

Gothic Feminism in Emily Bronte's Wuthering Heights

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Studij: Dvopredmetni sveučilišni preddiplomski studij engleskoga jezika i
književnosti i hrvatskoga jezika i književnosti

Nikolina Maligec

Gotički feminizam u *Orkanskim visovima* Emily Brontë

Završni rad

Mentor: doc. dr. sc. Ljubica Matek

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Bachelor's Thesis

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Abstract

The paper is concerned with the history of the Gothic as well as the most eminent elements which determine the Gothic as a literary genre. The chapter devoted to the Gothic starts with its beginnings and later focuses on the more recent parts of the Gothic history while paying special attention to the Victorian Gothic. Apart from the Gothic history, the paper also examines the history of feminism. The analysis is devoted to Emily Brontë's classic novel, *Wuthering Heights*, which is examined as a Gothic and feminist text. In order to portray Gothic feminism in *Wuthering Heights*, the features of Female Gothic and the figure of *the New Woman* will be applied in the analysis of the novel. Persecuted heroines of *Wuthering Heights* are used as examples of the feminist figure *the New Woman* and as the examples of Gothic heroines who are quite different, that is, more progressive than their predecessors. Unlike the earlier Gothic heroines, the female characters of *Wuthering Heights* embody the progressive elements of Female Gothic. Instead of serving the purpose of passive objects of male desire, they are depicted as human beings who possess both flaws and virtues. Despite some of them being overly emotional, they are active in their search for the freedom of a quiet and peaceful life. Catherine Earnshaw, Cathy Linton, and Isabella Linton endure similar experiences but in a very different way, which is the reason why they meet different endings at the end of their character arcs. Catherine Earnshaw must repress her masculine nature and adopt feminine habits. From the masculine type of the New Woman, she becomes the hyperfeminine New Woman, which ultimately leads to her death. Isabella's journey is quite the opposite: in order to survive Heathcliff's torment, she must become the masculine New Woman and repress her emotional and feminine nature. Cathy Linton, much like her mother, must repress her masculine nature, but instead of becoming a hyperfeminine woman and meeting her end, Cathy finds salvation and strength in her feminine features, which enables her to survive.

Keywords: Gothic feminism, Female Gothic, the New Woman, Gothic elements, *Wuthering Heights*

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Introduction

The beginning of the English Gothic novel is traced back to Horace Walpole's *Castle of Otranto*, published in 1765. In order for a novel to be labelled Gothic, it must include a combination of certain elements, those elements usually being: a castle, often ruined and haunted, ruined buildings which arouse a pleasing melancholy, extreme landscapes (rugged mountains, thick forests, icy wastes, extreme weather), omens and ancestral curses, any type of magic (supernatural manifestations or at least the suggestion of the supernatural), a passion-driven, wilful villain-hero or villain, a curious heroine with a tendency to faint and a need to be rescued frequently, a hero whose true identity is revealed by the end of the novel, horrifying (or terrifying) events or the threat of such happenings, and similar ("The English Gothic Novel"). The point of the Gothic is to cross boundaries and either imply or explicitly show taboos, fears, and social or emotional chaos. The Gothic usually includes dramatic topics such as incest, diabolism or necrophilia with which it manages to create feelings of gloom, mystery, and suspense.

Alongside her siblings Charlotte, Anne, and Branwell, Emily Brontë was "first exposed to the Gothic through their avid reading of the supernatural tales and poems" (Punter and Byron 95) in their childhood. Emily Brontë began her Gothic career with "poems about Gondal, a gloomy realm that she invented with her sister Anne" (Punter and Byron 95). She is noted to have incorporated Gothic elements into her writing but with crucial renewals: her heroines are complex and independent, she rejects the chivalrous hero who serves as a reward for heroine's troubles and has a more evident tendency towards problematic Byronic hero-villains who offer threat to the heroine's independence. Her only novel, *Wuthering Heights*, depicts such characters in the form of Catherine and Heathcliff. The Gothic elements, even the supposed supernatural elements (Catherine's restless ghost, Heathcliff's possible vampiric state) serve the purpose of exploring the dangers of human psyche rather than focusing on supernatural entities.

In her Gothic work Emily Brontë follows the footsteps of both Horace Walpole and Ann Radcliffe. Besides the elements of the Gothic in general, Brontë also incorporates feminist Gothic elements in her novel. Women at the time were restricted by social roles inflicted upon them, that is, the image of women being "submissive, pious, gentle, loving, serene, domestic angels" ("The English Gothic Novel"). Closely connected to literary feminism, but not necessarily the same, is the idea of heroinism, which was introduced by Ellen Moers: "Heroinism takes many forms, such

as the intellectual or thinking heroine, the passionate or woman-in-love heroine, and the traveling heroine. Clearly all the Brontë sisters utilize the passionate heroine, whether knowingly or not, to express subversive values and taboo experiences covertly” (qtd. in “The English Gothic Novel”). This paper aims to analyse the novel’s female characters in order to demonstrate that *Wuthering Heights* is a representative of the Gothic feminism.

The first chapter is dedicated to the Gothic. Its first part outlines the history of the Gothic novel, whereas the second part focuses on the Victorian Gothic specifically. The next two parts explain the elements of the Gothic and the Female Gothic. Chapter 2 deals with Feminism and the figure of the New Woman. The analysis of the novel will be provided in the third chapter, which is also divided into two parts. The aim of the first part is to explain why *Wuthering Heights* can be observed as a Gothic novel by applying the Gothic elements to the text. The second part of the third chapter connects the Gothic theory and the theory of Feminism in one place while providing the examples from the novel as to show why *Wuthering Heights* is a representative of the Gothic feminism. The paper ends with a conclusion which summarizes the paper’s findings.

1. The Gothic

1.1. The History of the Gothic

According to David Punter and Glennis Byron, the term *Gothic* originated when the necessity arose to describe any elements, entities, and agendas connected to a Germanic tribe called the Goths. Since history provides no evidence of any literature or art left by the Goths, the first meaning of the term *Gothic* served the purpose of differentiating between the Western Roman Empire, the core of developed classic art, the core of civilization, and the exact opposite, the primitive side represented by the barbaric invaders, who destroyed everything valuable in Roman, “civilized” eyes (3). Following the fall of the Western Roman Empire and the ending of the so called “Dark Ages,” during the Renaissance period, the term acquired a partly new meaning, but still somewhat the same, only this time it was applied to anything connected to the medieval era: “Since very little was known about the medieval world generally during the Renaissance” (Punter and Byron 3), it was fairly easy to label the middle ages as “dark” and “primitive,” unlike the rebirth of “civilized” ancient art in the Renaissance. As David Punter and Glennis Byron state in their study focused on the Gothic, “[Italian art historians of the early Renaissance] erroneously attributed a style of architecture to those Germanic tribes that sacked Rome, and identified this style as barbaric, disordered and irrational in opposition to the classical style” (4).

The meaning of the term, however, had an almost contradictory transformation in the eighteenth century when the English stumbled upon new sources, such as Tacitus’ *Germania*, which depicted the Goths (and other Germanic tribes) in a completely different light: “[Tacitus] depicted them as brave, virtuous and, as demonstrated by their representative system of government and their invention of the jury system, possessing a strong belief in justice and liberty” (Punter and Byron 4), so the English continued to believe that even their constitution originated with the Anglo-Saxon. They saw some of the most important moments in the English history, such as the Magna Carta or the Revolution of 1688, as recovering of their own tradition and “an original social order that had been replaced by foreign authoritarian rule” (Punter and Byron 5). Thus, the Gothic was no longer viewed as barbaric and primitive, but rather as chivalrous, superior, and worthy of celebration. In other words, England returned to its true foundations, and this time proclaimed its invaders, namely France, as the source of barbaric and primitive behaviour, whilst *Gothic* became a synonymous word for *genius*. Furthermore, Punter and Byron divided the Gothic

topics of literary interests of the eighteenth century into four categories. The first category dealt with the ancient British heritage, which above all included Welsh and Gaelic poetry, as well as the heritage of the northern Europe. The second field of interest included the interest in ballads, which held the utmost importance for their descendants in the Romantic period: William Blake, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, and Percy Bysshe Shelley. Thirdly, there was the inclusion of English medieval poetry, which mostly developed due to the evaluation of Geoffrey Chaucer's work, and finally there was the interest in the major work of Spenser and other Elizabethans.

The Gothic in the nineteenth century comes hand in hand with the metaphorical depictions of the arising industrialization. Since the term *Gothic* kept its initial meaning, that is, primitive and barbaric, it was in this period that it shifted in a different setting and merged with its semantic counterpart – civilization: “The savage and the primitive are shown to exist in the very heart of the modern, civilized metropolis” (Punter and Byron 22). Considering the fact that the nineteenth century's process of industrialization resulted in the development of a new socio-economic system, capitalism, the contemporary literature reflected the system in the latest forms of the Gothic genre, featuring a fresh type of a villain, whether it be the criminal or the capitalist system itself. Apart from the industrialization, another topic takes a special spot in the Gothic and horror fiction, more towards the twentieth century than the nineteenth: science. It was Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley with her science fiction novel *Frankenstein* who firstly implemented the fear of the new into her writing. The advancement of science invoked fear among the general masses mostly because of their inability to deal with brand-new scientific products such as artificial human, simulated life, and especially computer and genetic engineering, where the fear of the latter extends to the present day.

1.1.1. Victorian Gothic

A specific type of the Gothic genre that deserves an exclusive appreciation began to develop in the early nineteenth century as the classic Gothic novel was slowly dying down: the *Victorian Gothic*. It featured some of the most important authors who not only set the foundations for the future generations (Mary Shelley's establishment of science fiction with *Frankenstein*) but also courageously crossed boundaries of traditional Gothic (the “other” has a voice; women are not merely persecuted virginal objects but human beings with fears for their independence). The setting of the novels (mostly of horror fiction) is shifted from faraway places, whose role was to

distance the readers from the disturbance, to familiar surroundings, “the bourgeois domestic world or the new urban landscape” (Punter and Byron 26) because the threat is not distanced to some “exotic” or non-existent country but, as frightening as it appears, in the reader’s vicinity. For example, a Gothic England, as Punter and Byron claim, is relocated and constructed within a contemporary city, and the purpose of that relocation is, instead of romanticizing their lives, to show the human suffering under a corrupt system (28). The Gothic strategies are visible within the descriptions of the settings: “The city, with its dark, narrow winding streets and hidden byways replacing the labyrinthine passages of the earlier castles and convents, is established as a site of menace through the importation of various traditional Gothic motifs and scenarios” (Punter and Byron 28).

Gothic novels of the Victorian period frequently use transgression, whose purpose is to bring down the patriarchal gender roles. Transgression is implemented in stories in such a way that women, apart from being heroines, become monsters as well. The traditional patriarchal view portrays women as fragile, angelic, virginal figures who can do no wrong, and the tendency of depicting women in the new way of Victorian Gothic is to represent women as regular human beings who possess minds, emotions and numerous flaws as well as their “traditional,” “feminine” virtues.

The narrative that received the utmost popularity in Victorian Gothic is the ghost story. In the era of science development and rapid expansion of secularization, the ghost story carries the role of questioning and challenging their authority. As swiftly as science and secularization spread, so does the interest in spiritualism, psychics, and the occult. However, the supernatural is relocated in other literary pieces which significantly differ from ghost stories. For example, implementing the supernatural into a story developed by realist strategies results in a more shocking reaction on the reader’s side. Additionally, the “supernatural” that haunts the protagonist is not actually supernatural but only “an aspect of his repressed self” (Punter and Byron 30).

Even though some traditional Gothic conventions are being disputed in Victorian Gothic, “the past also remains a significant motif in both sensation and supernatural fiction, but again in a slightly modified form, with an emphasis on recent, rather than distant events” (Punter and Byron 29). The motif of past is manifested through the storylines of family past, hereditary diseases, criminality and similar, all that to explain a scandal that had been brought to respectable families.

It is mostly female characters who suffer from the “inevitable doom” of a hereditary disease, and such notion developed under the influence of at the time regnant social system – patriarchy. In order to criticize and fight patriarchal gender stereotypes, the theme of Female Gothic developed during the Victorian era. “Gothic is activated here, as it is repeatedly during the Victorian age, not only to convey a powerful sense of psychological disturbance, but also in the service of a penetrating social critique” (Punter and Byron 30). Female Gothic itself will be discussed later in more detail, but, before that, the focus will be shifted to the analysis of general elements which are used to label writings as Gothic.

1.2. The Elements of the Gothic

In order to classify a certain piece of writing as belonging to the Gothic genre, the elements of the genre itself need to be stated. The first element according to Punter and Byron’s study of the Gothic is associated with the setting of a novel. Punter and Byron call it *the haunted castle*. According to their study, the castle is usually described as “a place of womb-like security, a refuge from the complex exigencies of the outer world” (262). It can, however, at the same time “be a place of incarceration, a place where heroines and others can be locked away from the fickle memory of ‘ordinary life’” (Punter and Byron 262). Therefore, the walls of *the haunted castle* at the same time exhibit a sense of security as well as, in more frequent cases, one’s imprisonment and terror. *The haunted castle* serves the purpose of exposing the patriarchal mindset sewn into the subconscious parts of human mind. Just like *the haunted castle* conveys the message that “even the utmost monuments of human grandeur become, or perhaps always have been, ruins” (Punter and Byron 262), the same pattern of deducing can be applied to patriarchy. The patriarchal system was at the time represented to the masses as the proper way of thinking, living, and existing, but, in its core, it is rotten and deranged. The “ruins” of *the haunted castle* may as well represent the ruins, the ugliness of the human soul – the castle imprisons various heroines the same way that the evil imprisons the human soul.

The next two elements belong to the same category, that is, the category of human-like (but not exactly human) beings, but they must be divided into two separate entities considering the allegorical role they play in Gothic narratives. The first Gothic trope in this category is called *the monster*. Before taking a look at the types of monsters that appear in the Gothic, the etymology of the word must be taken into consideration. The word *monster* is possibly derived from two Latin

verbs: *monstrare* (to demonstrate) and *monere* (to warn). The word *monster* can be thus translated as “something that serves to demonstrate and to warn” (Punter and Byron 263). The sole purpose of the Gothic *monster* is to define the boundaries of “normal.” Precisely speaking, *the monster* exaggerates the lines set in the society that must never under any circumstances be crossed. *The monster* usually crosses these lines and suffers the consequences of the action while showing the readers what happens if they follow in the monster’s footsteps. The narrator is generally set on the side of what society calls “normal,” condemning the ones who dare to stand against it or question it in any way. Therefore, the purpose is to show the readers what happens to them if they act outside of the societal boundaries or make an attempt to be different – they will be proclaimed “a monster” and isolated from the community.

Apart from setting the boundaries, *the monster* may also serve as a challenge to them. Before Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*, it was not common to invoke the sympathy in the audience in the way that they may provide some understanding for the villain. The monster as a character was typically a voiceless creature without personality, without the ability to feel or think; a creature who was the inborn type of evil – he/she was evil only for evil’s sake. It was Shelley who first broke the tradition and took the path less chosen with *Frankenstein’s monster*. When she gave a voice to “the other,” they immediately stopped being objects of horror and terror and became characters of their own – characters whose side was heard for the first time, and who invoke sympathy as well as empathy and relatability.

The Gothic *monster* is, according to Punter and Byron, divided into three subtypes: the alien, the zombie, and the serial killer (264 – 265). The inclusion of aliens in the Gothic novels gained popularity during the Cold War when the fear of the enemy invasion was at its peak, and the job of *the aliens* was to allegorically signify exactly that – the enemy invasion. *The zombie* as the type of a Gothic monster has its beginnings in the early twentieth century but extends far into the twenty-first century as well. *The zombie* started off as a representation of slavery in a criticizing way, that is, *the zombie* criticizes colonialism, the social system which turned human beings into almost literal zombies – there was not a least bit of humanity left in the slaves; their only purpose was to serve the “better” kind without ever applying the basic human functions on their own (thinking, questioning, or feeling). The slaves were treated poorly until they rebelled against their masters and gained a bit more power. Similar actions are conveyed through zombie apocalypses where the

so-called monsters overthrow the human race as masters of the Earth. Finally, the third subtype – *the serial killer* – is the subtype that most clearly calls the monster trope into question. The narratives which include *the serial killer* popularized Shelley's endeavour to invoke sympathy in the audience. As Punter and Byron put it: instead of establishing the killer as the demonic other, he is identified as the socially inevitable monstrous product (266). Also, instead of drawing attention to the monster itself, it is directed towards the institutions whose by-product the monsters are. In the end, the monsters are not certain distanced "others" but the people in their own surroundings. As Punter and Byron claim, "these narratives insist that the potential for corruption and violence lies within all" (266).

The second place in the human-like category is reserved for *the vampire*, who made the first appearance in English fiction through John Polidori's 1819 "The Vampyre." Unlike *the monster* who served the purpose of demonstrating something or warning about something, *the vampire's* primary function was "to explain the spread of disease and sudden deaths in the community" (Punter and Byron 268). As the trope progressed and developed throughout centuries, it was given that much of a heavier metaphor, usually signifying transgression as well as other various psychological and social phenomena. What is similar to the previously mentioned *monster* is the fact that *the vampire* also sets boundaries that are not allowed to be crossed, only a different set of boundaries this time. Through the element of *the vampire* the readers encounter taboo topics usually connected to deviant sexuality, the most famous being necrophilia, incest, rape, sadism, masochism, and so on. In this case, just like with *the monster*, the narrative voice is also positioned on the side of "normal." *The vampire's* purpose is to reinforce the formally dichotomized structures of belief where there only exist good and evil without anything possibly standing in the grey area (Punter and Byron 270). Apart from "deviant sexuality," the texts featuring the vampires offer the possibility of them being read as political texts: "the tyrannical aristocrat [seeks] to preserve the survival of his house and threatening the security of the bourgeois family represented by the hunters" (Punter and Byron 269). In the later years of the trope's development appeared the so-called "new" vampire whose role turned from explaining diseases and sudden deaths to explaining more advanced and scientific issues: viral infections and evolutionary processes. The sympathy is again progressively applied in this case, similarly to *the monster* element. Instead of being a threatening "other," the vampire gets his own voice and becomes closer to humans than "the other" generally are thought to be. Growing closer to people and seeking emotional attachment is, in fact,

contrary to the popular belief, return to the origins of *the vampire*: “It is only Stoker’s Dracula who breaks with this tradition, remaining aloof, alien, cold and impersonal” (Punter and Byron 271), but, unlike Dracula, the original vampires craved social encounters and intimacy. New vampires return to their origins with a tiny transformation – they seek intimacy with other of their kind instead of human beings.

The fourth element that frequently appears in the Gothic genre and may as well be used for determining whether a certain piece of literature is Gothic or not – it is the emotional side invoked usually in the protagonist of Gothic novels; it is the case of persecution and paranoia. One of the first words that comes to mind when associating with the Gothic is the term “uncertainty.” It is the general atmosphere created in Gothic novels that makes both characters and narrators uncertain about their own perception and therefore unreliable. “Characters – and even narrators – frequently know little or nothing about the world through which they move or about the structures of power which envelop them . . . [these types of fiction] enact a classic psychology of paranoia whereby the self is threatened and pursued by its own unaccommodated residues” (Punter and Byron 273).

Next in line is the element of uncanny. To explain the term in the easiest way possible, Punter and Byron quote the definition provided by Andrew Bennet and Nicholas Royle: “it has to do with the sense that things are not as they have come to appear through habit and familiarity, that they may challenge rationality and logic” (qtd. in Punter and Byron 283). According to Bennet and Royle, the uncanny is featured through a whole list of different phenomena: repetition, coincidence and fate, animism, anthropomorphism, automatism, uncertainty about sexual identity, fear of being buried alive, silence, telepathy, and death (qtd. in Punter and Byron 283). Repetition is mostly manifested through *déjà vu*, *doppelgängers*, or the repetition of names. Coincidence and fate belong to the uncanny because evoke “the sense of imminent doom that haunts so many characters” (Punter and Byron 284). Animism is the term that designates the process of inanimate objects come to life. Similar is the term *anthropomorphism* “whereby the inanimate is not merely invested with animate qualities but specifically ‘impersonates’ the human” (Punter and Byron 285). Anthropomorphism signifies the dead coming back to life, old fears, and primitive terrors that exist in the depths of the unconscious (Punter and Byron 285). Next to animism and anthropomorphism stands the process of automatism. Quite the opposite of the previous two, it can be defined as “the performance of action without conscious thought or intention” (“Automatism”). The previously

explained elements of the uncanny deal with the disturbing feeling of things being similar to something already familiar but not exactly the same, yet some of the elements of the uncanny invoke the feelings of uncertainty, which is in a way a leitmotif of the Gothic literature. Such elements are mainly silence and uncertainty about sexual identity. The latter expresses the ideas connected to conventional gender roles – it challenges the boundaries of what is traditionally assumed under the terms *masculinity* and *femininity*. The element of silence has begun its tradition in ghost stories where moments of silence were used in particular to allow a sense of “other” to intrude.

Furthermore, the history of abuse as a characteristic of the Gothic genre comes hand in hand with the first element in this segment. In order to secure a safe place for the florescence of abusive and violent behaviour, the locations such as castle, monastery or convent are chosen for the setting due to their geographical or historical distance. The abuse in Gothic novels, most frequently the abuse of women, is generally used for the sake of ridiculing Catholic faith, assuming the reason for such ridicule can be found in seeking distance from the “purity” of Protestant England, since the plethora of Gothic literature was written from the Western point of view.

Finally, the last element of the Gothic that is included in this segment deals with the topic of hallucinations. Hallucination is “a mode within which we are frequently unsure of the reliability of the narrator’s perception, and thus of the extent to which we as readers are enjoined to participate in them or to retain a critical distance” (Punter and Byron 293). As it has been explained above, the Gothic is famous for the element of uncertainty, and the topic of hallucinations provides a pattern where uncertainty can flourish.

1.2.1. Female Gothic

Female Gothic developed as a subgenre of the Gothic. It was Ellen Moers who defined it for the first time “as the work that women writers had done in the Gothic mode since the eighteenth century” (qtd. in Punter and Byron 278). Female Gothic, however, cannot be defined that simply since, according to another definition given by Punter and Byron, it can be written by men, too. In order for it to be proclaimed “female,” it has to contain a female protagonist (and certain other defining features, which will be discussed in detail later). Examples of male-authored Female Gothic include J. Sheridan Le Fanu’s *Uncle Silas* and Wilkie Collins’ *The Woman in White*. To clarify, the Female Gothic subgenre can be placed in the opposition to the male Gothic and thus

distinguished from it. While male Gothic contains a male protagonist who attempts to penetrate some encompassing interior, Female Gothic features a female protagonist who wants to escape it (Punter and Byron 278). The focus of male Gothic is placed on a tragic plot, questions of identity, transgression of social taboos, and confrontation with social institutions (law, church, family). Women in these texts are represented as objectified victims whose bodies represent barriers between inside and outside that the protagonist has to overcome. Such narratives are considered to be transgressive since (sexual) violence “is dealt with openly in lingering and lascivious detail” (Punter and Byron 278).

The Female Gothic genre can be described as a subversive genre because it tends to depict women’s fears and protests against patriarchy. At the time, women were controlled by patriarchy and its domestic ideology, hence women searched for a safe place to express the issues that were tormenting them. Therefore, in the Female Gothic texts, unlike in their “male” counterparts, “the transgressive male is the primary threat to the female protagonist” (Punter and Byron 279). The storyline of the female protagonist begins with her “enjoying an idyllic and secluded life” (279), which is followed by “a period of imprisonment when confined to a house or a castle under the authority of a powerful male figure or his female surrogate. Within this labyrinthine space she is trapped and pursued, and the threat may variously be to her virtue or to her life” (279). What is also characteristic for Female Gothic is the fact that such narratives tend to put emphasis on different aspects of fear than regular horror literature. Instead of focusing on “violent encounters or rotting corpses” (Punter and Byron 279), Female Gothic aims attention at “[the female protagonist’s] fears and anxieties” (279).

Additionally, the supernatural may appear in such narratives, but its existence turns out to be either a consequence of a character’s mind or rationalized in some other way. Furthermore, certain literary theorists, such as Norman Holland and Leona Sherman in their article “Gothic Possibilities,” did not hesitate to describe the Female Gothic texts as “a rewriting of the male Oedipal struggle – the female protagonist’s problematic attempt to separate from the mother” (qtd. in Punter and Byron 280). Other theorists, such as Claire Kahane in “The Gothic Mirror,” and Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar in *The Madwoman in the Attic* discussed similar issues: there is either a mother figure who represses her problems while the daughter confronts them, or a mother

expresses her mad nature while the daughter represses it; “the madwoman...[acts] out the rage and the desire that the protagonist must repress” (Punter and Byron 280).

2. Feminism

Before incorporating the elements of the Gothic (especially Female Gothic) as well as the feminist theory into the analysis of *Wuthering Heights*, the feminist theory needs to be explained, starting with the history of feminism. According to Margaret Walters, the first traces of feminist philosophy can be found as early as eleventh and twelfth centuries in the works of Hildegard of Bingen, who was a talented writer and musical artist, and who, against all rules, “embarked upon preaching tours all through the German empire, even though at that time only priests were allowed to preach” (Walters 7). The contemporary, secular society of the twenty-first century most of the time fails to acknowledge these early feminists as people responsible for initiating such important movement, even though it was not a proper movement at the time, merely because the women of the medieval times worked and prospered “within religious framework, and in religious terms” (Walters 6). In other words, only the women who found fulfilment and satisfaction inside the walls of convents managed to break loose of the traditional feminine behaviour that had been assigned to women since birth: “it allowed some women to develop a talent for organization, and some were able to read, think, and discover their own distinctive voices” (Walters 6).

After Hildegard of Bingen, Julian of Norwich took a step further in the fourteenth century with her belief in God being of feminine gender, that is, she described him as a mother, not father, to our world: “our Saviour is our true mother in whom we are eternally born and by whom we shall always be enclosed” (qtd. in Walters 7). Furthermore, Jane Anger, in the sixteenth century, had claims similar to those of Julian of Norwich, especially when she argued about Eve’s superiority to Adam. Also, prophetess Anna Trapnel, who lived in the disturbing times of seventeenth century, had an important religious role because of her declaration to be the voice of God during the times of Interregnum, when she fiercely criticized Cromwell and his government. The seventeenth century brought out some of the most important points in feminist history, precisely its religious part. Many independent congregations recognized women as equal to men and encouraged them to develop their talents and abilities, some of those congregations being Anabaptists, Levellers, and Quakers.

Ironically, secular society brought more restriction, hence more difficulties to those fighting for gender equality when “the divine inspiration” or “the Lord’s cause” ceased to be the source of “unfeminine” ambition. Many women prospering during the early or later phases of secular feminism faced disapproval from both men and women. Lady Mary Wroth, for example, created (but never fully finished) a sonnet sequence, which was published for the first time only in the twentieth century. Also, the writing of Margaret Cavendish, Duchess of Newcastle, who mostly wrote poetry and philosophical verse about women’s fear and grief, was criticized by Samuel Pepys and Dorothy Osborne (a very talented writer herself, but raised to believe such work had no place for a woman).

The eighteenth-century feminist writers were engaged in criticizing and improving the education of women, which was always a problematic issue. However, the eighteenth-century feminists actively began to induce a change. Mary Astell, among her other writings, published a book called *Thoughts on Education*, where she emphasized how crucial the education was for young women (and women in general). Mary Wollstonecraft published in 1787 a similar “well-argued plea for girls to be given a chance to develop their God-given intelligence” (Walters 32) in her *Thoughts on the Education of Daughters*. The place of Wollstonecraft’s most important work, of course, belongs to her feminist polemic *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, published in 1792, in which she argues against the socially constructed idea of femininity. In it, as Margaret Walters presents it, Wollstonecraft says that “any woman who tries to act like a human being...risks being labelled ‘masculine’” (qtd. in Walters 35).

The eighteenth century, apart from actively supporting the changes in the education system for women, also popularized the reading and writing of Gothic fiction. In terms of feminism, Gothic fiction can be connected to its philosophy through the Gothic in general, but especially in Female Gothic. Such fiction was a safe place for women to express their fears, their pain and difficulties. Usually through allegories they would express their opinions on the system which oppressed them: “virtuous heroine finds herself in a nightmarish world where she has to fight masculine predators for her chastity, even her survival” (Walters 39).

2.1. The New Woman

The appearance of the new figure, called *the New Woman*, caused a panic reaction when it began to seem clearer that the traditional, “proper” femininity was on the verge of turmoil: “she

was a construct, ‘a condensed symbol of disorder and rebellion’ who was actively produced and reproduced in the pages of the newspaper and periodical press, as well as in novels” (Pykett 137). The figure of *the New Woman* can be divided into two types, both of which present a threat to the traditional gender roles, especially the construct of femininity. The first type is *the masculine woman*. She acts like a man whether it is in her appearance or her behaviour. She dresses like a man, and she is independent in her beliefs as well as dominant and aggressive in her presence. *The masculine woman* stands as a threat to patriarchy because she refuses to bear children and thus risks the survival of the human race. Her masculine nature is at the same time “the cause and consequence of her resisting traditional womanly roles” (Pykett 140).

The other type is *the hyperfeminine woman*, the demonized type of a traditionally feminine woman. This type is prone to extreme outbursts of emotion which are so intense in their expression that they cross the line of what is considered “properly feminine.” Such expressions of emotions over time developed into what is today known under the term *hysteria*: “a degenerate form of her natural affections...a form of brain-poisoning induced by the pressures of modern life by women’s attempts to resist their traditional roles and ape those of men” (Pykett 141). This type of “improper feminine” also threatened (as well as its masculine counterpart, only from the other side of the paradox) “the future of the race by disabling women and preventing them from fulfilling their ‘natural’ roles of wives and mothers” (Pykett 141).

3. The Analysis of *Wuthering Heights*

3.1. The Gothic Elements

According to Harold Bloom’s Introduction to *Modern Critical Interpretations: Emily Brontë’s Wuthering Heights*, the Brontës invented a new genre that can be described as a northern romance influenced by their earlier fantasy-life and its literature as well as their hero George Gordon Byron. Byron’s passive-aggressive sexuality (sadoomasochistic, homoerotic, incestuous, and ambivalently narcissistic) sets the pattern for the ambiguously erotic universe of *Wuthering Heights*. The connection can also be made to the Gothic novel and the Elizabethan drama (1-2). Diane Long Hoeveler claims that the Gothic novel partly originated from popular melodramas, later known as Hollywood “women in jeopardy” films (Long Hoeveler 106). She also claims that the Gothic developed from popular melodramas, where it was crucial to feature “representation of life that tends to strip the façade of manners in order to reveal essential conflicts” (Long Hoeveler

107). Other features from these popular melodramas that found its way into the Gothic included hyperbolic figures, lurid and grandiose events, masked relationships and disguised identities, abductions, slow-acting poisons, secret societies, mysterious parentage, and depicting women as the innocent victims of a corrupt and evil patriarchal system.

The Gothic atmosphere in *Wuthering Heights*, not just the novel, but the actual place as well, is set with the help of certain elements: the gates are always locked; fierce and sometimes dangerous dogs protect the house from strangers; there is a mysterious room which is not allowed to be entered; Cathy is kept prisoner there, and Heathcliff is the Gothic tyrant figure (Oda 9). The Gothic novels feature one of the first ideological strategies of the Female Gothic, and that is the extremely polarized attitude towards gender. Ann Radcliffe, however, develops new types of characters, a kind of prototypes of figures that belong to feminist texts rather than traditional Gothic, and these characters include a feminized hero and a masculinized heroine. Such characters can be found in *Wuthering Heights* as well, the most prominent examples being Linton Heathcliff and Cathy Linton.

Furthermore, *Wuthering Heights* can be proved to be a Gothic novel simply by applying the elements mentioned in the earlier chapters. *The haunted castle* exists in the form of *Wuthering Heights* as a setting of the novel which is isolated from the world: “a perfect misanthropist’s Heaven” (Brontë 1) whose geographical isolation provides a perfect atmosphere for all kinds of horrors to occur. The description of the exterior is reminiscent of old medieval castles that tend to appear in earlier Gothic texts: “Happily, the architect had foresight to build it strong: the narrow windows are deeply set in the wall, and the corners defended with large jutting stones” (Brontë 2). The place where *Wuthering Heights* is set is extremely dangerous even for the inhabitants who are deeply familiar with the moors: “Do you know that you run a risk of being lost in the marshes? People familiar with these moors often miss their road on such evenings; and, I can tell you, there is no chance of a change at present” (Brontë 7). During his first visit, Lockwood feels uncomfortable and out of place, but he is also led to a forbidden room by one of the servants, an essential feature of such castles/houses.

As for *the monster* and *the vampire*, both of these elements are embodied in Heathcliff’s character. He is described as a violent and damaging personality who treats everyone around him in a disastrous, harmful way: “He evidently wished no repetition of my intrusion” (Bronte 5); “Get

it ready, will you?’ was the answer uttered so savagely that I started. The tone in which the words were said revealed a genuine bad nature” (Brontë 8); “He turned as he spoke, a peculiar look in her direction, a look of hatred unless he has a most perverse set of facial muscles” (Brontë 9). The later parts of the story present Isabella’s doubts of his peculiar nocturnal actions, that is, she describes him as possibly being a vampire: “Heathcliff – I shudder to name him! has been a stranger in the house from last Sunday till today. Whether the angels have fed him, or his kin beneath, I cannot tell; but he has not eaten a meal with us for nearly a week. He has just come home at dawn, and gone upstairs to his chamber” (Brontë 126).

The element of persecution and paranoia is embodied in almost all of the female characters, but the most emphasised one is the persecution of Isabella: “add to this a deep cut under one ear, which only the cold prevented from bleeding profusely, a white face scratched and bruised, and a frame hardly able to support itself, through fatigue” (Brontë 123). After her death, the element is transferred to her son Linton: “The wretches! Do you know, Miss Linton, that brute Hareton laughs at me! I hate him! I hate them all: they are odious beings” (Brontë 172); “But I have been vexed, because you wouldn’t come. And papa swore it was owing to me: he called me a pitiful, shuffling, worthless thing” (Brontë 173).

The uncanny is illustrated in the repetition of names as well as the appearance of Catherine’s ghost (which looks like her, but it is not exactly her): “In vapid listlessness I leant my head against the window, and continued spelling over Catherine Earnshaw – Heathcliff – Linton, till my eyes closed...the air swarmed with Catherines; and rousing myself to dispel the obtrusive name” (Brontë 13).

Another substantial element of the Gothic is the history of abuse. Various characters are abused, such as Heathcliff, Catherine, Linton, and Isabella, but it is only Heathcliff’s history of abuse that is crucial for the plot development. While other characters run away from the violence, Heathcliff makes use of it and plans his revenge against those who wronged him and “his” Catherine; to be precise, he plays a role in the death of Catherine’s brother Hindley, who used to torture both of them, but especially Heathcliff, while Catherine and Heathcliff were young children: “‘You forget you have a master here,’ says the tyrant. ‘I’ll demolish the first who puts me out of temper! I insist on perfect sobriety and silence. Oh boy! was that you? Frances, darling, pull his hair as you go by: I heard him snap his fingers’” (Brontë 14).

Finally, the element of hallucination is experienced through Lockwood's character, when he sees Catherine's ghost but is unsure whether it was real or not. The beginning of the hallucination is depicted through Lockwood falling asleep: "I began to dream, almost before I ceased to be sensible of my locality" (Brontë 15). Lockwood tries to reach a branch, but it is a hand, not a branch, that eventually clings to him: "I tried to draw back my arm, but the hand clung to it, and a most melancholy voice sobbed, 'Let me in – let me in!'" (Brontë 17).

3.2. Gothic Feminism in *Wuthering Heights*

Ellen Moers gives a definition of Female Gothic: "a paraphernalia of claustrophobic castles, villainous dominating men, and beleaguered heroines to thematize women's sense of isolation and imprisonment within a domestic ideology fast becoming hegemonic by the end of the eighteenth century" (qtd. in Oda 3). The basic function of the Gothic genre was to illustrate an ideological construct in attempt to maintain control over the sexuality of women whether it is before or after marriage. The heroine of a Gothic novel is a blameless victim whose purpose is to use various strategies (usually passive-aggressive) in her pursuit of a triumph against patriarchy. These features as well as the features of Female Gothic can be found in at least four of *Wuthering Heights* female characters since all of them suffered from male domination in one way or another: Catherine Earnshaw, Cathy Linton, Isabella Linton, Frances Earnshaw. In further analysis the elements of Female Gothic and *the New Woman* will be applied to the previously mentioned characters.

Catherine Earnshaw presents the first example of a persecuted woman in *Wuthering Heights*. However, her personality contains features that depart greatly from the typical virtuous and virginal Gothic heroine. The conventional view is embodied in the characters of Nelly and Joseph, who see her as lacking proper manners. She is wild, and hence approachable and appealing to Heathcliff. Catherine does not exactly experience persecution by the novel's *monster*, which is another element that separates her from typical Gothic heroines. She is, in fact, "imprisoned" by the Linton family, who work their best to turn her from a boyish girl into a "true" lady. She subconsciously seeks a way out from Thrushcross Grange, whilst Heathcliff actively tries to penetrate it – these are the elements of both Male and Female Gothic. Taking into account the theory of feminism, Catherine can be observed as a specimen of *the New Woman*. She grows up

as a masculine child, running around the moors, spending all of her time with Heathcliff, never devoting any time to developing “feminine” skills. When she is “adopted” by the Lintons, she loses the masculine side of her own personality, which slowly suffocates her over time without her being aware of it. In the end she becomes a hyperfeminine woman, filled with hysteria, who dies in childbirth – a final indication of female imprisonment.

Speaking of Catherine Earnshaw, Harold Bloom calls her unfit for the “grand array of heroines of the Protestant will” because she is “too wild and Byronic, too High Romantic, to keep such company” (2). The High Romantic element in Catherine’s life is the motif of early marriage and early death, which “emerge[s] from the legacy of Shelley, dead at twenty-nine, and of Byron, martyred to the cause of Greek independence at thirty-six” (Bloom 5). This pattern is not the only feature that makes Catherine a troublesome figure. Her relationship with Heathcliff is also essentially problematic in the sexual sense, and the consummation of their “love” cannot occur in any circumstance other than death. In other words, the consummation of Catherine and Heathcliff’s love equals death. The relationship cannot be identified as love because the transference in their relationship does not exist (Bloom 7). Catherine and Heathcliff essentially *are* one another, and such identification is perfectly compressed in Catherine’s words: “If all else perished and he remained, I should still continue to be; and if all else remained and he were annihilated, the universe would turn to a mighty stranger; I should not seem part of it” (Brontë).

An inevitable feature of the Gothic is to include a tyrant male and an obedient female character. Such relationship develops between Heathcliff and Isabella Linton. As the exact opposite to Catherine Earnshaw, Isabella embodies the conventional Gothic heroine: “Gothic heroines are cautiously and delicately educated, kept away from male coarseness and sexuality as far as possible...it seems however that the heroines’ carefully cultivated decency often makes them defenceless against tyranny and persecution” (Oda 5). Isabella fulfils the Gothic virgin type with her naivety and ignorance. Her crying over trivial matters illustrates the opposition of her and Catherine’s personalities because such behaviour is frequently the object of Catherine’s ridicule. Her naivety is the most prominent at the moment of her escape with Heathcliff. In her mind “Heathcliff was the hero who rescued her from the Grange where people did not approve of her feelings for him” (Oda 6). Heathcliff, of course, uses that chance to exploit her naïve ideas in order to achieve his own revenge. The moment of her escape represents a tremendous turn in her arc,

because at that moment she meets the true Heathcliff behind the façade, and she sets off on a journey of breaking free from the Gothic convention. Isabella is not masculine at the beginning, but not hyperfeminine either. She embodies the exact picture of a patriarchal lady – she is feminine, and most importantly obedient. However, after her “encounter” with Heathcliff she must develop some masculine skills in order to survive. She learns how to take care of herself and her son without depending on anyone else, especially another man; after leaving Heathcliff, she remains alone with their son. Isabella’s experience at Wuthering Heights brings out a magnificent transformation in her character, “from the naïve girl who burned with passion and then cried for help in the brutal environment of the Heights” (Oda 7) to an independent woman who not only “discover[s] the need for self-protection” and “learns that she must act powerfully in order to counter the violence and evil surrounding her” (Oda 8) but also takes a step further and “confesses her wish and plans for revenge” (Oda 7).

However, she is not exactly the embodiment of *the New Woman* since she does not fit either of the two types – she is neither masculine nor hyperfeminine, but she can still fit the feminist framework. In the end, Isabella is the embodiment of a true feminist heroine with a strong and wilful mind, which is necessary for her in order to endure the oppression of the established patriarchal system. Similar to Catherine and Heathcliff being one another, Isabella and Heathcliff also represent each other’s doubles. Both Isabella and Heathcliff begin the journey of protecting themselves. Heathcliff is illustrated as a dark and cruel character who later on “obtains power and gentlemanliness to conquer the domains of two families” while “Isabella acquires the violence and fierceness which originally belongs to Heathcliff, for her own sake” (Oda 7). The character of Isabella stands as a fantastic example of Female Gothic, with her story beginning as an enjoyment of “idyllic and secluded life,” which is followed by a long time of imprisonment, to a sad ending of early death (even though she did experience at least a short time of happiness with her son after fleeing Wuthering Heights). Even her son, Linton, can be observed as an example of Female Gothic; even though he is not a woman, his storyline definitely contains some of the Female Gothic elements. He first enjoys idyllic life with his mother, then she dies, and he becomes a prisoner of his father. He cannot withstand the imprisonment and soon dies like his mother.

Cathy Linton as a Gothic heroine sits right in the middle of the two extremes represented by Catherine and Isabella. On the one hand she is raised like Isabella: an inexperienced heroine,

ignorant of the world, protected from all the perversities, and therefore unable “to understand that there are people who do not treat her as her father and servants do” (Oda 8). Cathy is also a mild victim of patriarchy since her father Edgar is “briefly cast in the role of a Gothic-style domineering father” (9) who controls every aspect of Cathy’s life. On the other hand, “Cathy possesses haughtiness and courage that traditional Gothic heroines do not show” (Oda 9). Unlike Isabella, who had to become stronger, more powerful, fiercer, and even violent at times in order to protect herself at Wuthering Heights, Cathy must obtain a soft temper and get closer to Hareton, who may be her ticket out of the life of constant torment. *The New Woman* is embodied in Cathy’s masculine nature, which is similar to that of her mother’s. She must repress these masculine traits and embrace her feminine side if she intends to survive Heathcliff’s tyranny.

The elements of the Female Gothic are visible in her character as well. Much like Isabella, she enjoys her early idyllic life, which is soon to be followed by a period of imprisonment at Wuthering Heights. After Heathcliff’s death she is finally free, which makes her the only representative of the Female Gothic in this novel who is strong enough to survive the torment of her prisoner. Finally, both Isabella and Cathy “achieve self-development beyond the scope of the traditional Gothic virgin” and “[reach their] happy ending via a series of accidents, and not strictly as a result of rescue by the hero” (Oda 10). With their character developments, the romanticized literary device of “a damsel in distress” who must be saved by her handsome hero is scrutinized and broken since both the heroines who begin their arcs as innocent, naïve, and helpless young girls achieve their ultimate satisfaction thanks to their own self-development and self-realization.

Conclusion

Emily Brontë's only novel, *Wuthering Heights*, is a classic representative of the Gothic genre due to the fact that it contains certain elements which determine whether a piece of writing truly is Gothic. The element of the haunted castle can be recognized in the actual setting – Wuthering Heights. The main protagonist and the house's tenant, Heathcliff, is the monster or the vampire of the Gothic novel, whose history of abuse contributes to his motivation and at the same time to the development of the story. Gothic novel usually contains victims of persecution and paranoia, and this novel embodies such elements in the victims of Heathcliff's persecution – Isabella Linton Heathcliff and their young son Linton. An essential feature of the Gothic is the element of uncanny, which is depicted through the repetition of names and the appearance of Catherine's ghost. The latter may also be attached to the final important feature – the element of hallucination whose purpose is to confuse both the narrator and the reader, and thus bring the narrators perspective into question and make him even more unreliable.

Wuthering Heights can be examined as an example of a regular Gothic novel as well as a progressive feminist text. The reasons why *Wuthering Heights* belongs to the Gothic genre include the fact that the story is set in a patriarchal system where female sexuality and general behaviour is under constant control. The story is set in an old house with a mysterious aura; it features a tyrant figure embodied in the character of Heathcliff and several types of persecuted Gothic heroines. The types of Gothic heroines that are different from the traditional Gothic bring out the feminist side of the novel. Catherine Earnshaw is far from well-behaved, well-mannered, and innocent type of a Gothic heroine. Isabella Linton begins her journey as a conventional Gothic heroine but as the story progresses so does her independence and fierceness. Cathy Linton's early life is very similar to that of her aunt Isabella's, but much sooner than Isabella she lets out her haughtiness and courage.

All three women may also be examined as embodiments of *the New Woman*. Catherine experiences both of *the New Woman* types in her character development: she goes from a boyish girl to a hyperfeminine woman. Her daughter Cathy inherits the masculine nature from her, yet she has to find and embrace a more feminine side of herself in order to stay alive. Isabella, however, must embrace the masculine *New Woman* if she wants to escape Heathcliff's imprisonment and survive his torment. *Wuthering Heights* can be interpreted as a feminist text because it features

female characters (Isabella and Cathy) who achieved their happily ever after not because they had help from a strong male figure, but because they were forced to find strength inside themselves – either masculine or feminine – and use it to their advantage.

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