"Sins of Fathers": Confrontation of History in Gothic Fiction

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The roots of the word "Gothic" are only tangentially related to the literary movement that popularized it, but its very adaptation and appropriation by 18th- and 19th-century horror authors exposes the movement's latent tendencies. In its original sense, to be "Gothic" means to be related to the Visigoths and Ostrogoths, the now-extinct German tribes of the 4th to 6th centuries. Its first appropriation, however, was the Gothic movement in European architecture in the 12th century, characterized by flying buttresses and other ornate features. Because of these layered, referential definitions, the word "Gothic," by the eighteenth century, was used to label a subject "obsolete, old-fashioned, or outlandish" (Clery 21). Its reference to Gothic architecture also connotes meanings of opulence and elegant antiquity, while its connection to the Visigoths and Ostrogoths, barbarous invaders of the Roman Empire, suggests an ominous threat to the very foundations of Western society. These two meanings represent a central dichotomy of Western European cultural history: barbarity versus civilization, superstition versus reason, eerie gloom versus enlightened ornament. Both of these exist simultaneously in, and consistently struggle to overtake, the historical consciousnesses of the region's habitants.

To be Gothic, then, a text looks back upon this web of historical meanings and attempts to make sense of contradictions and archaisms which threaten a coherent cultural identity. While for much of the canonical Gothic texts this meant interpreting Europe's past, the same can be (and is) done with the history of any place, ethnicity, tradition, or people. By incorporating the supernatural into old settings, these texts attempt to explain atrocities and customs that feel inexplicable within our available framework. As Gothic scholar David Punter suggests, these texts all share a "fascination with the past that flows from a mingled yearning and terror for a set of simpler verities" (110). The past is horrifying and abject as well as being mystifying and sensational, just like the many other taboos and mores that Gothic fiction explores. Instead of the barbarism of the Gothic tribes, these texts use Catholicism, colonialism, hereditary power, inquisitions, ethnic impurity, and other historical threats to represent the parts of history that continue to haunt their authors and that must be revised, rejected, and othered through supernatural, horrifying figures and descriptions. In a movement preoccupied with transgression, these objects thus become transgressors of linear time and enlightened society—all while remaining romanticized representations of a superstitious, "dark" past.

This central anxiety of Gothic fiction may be summed up in the message that Horace Walpole, in his phony first preface to the foundational *Castle of Otranto*, derives from the invented original Italian manuscript, which sounds more like a curse than a moral: "the sins of fathers are visited on their children to the third and fourth generation" (18).

Historical Ambiguity in the Romantic Genre

Allowing and encouraging Romantic-inspired infusions of imaginative settings, creatures, and emotional situations, the Gothic genre is ideal for expressing this tension between fear and fascination of a traumatic and mysterious past. In this way, the movement also serves as a reaction to the Enlightenment's rigid accounts of the past in both histories and historically based fiction. Alongside the many social and literary upheavals initiated by the Romantics was a

drastic shift in how writers and historians viewed the past. Some scholars attribute this to the influence of the French Revolution. One such scholar, Jonathan Dent, puts it aptly when he argues that "the transgressions taking place in France shattered Enlightenment models of historical understanding," and encouraged a "heightened state of historical consciousness" in the Gothic movement (4). Whether Romantic and Gothic authors had the French Revolution in mind when they wrote is irrelevant; instead, it is more useful to examine the ways in which this milieu of political turmoil shaped the way Europeans thought about history and cultural identity. Percy Shelley's "Ozymandias," by description of pharaoh Ramses II's decaying statue, exposes history's power structures, wealth, and splendor as something at once remarkable and utterly futile against the powers of nature. William Blake's *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* reimagines Milton, a foundational figure for the whole Western canon, as a Satan-sympathizer, and in his other work urges criticism of institutions as barriers to individual feeling. Given Romanticism's preoccupation with the power of emotion and imagination, choosing the age of Gothic tribalism as a point of inspiration seems natural. "The Gothic age, precisely because of its relative barbarity," E.J. Clery writes, "was especially conducive to the free play of imagination; [. . .] what the modern era had gained in civility it had lost in poetic inspiration" (27).

Romanticism not only influences the ways these texts view history, but also the ways they deliver it. The ambiguity and fragmentation that characterizes Coleridge's and Shelley's poems translates to a vague and uncertain definition of historical time and narrative in Gothic texts. This is thanks in no small part to their frequently subjective narrations; past events are delivered through letters, oral histories, manuscripts, and legal documents—all subject to the flaws and imperfections of human emotions and personalities. Painting an accurate description of Europe's past is not the point. Instead, these Romantic texts see the past as something that straightforward channels fail to depict accurately, and this is part of what makes it threatening and enticing. Viewed this way, the vague, indefinable expanse of the past joins readily with the Romantic preoccupation with the Sublime. Alongside rapturous descriptions of natural scenery, relics and other representations of boundless history build settings that horrify by their inability to be contained, defined, or controlled by humanity.

This shows itself from the Gothic movement's genesis in Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* which, though it predates the Romantic time frame, serves as a proto-Romantic origin point for this type of historical narrative ambiguity. Walpole's use of historical narrative initiates the Gothic suggestion that "the imposition of any conceptual framework to understand and write the past will only inculcate distortion and reductionism" (Dent 37). It is no wonder, then, that the Gothic turns to the supernatural, the highly emotional, and the terrifying to explain a history that continually haunts the present. Walpole has complete narrative power over the events in his short novel, yet acts as if they are beyond his control by refusing the audience any concrete understanding of when they take place, situating it only "between 1095, the era of the first Crusade, or 1243, the date of the last, or not long afterwards" (5). This vagueness also allows the historical representation in Gothic fiction to not simply reflect upon the anxieties provoked by a specific time period, but to invoke a fear of the past in general. It is intimidating to accept that the past cannot be remembered or represented with any amount of certainty, and perhaps would be even more affecting to an audience accustomed to Enlightenment-era historical accuracy. A vague sense of "past-ness" lends these texts an interesting combination of authenticity and ambiguity that simultaneously thrills and unsettles.

A similarly striking example of this historical ambiguity and fragmentation populates Charles Robert Maturin's *Melmoth the Wanderer*. Here, the reader is made to piece together

historical facts through a string of narratives along with the younger John Melmoth. Just as Maturin continually teases the reader with incomplete accounts of Melmoth's satanic bargain, the structure of the novel itself mocks the reader's yearning for chronological structure and linear coherence. *Melmoth* is a hodge-podge of historical information all connected through the Wanderer, himself an unnatural threat to the natural flow of history—a living, anachronistic artifact. Differences in time and setting are continually downplayed using devices connecting each narrative; places of confinement, feelings of hopelessness, and oppressive institutions transgress the national and temporal borders that Melmoth flies seamlessly between. In his introduction to Maturin's novel, Victor Sage agrees. "History is present in the novel, painfully present," Sage writes, "but it is not represented as a steadily cumulative process with linear narrative as its point of overlap." The novel's interpretation of history is "a confrontation and polemical repetition between the late seventeenth and early nineteenth centuries," showing the settings' similarities rather than the differences that developed over time (xix). This is scary because it endangers the Enlightenment's grand narrative of linear progress and suggests that what we attribute to bygone history—its outdated customs, superstitions, and atrocities—are, like Melmoth, continually haunting the present.

Sources of Historical Anxiety

Part of what makes the past so threatening is its seeming incongruity with the present. Historical modes of social organization and religion, like the lifestyles of the Dark-Age Goths, often feel so incompatible with current modes of life that they appear inhumane, violent, and incomprehensible. Gothic texts attempt to answer the question" "how could such a thing have happened?" through equally incomprehensible explanations involving Satanic bargains, vampires, and other mysteries. "True horror," Robert Miles writes of Ann Radcliffe's Gothic work, "is reserved for the fear of finding oneself thrust back into the dark medieval heart of the *ancien régime,*" referring generally to any outdated social system, but also the status quo that urged the French Revolution around the time of the Gothic movement's heyday (54). Because they include institutions and customs that the present has rejected and continually suppresses, historical settings easily become horrific ones.

Catholicism and the Inquisition

The anti-Catholicism throughout the Gothic movement makes sense in relation to the movement's origins in the heavily Protestant United Kingdom of the 18th and 19th centuries. The barbarism and superstition of the Gothic tribes that gives the word its meaning are attributed instead to Catholicism with the term's revival. Catholicism, even in up-to-date Gothic texts, represents a pre-Reformation Europe that threatens the stability of the new modern society. Tales set in Spain and Italy paint southern Europe as a region not quite caught up with "Enlightened" Britain; using these settings for fantastic tales of specters and demons offsets their threatening nature by connecting them to peoples who are seen as naturally more superstitious and outdated in their beliefs and practices. Placing these narratives abroad implies a kind of displaced historical exoticism. They often include frame devices, like the introduction to *The Italian* where some English travelers encounter an Italian abbey, that clarify to the reader that the story to come should be interpreted as "emblematic of Italianness, Catholicism, a mysterious and un-English way of life" (Schmitt 853). Protestantism had by this point become so integral to Britishness that any amount of relative proximity to Catholic nations threatens the unity of national identity.

With this in mind, it is quite reasonable to expect the Spanish Inquisition. The Inquisition serves as the penultimate negative example of Catholicism's antiquated cruelty. Conveniently, too, locating this extreme violence in Spain distances it from these stories' British authorships and readerships. Three texts, *Melmoth the Wanderer,* Ann Radcliffe's *The Italian,* and Matthew Lewis' *The Monk* feature Inquisitors prominently. Melmoth encounters the Holy Inquisition through his temptation of the imprisoned Alonso Monçada who, like Radcliffe's Vivaldi, serves as a representative victim of the system's cruelty against innocents. The Inquisition's handling of Ambrosio in *The Monk,* however, is painted as serving a just purpose because the monk himself is an even more unsettling representation of Catholic corruption. The frequent portrayal of the Inquisition is a significant choice, as the institution itself was, by the 18th century, its own sort of relic. It was first established in 1478, but by the time the major Gothic novels were written and set, were largely covert and in decline (Ryan). Combined with the Inquisition's relegation to subterranean dungeons and tunnels, the tortures and atrocities it commits suggest a barbaric brutality that continues to exist through secret and unregulated channels.

Power Structures and Inheritance

Matters of inheritance and lineage bring anxiety about the past's influence of the present to the lives of Gothic characters on an individual scale. This often takes the form of parental authority figures standing in the way of their children's autonomy; symbolically, this is the older generations' ideologies exerting lingering control over the younger ones'. Corrupt parents who restrict their children's marriage options, like Manfred and the Marchesa de Vivaldi, act as "feudal remnants," threatening to halt social progress with outdated ideas of political marriage and class distinction (Miles 48). Additionally, religion's arbitrary rules about inheritance and legitimacy thwart meaningful relationships, as in Alonzo Monçada's relationship with his mother in *Melmoth the Wanderer*. This kind of institutional skepticism is characteristic of the Romantic movement as a whole, and further places the Gothic firmly within the Romantic generic sphere. Anxiety about inherited power and customs shows the extent of the past's control over the present as well as the future, beyond the novel's temporal constraints.

Inheritance drama is a symptom of a larger rejection of chivalrous power dynamics throughout Gothic literature; this is one of the "barbarisms" that the movement seeks out from Europe's past to deny and expose. These structures impose restrictions and harmful expectations upon individuals, including the villains of these tales, in ways that suggest the extent of their corrupting power. William Godwin's *Caleb Williams* not only deals with the titular hero's flight from his employer, Mr. Falkland, but also Falkland's struggle with his own mental state which is damaged and repressed by societal ideas of chivalry and aristocracy. It is society's rigid structure that seals both of their fates; Caleb's incessant curiosity about the contents of Falkland's chest—a symbol of his mental state and ideology—lead him to entrap himself in a role he should have tried to avoid (Miles 51-52). In this vein, the Gothic is just as anxious about what the entire culture inherits as the inheritance of individuals; what does it mean to try to create a new, modernized Europe from the ashes of its atrocities and rigid feudal and religious institutions? What does it entail to take part in a Protestant revolution in a nation comprised of the descendants of Crusaders and colonizers?

Colonization and National Identity

Part of the increased historical consciousness of Romanticism and the Gothic movement is an upped awareness of colonialism and emergent threats to its stability, on which many

postcolonial scholars have commented. Indigenous populations serve as haunting reminders both of England's pre-"civilized" past and of its own colonial violence and atrocities in which all of Europe is somewhat implicated. Tales of Englishmen traveling around continental Europe, as in *Caleb Williams* and the beginning of *The Italian,* connote similarly imperialist sentiments by heightening the cultural distinctions between England, the colonial powerhouse, and the rest of "godless" Europe. As argued in an excellent dissertation by Charles Bondhus, these nations serve as "uncanny doubles of England" that reflect "Britain's need to reevaluate its identity in the face of a rapidly expanding empire" (8). Othering and demonizing members of colonized lands provides a perfectly legitimate rationale to Gothic writers and readers for the increasingly widespread violence that Britain's imperial expansion required.

Of the many novels to tackle imperial identity, *Melmoth the Wanderer* does so most directly through the narrative of Immalee, the "Tale of the Indians." While representative of an indigenous pre-colonized person, Immalee is not violent or primitive, but an innocent, naïve "noble savage" who yet maintains a certain power through her goddess-like connection to nature and lack of socially instilled fear. It seems ironic, then, that Melmoth serves as her colonizer as well as the story's villain. Maturin's depiction of colonization is more nuanced than his predecessors' as it depicts, in the words of Laura Doyle, "an implicit, worried response to the force of an active and violent resistance to colonization" and a general questioning of its ethical legitimacy (514). With his unnatural lifespan, Melmoth acts as witness to coloniality's advantages as well as its crimes; what results is his simultaneous sorrow and malicious exultation at "colonizing" Immalee's worldview and body (Doyle 539). Immalee herself is a figure of history; on her untouched island, she lives in a pre-colonized world frozen in time and, through her happiness and ignorance, forces reflection on Britain's colonial impact. Beautiful and threatening through her otherness, she is the dual connotation of Gothic British orientalism.

Devices

Archaic Spaces

Though many Gothic texts are set decades or centuries before the era of their composition, even the ones placed in non-historical contexts contain settings and place descriptions that denote and resurrect the past. Like history itself, these spaces have the potential to be both sublimely beautiful and terrifying. Underground tunnels, crypts, and ruins show the eerie, crumbling fallibility of the past's physical hubris, like Ozymandias' statue, but their looming presence is a constant reminder of history's never-ending influence on the present. Like vampires and demons, they are a sort of living death that survive their past inhabitants in a way that feels unnatural and perverse. Dark, subterranean spaces (as in *Melmoth* and *The Italian*) relegate characters to the ancient and unfathomable earth, further demonstrations of the Gothic sublime.

Castle settings and vast estates serve as structural representations of Europe's aristocratic history and ancestry; they are vestiges of antiquated chivalric identities and power structures whose effects still linger in the continent's institutions. "The feudal castle that blights the present is thus not an object out there," Robert Miles writes, "but a state of mind that immaterially fetters its victims, burying them, and their rights, alive" (49). With their dizzying chambers, dungeons, and corridors, they symbolically trap protagonists in a seemingly inescapable, claustrophobic, medieval social system. In *Otranto,* the castle literally starts to come alive in an effort by the past to destroy the present. The decaying Karnstein estate in J. Sheridan Le Fanu's *Carmilla* lurks in

the novella's background as an eerie reminder of Carmilla's unknown matriarchal lineage. Castle Dracula, with its unsettlingly empty, unused rooms, emphasize the terror of the old, archaic, yet semi-permanent. These archaic feudal settings make the past's lingering effects on the present even clearer, while also harkening back to the part of "Gothic" that relates to the medieval architectural style which in itself represents decadence as well as oppression.

In addition to the previously discussed settings in Catholic countries like Spain and Italy, Catholic interior spaces, like monasteries and convents, also run rampant throughout Gothic fiction as sites of violence and confinement, heightening the already very strong anti-Catholic messages of their plots and characters. In a short reflection, Romantic poet and scholar Anna Laetitia Barbauld expounds upon her feelings while glancing on some monastic ruins, which she calls "the haunts of ignorance and superstition:"

> The low cells, the long and narrow aisles, the gloomy arches, the damp and secret caverns which wind beneath the hollow ground, far from impressing on the mind the idea of the God of truth and love, seem only fit for those dark places of the earth in which are the habitations of cruelty. These mossy stones and scattered reliques of the vast edifice . . . produce *emotions of mingled dread and exultation*. Farewell, yet one venerated seat! Enough of you remains, and may it always remain, to remind us from what we have escaped, and make posterity for ever thankful for this fairer age of liberty and light. ("On Monastic Institutions" 196; emphasis added)

This feeling of "mingled dread and exultation" Barbauld experiences is precisely why these spaces are the settings of sensational Gothic tales. They remind the viewer and reader of a sublime European history that is somewhat inextricable from cultural identity and that, despite Protestant efforts to repress it, merit feelings of awe alongside rejection. Barbauld's quote also directly links Catholic spaces with the "dark ages" that the word "Gothic" delineates and sets it at odds with the "liberty and light" of reformed Europe.

Vampires: Historical Transgressors

As suggested earlier, the horrific beings that haunt Gothic literature are scary both as representations of a haunting past and as "unnatural" transgressors of linear time. Additionally, they serve as monstrous beings by which certain components of human (and historical) behavior are "othered" and rejected through their separation from normative humanness. As discussed above, Melmoth and other mortality-compromised beings deviate from the natural flow of time to serve as objects of Satanic terror. Vampires, however, hold a distinct place in the Gothic tradition that reflects eerily on the cultural pasts of the authors and readerships.

Count Dracula is a sexual, racial, and temporal other. His location in Transylvania geographically others him even further from Britain than previous Italian and Spanish characters; eastern Europe similarly becomes a site of backward archaism, but instead of its customs simply lingering in the continent's background, they threaten to, through Dracula, usurp and conquer the "civilized" west. As Jonathan Harker first approaches Castle Dracula, Stoker takes care to narrate the troubled past of the region, riddled with invasions, conquests, and bloodshed. The Count himself calls Transylvania a "whirlpool of human races" (41), directly addressing Western European anxieties about ethnic mixing and hereditary heterogeneity which are furthered by the obsession with blood throughout the novel (Arata 464). The way Transylvania is presented in *Dracula* makes it the ideal replacement of the Gothic tribalism that gives the literary movement its name; it reflects fears that eastern Europe's history is also Britain's history, and that that barbaric past can return at any time to take vengeance on colonial crimes. Stephen J. Arata calls

this fear "reverse colonization." Through his predatory vampirism, Dracula "imperils not simply his victims' personal identities," argues Arata, "but also their cultural, political, and racial selves" (465). Through this lens, the Gothic paints the advancement of colonized peoples as the degradation and degeneration of the colonizers' selves and social orders.

Popular readings of *Dracula* also tend to focus on the Count as a representation of sexual deviance. Vampirism is inherently sexual in nature, and Count Dracula's predation on Jonathan Harker, and the indirect means by which he accomplishes it, add an extra level of transgression to his Victorian villainy. Similarly, J. Sheridan Le Fanu's *Carmilla* conflates vampirism with blatant lesbianism and seduction. While this may at first appear incongruous with the Gothic's discourse with the past, combining the vampire's sexual transgression with their near-immortality and temporal deviance suggest that Europe's past is, like the vampire, queer. Like feudalism or the barbaric Gothic past, queerness is ever lurking beneath the surface of European society, unable to be repressed or dismissed as something extinguished through any amount of Enlightenment rationality or science—like vampires, it threatens the status quo.

The Contemporary Gothic

Gothic themes and devices have expressed themselves in a myriad of ways in the media of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, including through its fiction and drama and, just as profoundly, in its popular culture, film, television, and video games. Gothic buildings haunt the Hogwarts campus of the *Harry Potter* series. Feudal and aristocratic systems of Western Europe commonly inspire—of all things—Japanese media, including anime like *Violet Evergarden* and role-playing games like the *Fire Emblem* and *Legend of Zelda* franchises. The Gothic obsession with the past still exists, but it often shows itself through intertextual reference and revision of the influential Gothic texts from centuries ago. Because these works and the aesthetics and tropes they created are now part of our cultural history and identity, they warrant the same types of reflection and confrontation that the previous works explored. The original spirit of the Gothic movement's historical preoccupation, however, remains most faithfully in genres and formats that don't appear "gothic" as explicitly as tales of vampires and castle dungeons might. It has been particularly effective in the literary movements of cultures whose histories warrant intense reflection in their works of fiction. An example of one such work, *Beloved* by Toni Morrison, uses the supernatural and the spectral to reflect upon slavery, a site of extreme sociohistorical trauma, in ways that truly enhance the Gothic tradition.

Beloved, published in 1987 but set in a newly post-slavery Ohio, chronicles the experiences of Sethe, a freedwoman and mother, who lives in a home possessed by the violently lamenting spirit of her daughter whom she killed as an infant under threat of re-enslavement. Early in the novel, Sethe and her surviving daughter, Denver, encounter a strange woman who can barely speak and only identifies herself as "Beloved." Unbeknown to Sethe for much of the novel, Beloved is her unnamed baby daughter, suddenly and inexplicably in corporeal form at the same age she would be, had she lived. Like Dracula and Melmoth, Beloved breaches the logic of time; among the first descriptions of her are remarks about her unnaturally smooth, baby-like skin which, like Dracula's reverse-aging, is unsettling because it drags the past to the present in corporeal form. Like the Count, Beloved transgresses time and space to challenge conventional ideas of history and dialectic. Among many things, Beloved represents the historical trauma of slavery haunting freed slaves well after its abolition. Sethe and the novel's other protagonists continually "beat back the past," repressing memories of a horrific history. By returning from the grave, Beloved brings historical trauma back to the surface that refuses to be

ignored. She becomes an increasingly large part of Sethe's life, growing physically bigger and crowding the home, making it a space like Walpole's castle where its history threatens to overthrow the present inhabitants.

These modern dialogues with history by Morrison and her contemporaries differ from those of the original Gothic canon in one major way: the past being discussed and confronted by the characters in Black-centric fiction is one that did not, like that of Britain, result in their becoming a major world power. While Stoker and Maturin reflect upon a past full of what their ancestors *did*, Morrison and other authors of color must confront what their ancestors *had done to them*, which is, arguably, more terrifying. Both movements involve the past's effect on present identity, but Black Americans are forced to confront how it contributes to their present lack of power, rather than how it put them in power. These works, however, construct a meaningful conversation with the Gothic tradition that expands its potential well into the future. Morrison's novel "appropriates Dracula to gothicize the horrors of slavery," writes Cedric Gael Bryant, "and, more importantly, to defamiliarize the assumptions of 18th- and 19th-century rationalist discourse that elided blackness from essentialist arguments about what it means to be—and not be—fully human" (546). Not only are the characters in discourse with their enslaved pasts, but the novel itself confronts European literary traditions, including the Gothic, that only serve to represent one demographic's relationship to the past.

The Gothic's obsession with othering the past makes it clear just how much the past threatens to infringe upon the individual present as well as society's collective future. A definition of Gothic fiction that focuses on its dialogue with cultural history expands the genre's adaptability into contemporary literature; it is a form that can be employed well into the future, as any amount of social progress mandates a certain amount of reflection and confrontation of the past that made it possible. Cultural identity is as potent an inheritance as any feudal estate or ancestral portrait, and Gothic fiction expresses the innate human desire to simultaneously admire it and distance oneself from it. It encourages readers to think of history as more than a collection of facts, but as an emotional organism of its own, living, breathing, and haunting.

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