

1-1-2014

Eliza, or the Unhappy Nun [supplemental material]

Heather Noble

Eliza, or the Unhappy Nun, by an unknown author.

Contents

MLA Citation.....	1
MLA Citation from the Gothic Archive.....	1
Full Title.....	2
Summary	2
Constellation of Knowledge/Historical Context	2
Key Words	3
Androgyny	3
Blood	4
Doubling	5
Entrapment	6
French Revolution.....	7
Letters/Manuscripts.....	7
Missing Mother	8
Wasteland.....	8
Bibliography of Related Information.....	9

MLA Citation

Eliza, or the Unhappy Nun: Exemplifying the Unlimited Tyranny Exercised by the Abbots and Abbesses Over the Ill-Fated Victims of Their Malice in the Gloomy Recesses of a Convent. Including the Adventures of Clementina, or the Constant Lovers, a True and Affecting Tale. London: Tegg and Castleman, 1803.

MLA Citation from the Gothic Archive

Eliza, or the Unhappy Nun: Exemplifying the Unlimited Tyranny Exercised by the Abbots and Abbesses Over the Ill-Fated Victims of Their Malice in the Gloomy Recesses of a Convent. Including the Adventures of Clementina, or the Constant Lovers, a True and Affecting Tale. Published 1803. E-Publications Marquette. The Gothic Archive, Marquette University, Wisconsin.

http://epublications.marquette.edu/english_gothic/19/. Accessed 9/16/13. Web.

Full Title

Eliza, or the Unhappy Nun: Exemplifying the Unlimited Tyranny Exercised by the Abbots and Abbesses Over the Ill-Fated Victims of Their Malice in the Gloomy Recesses of a Convent. Including the Adventures of Clementina, or the Constant Lovers, a True and Affecting Tale.

Summary

The tale of Eliza is framed by an unnamed narrator, a British man who traveled France during the French Revolution. A convent, said to be run by a strict abbess stood on a hill near the village, and he heard rumors that an Englishwoman had been kept there. As the narrator prepared to return to England, insurgents came to the village, burning the convent, brutalizing the nuns, and murdering the abbess. Though the narrator is sympathetic to King Louis XVI and the French aristocrats whose homes were looted, he believes that the cruel abbess deserved her fate. While exploring the burned convent, he finds a manuscript by Eliza, an English nun. The remainder of the chapbook is Eliza's first person narrative, written three decades before being found, which describes her upbringing as the child of a fanatical Roman Catholic father and nurturing Protestant mother, who gave Eliza a Protestant education despite her father's insistence that his children be raised Catholic. Upon hearing that Eliza favored the "established religion," her father sent her to the French convent. Eliza submitted, but was determined to escape from the despotic abbess and the convent if given the chance. She befriended a French nun, Sister Madeleine, and falls instantly in love with one of her relations, Charles de R..., with whom she communicated through secret letters. Eliza planned to escape, but the abbess found her letters and had her confined to a dungeon for life where she was denied adequate food. She penned the narrative for her father, then slit her own throat and died in Madeleine's arms.

Constellation of Knowledge/Historical Context

Eliza is part of a collection of stories first published in 1803 called *Biographical annals of suicide, or Horrors of self-murder*. The chapbook version was printed a year later, and it included *Eliza* along with three other stories of young people driven to suicide by the Catholic clergy. Though *Eliza* is attributed to George Barrington, an infamous London pickpocket, he did not author the volume in which *Eliza* is published. The publisher, Thomas Tegg, likely used Barrington's famous name to increase sales.

During the period before and after the French Revolution, French writers and thinkers participated in anti-clerical discourse that influenced later English anti-clerical works. Published in 1796, Denis Diderot's *The Nun* was founded in Diderot's own experience being forced into a monastery by his father and his sister's death after taking the veil. Like *Eliza*, *The Nun* consisted of the writings of a nun forced by her family to take the veil. *The Nun* was first published in England in 1797 under the title *Memoirs of a Nun*. This led to an increase of anti-clerical literary works in England, including *Eliza* in 1803.

The framing of Eliza's narrative is reminiscent of Radcliffe's *The Italian* (1797), which frames its anti-Catholic story by placing an English traveler in a dangerous, Catholic country. Like the English traveler in *The Italian*, the narrator in *Eliza* reads a manuscript telling the story of a despotic Catholic authority figure who abuses power, particularly power over young women. This tradition of framing a Gothic work was also utilized by Nathaniel Hawthorne in *The Scarlet Letter* (1850). Unlike *The Italian* and *Eliza*, the unnamed narrator is not in a foreign land but in a custom house searching into the past of his own nation and his own Puritan forefathers. He finds manuscripts telling the story of Hester Prynne's religious and social persecution and bases a novel on them, further complicating the use of this framing device as a means to interrogate the purpose of stories and the reliability of the written word to present a version of the truth.

Key Words

Androgyny

The abbess, who is never named or physically described in great detail, wields social power like a man. She is admired and feared, and she rules over a community of women with severity and fanaticism that resembles Eliza's father.

Androgyny took on a prominent place in describing the sexual orientation of characters in fin de siècle Gothic literature. In a biological context, being androgynous suggests a combination of male and female sexual organs and characteristics. In Gothic literature, to be androgynous is to be neither specifically masculine nor feminine thus creating an amorphous character with an ambiguous sexual orientation. Some authors combine the biological and social definitions of androgyny to the characterization of their characters. Androgynous behaviour is exhibited in marginalized characters such as the foreign other and females to mirror cultural and sexual anxieties in this period of enormous social turbulence. Androgyny is a fin de siècle symptom exemplifying the Victorians' frustration, confusion and resentment towards the strict demarcation of gender roles. Gothic literature thus uses the site of androgyny to contest with gender conventions and experiment with mutable forms of sexuality. This is seen in recent times where several feminists advocate androgyny as a substitute to patriarchy. In *Dracula*, Bram Stoker describes Mina Harker as a motherly female with a "woman's heart" who interestingly, also has "man's brain." Androgyny is also manifested in the hyper-masculine Dracula who is also hyper-feminine at the same time. He is at once the pursuer of virginal females and the pursued by a band of masculine men. Hyde in Stevenson's *The Strange Case of Doctor Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* is feminized with his "dwarfish" stature. Androgyny can then be seen as a projection of various anxieties in the fin de siècle Victorian period. This is due to the emergence of the new woman, fall of the family and the questioning of assumptions of being either man or woman in the Victorian society.

Source: Metta Yang. "Gothic Keywords."

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

Blood

There is the implicit spilling of blood recalled by the historical context in which the text is framed. The first lines, referring to King Louis XVI prefigure his beheading, and the same type of mob mentality results in the murder of the nuns. The most significant instance of blood being spilled is Eliza's suicide. She cut her throat while kneeling before an ivory crucifix, and bled to death in the arms of her French friend, Sister Madeleine. This signals a potential alliance between France and England on the basis of the middle class anti-Catholic ideology embodied by these two victimized women. More literally, it figures Eliza as a sacrificial lamb who, abused under the regime of Catholicism, was forced to commit what is, under that regime, and unforgivable sin. In hoping her blood father will eventually find the manuscript, she is entreating him (and other English Catholics) to reevaluate their religious and social convictions.

The significance of blood in gothic literature can be illustrated in many aspects. At the elementary level, blood denotes genealogy, lineages and procreation. This denotation has historical significance for the gothic text to either construct or recall its origins. Extending genealogy to the family, what we often associate as 'blood is thicker than water' is challenged in the gothic texts like Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* and Robert Louis Stevenson's *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* that foreground certain anxieties within the family structure such as in the relationships between fathers and sons, husbands and wives.

What we know as 'blue blood' reminds us at once of the aristocracy and nobility. The gothic texts in the Victorian era were concerned with the rise of the bourgeois class, a liminal force itself that threatened to destabilize the ruling power of the former elite. Therefore, the gothic treatment of blood sometimes focuses on the purity and taintedness of blood like in Bram Stoker's *Dracula* to highlight then contemporary societal anxieties.

Blood, due to its ability to be transfused between humans, can be treated as a transactional currency in the gothic text as exemplified in Stoker's *Dracula*. This co-modification of blood is highly significant as it reflects the anxiety of the genre towards increasing dominion of capitalism and industrialization especially in the 19th century that threatened traditional ways of life. Blood in the gothic text can also connote sexuality and the libido. In *Dracula*, Dracula and his thirst for blood highlight a libidinous nature that arises from his 'eastern' hence different origins. Blood has the further implications of gender and race as despite its physical omnipresence between genders and across races, the perceptions of blood cannot but be influenced by perceptions of race and gender. The ambivalence of blood's dual functionality as a life-giver and yet also a life-denier highlights the liminal space that blood occupies in the gothic genre. Stoker's *Dracula* is the epitome of a character who both denies and yet gives 'life' to his victims. The 'liminality' of blood, along with other gothic motifs such as the dual-door house in Stevenson's *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* and Victor's ambivalent monster in *Frankenstein* who is both inhumane yet humane are all characteristic of the genre. The notion of blood as a life-giver is further extended by the religious connotations of blood itself. The blood of Biblical Christ who had sacrificed himself on the cross for mankind's salvation had been subverted in Stoker's *Dracula* when Dracula, now possibly perceived as the Anti-Christ who consumes his victim's blood instead of giving blood for salvation. Without doubt, we need the bloody key to open the door to the gothic world.

Source: James Tan. "Gothic Keywords."

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

Doubling

The most apparent and significant instance of this trope is the doubling of the cruel Roman Catholic abbess and Eliza's nurturing, kind Protestant mother. This serves the anti-Catholic ideology by sentimentalizing and valorizing of Protestant motherhood and demonizing the sadistic and unnatural Catholic maternal relationships.

Doubling refers to a multiplication by two, such as when two or more characters parallel each other in action or personality, for example. It can also mean internal doubling, or division within the self to exhibit a duality of character.

Often, seemingly disparate characters are shown through doubling to be fundamentally similar, hence collapsing the self-other dichotomy and imparting a worrying sense of indistinguishableness between the supposed opposites. This implies that boundaries between deliberately demarcated groups of people are actually slippery and unstable. External identity markers such as dressing and mannerisms are hence undependable, allowing social categories to become permeable and vulnerable to transgression by virtue of their easy imitation.

Doubling hence illustrates deep anxieties that Victorian elites had regarding the weakening of the distinctions drawn along lines of class, gender, race and nationality, posing threats to the interests of the self. It also raises a cautionary point that a thin line separates good and evil, and while it is easy for evil to infiltrate one's protected sanctum, it is equally easy for one to fall into the latter's trappings. As such, everything that seems good must also be held in suspicion of harboring a negative underside.

Doubling also foregrounds the motif of mirroring, in particular the projection of one's fears, desires and anxieties onto the other, which becomes an uncomfortable reflection of ugly traits that the self refuses to acknowledge. The other thus reveals the social ills and moral decay that high Victorian society tries to ignore. It also broaches the notion that there are always two sides to a coin, such as that crime and poverty would necessarily accompany wealth accumulation in a capitalistic society. Progress for some comes at the cost of hardship for many others.

At the individual level, doubling plays out an internal splitting of the self between the public face of high Victorian respectability and professionalism, versus the carefully hidden face of despicability and immorality. It makes an oblique reference to Victorian hypocrisy, duplicity of standards and multiplicity of facades, as well as the fear of being discovered as such. It also dramatizes the inner struggle and vacillation between choices of good and evil in the individual. It is also interesting to note that for particular groups, doubling shows the essential sameness of perception by society of their status. Gothic representations of female characters for example, almost always seem to double each other in their stereotypical portrayal of feminine passivity when confronted with masculine power.

Lastly, at the narrative level, the form and structure of gothic writings sometimes act as a double to the content of the novel, underscoring the importance of themes that are doubled (reiterated through form and content), and the narrative strategy of doubling itself.

Source: Diana Chan Tsui Li, "Gothic Keywords."

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

Entrapment

Eliza and Sister Madeleine are both trapped in the convent, which restricts them socially, intellectually, and physically. Eliza is then physically confined in a dungeon, which resulted in her desperate act of suicide. Though she is forced to take the vows, however, Eliza is never fully entrapped psychologically. Her Protestant upbringing is the factor which allows her to resist the Catholic ideology despite the abuse she suffers by her father and the abbess.

Entrapment, a favorite horror device of the Gothic, means to be confined or to be trapped in such a way that there is no way out. It is this sense of there being no escape that contributes to the claustrophobic psychology of Gothic space. The notion of claustrophobia is closely tied up with that of entrapment. Although it is most often regarded as a consequence of physical entrapment, it can also be more generally attributed to a character's sense of helplessness, or a feeling that one is caught up in some sinister plan or destiny over which one has no control.

There are essentially three types of entrapment: physical, mental, and existential. Physical entrapment would mean being physically trapped in some place. A recurring gothic device of physical entrapment is that of the protagonist trapped in a maze of some kind and trying to escape, but inevitably returning to the same spot again and again. An example of physical entrapment can be found in Stoker's *Dracula*. When Harker is being driven to the castle of Dracula, he experiences a moment of being physically trapped in the nightmare landscape of the Transylvania, as is evident in his remark that "[it] seemed to me that we were simply going over and over the same ground again; and so I took note of some salient point, and found that this was so" (Stoker). Another example of such entrapment is found in Smith's "A Rendezvous in Averioigne." In this short story, the protagonist Gerard is trying in vain to escape from a forest; he returns, inevitably, to the same spot every time. Eventually, "[his] very will was benumbed, was crushed down as by the incumbence of a superior volition."

Mental entrapment, on the other hand, is about being confined to a certain state of mind. The gothic trope of madness, for example, is a form of mental entrapment. In a way, the insane are trapped in their own mental universe, into which no one else can penetrate. Renfield, in *Dracula*, is doubly entrapped; physically locked up in an asylum, he is also limited to the confines of his mental universe, doomed to be continually misunderstood by Seward, or simply dismissed as insane.

Lastly, there is also existential entrapment, which takes the form of social entropy and ontological or epistemological entrapment. An example of existential entrapment can be found in Stevenson's *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*; Dr Jekyll feels trapped by societal notions of respectability, by a constant pressure of having to uphold his reputation as a gentleman in the eyes of the Victorian public. As a way of breaking out of this 'prison',

Dr Jekyll invents the figure of Hyde. Hyde is therefore Jekyll's liberator, for it is as Hyde that Dr Jekyll can truly express himself, unbound by considerations of maintaining his respectability.

Source: Esther Leong, "Gothic Keywords."

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

French Revolution

Details forthcoming.

Letters/Manuscripts

The narrative is framed by an Englishman who is present in a significant, identifiable historical setting, the French Revolution. This is the historical setting in which Eliza's manuscript is found, and it adds a degree of urgency and legitimacy to the story during a time where the British were very anxious about class and religion.

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.

Source: Chan, Felicia. "Gothic Keywords."

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

Missing Mother

Eliza is raised and educated by her loving Protestant mother, who goes back on a promise to have the children raised Catholic. When Eliza's cruel father finds out, he has her committed to the convent in France, and Eliza's mother dies soon after. The use of the Gothic "missing mother" is twofold; Eliza is disconnected from her biological mother, but also her motherland. There is a sense of alienation from Mother Britain not only in the character of Eliza, but also the narrator who fears the violent chaos of the French war against the aristocracy.

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.

Wasteland

The beautiful countryside and mansions of the noblemen are burnt by a group of marauding peasants. Here, the middle class ideology is most clear. The result of an uprising or revolution by the lower classes against the monarchy and upper classes results in a wasteland of fire and destruction of the social order.

Gothic narratives often play out amidst the most blighted of settings. The barrenness and harshness of these primal landscapes often depicts allegorically the spiritual impoverishment and internal desolation that many of the characters of these novels experience. The wasteland of the gothic novel is the ugly sister of the civilized urban

cityscape, lacking even the rustic charm of rural, pastoral land. Within the city, civility and the hierarchy of social order prevail, while in the wasteland no such laws and norms govern life, which grows indiscriminately and in unforeseeable ways. It is altogether unwholesome and inimical to civilized human life, which often visibly distorts and reverts to base primal instinct while it resides there. Wild and untamed, the wasteland suggests regressive superstition in its lack of civilization, defying penetration by the reasoning mind. Prehistoric dwellings mark Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's Grimpen Mire in *The Hound of the Baskervilles*; once the abode of savage Neolithic man, it now plays host to gypsies and an escaped convict, creatures living on the fringes of society, the civilized man's other.

Where the urban setting is associated with life and mobility, the gothic wasteland presents its opposites – it is filled with ever-present danger and death, while its untamed bounds restrict rather than facilitate travel. In Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, the bleak Arctic landscape threatens to freeze Robert Walton's ship in place – death literally by stasis. Likewise, the blasted Grimpen Mire around the Baskerville estate in *The Hound of the Baskervilles* entraps travelers and animals in sticky mud, into which they sink to their deaths. Arctic blizzards and rolling fog respectively also occur in these areas, extending the gothic trope of obscurity to the land itself, waylaying the unwary and concealing misdeeds. Treacherous and inhospitable, gothic wastelands represent Nature and by extension human nature in crisis, or in a state of infirmity or insanity.

Source: Kenneth Tan "Gothic Keywords."

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

Bibliography of Related Information

Barnes, James. "Reassessing the Reputation of Thomas Tegg, London Publisher, 1776-1846." *Book History* Vol. 3, Issue 1 (2000): p. 45-60.

Frank, Frederick S. *The first Gothics: a critical guide to the English Gothic novel*. New York: Garland Pub, 1987. 22-23.

Hoeverler, Diane. *The Gothic Ideology: Religious Hysteria and Anti-Catholicism in Popular British Fiction, 1780-1880*. New book forthcoming from Cardiff: University of Wales Press (distributed in USA by University of Chicago Press), 2014.