

Women in Gothic Novel in the Light of “The Castle of Otranto” by Horace Walpole

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Abstract

This paper examines the position of women in Horace Walpole’s 1764 novel “The Castle of Otranto,” dubbed the “first Gothic novel.” An ancient castle, romance, and mysterious beings are all included in early Gothic literature. While many writers stress the role of women in different centuries of Gothic literature, they are typically represented as subservient and indecisive in the early ages. However, their status as prominent overall characters evolved in the modern period. The analysis of The Castle of Otranto demonstrates women’s incredibly innocent and unselfish position. They are not trusted and are viewed as commodities. They do not have the same rights as males. Women are often characterised by their natural roles, and the evolution of those roles across time is fascinating. In Gothic literature, women are primarily shown in two roles: “victim” and “predator.” The former is delicate and vulnerable, whereas the latter is deadly and strong. They entice guys with their femininity, beauty, and charming speech. Women who stand up for themselves and show strength to defend themselves enthusiastically are hailed as modern-day heroines, but those who compromise against their exploitation and lack fortitude become victims of men’s torment and physical violence. It may be argued that women in that age were terrified of their husbands and had to put up with insults, rudeness, and cruel behaviour from them to be respected in society.

Keywords: Gothic, Manfred, Castle, Lordship, Church, Isabella and Matilda.

Introduction:

Horace Walpole wrote “The Castle of Otranto” in 1764. This was a classic Gothic book. An ancient castle, romance, and otherworldly beings dominated early Gothic fiction. In general, women in Gothic literature are portrayed as weak and reliant on their male counterparts. The narrative follows Manfred, Lord of the Castle, and his family. It all starts with the Lord’s son being killed by a massive supernatural helmet at his wedding to Princess Isabella. This mysterious occurrence makes Manfred fearful about handing on dominion from his family. Lord intends to marry Isabella and divorces Hippolita to retain control of the castle. She relinquishes her rights to her husband’s will. Isabella, the young lady, is in difficulty. However, as Manfred attempts to marry Isabella, she flees to a chapel with the assistance of a peasant named Theodore. Manfred seeks Isabella and discovers her in the underground chapel. He consults with Friar Jerome about Isabella and orders Theodore’s execution. When Theodore removes his shirt, Jerome recognises him as his son. Jerome begs for his son’s life, but Manfred insists on a trade. A knight interrupts the broadcast and demands Isabella’s release. The race to find Isabella begins between the knights and Manfred. Theodore escapes with the assistance of Manfred’s daughter Matilda. He locates Isabella in a chapel and confines her in a cave. He barricades it to keep

Manfred and the knight away from her. Theodore triumphs over the knight. The knight is revealed to be Isabella's father, Frederic. They all make their way to the castle. Matilda, Manfred's daughter, captures Frederic's heart. Both begin to make plans to marry one other's daughters. Manfred believes Isabella is meeting Theodore at church. He kills her with a knife in the chapel, but she is his daughter Matilda. Matilda passes away, leaving Manfred to mourn. Theodore ascends to the throne and eventually marries Isabella.

The goal of this study is to emphasise the role of women in early Gothic literature and to investigate men's interactions with women as well as women's standing in that society.

Research Questions:

- i. What is the role of women in Gothic Novels according to "The Castle of Otranto"?
- ii. What the status of women's rights is in that age as portrayed in the novel?
- iii. How women are treated by their men according to the novel?

Review of Related Literature:

Today, Gothic can apply to a variety of things, but it originally referred to the Goths, a Germanic tribe that waged multiple battles against the Roman Empire. It is sometimes referred to as a certain type of art, such as new paintings or architecture. Almost all of these works are set in gothic-styled structures, such as castles and palaces. The Gothic Novel first appeared in the 18th century (Wright, 2016; Varma, 1966). Its first phase lasted from 1750 until 1820. This time was crucial in the establishment of the modern age. As a result, the Gothic Novel represents a kind of Romantic writing in its early stages (McIntyre, 1920).

The portrayal of women's identities is vital in Gothic literature. Female characters in classic literature, such as Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, are frequently portrayed as unselfish and innocent. However, in modern gothic fiction, their significance is altered to the same amount as in F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* and Coleridge's *Christabel*. Women are shown as objects of desire and supernatural entities in this genre and are often characterised by their natural duties (Milbank, 1998). However, the evolution of their roles over time is fascinating. In Gothic literature, women are primarily depicted in two roles: 'predator' and 'victim' (Watt, 1995). The former is lethal and strong, whereas the latter is frail and susceptible.

Women in this literature are characterised as indecisive and subservient. The portrayal of women is increasingly evolving in tandem with societal trends. Women played an important part in their culture, yet they were still dependent on their males (Castle, 1995; McIntyre, 1920). Their males, like in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, abuse women's innocence and selflessness (Okin, 1983). Caroline Beaufort is the novel's most unselfish character. She looks after his children. She couldn't contain her worry when she learned that her favourite's life was in jeopardy (Scott, 1906). She constantly wishes her children the best of luck in the future. Elizabeth Lavenza is *Frankenstein's* adoptive daughter. Despite this, she and Victor marry, and she takes on the role of the loving wife, eagerly awaiting Victor's return from Ingolstadt. Elizabeth's attractiveness and beauty characterise her, which is a fundamental aspect of a gothic female, being gorgeous yet lacking a sense of importance (Wallace, 2013).

Women are sometimes penalised solely for their gender. They are being accused of crimes they did not commit, and no one will stand by them. Women's voices opposing men's supremacy are unheard and do not affect the man-guided legal system (Summers, 1964). She is

accused of the murder of William Frankenstein, as was Justine Moritz in Frankenstein. Elizabeth represents Justine in her trial when everyone else blames her for William's death. She was not guilty of the crime, but she confessed under duress from guys. She is innocent and condemned due to his creature's actions, but he lets her bear the blame. Women are also depicted as objects of desire, her transformation from lover to mother figure; women are frequently totally defined by their biological duties, the loss of their virginity, or their 'destiny' as women to bear heirs. If they are unable to satisfy their men's desires, they are devalued and punished cruelly (Murphy, 2016). Although women want to be mothers because they have a maternal instinct, they must occasionally have heirs just to satisfy their men's desires. Mina, like Dracula, has already decided to become a mother and is determined to make it a reality, whether out of social pressure or maternal yearning (Smith and Wallace, 2004).

Women, on the other hand, appreciate the freedom of femininity in current Gothic fiction. They are not as obedient and courteous as they formerly were. They have a materialistic outlook on life and seek for their wives to have the same. As a result, women are portrayed as the centre of sexual attraction (Stone, 1977), utilising their femininity as a potent instrument to satisfy their wants, similar to Daisy's position in Fitzgerald. However, some women's lives are very different from Daisy's. Her marriage is unhappy and full of difficulties. Her spouse treats her cruelly in the garage. Tom was nasty and brutal to her wife in this situation. Men have social, political, and financial dominance over women, and they regard women as tiny lovely idiots. Women do not have the same rights as males. All of their social, political, and economic rights had been restricted. It implies that only males (Knowles, 2007; Williams, 1995) may attain prosperity and social standing. This demonstrates that males do not prioritise promoting women in any male-dominated industry (Sherman, 1980).

Aggression is a popular theme in modern Gothic literature. Women appreciate the experience of being under a spell. This idea of embracing pain and suffering is novel; Coleridge revolutionised the concept of Gothic heroines in *Christabel*, as she is not as innocent as she is presented as a troubled young lady. However, her actions from start to finish say otherwise. The giving of alcohol, sitting naked, and interest in watching Geraldine strip appear to be far from those of a young and inexperienced lady. *Christabel's* innocence is merely a sentiment, not a reality. Her actions show an aggressive aspect to her character and imply that, while Geraldine manipulates the other characters, *Christabel* manipulates her audience (Ledoux, 2017; Saglia, 2014).

Women are also represented in literature as magical beings rather than ghosts or horrifying beasts. To begin with, her strength and influence over the other characters clash with the stereotyped position of women in classic Gothic fiction (Moir, 1995). Geraldine was the first female character in fiction to wield such power over all other characters, transforming herself into a supernatural figure. She puts a spell on *Christabel* and then takes Geraldine back into her room, where Geraldine undresses and glances at Geraldine's body, maybe in fear of ruining her innocence (Potter, 2005; Robertson, 1994).

The preceding explanation shows that females are constantly dependent on males and must seek permission to breathe or conduct any action (Miles, 2000). They entice guys with their femininity, beauty, and charming speech (Moers, 1976). Women who stand on their own and show bravery to defend themselves positively are hailed as modern-day heroines, but those who compromise against their exploitation and lack fortitude become victims of men's torment and physical violence. It seems that if women showed some guts and confidence, they could handle their difficulties.

Women in “The Castle of Otranto:”

Horace Walpole wrote *The Castle of Otranto* in 1764. *Otranto*, often regarded as the first Gothic novel, established a literary reputation for writers and has all the required components for the genre, including mistaken identities, ghosts, and troubled women. Females are shown as “damsels in distress” at the Castle of Otranto, demonstrating their vulnerability and reliance on their males. Women do not have the same legal rights as males. They had to follow their spouses. They were prohibited from holding property, and widows were not permitted to remarry. The wife and daughter received useless bequests such as books and other household things. Women were employed to produce successors for their families’ dynasties.

The narrative begins with the death of the king’s only son, who is crushed to death by a massive helmet that falls from the sky soon before his wedding ceremony with Isabella. Matilda, the daughter of the King of Otranto, is also a princess. She was the most gorgeous eighteen-year-old virgin, but because she was a female, her father disregarded her. Females have been physically, monetarily, psychologically, and mentally subjugated to their men. The submission’s premise was that “a bad husband is better than no husband.” They have no choice but to marry a horrible husband or remain single. This exemplifies the influence of society and culture in their personal lives (Meyers, 2001).

They didn’t bother wishing for ladies while married since, following the death of the prince’s son, he devised a plot to marry his son’s bride and divorce his first wife. Matilda and Hippolyta are both devoted, respected, dependable, and submissive ladies. For example, for the good of the kingdom, she agrees to divorce Manfred. This demonstrates how obedient and disciplined she is. She merely obeyed her husband’s command and did not attempt to defend herself. This is an extreme case of male domination in which she has little choice but to submit to her husband’s wishes. She also attempted to make Matilda and Isabella dependent on their boyfriends and devoted to them. This demonstrates how women give up their rights to their males and make them subordinate (Norton, 1999).

Men deny women the right to choose and treat them as commodities. Isabella escapes to a chapel after refusing to marry Manfred. Manfred hunts for her and finds her. A discussion between Gerome and Manfred begins, and they use Isabella as a bargaining tool to further their interests. The knight’s intervention changes Isabella’s father, who subsequently falls in love with Matilda. Both girls’ dads decided to marry each other’s daughters without consulting them. These activities demonstrate female worthlessness at that age when even men did not care about the integrity of relationships. Men did not trust women and believed that women cheated on them. Manfred believes Isabella is fooling him by revealing her relationship with another man. He thinks of meeting Isabella at church. He rushes to the chapel with a knife and murders her, but she is her daughter Matilda. The murder of Matilda illustrates women’s fear of males. The Castle of Otranto demonstrates men’s full authority over women, as they must seek permission to breathe or do any activity. They are not allowed to speak against their guy and must submit gladly or unwillingly. It may be argued that women in that age were terrified of their men and had to put up with their men’s insults, rudeness, and inhuman behaviour to be respected in society.

Conclusion:

Women are shown as stupid and weak in early Gothic works, such as *The Castle of Otranto*, since they are frequently under the power of males. In Gothic literature, characters are

represented as reluctant and subservient, and their effects are either favourable or detrimental. When making judgements, they are often impacted by the external pressures of their men and society. Most women are seen as weak because they are subject to male dominance. In this literature, women are portrayed as indecisive and meek. The portrayal of women is rapidly shifting in tandem with societal ethics and developments. Women had an important part in their culture, but they were not granted the opportunity to make their own decisions. Their males exploit women's innocence, and they must seek permission to speak in public. This was the plight of women at the time. The evolution of women's roles from early Gothic to modern is fascinating. The position is transformed from one of weakness and folly to one of dominance and supernatural might. The writers were motivated by the dynamic role of women in society. As a result, because literature is a reflection of society, the roles of characters in literature have shifted.

Recommendations for further researchers:

Women are portrayed in a variety of roles throughout literature. I propose researching the causes and situations that led to women's roles shifting from innocent and selfless to dominating and powerful supernatural entities.

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