that has preoccupied Gothic literature from its very beginnings: the child, a fragile creature in the claws of evil, depersonalized and deprived of his most common human senses. The paper has both scientific and moral goals. It aims at concreteness, involving socio-psychological and analytical methods. Owing to the widely written works on this topic, the constant reader has got the chance to compare Stephen King's stories not only between them but also with other literary works from earlier periods of American and English literature. The writers' interest in observing the children's reactions against obscure forces of the universe turned into interesting educational stories intensely savored around the world. The heroes' attitudes spring from a tormented, often traumatized nature that most of the time bursts into anti-social behavior and reprehensible deeds. The children possess telekinetic abilities and other supernatural powers beyond the elders' understanding and explanation. Multiple literary creations, such as the bildungsroman, satires, or lurid melodramas offer complete introspections of the little villains' souls. Thrilling, versatile, and seductive, the Gothic child has changed all social, political, and religious environments.

Keywords: Gothic, Children, Evil, Psychological, Thriller

INTRODUCTION

Through literary representations, the child consolidated his role as an independent character responsible for cultural development and national identity. The character endured its gradual transformation from an innocent creature into a soulless villain capable of destruction, murder, and contempt. For decades, the gothic genre has brought to the fore the corruption of the child's soul by dark forces and drawn attention to the danger of the decline of the individual and the social structures consolidated around him. This article offers an objective interpretation of the child's character, placing him in the context where the terms associated with childhood become crucial elements for constructing anxious societal realities. Observing the children's functions in society and their subsequent development, physically and emotionally, becomes a priority in the analytical process of this article. Discrepancies arise against the background of the lack of harmonious psychological development caused by the inability of parents to

provide children with a healthy education and worthy examples to follow.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The children fulfill different narrative functions and become the pivotal elements in leading the thread of the story. They are the protagonists, antagonists, or catalysts of plot development. Gothic authors explain how children can attract the supernatural or uncanny and how they can heighten the tensions within the conflict. Chloe Buckley considers children as allegoric symbolic representations and means of examining the societal structures that have deliberately contributed to their loss of innocence, sexual repression, marginalization, and brutal rejection of the unknown.

The historical climate of different eras reflects the physical and mental transformations of the child. In the physical and mental development of the child, the social reality, and the historical climate of different eras work together. Depending on the economic, political, and scientific premises, the world has adopted different attitudes related to the growth and education

of children and how they should prepare for integration into society. Thus, for the romantics, the child is the expression of innocence; for the Victorians, he is a loyal worker without pretensions and for the postmodernists, he represents the best means of satirizing and condemning the social devices that take away fundamental freedoms and encourage spiritual dissolution.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY AND RESULTS

Forcing the child to mature from an early age, when he should only be concerned with childhood games and toys, can have devastating consequences on the harmonious development of his psyche. The happy and sinless child described by The Lake Poets in English Romanticism has turned into a ferocious primitive and a tool of evil in contemporary society.

The children's reprehensible deeds are the consequences of the atrocities that they have experienced on the grounds of the negligence of their parents who have let them access certain materials, inappropriate for their ages or because of mistreatment of all kinds, including bullying or abuses from other people. Unfortunately, children nowadays have a deep predilection for horror and dark comedy. Physical development is inversely proportional to emotional development. Because of the frustrations and the lack of discernment, the child acts desperately and many times he wants to do justice to himself. Society is to blame for its absurd impatience and unjustified desire to speed up the child's growth by forcing the mechanisms of physical development or by ridiculous demands, impossible to understand and realize by him.

The development of fiction inflicted on the young characters and literature became 'one of the major drivers of the Evil crystallization phenomenon featuring the society in the modern era. Children's books absorbed the whole spectrum of plots abundant in vulgarity and cynicism of adult horror-styled literature, with all ensuing effects' (Machan 2017: 104-135).

In the Gothic novel, the reader is not aware of the role of the child from the very beginning of the story, because it generally does not contain the expression 'suffering child' in its title. Instead, the authors showed deep proclivity towards the use of such terms as 'orphan' or 'outcast'. The examples are numerous, ranging from *Emmeline, the Orphan of the Castle* (1788) and *Edmond, the Orphan of the Castle, A Tragedy in Five Acts* founded on Clara Reeve's *The Old English Baron* to *The Discarded Son* (1807).

The emergence of Gothic fiction is assigned to the year 1764 when two referential works were published: *The History*

Using the investigative method and lucid analysis enabled a systematic and comprehensive approach to this article. The results obtained came from consulting the works of several authors from Great Britain (Charles Dickens, Lewis Carroll, and William Golding) and America (Mark Twain, Henry James, and Stephen King). Studying the characters from various literary genres, such as gothic, realism, or fantasy, individualized them within the respective genres and allowed a multidisciplinary approach to the chosen texts.

of Little Goody Two-Shoes by Mr. John Newberry and *The Castle of Otranto* subtitled *A Gothic Story* by Horace Walpole which introduces the general taste for the supernatural. Newberry's book inserts thrilling episodes of explained supernatural, powerful acts of exorcism, and exploits such themes as witchcraft, phantasmagorical apparitions, and other 'nonsensical stuff' that the adults instill in their young children's brains. Yet, they are warned about the danger of illusion perceived as a reality by irrational minds:

'I hope you will not believe any foolish Stories that ignorant, weak, or designing People may tell you about Ghosts; for the Tales of Ghosts, Witches, and Fairies, are the Frolicks of a distempered Brain. No wise Man ever saw either of them.' (Newberry 1765: 56).

Society has witnessed the transformation of the quiet family home into a sinister, fearsome place. Everything people love produces horror. An ordinary sequence of everyday life shows that one day going to the movies, Stephen King sees children holding 'knives, hatches, pipes, rocks, hammers' (King 2009: 565).

The 'family horror' concept was disseminated around the 1960s when TV producers and literary authors increased their attention on the child because he could 'function as both object and subject of social control since in his state of dependency it is precisely what he lacks that makes him rhetorically efficacious.' (Sanchez-Eppler 2005: XVII)

During the ages the perception of children as innocent figures has gradually changed. The issue under discussion is where and when William Blake's children from *Songs of Innocence* (1798) disappeared. What space and time have they taken up since we no longer can see them? Symbolized by the lamb, the child is the expression of pure innocence. People sacrificed the lamb and remembered the Lord Jesus Christ, who took upon Himself the sin of man, and His sacrifice saved them from eternal death. When preaching on the mountain the Savior said:

'Suffer little children to come unto me, and forbid them not: for of such is the kingdom of God. Verily I say unto you,

whosoever shall not receive the kingdom of God as a little child shall in no wise enter therein.' (Luke 18:16-17 KJV)

God is the light of wisdom and wisdom is our salvation. The child Jesus who preached in the temple and amazed the scholars of the time with his knowledge must be an example for the children of all times.

In *Songs of Experience*, the English Romantic poet, William Blake blames Satan for destroying the children's innocence, meaning God's intent to preserve this world sinless and innocent like a child's soul. Evil is well-known in the Bible from the very beginning. In the very scene of the Crucifixion of our Savior, He sees Satan turned into a baby who smiles cunningly in her mother's arms.

In the Gothic genre, children symbolize regeneration or destruction and ensure the succession of a family or its fulfilment. They can become surprisingly powerful. Children endowed with supernatural powers have become a favorite topic of contemporary society. Unfortunately, these powers are not always put at the service of good and their possessor is aware of his super powers when he is in a terrible emotional crisis. Rather, these powers serve as a defense mechanism for the subject in the fight against the evil circumstances that try to destroy him.

Traditional literature recalls old wives as providers of ghost stories for the young children that their parents left home to be nursed and taken care of. The unconscious habit of nannies to scare young children with witches, ghosts and other dangerous creatures brings into the child's soul a feeling of fear, which he can hardly be repress later. Even in adult life, the subject can develop certain phobias as a consequence of the traumatic experiences seen or lived in the past. This hypothesis is sustained by the ideas developed in the full Enlightenment Era by John Locke, one of its prominent philosophers and thinkers who condemned the terrible stories like *Raw Head and Bloody Bones* or such other names as: 'they carry with them the Idea's [sic] of something terrible and hurtful, which they have reason to be afraid of, when alone, especially in the dark.' (Locke 1989: 196)

In the latest decades, the means to take control over the human mind have been intensified. The manipulation of the masses has always been a much-practiced technique over time. But, beyond the atrocity of the act itself, this can cause at any time terrible attempts of the individual, if not criminal, then suicidal. The 'evil child' is an early childhood stage regression where horrible things from the past are revealed.

American children's literature of the 20th century developed against the backdrop of the mass commercialization

of culture required by a consumerist society that does not make special efforts to preserve its traditional moral values, but on the contrary, it abandons the idea of fulfilling the American dream. Therefore, the fundamental problem of whether the child is a victim or aggressor must still be subjected to rigorous analysis.

Critics and other scholars agreed on two points of view that characterized the Gothic child: firstly, he became a hero/heroine or a villain and secondly, they followed the nature of the relationship developed with the environment, as well as the attitude towards the other characters in the Gothic world. For instance, in Stephen King's *Carrie* (1974), the ostracized teenage girl endowed with telekinetic powers uses them to destroy her bullies and her religious fanatic mother. Humiliated constantly, especially at the high-school prom, Carrie takes revenge over the whole quarter of Chamberlain, Maine, deserting it completely.

Danny Torrance, the child character from *The Shining* (1977) uses his extrasensory perceptions to 'shine' (to be read 'decipher') other people's minds and interact mentally with the others who possess the same gift. The child is seen now as a victim of environmental evil which is perceived as a threatening and destructive unknown force. The vices (drugs, alcohol) of adults are used as tools to threaten the child who becomes a victim of his own possessed father. Recurrent in Stephen King's work, the theme of the irresponsible adult and his cruel behavior draws parallels with Charles Dickens' Victorian child who was physically and morally abused, thirsty and hungry, imprisoned and left to die in London undergrounds or other dirty, sad, and forgotten places. From the autobiographical bildungsroman *David Copperfield* to *Oliver Twist* and *Great Expectations*, the children (David, Oliver, and Pip) have a complex nature and overpass the obstacles of life, leaving behind hope and a moral lesson for everybody. Bad children like Bill Sikes, Artful Dodger, or Noah Claypole lost the meaning of justice and common sense and did not repent at all for their sins.

History of literature noted the great difference between the circumstances of child abuse in Dickens and the circumstances presented by American authors. In Victorian England, adults consciously and deliberately mistreated children. It was a common thing in a society that was too blind to see what happened within its structures. However, it insisted on the physical abuse more than on the psychological side of the hero, the latter being mentioned as a normal consequence of the abuse.

In America, the inner turmoil of the hero occupies the central place of the narrative; he is the victim of a mentally

unstable adult or of other factors that exceed the capacity of human understanding. The American novel generally focuses on the free reactions of the character, child or adult, against hostilities and over his power to concentrate on eliminating evil and restoring the social order. Yet, in the American tale, there is always the feeling that this evil can return to take revenge on the heroes. They represent a rational and harmonious democratic civilization as opposed to savagery and chaotic anarchist rules. The two contrasting personalities represent the dual nature of the human being, made of a clear, good side and a dark, malefic one.

Given that 'every man has a potentiality to be a Nazi' (Biles 1970: 3), the reader finds it difficult to anticipate the behavior of a character caught in a borderline situation that consumes energy and common sense. Self-control, patience, and valuable principles preserved from the first years of life are decisive. As acknowledged, everyone brings out what is in his heart.

The child's self-doubt reflects the dual nature of the adult and the ability to change his disposition is the right piece of the Gothic puzzle. Gothic heroes face a never-ending inner conflict between their conscience and their moral duties to avenge their parents or other reasons to justify their actions. This apparent reconciliation of so-called 'incompatible ideals' (Wein 2002: 4) comes from the childlike behavior of the Gothic characters from whose multitude the most important is the child, the only one who paradoxically preserves by destroying.

When speaking about preservation, the child is said to better care for the moral values that his forerunners established. Once destroyed by outsiders, love gives way to hate, cruelty replaces gentleness, and the hero's entire inner world explodes into a thousand pieces.

Children adore the animals, and their loss is a trauma that they can barely overcome. For instance, the dead dog hugged by the ten years old child whose hands are full of blood cannot easily be forgotten by William Godwin's traveller of the seventeenth century, St. Leon, even if the narrator argues this is an event which lacks any significance written only to meet the needs of the reader. This exposure of the child to death occurs in the majority of Gothic novels whose declared aim is to study the nature of the suffering child and to assess his emotional stability. In Stephen King's *Pet Sematary*, released in 1983, the innocent two-year-old Cage Green was brought back to life and possessed by a mythical evil spirit, a Wendigo. Cage became an instrument of evil, as did Church, the cat, which the strange Micmac cemetery had brought back to life after a few hours in. The character's ability to discern becomes

worthy of consideration. At a young age, Cage is knowingly buried by his father, Louis Creed, in the evil place that could have brought him back to life. Thus, Louis is responsible for his son's ulterior criminal deeds as Cage fits the Gothic prototype, evolving 'from a mere victim to a frequent aggressor, killer, and a veritable monster.' (Bussing 1987: XIV)

In American gothic fiction, nature is all-pervasive and goes hand in hand with the hero's actions, sometimes even punishing him for the bad ones. The terrible storm from Edgar Allan Poe's *The Fall of the House of Usher* (1839) sustains the paranoia of Roderick Usher who suspects that his twin sister has been buried alive and is now responsible for all the noises that precede the fall of the house and her strange reappearance.

The image of the child represented by a dwarf in popular culture is, according to Carl Jung's theory, a representation of 'the sacred forces of Nature' (Jung 1991: 124). Children have incredible connections with the natural environment and give their lives for the planet's protection if necessary. They also use the natural forces to open the gates to evil. 'Children of the Corn' (1977) had to take over the responsibility of the adults to take care of the harvest and for the corn to gnaw every person over nineteen had to disappear from the group. King's paradox focuses on the children's attitude, both innocent and criminal: 'They got religion and they killed off their parents. All of them. [...] Shot them in their beds, knifed them in their bathtubs, poisoned their suppers, hung them, or disembowelled them.' (King 2009:125)

Once the sinful parents were killed the children could live in an innocent world where the corn would not mingle with the filth of crimes. The mistakes of adults compromise the innocence of children and destroy their lives.

The American authors have offered an anthropological approach using the child as a literary character to highlight the damnable actions of contemporary society. Their creations had extraordinary resonances beyond the American borders and made their way to eternity.

Hardly had the first Gothic tales been printed when their younger readers appeared. When the father questioned his son about having peeped into the novel that his sister was absorbingly reading, the latter offered a quick, sincere answer: 'Because it is so shocking, Sir.'

Besides shocking, the beauty of the Gothic novels resides in the vernacular acceptance that there is a sound interaction between the Gothic children and their society. This interaction targets the religious, social, and even political spheres. The decisions that the children make will define their further development and personalities.

CONCLUSIONS

In the narrative, the child is not a passive victim who accepts his fate. He fights to overcome the obstacles, traps, and challenges of destiny. The Gothic novels use the children's behaviors to condemn the destructive society in which they do not find their place. The children must resort to the arsenal of powers (telekinesis, the shining, or telepathy), which they discover after facing conflicting situations. Characters like

Carrie, Danny Torrance, and Abra Stone are as exponential today as Pip, David Copperfield, and Huckleberry Finn were once.

Through memorable characters, Gothic authors explore the depths of human nature, revealing its duality. The hidden thoughts and frustrations of childhood surface in the actions of the adult, who is disowned by family, rejected by friends and isolated from society.

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