The Radcliffean Gothic Model: 
A Form for Feminine Sexuality

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During the eighteenth century, a period of the most lively investigation into the possibilities of that “new” genre, the English novel, several models were developed which proved so successful that they have persisted even into the present. Some, like the novel of manners, seem equally suited to both male and female protagonists; others, however, seem curiously segregated by sex. For example, the picaresque novel has usually proved easier to adapt to a male protagonist while the Gothic novel, especially as it was shaped by the work of Ann Radcliffe, has come to be dominated by women—written by women; read by women; and choosing as its central figure a young girl, the Gothic heroine. Indeed, the achievement of Radcliffe is quite remarkable, for she invented a fictional language and a set of conventions within which “respectable” feminine sexuality might find expression. Unlike the picaresque form (which has changed even as the social extravagances it is intended to expose have changed), the Radcliffean Gothic model has survived virtually intact, attaining almost the status of a cultural myth.

Before we move to an investigation of Radcliffean Gothic fiction, we might begin with a brief summary of some of the attitudes about sexuality that inform the Gothic quest. Furthermore, we must begin this discussion of women and sexuality by observing a pattern that sometimes characterizes the way men think their sexual experience, for the analogous pattern in women’s fantasies about men has been much less fully documented.

Many men have a tendency to divide “love” into two components: an affectionate (and asexual) element; and a passionate (sexual) element. Furthermore, since the areas of affectionate and sexual love are fraught with complex emotions of guilt and anger, many men manage these difficult and (to their way of thinking) dangerous feelings by projecting them onto the women about them. Thus, through this process of projection, men may perceive the world as a place inhabited by two kinds of women: “good” women whom they idealize and who have no sensual desires (and for whom, of course, the men themselves feel no sexual longings); and “bad” women who are sexual by nature (and with whom it is permissible—perhaps even expected—to have sexual relations). This imaginative construct has come to be called the “Virgin/Whore” syndrome.

Several things are worth remarking here. First, when such a pattern emerges, the individual who should be the main actor (that is the man whose feelings are at issue) may seem unnaturally “drained” of
apparent effect: the inclinations that are in the first instance his own have been projected outside of himself. The women, who in more normal cases would be the objects of his feelings, are in this case construed as embodiments of them. Second, the emotions that have been sundered retain a curiously primitive quality. They have not been "diluted" by the compromises that would be necessary to accommodate them to a real life adult existence. Finally, behind the scenes of this vivid drama there sometimes lurks yet a fourth party—a rival (sometimes an obvious father-figure). Any number of literary instances of this masculine sexual drama may be found: particular variations exist, but the persistent pattern is the same: a man beseiged by two types of love embodied in two different sorts of women.4

Until very recently neither psychological investigation nor literary criticism has described an analogous situation for women. Thus if women (either in real life or in fiction) seem to perceive the world as inhabited by two types of relatively active men—one embodying "safe" asexual love and the other embodying "dangerous" sexuality—with women playing the part of more or less passive spectators, investigators and commentators have assumed that such is the "real" state of women. At last, however, this strange myopia has begun to be corrected: psychiatrists are beginning to understand that a "Devil/Priest" syndrome exists which is an analogue in women to the "Virgin/Whore" syndrome in men, and that far from revealing women as without sexual passion, such fantasies suggest that women's passions are potent—indeed so powerful that women, like men, often feel the need to handle these "dangerous" feelings by the device of projection.5

If we return, now, to the Radcliffean Gothic, we can begin to see the exact nature of Radcliffe's accomplishment as well as the very real limitations of the fictional model she devised. On the one hand, she found a way to express some of the dilemmas of feminine sexuality (albeit a way which handled the dilemma in a disguised form). Thus the affective response that a female reader might feel while reading a Gothic tale would be a powerful reiteration of the sexual feelings she might experience in her own life. The Gothic tale thus reinforces a woman's sense of herself as an essentially sexual creature, something that society has often been at pains to deny. On the other hand, Radcliffe's specific formulation of feminine sexuality had its drawbacks; for by choosing to dramatize that mode of sexual experience in which a woman's own feelings are projected onto the men around her, Radcliffe severely limited the possible range for a heroine's behavior. This is no more than a literary problem for Radcliffe and for those novelists who have followed her lead; however, if by some confused reversal, this pattern of "Gothic sexuality" were to be construed as a realistic and acceptable model for actual lives, then there would lurk in the Radcliffean paradigm a potential for dangerous confusion.

One necessary element in the Radcliffean Gothic was, in fact, introduced by Clara Reeve, who wrote The Old English Baron. In it, Reeve postulated the "haunted apartment." Often when we think of a haunted house, we assume that the fearful presence has more or less full
rein throughout (such had been the case earlier in Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto*); however, the terrors of Gothic mansions tended to be confined after the fictions of Clara Reeves to only one or several frightful chambers.

To put the matter rather bluntly, danger is palpably equated in these fictions with a specialized form of "inner space"; and if the heroine can manage to stay away from the treacherous cave—tunnel, basement, secret room—she will usually be safe. The overtly sexual implications of this recurrent situation are inescapable, even in eighteenth-century Gothic fiction. There is, for example, the heroine of *The Romance of the Forest*, who sees

the arras, with which the room was hung, wave backward and forwards. . . . The old bedstead, which La Motte had found in this apartment, had been removed to accommodate Adeline, and it was behind the place where this had stood, that the wind seemed to rush with particular force. . . . She felt about the tapestry, and perceiving the wall behind shake under her hand, she lifted the arras, and discovered a small door, whose loosened hinges admitted the wind. . . . The door was held only by a bolt, having undrawn which, and brought the light, she descended by a few steps into another chamber. . . . Holding up the light to examine it more fully, she was convinced by its structure that it was part of the ancient foundation. . . . 'A mystery seems to hang over these chambers,' said she 'which it is perhaps my lot to develop.' . . . Her foot stumbled over something on the floor. . . . The obscurity of the place prevented her discovering what it was that had impeded her steps, but having brought the light forward, she perceived on the floor an old dagger.6

Mrs. Radcliffe must be credited with popularizing the bedroom door that has a bolt on the outside only; such a door plays havoc with Emily's tender sensibilities in *The Mysteries of Udolpho*. "She was alarmed by a strange and loud knocking at her chamberdoor, and then a heavy weight fell against it, that almost burst it open. . . . A kind of instinctive remembrance of her remote situation from the family heightened [her fear]. She looked at the door which led to the stair case, expecting to see it open."7 Merely the geographical configuration of this situation can be a source of repeated and continuing terror as each night the fearful fantasy returns: "'What if some of these ruffians,' said she, 'should find out the private staircase, and in the darkness of night steal into my chamber!'"8 It is scarcely necessary to emphasize the specifically sexual component that is latent in such scenes.

After Ann Radcliffe had begun to exploit the highly stylized paraphernalia that we now associate with the Gothic-novel—a castle or abbey that is for the most part a safe place, but which has as its foundation some "complicated maze of underground vaults [or] dark passages" and in its bedrooms "sliding panels and trapdoors"9—this endlessly reenacted fantasy is always figured in terms of "inner space." Thus the "Gothic" building (whatever it may be) that gives the fiction its name may become in this treatment of the tradition a way of identifying
a woman's body (in imagination, of course, the reader's own body) when she is undergoing the seige of conflict over sexual stimulation or arousal.

The device that occasionally achieves subtlety in the works of Radcliffe and her followers becomes almost painfully overt in twentieth-century examples of this Gothic mode. However implausible the existence of some "Gothic" structure may be, it is the necessary precondition for the events that follow in the novel (its importance is tacitly acknowledged by the fact that most modern examples of this genre bear a picture of a looming building on their covers). We are asked to accept Gothic castles on the coast of California, on the New England coast in the early eighteenth century, on Key West in 1845—anywhere at all, in fact. Yet the devotees of such fictions quite rightly do not quibble: they respond to the emblematic significance of the building; its "reality" rests in its ability to represent the conflicting passions that may be "housed" within a single woman's body. The Gothic structure becomes a frank, almost embarrassingly direct morphological statement. "Wyndspelle. High on a promontory above a rocky beach and an unpredictable sea, it bridged a chasm in the face of the crag; a rift that was widest where it touched the water... Wyndspelle waited for the wind to come, and the waves to rise. For when the sea thundered below it, exploding into white plumes against the stone in anger, spume flying on the screaming wind, the house would come to life—And begin to breathe—"11

As is appropriate to their content, Ann Radcliffe's novels are all set in some undefinable location, deliberately distanced from real-world, eighteenth-century England—in Scotland during "the dark ages" or to the south "in Italy." Modern Gothics follow in the tradition of Radcliffe's work: sometimes they invoke the murky atmosphere of a world that it vaguely called "Victorian England"; sometimes they take place in the present, but in a distant land—Ireland, Greece, a tropical island. Clearly the ritualized story is meant to be placed in a never-never land, existing beyond the reach of spatial or temporal constraints. "Time tends to dissolve as it goes by, like a morning mist melting away under rising sun. Moments blur, and hours blend, and the past recedes until it becomes only a fading trail across the track of years. But that fading track has its own reality, so I still remember the day that was the beginning, and the night that was before. . . ."12

The unconscious is timeless. It is, then, perhaps easy to accept the deliberately vague sense of "place" in these fictions. The lack of definition in the characterization of the heroines is less easy to comprehend.

An initial glance at these ladies is apt to be misleading. Radcliffe's heroines, for example, seem to divide neatly into spritely and helpless (those who pick up a candle and go exploring the forbidden recesses and those who cower fearfully behind doors). Yet, as Edith Birkhead remarks with some asperity, "Mrs. Radcliffe's heroines resemble nothing more than a composite photograph in which all distinctive traits are merged into an expressionless 'type.'"13 They are not without talent: "In reflective mood one may lightly throw off a sonnet to the sunset or to the nocturnal gale, while another may seek refuge in her water-colours..."
or her lute.”

Yet their accomplishments and their supposed ingenuity
and intelligence are never of the slightest practical use. Their business is

to experience difficulty, not to get out of it; and by consequence, any

individuality that may be imputed to them at the beginning of the novel

is soon dissolved. The specific details are different in modern Gothics,

but the pattern is the same: the author assigns interesting talents and a

measure of intelligence to her heroine at the beginning of the novel, and

these then vanish as soon as the young woman is swept into danger. “I’d

been educated at Bryn Mawr, I had a B.S. in bacteriology, which I never

intended to pursue because I’d only take work away from someone who

needed it more than I,” muses one heroine who subsequently spends

several weeks in a Spanish castle, unable to realize that her terrifying

hallucinations have been caused by drugged food. No matter what

these heroines have been doing before the novel opens (and the variety

is wide), once the predictable plot begins, they do almost nothing. They

are ciphers, drained of initiative—even of a large measure of most

feelings other than fear.

In fact, their only characteristic accomplishment is something

more or less thrust upon them by circumstance: namely, to become

“rightful mistress” of the Gothic structure in which the novel takes place.

Invariably orphaned when the novel opens, they conclude as “some-

body.” For both Radcliffe and those twentieth-century authors who

have followed her the question of the heroine’s right to preside over the

structure in which her ordeals have taken place is the single most

common plot device.

Given the character (such as it is) of the typical Gothic heroine,

one might be tempted to conclude that the small army of women who

enjoy Gothic fiction are irretrievably passive, even masochistic; that

they cannot rise to the emergency of a crisis with rational, effective

behavior; and, most incredible of all, that they enjoy having these

ineptitudes rehearsed in the fictions that they read. That was not true of

Jane Austen; it seems equally unlikely in modern readers. Yet, in order

to offer an alternative explanation, we must postulate a rather special-

ized relationship between the reader and her Gothic novel.

Let us say that when an individual reads a fully realized piece of

fiction, he (or she) will “identify” primarily with one character, proba-

bly the principal character, and that this character will bear the prin-

cipal weight of the reader’s projected feelings. Naturally, an intelligent

reader will balance this identification; to some extent there will be

identification with each major character—even, perhaps, with a narra-

tive voice. But these will be distributed appropriately throughout the

fiction. Now a Gothic novel presents us with a different kind of situa-

tion. It is but a partially realized piece of fiction: it is formulaic (a

moderately sophisticated reader already knows more or less exactly

what to expect in its plot); it has little or no sense of particularized

“place,” and it offers a heroine with whom only a very few would wish

to identify. Its fascination lies in the predictable interaction between the

heroine and the other main characters. The reader identifies (broadly

and loosely) with the predicament as a totality: the ritualized conflict
that takes place among the major figures of a Gothic fiction (within the significant boundaries of that "enclosed space") represents in externalized form the conflict any single woman might experience. The reader will project her feelings into several characters, each one of whom will carry some element of her divided "self." A woman pictures herself as trapped between the demands of two sorts of men—a "chaste" lover and a "demon" lover—each of whom is really a reflection of one portion of her own longing. Her rite of passage takes the form of (1) proclaiming her right to preside as mistress over the Gothic structure and (2) deciding which man (which form of "love") may penetrate its recesses!

There have been two distinct waves of Radcliffean Gothic fiction: one that began in the late eighteenth century and one that began in this century between the World Wars. So far, we have been considering these together, quite rightly so, for they share many of the same features. Furthermore, both eighteenth-century and modern Gothic fictions focus on the same emotional situation: a relatively faceless heroine who is poised between two men of different amatory dispositions. Yet at this point we must distinguish between early examples and current ones; for although they deal with the same problem, they resolve it in opposite directions.

The pairing of "villain" and "hero" in the eighteenth-century Gothic is quite overt, achieving a kind of Augustan balance. The antagonists play strangely similar roles to the heroine, each embodying one sort of "authority": the demon lover is a figure of considerable power who would exert a malevolent influence; the hero (a considerably less potent figure throughout much of the novel) is a force for order and benevolent control.

Generally the heroine declares her preference for the hero very early in the novel; an obstacle to their union is discovered; and they remain throughout the story—pining, faithful, (exchanging, at best, a chaste kiss)—to be rewarded at the very conclusion with the gift of marriage. These are stories of a courtship interrupted. The demon lover is an intruder, dominating the fiction as its undeniable emotional focus. The heroines are not indifferent to the compelling presence of such men; however, they always react with instinctive aversion. When Montalt makes his second call on Adeline in The Romance of the Forest, she has no objective reason to shun him. Still, "an emotion, whose cause she did not trouble herself to inquire for, made her instantly retreat from the window."17

We cannot move on to twentieth-century Gothic fiction without first commenting on the remarkably violent taboo that enshrouds the entire relationship between these eighteenth-century heroines and their demon lovers. Despite the fact that the man is darkly attractive, the woman generally shuns him, shrinking as if from some visible contamination. Too often to be insignificant, this aversion is justified when he eventually proves to be a long-lost relation: an uncle, a step-father, sometimes the biological father himself—lusting after the innocent daughter's chastity. This spectre of incest (an unself-conscious reminder of the origins of the fantasy that is being rehearsed) hangs over the entire
tale and is occasionally reinforced by the presence, not fully developed as a character, of an antagonistic older woman with whose competitive malevolence the heroine must contend.

In their day, these works enjoyed a run-away popularity that we are now in a position to understand. Their explicit subject was "courtship," and with suitable indirectness they explored the entire range of emotions that any woman might be expected to feel during this initiation into adult romance. They were titillating. At the same time, however, they were unimpeachably safe, for the fiction is constructed in such a way that the figure who embodies explicit sexual passion is always repudiated. The villain is punished or killed, and the problem of love divided is resolved in the direction of "chastity." Over and over again, an eighteenth-century female reader might renew the drama by reading yet another Gothic fiction: the reading always provided a forbidden pleasure by allowing her to indulge sexual feelings of immense power (as she responded to the demon lover), and it always concluded by reassuring her that these emotions were, in fact, under control and that they would never find overt expression save in another similarly "safe" fictional world.

Because the heroine was generally devoid of passion, these novels might rehearse the potent and complex elements of feminine sexuality while appearing to reinforce the social definition of women as basically "pure" and "passive." Still, this was powerful fantasy, despite its disguised form, and as England moved into the period of strict Victorianism, Radcliffean Gothic fiction fell from favor.15

It is difficult to place the beginning of the second Gothic revival. By the 1950's, the genre was flourishing once again. The same conventions reappeared—ominous castles, distant and dim locations, faceless heroines. More important, the same root emotional configuration emerged, a woman caught between a chaste lover and a demon lover. But now, the problem was resolved in the opposite direction: these are not reiterations of the notion that women are basically pure; they are repeated rehearsals of the notion that contrary to appearance, it is both "permissible" and "safe" for women to claim sexuality as their own. In modern Gothic fiction, the woman marries the demon lover.

The basic configuration is developed in more varied ways now. Sometimes the juxtaposition of the two male candidates is quite explicit:

Several generations [of the Trelawney family] produced twins—always boys and always named Nicholas and Giles. And there was in every generation this double streak—a talent for business and for making money combined with a wild, recklessness. One Trelawney went into shipping and increased the family fortunes considerably; his brother became a gunman and died at a shootout in a bar.16

Sometimes the heroine is mistakenly led to believe that one of the two lovers is chaste—"He touched her arm, his fingers firm and assured, yet at the same time gentle and respectful. His manner suggested that he
was a man who would put the woman he loved on a pedestal.”

—when, in fact appearances are deceiving and this lover is revealed as treacherous while the passionate lover becomes her ultimate protector. Sometimes the chaste lover plays only a very subordinate role, and the heroine’s principal task is to discover that it is safe to make a match with the man whose violent feeling makes him seem initially too dangerous.

In every case, however, it is clearly undomesticated, undiluted passions that are at stake. "Power": it is the most often-repeated descriptive word in these fictions; it carries an explicit sexual connotation; and it is always, finally, a positive appellation. "This man was all compact power. He might have been a dock worker."21 "It was Kyle Franklin who stood there. He looked like a powerful, angry statue carved out of rock."22 "He gave an impression of both strength and cruelty. There was sensuality in that face, I decided—that came through; but there was much else that was hidden."23 "There was a ruthlessness in him which would always admire success."24

The heroine becomes "somebody" when she is united with such a man. Marriage seals the bargain by which she becomes mistress of the castle (either one she has inherited or one that belongs to the husband’s family): and when she recognizes that the impulses of the "demon" lover are, in fact, ones that may be tolerated within the boundaries of "her house," it is clear that she may preside with confidence over the conflicting emotions that inhabit her own body. Thus this twentieth-century rite of passage leads not to a rejection of feminine sexuality, but to an embracing of it: what seemed at first menacing is revealed as both tolerable and desirable. The problem of love divided is now resolved in the direction of undiluted sexuality, and the reading and rereading of modern Gothics gives comforting reassurance both that sexuality is safe and appropriate for women and that the primitive quality of this passion need never be compromised or relinquished.

Modern readers often deprecate twentieth-century Gothic fiction as "pulp romance" or "mere formula." Ann Radcliffe is held in higher esteem, although her work too is deemed negligible compared to that of the "giants"—Fielding and Richardson. But these reactions are hasty and inadequate, for the force of a fictional tradition cannot be judged unless one also takes into account its influence upon other work, work that any reader might willingly admire.

Thus Jane Austen, who read Radcliffe’s Gothic fiction with great pleasure, may poke fun at it in Northanger Abbey. However, despite the liberties she takes, she also relies on the implications of this convention to convey the diverse elements of Catherine Morland’s adolescent awakening. Structurally, the novel is a light-hearted mockery of the Gothic courtship motif: Catherine begins by construing herself as a "heroine" convinced that "something must and will happen to throw a hero in her way."25 When Henry Tilney appears, obviously a suitable figure on which to fix her maidenly affections, her case seems only to want abduction and villainy to be complete. Abduction eludes her, but her visit to the Tilney mansion—Northanger Abbey—deludes her into believing (quite falsely) that there may be some mystery surrounding
Mrs. Tilney’s recent death. The explosion of these romantic fantasies is a maturing experience, rendering her quite grown-up enough to marry a man instead of continuing to seek a “hero.”

All of this has been acknowledged. Yet there is another side to Catherine’s fascination with Gothic fiction that has not been remarked. Her fantasies include not only the undefined, melodramatic expectation of danger, but also a quite precise (albeit veiled) suggestion of sexual anticipation: “Her passion for ancient edifices was next in degree to her passion for Henry Tilney—and castles and abbeys made usually the charm of those reveries which his image did not fill. To see and explore either the ramparts and keep of the one, or the cloisters of the other, had been for many weeks a darling wish.”26 With an imagination whose categories have been shaped by Ann Radcliffe (her works are mentioned repeatedly throughout the novel), Catherine formulates her anxieties in predictable ways once she is ensconced within the Tilney home. “The very curtains of her bed seemed at one moment in motion, and at another the lock of her door was agitated, as if by the attempt of somebody to enter.”27 And when Henry Tilney finally expostulates, “‘Dearest Miss Morland, what ideas have you been admitting?’”28 a perceptive reader would have to answer: a fearful but nonetheless exciting interest in sexuality. In other words, Catherine Morland is a perfectly normal seventeen-year-old, with perfectly normal appetites and emotions; if Austen had not had the language of Gothic fiction at her disposal, she probably could not have conveyed this fact without violating the humorous and ironic tone of her fiction.

Although Gothic fiction was important in the development of Jane Austen’s art, in the end, its influence was not central: dramas of sexual initiation were not of primary interest to her. If we wish to find the truest translation of the Gothic tradition into the major fiction of this period, we must look elsewhere—to the work of the Brontes, in general, and to Jane Eyre in particular.

Ann Radcliffe and the romancers who followed her have been willing to subordinate specificity of “place” and fullness of characterization to the ritual rehearsing of a core fantasy. Their achievement is limited; however, to judge from the continued eagerness with which their works are received, it is one of some consequence. They evoke a series of primitive emotional responses from the reader, and they rearrange these emotions into an acceptable relationship. Now Bronte did not accept the drastic reductions that had been dictated by the Gothic tradition—her novel offers neither a never-never land of fantasy nor a puppet heroine—but neither does it reject the validity of the Gothic tradition altogether. Bronte addressed herself to the underlying problem of Gothic fiction, the dilemma of feminine sexuality, and carried it into the penetrating light of realistic limitations and real world constraints. In addition, she appropriated many of the techniques of this genre and translated them for her own use. The result was a novel composed out of the constituent parts of romance—a specific, contemporary story that nonetheless evokes elemental feelings with great force.
In very large measure, Bronte must be acknowledged to have achieved the best of both fictional possibilities: the continuing power of *Jane Eyre* bears testimony to this fact. Yet the contorting of larger than life feelings and situations into the frame of a realistic narrative is not done without sacrifice; and the features of this work that relate to everyday life do not dovetail flawlessly with its more hyperbolic components. There are breaks in the continuity of plot when Bronte must invoke melodrama in order to arrive at some desired resolution; and there are breaks of even more disturbing proportion in the characterization of subsidiary players (the treatment of Rochester has proved most disturbing).

The unusual, hybrid nature of the work is achieved by a kind of layering of the fictional world—a manipulation of narrative vantage that gives differentiated ontological weight to different elements within the fictional world. Fully to understand the triumphs and failures of *Jane Eyre*, we must begin with narrative point of view. Indeed, we must begin as the novel does, with Jane herself.

Nothing in the novel is more “real” than Jane: she is in the foreground throughout, telling her story with a ferocious intensity. We never actually hear any voice other than hers (no conversation except she reports it), never see other people except through her eyes. Thus we might say that if Bronte invented the components of this fictional world, she gave over the interpretation of them to her interlocutor-heroine. In general, when a novelist employs such a narrative method, the reliability of the reporter is in question. Often, we can make some judgement on this score: the reader is permitted a kind of ironic double vision whereby he can perceive the people and events of the fictional world more or less as they “really” are and his understanding with that of the narrator (as, for example, in *Great Expectations*). However, such is not the case here. The most notable quality of Jane’s narrative is its blazing earnestness. It compels belief. We may not always approve of the character Jane Eyre (the retrospective narrator, Jane Eyre, clearly disapproves of many of that character’s actions and attitudes), but we are never meant to doubt the veracity of her story.

Indeed, we might say even more. We can sympathize with other characters in the novel, but it would be difficult to identify with anyone but Jane herself, for she dominates the story. And if we cannot project our emotions into the character of Jane—feeling each detail of her trials with trusting acquiescence—then we may find it difficult to read the novel with any sympathy at all. (Bronte clearly trades on this fact, encouraging intimacy through those many confidences addressed directly to the reader.)

The novel treats many complex subjects but at least one of the elements of Jane’s quest is related to the central concerns of Gothic fiction: her struggle in this connection might be termed one of repossession. In Gothic romances, the sexual inclinations that rightly belong to women are projected onto men; these men take an active role in the drama while the women are relatively passive. Bronte’s novel deliberately reintegrates the forces that Gothic fiction had dispersed; Jane Eyre
asserts her right not only for herself, but for all women. Thus while the labyrinthine passageways and attics of Thornfield do play the role in this novel that such architectural accoutrements have always played in Gothic fiction (becoming a kind of figurative embodiment of the “secret” regions of feminine desire and of the passageways and inner space that have anatomical sexual significance), the treatment of Jane’s exploration of them is unique.

I climbed the three staircases, raised the trap-door of the attic, and having reached the leads, looked out afar over sequestered field and hill, and along dim sky-line . . . . Restlessness was in my nature; it agitated me to pain sometimes . . . . Women are supposed to be very calm generally: but women feel just as men feel; they need exercise for their faculties, and a field for their efforts as much as their brothers do; they suffer from too rigid a constraint, too absolute a stagnation, precisely as men would suffer.\(^{29}\)

This essentially passionate drama has its moral component. If Jane Eyre (or any woman) would repossess herself of sexuality, then the primitive, narcissistic, amoral element of raw passion must be tamed. A “real” woman must be able to function in the “real” world, and she must domesticate even her sexuality in some degree. It becomes Jane’s task then to find a median position between complete denial of sexuality and unchecked expression of desire.

The terms of this problem are relatively easy to understand; however, the fictional rendering of them presents considerable difficulty. What, for example, is the ontological status of Rochester? In this fiction, he exists entirely from Jane Eyre’s point of view (in a more ironic or balanced first-person narrative, we might be able to perceive a difference between the way he “really was” and the way the narrator perceived him, but such is not the case in this obsessive and intense recital). Yet Jane Eyre’s categories are highly colored by the conventions of Gothic fiction: for a very large portion of the novel (by far the major part), she renders Rochester not so much as a man, but rather as the embodiment of passion. His passion. Her passion as well. He becomes her demon lover.

My master’s colourless, olive face, square, massive brow, broad and jetty eyebrows, deep eyes, strong features, firm, grim mouth,—all energy, decision, will,—were not beautiful, according to rule; but they were more than beautiful to me: they were full of an interest, an influence that quite mastered me,—that took my feelings from my own power and fettered them in his.\(^{30}\)

As the reader can be said to project her own emotions into the character of Jane Eyre, so Jane seems quite clearly to be projecting one part of herself—her own sexual passion—into the figure of Rochester as he becomes a part of the recounted tale. Thus Rochester (and to a lesser extent St. John, the “chaste lover”) has a kind of double identity in this complex fiction. On the one hand, we must accept him as a more or less
“real” person who has participated in Jane’s adventure, a good deal less fully rendered than she as a character in the fiction, but clearly much more than the two-dimensional demon lover of Gothic romances. On the other hand, insofar as Jane Eyre’s own account of her life is an interpretation of that life—an imaginative construct that is defined in those categories most congenial to her—he may well be seen as a projection of her own most primitive feelings. In this role, he retains the violent effect of such feelings and returns it to the novel, thereby immensely enhancing its impact upon the reader.

Is Rochester “real” or not? In the end, we must accept him as both: both a real man, whom Jane can love and reject and finally marry; and the vivid incarnation of feelings that Jane must come to terms with. A similarly tenuous condition pertains to some of the women who are paired in Jane’s imagination.

An ominous presence haunts Thornfield. It has an unmistakably sexual component (it creeps into Jane’s bedroom one night and rends her wedding veil in twain), and it is dangerous as well. Eventually, Jane confronts this presence; and her description of the event relies heavily on language from Gothic fiction with which we have already become familiar:

He lifted the hangings from the wall, uncovering the second door: this, too, he opened. In a room without a window, there burnt a fire, guarded by a high and strong fender. . . . In the deep shade, at the further end of the room, a figure ran backwards and forwards. What it was, whether beast or human being, one could not, at first sight, tell; it grovelled, seemingly, on all fours; it snatched and growled like some strange wild animal: but it was covered with clothing; and a quantity of dark, grizzled hair, wild as a mane, hid its head and face.31

This is Mrs. Rochester: at once the rival, an injured (and hostile) wife of the beloved, and an embodiment of unchecked animal passion. In this novel, then, the ultimate sexual presence to be found in the “haunted apartment” is ravishing female bestiality: a terrible emblem for Jane of the possible consequences of her own desire should it develop entirely without restraint. Bertha Mason can play this over-determined and rather melodramatic role as “woman” and embodiment of “animal impulse” because we do not have to confront her actual presence in the novel very often. But if we did, we might find the definition of her “reality” as a character to be as problematic as Rochester’s.

Bronte has constructed her realistic fictional world in such hyperbolic terms that satisfactory resolutions are impossible. The absolute horror and animosity of Bertha Mason must be matched (for the sake of Jane’s progress toward selfhood) by a benevolent feminine force of equal weight. There is no convenient method for introducing such a character into the fictional world, and so at several crucial points, Bronte postulates the existence of a sustaining and guiding force—“Nature”—which is a feminine counterpart to the male Divinity. The sections of the novel that describe Jane’s direct mystical communion
with this Being are awkward, and they suggest just how violently the
conventions and assumptions of this work contend with the limitations
of realistic fiction.

Most problematic of all, however, is Rochester’s final fate. Throughout most of the novel, he seems a plausible entity. The embod-
iment of Jane’s own most vehement sexuality, he is brooding, primitive
passion made flesh. An ontological paradox whom we find, somehow,
believable. Rochester has enough credibility as a character so that we
can be persuaded to see him as a “real” man during the long season of
courtship; he can even pass muster as a character during Jane’s painful
sojourn away from him. Yet if she is ultimately to return and be reunited
with him, Rochester must appear in the final episodes of the novel as a
“real” man with moderate passions; the difficulty with this final appar-
tion is that there is not enough accumulated “characterization” of him to
render the transition from larger than life “demon-lover” to husband in
terms of personality. Bronte must resort to more drastic remedies. The
change must be rendered emblematically, and Rochester is mutilated.

At the conclusion of the novel, Bronte finally loses full command
over the tenuous balance of Rochester’s nature: Jane Eyre remains a
“real” woman, but Rochester slips dangerously close to stereotype. The
marriage that should provide a moral and psychological conclusion
becomes for many readers the least acceptable episode in the novel.

In recent fiction Judith Rossner has explored the dark side of our
Gothic inheritance in Looking for Mr. Goodbar—for despite its appar-
ently contemporary trappings, this too is a kind of “Gothic” novel. Yet it
is a Gothic of despair. The heroine has been wounded in childhood: literally, because she sustained a back injury that put her into a cast for a
year and left her with a permanent limp; and figuratively, because she
has had a strict Catholic upbringing that left an indelible sense of
feminine sexuality as something both forbidden and dirty. The pain of
coming to terms with these constraints is too great, and so the girl,
Theresa, spins herself into a world of make-believe whose categories
have been solidified along the lines of Gothic fiction.

It was much more bearable to be a princess getting tortured in a
dungeon than a crooked little girl being tortured by doctors: after all, if
you were a princess being tortured by bad guys, the good guys might
rescue you at any moment.32

This world—of princesses who are passive, of bad guys and good
guys—gradually becomes Theresa’s “reality.” It is a reality that is car-
ried with virulent intensity into her definitions of sexuality.

Throughout the novel, the force of this inner vision displaces
everything else: Theresa has a job, but we know very little about it, and
it plays almost no role in her perception of herself. The most vibrant
evocation of “place” is the description of a series of small Manhattan
apartments that constitute an extension of the heroine’s “self.” And in
this timeless, claustral space is enacted the ritual plot of the fiction—an
insatiable quest for sexual fulfillment.
Theresa’s perceptions of the men around her are characterized by a fundamental, and eventually demented, confusion. In the fictional world, these are unmistakably “real” people; however, in her understanding of them, they become no more than the projections of her own sexuality. The “good guys” seem chaste lovers, men a nice Catholic girl might marry, and the “bad guys” seem demon lovers, men with whom a woman can reach sexual climax. Yet while the “good guys” treat her well, the “bad guys” actually beat and abuse her, and given the illusions that attend her vision of the world, beating and abuse become perversely linked with sexual satisfaction.

Occasionally Theresa attempts to ponder the disjointed elements of her personality; but the fragmentation of her own feelings has crippled her ability to make meaningful assessments, and the “real” Theresa eludes her.

She had realized some time earlier that . . . of the compartments into which she’d divided her life, only some were labeled real. School was real. Visits to her parents were real. What else? Tony [a “bad guy”] was unreal. James [a “good guy”] was . . . James was real. What did she mean by real, then? . . . She was more herself, the real Theresa, in some ways with James, than she’d ever been with anyone. . . . Her whole self had been engaged . . . . Her whole self except for her sexuality . . . . While with Tony there was no boundary except around her mind, which was not susceptible to invasion by him.

She might go off, like the heroine of an eighteenth-century Gothic, and be married to her chaste lover; but “if she married him she would have to be faithful to him, there was no doubt about it, and how could she be faithful to a man for whom she had no sexual feeling?”

Eventually, she picks up a drifter and takes him to bed. It is good, “so good that sometimes she would shake her head—no, no—because it was so good she might not be able to stand it, she would burst.” When sex is finished, she demands that he leave. Calm at first, she issues her demands with increasing hysteria. The apartment is her domain, her “castle,” the most coherent image of “self” that she has preserved. She must preside over this—at least this inner space. But the drifter will not withdraw. And when Theresa berates him, he beats her to death. The “reality” of the demon lover’s literal violence triumphs, after all.

Two hundred years ago Ann Radcliffe introduced Gothic conventions into the mainstream of English fiction. For the first time the process of feminine sexual initiation found respectable, secular expression. Yet the terms of this expression were ultimately limiting. It is important to recognize and acknowledge the heritage of Ann Radcliffe’s Gothic tradition; it is even more important now to move on and invent other, less mutilating conventions for the rendering of feminine sexual desire.

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NOTES

1. Today more than ever before, women dominate in this field. Publishers of current Gothic novels are well aware of the particular demands of the almost exclusively female audience for such works. Virtually all of them have been written by women; and when a man does venture into the field of modern Gothic fiction, he generally writes under a feminine pseudonym (a comic reversal of the demands made upon serious women writers during the Victorian era).

2. The most provocative examination of the “feminine” as it has been expressed through the Gothic tradition may be found in Ellen Moers’ book, Literary Women (New York, 1977).

3. The classic study was done by Freud; see Sigmund Freud, “A Special Type of Choice of Object Made by Men,” in Works (London, 1923), XI, 165-175 and S. Freud, “On the Universal Tendency to Debasement in the Sphere of Love,” in Works (London, 1923), XI, 179-190. In most men, the two currents are fused well enough; however, in some men the separation takes on a morbid intensity, and a complete schism occurs. Moreover, Freud claims, although the pathological cases are not numerous, some traces of the tendency remains in all men. It is, in Freud’s words, a “universal affliction under civilization.”


8. Ibid., 324.


10. In the early part of the nineteenth century, many Gothic fictions were condensed and sold in cheap, paper-covered editions: these “blue books,” like modern paperbacks, often had a picture of the Gothic castle on the front. The marketing tradition appears to have substantial origins.


14. Ibid., 46.


17. Radcliffe, The Romance of the Forest, 118.

18. A perusal of Montague Summers’ A Gothic Bibliography (New York, 1964) will indicate the pace of this decline after 1835 quite vividly. The defensive tone of the Preface to the second edition of Jane Eyre (in 1847) makes this decline in the “acceptability” of this sort of fiction evident.


22. Dorothy Eden, Dark Water (Greenwich, Conn., 1963), 175.


26. Ibid., 141.
27. Ibid., 171.
28. Ibid., 198.
30. Ibid., 166.
31. Ibid., 278.
33. Ibid., 214.
34. Ibid., 270.
35. Ibid., 277.