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The Mysterious Murder, by Isaac Crookenden

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MLA Citation

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Full Title

The Mysterious Murder; or, the Usurper of Naples: An Original Romance. To Which is Prefixed, The Nocturnal Assassin; of, Spanish Jealousy.

Summary

Estaphana, daughter Lusigni, and Belfoni fall in love. When Estaphana tells her father, however, Lusigni is notably averse to the match. Instead, Lusigni arranges for Estaphana to marry the Duke de Savelli. When Estaphana objects the Duke kidnaps her and takes her to a castle tended by an old servant, Jacquilina and her husband. In the meantime, Lusigni catches Belfoni outside his home imprisons him in a secret dungeon.

Locked in the Duke's castle, Estaphana is visited by the Duke who attempts to rape her. Fortunately, Jacquilina bursts in and reveals that Estaphana is the Duke's daughter, proven by a miniature of the Duke's former wife that Estaphana wears. Jacquilina reveals herself to be Emily de Salerno, one of the Duke's former lovers, who kidnapped Estaphana as an infant as revenge against the Duke. Estaphana was left on the doorstep of Lusigni to be raised as his daughter.

Duke stabs Emily de Salerno and himself. As the Duke dies, Belfoni enters (having secretly escaped from Lusigni's dungeon). Belfoni and Estaphana enter through a secret door from which they hear groans, and discover the Duke's dying wife, Estaphana's mother.

Upon returning to Naples, Belfoni and Estaphana find Lusigni on his deathbed. Lusigni reveals to Belfoni that he is Belfoni's uncle. Lusigni explains that he imprisoned and murdered his older brother, Belfoni's father, to gain his inheritance, making Belfoni the heir the estate. As a dying wish, Lusigni asks that Belfoni and Estaphana be married.

Constellation of Knowledge/Historical Context

Despite his prolificacy, very little is known about Isaac Crookenden and the basis for his writing. Though he was a very popular writer of Gothic bluebooks, none of his works were reviewed and only one, *The Mysterious Murder*, was republished outside of England (New

York, 1827). This is likely due to his reputation as a Gothic plagiarist, with almost all of his works heavily borrowing from famous Gothic novels of the time.

One of Crookenden's favorite authors to draw from is Anne Radcliffe with her rational approach to the typical Gothic supernatural. Similar to Radcliffe, Crookenden's *The Mysterious Murder* does not rely on the occult to explain evil. Rather, the evil is explained through human motivation and long-kept secrets. In addition to his reliance of rational explanations, Crookenden's text engages with a number of common Gothic tropes that bear close resemblance to a number of Gothic novels. The result is a hodge-podge tale that employs images and plot lines from the Gothic tradition as a whole. For example, the identificatory talisman (in this bluebook, Estaphana's miniature) is frequently employed by Crookenden and is reminiscent of Radcliffe's *The Italian*. Likewise, the night time prowling of the Duke de Savelli and his attempted rape of Estaphana should remind readers of Matthew Lewis's *The Monk* and Ambrosio's first assault of Antonia with the help of the myrtle branch.

What is notably lacking in *The Mysterious Murder* is the presence of anti-Catholic sentiments. The text is devoid of clerical presence or the institutional Church that is common in many of the Gothic chapbooks. This may partly be attributed to the Gothic bluebook tradition in which Crookenden was taking part. While chapbooks come from a more propagandistic tradition attempting to demonize the Catholic Church, the bluebooks were written to provide moral lesson to individual readers. The result is two very separate popular literature traditions that serve two different social ends.

Key Words

Beauty

Beauty is often juxtaposed to what is man-made or corrupted. Victor in *Frankenstein*, in his scientific transgression, fails to enjoy the 'charms of nature.' (53) Hence it can be an indication of the state of one's inner mind. The beauty of nature is pervasive in *Frankenstein* and it contributes greatly to the sublime. There is a sense of the overwhelming in its grandeur and infiniteness as compared to man who is small. It acts as a refuge by diminishing man's problems, but it can accentuate them also because it is threatening and uncontrollable. Victor's escapade to Montanvert filled him with 'sublime ecstasy that gave wings to the soul, and allowed it to soar...' (94) The mountains are 'terrifically desolate' yet possessing a 'solitary grandeur.' (94) Such a beautiful landscape becomes almost paradoxical as it would witness Walton's and Victor's suffering travels across the frozen seas, and its attractive-repulsion parallels the nature of the construction of the monster as well-attractive, dangerous and uncontrollable.

Beauty is brought to perfection in women, who are likened to angels and the Virgin Mary. They usually fit within moral and domestic conventions, like Frankenstein's Elizabeth and Dracula's Mina. However, sensation and shock tactics are created by defiling such women, and bringing to light the ideological suppression of women in society. Beauty without

morals or chastity becomes unnatural and bestial, evoking attraction and repulsion. Beauty here is seen as something to be feared due to its power to seduce and bring out the irrational in man. Lucy possesses two faces of beauty within herself, the seductive and cold beauty when she is a blood sucking vampire and the earthly and peaceful one when she is truly dead as a virtuous woman. Similarly, Ollala's beauty is that of degeneration, like the house, and is an indication of illness, insanity or bestiality.

Source: Candida Ho, "Gothic Keywords."

<http://courses.nus.edu.sg/course/ellgohbh/gothickeywords.html>. Last Updated 2006. Last Accessed 9/16/2013. Web.

Castles

Description forthcoming.

Creepy Sounds

Description forthcoming.

Death

Gothic literature is obsessed with death. We find portents of death, unnatural deaths, and series of deaths (e.g. *Frankenstein*), all of which contribute to an atmosphere of horror. Death in Gothic literature is associated with the supernatural. If Gothic literature reflects a wish to overcome one's mortality, there is also a fear of those who somehow manage to transcend it e.g. She, vampires, Frankenstein's monster.

In Gothic literature, death is horrific because it is often not quite the end. This thwarts the human wish for certainty. The vampires who are Undead occupy a liminal space; they are at once both alive and dead. The vampire hunters in *Dracula* have to drive a stake into them, to make sure they are really dead. There is also the trope of the dead who return e.g. Poe's "Ligeia". These kinds of spectres can also be seen as manifestations of the return of the repressed.

Likewise, the subject of death itself has often been ignored or repressed. It is what is unknown, and poses a threat to the Victorian mind which desires order. The Gothic is interested in what has been glossed over. We don't really get sentimental scenes like the death of little William in *East Lynne*; rather, the more gruesome, inexplicable aspects of death are explored. The corporeality of the body is emphasised with gory descriptions of blood and grave worms. Reading about death serves as a reminder of one's mortality.

There is also a Gothic obsession with the bodies of dead women. Poe said that the death of a beautiful woman is "the most poetical topic in the world". For a discussion on death, femininity and the aesthetic, see Elizabeth Bronfen's book *Over her Dead Body*. She suggests that Gothic writing itself may be an act of killing off the female as it transmits the animate body into inanimate text. Necrophiliac desire for the dead woman e.g. Heathcliff's digging of Catherine's grave, also points to other kinds of transgressions e.g. incest.

Source: Khoo Lilin, "Gothic Keywords."

<http://courses.nus.edu.sg/course/ellgohbh/gothickeywords.html>. Last Updated 2006. Last Accessed 9/16/2013. Web.

Dislocation

"Dislocation" is the destabilising effect caused by fundamentally unstable and cryptic gothic narratives in its fragmentary epistolary forms such as *Frankenstein* where letters from the no man's land of the Arctic may never reach Margaret, or in the heteroglossic narration of *Dracula* which is made up of curiously collated newspaper reports, unopened letters and supposedly private journals. The avoidance of a neat arranging of elements and reassuring endings in gothic narratives leads to the desired dislocation of perspectives and ultimately the disturbance of a smooth reading experience as perhaps part of gothic narrative's agenda to challenge assumptions of normalcy in the linear narration and neat resolution of social realist novels. This destabilizing reading experience can be aided by the technique of either the lack of omniscient narrators in both *Frankenstein* and *Dracula* as an objective and cohesive voice pulling together the different articles with its comments or by problematizing the omniscient voice in *Jekyll and Hyde* that frustrates the reader in its deliberate effacement at times.

The abstraction of the gothic narrative form often parallels the story's concerns and anxieties when confronting gothic themes which are notorious for its inability to pin down a stable center of meaning hence also resulting in the pathological effect of dislocation. This is exemplified in the split into "self" and "other" when societal demands are unable to be reconciled with individual impulses especially in the urban gothic tale of *Jekyll and Hyde*. However when the boundaries of self/other collapses as when it gets progressively difficult to control the figure of the "Other"/ Hyde, so does it become even more impossible to locate stable identities. The collapse of any single, firm definition is also manifested in gothic fiction's use of overdetermined symbols such as "blood" in *Dracula* which furthers the notion of the genre's multiplicity. It may be impossible to fix gothic fiction with a stable meaning however one might say that the dislocation of the reader from a fixed vantage point paradoxically jars one into a greater critical engagement with all elements of the text.

Source: Belinda Loh Mei Lin, "Gothic Keywords."

<http://courses.nus.edu.sg/course/ellgohbh/gothickeywords.html>. Last Updated 2006. Last Accessed 9/16/2013. Web.

Entrapment

The notion of entrapment is a prevalent motif in gothic literature. There are two main types of entrapment which can be observed in such works: physical and psychological entrapment of the character(s).

Physical entrapment occurs when a character's body is constrained within a particular physical setting and he is unable to get himself out of that setting. Such is the case when Frankenstein's monster is entrapped in a body which Frankenstein had created for him.

Psychological entrapment is manifested in the form of inescapable, agonizing tensions within a character's mind. For example, Frankenstein is psychologically entrapped when he has to make a decision either to create a female monster or risk his family being murdered by his original monster.

The entrapment of characters in gothic literature mirrors the entrapment faced by individuals in the Victorian society. These individuals were entrapped because they were forced to repress certain desires that they had, for example, sexual desires, in order to observe strict Victorian social decorum and rules and work towards an ordered society.

Besides being entrapped in such an oppressive society, the Victorians may have also found themselves entrapped in a rapidly changing world. With the onset of urbanization, the Industrial Revolution and the Financial Revolution, they might have felt entrapped as they were unable to escape the resulting changes that were taking place.

On another level, the readers of gothic literature might feel a sense of entrapment too because they are forced to accept the typical presence of the uncanny, the supernatural, and other unfamiliar elements coupled with secrecy and the withholding of certain facts in the literature. For instance, when one reads *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, one might feel entrapped when the story does not reveal facts such as the identity of the omniscient narrator or the real reason for Hyde murdering Sir Danvers Carew.

Source: Fernandez, Claudine. "Gothic Keywords."

<http://courses.nus.edu.sg/course/ellgohbh/gothickeywords.html>. Last Updated 2006. Last Accessed 9/16/2013. Web.

Family

Industrial development in the Nineteenth century encouraged urbanization and by 1850 more than half of England lived in cities and worked in industries. This changing economic condition inevitably challenged conventional ideology of the family which became redefined to include members "whether actually living together or not" and "connected by (either) blood or affinity" (OED).

By this definition, the patriarchal figure became freed from monogamy. Dracula, as symbol of the new money-obsessed class, had three vampire wives. Similarly, with ready money, many figures of authority were in command of the imp-child. Instead of a genealogical right, the new capitalist society allows wealth to gain patriarchal authority over many.

While the new factory communities introduced new figures of authority, with respect to cloth and steel, production becomes increasingly specifically gendered. Through personifying industrial production, Gothic tropes seem to suggest via Frankenstein and Dracula that while possible, the resultant single-parent offspring are unnatural and terrifying.

At the same time, economically active working class women and the 'masculine' New Woman threatened conventional notions of feminine dependency. Writers like Stevenson

reacted by only presenting negative working women (in both sense of the word) while Stoker singles intellectual Mina out for Dracula's sanction.

Proliferation of child labor positioned children as 'property generating property' as exemplified in *The Bottle Imp*. Dracula's brute beast children also aid his creation of vampire children. The horror of the four female vampires' feeding off children is an implicit gothic comment on the inhumane nature of this exploitation.

Source: Yao Lingyun. "Gothic Keywords."

<http://courses.nus.edu.sg/course/ellgohbh/gothickeywords.html>. Last Updated 2006. Last Accessed 9/16/2013. Web.

Female Sexuality

Aspects of female sexuality figure prominently in gothic literature insofar as there is a strong preoccupation with what may happen if female sexuality is not contained within the structures of patriarchal authority across many Gothic texts. The highly disturbing image of Lucy the "Un-Dead" throwing the child whom she was cradling in her arms earlier on onto the hard ground without so much as a blink in the eye in Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897) encapsulates one example of such a preoccupation—that of motherhood gone wrong. The mother-child relationship—one that is usually regarded as nurturing and loving—is violently destabilized at this instance where Lucy—as the symbolic mother—harms the child whom she was supposed to be protecting. Relating to motherhood, the theme of birth signals the preoccupation with the unknowable dimensions of female sexuality that many Gothic texts exhibit. In Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1831), the birth of Victor Frankenstein's creation is depicted as one that is monstrous insofar as it is "unnatural"; Frankenstein is, symbolically, both father and mother to the creation that he abhors from the moment of its birth. Given that it was a woman who authored Frankenstein, this then signals how female sexuality—in all its different aspects—was very much on the minds of both men and women in Victorian Britain. When seen alongside the socio-cultural-historical developments in Victorian Britain, it becomes possible then to view the depictions of female sexuality in gothic literature as responses to women's increasing freedom and mobility during this period; Mina Harker in *Dracula*, for instance, is very much a response to the New Woman phenomenon.

Source: Ashley Lin, "Gothic Keywords."

<http://courses.nus.edu.sg/course/ellgohbh/gothickeywords.html>. Last Updated 2006. Last Accessed 9/16/2013. Web.

Genealogy

Description forthcoming.

Gothic Transgression

Transgression is central to the Gothic because it serves as a means for writers to interrogate existing categories, limits and anxieties within nineteenth century English society. By transgressing social limits the Gothic reinforces the values and necessity of

restoring or defining limits through the presentment of the horrific outcomes of transgression. Most often, these transgressions reflect and refract current anxieties of the age as a way to deal and contain them. Anxieties regarding the dissolution of gender differences, due to the emergence of the New Woman and the aesthete; regarding the possibility of devolution and degeneration in man; and regarding fears of the working class - a repercussion of the French Revolution- are dealt with singly or in overlapping ways. Consider how in *Dracula* sexual differences are “ef(face)ed” by the trope of the vampiric mouth which is both “penetrator” and “orifice”; which is further complicated by the essentially male act of penetration to the neck by male and female vampires alike. The New woman (who is gender ambiguous in being biologically female, yet desiring masculinity) seems to be parodied horrifically here. The New Woman is further parodied in the vampiric Lucy whose maternal instincts are reversed (with her feeding on children, instead), promiscuous (with multiple husband’s whose bloods are coursing through her) and blatant sexuality (in seducing Arthur). The threatening figure of the New Woman as Lucy, and the sexual ambiguity represented by all the vampires, are subdued and destroyed, vicariously for the reader. However such overt aims are problematised by the numerous Gothic works that lack reassuring closures, presenting their own narrators as unreliable and questionable, and revealing the covert monstrosity in mainstream society and the aristocrats (- that leaves the reader more insecure than not. The Gothic writers themselves seem to be unlikely proponents to restore societal limits and boundaries – since they, very often, were transgressors of those very boundaries (e.g. Shelley, Wilde, etc.). Thus, although Gothic transgression did interrogate current issues, its aims and intended effects were ambivalent.

Source: Grace Dong Enping. "Gothic Keywords."

<http://courses.nus.edu.sg/course/ellgohbh/gothickeywords.html>. Last Updated 2006. Last Accessed 9/16/2013. Web.

Identificatory Talisman

Description forthcoming.

Letters

Letters to a phantom sister, wills, transcript, journal entries, newspaper entries; Gothic narratives are punctuated with embedded writings in the form of letters and entries that are both a pastiche and fragmented, the sum total of which makes up the complete text. Letters while seemingly presenting objectivity on one level through the assumed tone of factuality, are also simultaneously open and subject to interpretation. It is linked to a reading of words as well as a misreading. There are letters that are not replied in *Frankenstein*, letters that may not have reached their destination, letters of secrecy in *Jekyll and Hyde*, letters that chronicle events—these letters attempt to present to us an understanding of what happened, reiterated with the supposed advantage of retrospect and an over-arching perspective that is allowed by the passing of time. However, as the paths of these letters are always dubious, it calls to attention its own in-authenticity and hence the potential for a misreading since we are never always sure if what we are reading

is accurately represented. In other words, what has happened is always fragmented and there can be no complete reading of events.

These fragments also call to attention the reliability of information in an age where information is becoming increasingly available, as seen from the inclusion of newspaper reports in *Dracula* and the fact that distance is no longer a barrier to words. Some letters and entries, instead of being handwritten, are now type-written which displaces the personal touch of the writer from the reader and handwriting can no longer be a measure of authenticity. Anything, including words, can be reproduced. This links the idea of letters to modern communication and technology. The use of problematic embedded narratives illustrates an anxiety about the increasing ease of communication and whether more information really means knowing more. Narratives within narratives draw to attention its own artificiality and the question of whether there can be an original sequence of events behind what is narrated. At the same time, letters are also clearly letters of the alphabet which cues the reader in to the notion that all that is being read is a construct of "letters". Perhaps over-determined, but letters open the doors to the multitude of readings and misreadings in the Gothic world. (Felicia Chan, 2006)

Source: Chan, Felicia. "Gothic Keywords."

<http://courses.nus.edu.sg/course/ellgohbh/gothickeywords.html>. Last Updated 2006. Last Accessed 9/16/2013. Web.

Memory of Past Sins

Description forthcoming.

Misogyny

Male misogyny is a prominent theme in gothic literature, varying in its treatment of the Victorian woman from barely acknowledging her presence to demonising her. This attitude arises from a number of socio-cultural developments in the Victorian era, such as the growing prominence of women beyond the domestic circle and growing masculine insecurity. The fact that such attitudes are reflected as early as Mary Shelly's *Frankenstein*, and by a female author no less, show that misogyny in Gothic texts are not simply male adolescent fantasies but reflections of underlying currents of thought and fears of the period. Fear of female sexuality is a key part of misogyny in Gothic texts, wherein it becomes a force that threatens to overwhelm the masculine self in texts like *Dracula* or *Ollalla*. It is the fear of the vagina detenta, in which the female sexuality is alluring to the male, yet also involves a symbolic castration of male virility. Often, in such texts, physical violence, shrouded in phallic terms such as the stake used on Lucy in *Dracula* or the tearing apart of Elizabeth in *Frankenstein*, is used to symbolically exorcise the threat to the masculine self and allow the male to continue partaking in purely masculine activities. Such violence and activities not only restore the male self-belief in his masculinity, but also serve as a containment of the female by isolating her away from the realm of the male, thereby removing the "threat" of her presence to male superiority. The concept of the hunt or adventure, for instance, as a purely masculine enterprise in a great number of gothic texts

reveal deep-seated fears of women entering and surpassing men in what were previously solely male activities, such as business.

Source: Tang Chee Mun. "Gothic Keywords."

<http://courses.nus.edu.sg/course/ellgohbh/gothickeywords.html>. Last Updated 2006. Last Accessed 9/16/2013. Web.

Missing Mother

The typical gothic mother is absent or dead. If the mother is alive and well, such as Lucy's mother in Bram Stoker's *Dracula*, she is associated with the incapacity to carry out her maternal duties. The typical gothic mother has to be killed in order for the domestic instability that underpins the gothic text to flourish. Only the occasional evil or deviant mother (Olalla's mother in Robert Louis Stevenson's "Olalla" for example), is allowed to survive in the gothic text. Even then, the evil and deviant mother figure (such as H.R. Haggard's titular character in *She*) has to be removed eventually for there to be some sort of closure to the gothic text.

The repression of the mother allows the progression of the narrative in the gothic mode. The missing mother also serves as a social commentary where her absence and silence highlight the repression of women within an overwhelming patriarchal regime.

The missing mother points to the absence of regulation and the absence of stability in the family, hence the desire for the male characters to usurp the maternal role and circumvent the female's role in procreation (Victor Frankenstein and Dr Jekyll do that in their respective fictional worlds). At the same time, the missing mother is a signifier for the stranglehold of men over the legal and physical self-agency of the women in gothic texts.

Source: Choo Li Lin. "Gothic Keywords."

<http://courses.nus.edu.sg/course/ellgohbh/gothickeywords.html>. Last Updated 2006. Last Accessed 9/16/2013. Web.

Secret Passage

Description forthcoming.

Secrets

See Secrets, namely that which is 'unspeakable' is a distinctive gothic trope. In literary novels, secrets are knowledge deliberately concealed from the readers and/or from the characters involved. In gothic literature, secrets aid in creating a sense of suspense, hinging on a scandal or mystery and subsequently lead to a shocking revelation at the end. Often, a foreboding shadow is cast upon those who withhold secrets, be it a dark family history or a Faustian pact as exemplified by Shelley's *Frankenstein* and Stevenson's *Dr Jekyll* who are both possessors of an 'unspeakable' knowledge which allows them to transcend the limits and abilities of man but eventually at the expense of their sanity, friends and lives.

The secrecy of identity and sexuality is also prevalent in Gothic literature where the ambiguity and anonymity of informers and correspondents add to the overarching

mystery. There are also suggestions that the seemingly upright life led by Victorian men in the day is coupled with a lurid 'secret' life at night where at times even their heterosexual preferences are called into question. Although not overtly articulated, novels such as *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* reveal a generally homosocial society whereby the fast bonding of the men hints at something more than platonic friendship.

Secrets as a form of concealment also connote darkness and acts as a means of subversion against the façade of the hypocritical Victorian society which boasts a well-policed state with brightly-lit streets at night, claiming the honourability of well-clothed individuals and the safety of the private self, all which the gothic trope seeks to challenge.

Source: Kong Yuqi. "Gothic Keywords."

<http://courses.nus.edu.sg/course/ellgohbh/gothickeywords.html>. Last Updated 2006. Last Accessed 9/16/2013. Web.

Weather

Weather plays an important function in gothic literature, and remains one of the keys in decoding the inner landscape of the protagonists. Often present in gothic novels not only as a form of sympathetic background, certain elements of weather are typically used to mirror and magnify the feelings of the protagonist, to establish moods, and to underscore the action of the story. For instance, the use of fog within the gothic novel is a convention often used to obscure objects by reducing visibility and changing the outward appearances of truth; and storms, when they make their appearance, frequently accompany important events and characters. Bad weather, in particular, is often associated with the supernatural, as well as being the birthing landscape of the imagination. Storms are perceived as harbingers of evil, and often present both a reflection and refraction of the inner self of the protagonist, an externalization of internal fears and conflict. Weather can also function as a site of displacement of fears, when they are projected onto the storm itself. In Le Fanu's novel *Uncle Silas*, the main protagonist, Maud's fears for her future after her father's death are both underscored by the approaching storm, and also displaced onto it.

Weather has also acquired a certain predictability in its interpretation in gothic literature; a feature that can easily be, and is often parodied in gothic works. There is the sense that readers are habitually lured into reading the weather as codes signifying the protagonist's inner landscape, and are ultimately unable to resist assuming heavily overdetermined meanings in the relationship between the weather and the inner self, thereby illustrating the gothic nature of the text by tempting one to oversimplify its reading, and yet simultaneously contributing to the destabilizing sense of gothic unease by having its meaning perceived through a different set of codes that are ultimately arbitrary.

Source: Chang Keng Mun. "Gothic Keywords."

<http://courses.nus.edu.sg/course/ellgohbh/gothickeywords.html>. Last Updated 2006. Last Accessed 9/16/2013. Web.

Bibliography of Related Information

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Note: This document scan is missing page 13, which details the circumstances leading to the kidnapping of Estaphana by the Duke.