

## ROMANTICISM AND THE GOTHIC TRADITION IN ANN RADCLIFFE'S *THE MYSTERIES OF UDOLPHO*

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This paper attempts to provide an analysis of the gothic tradition in Ann Radcliffe's *The Mysteries of Udolpho*. It focuses on the Gothic romance and its significance, main characteristics and nature. It also discusses the types of Gothic schools, namely, that of terror, represented by Ann Radcliffe (*The Mysteries of Udolpho*) and that of horror, represented by Matthew Lewis (*The Monk*). More specifically, some examples of the Gothic tradition present in Radcliffe's book are explored.

**Key words:** Ann Radcliffe, Gothic Tradition, the Sublime, Terror, Horror

The aim of this article is to provide an insight into Gothic elements of a novel from the Romantic era. In order to achieve such a goal, I will use the author Ann Radcliffe, and more specifically her fourth novel *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, as a platform for academic research. The choice of the author for such an undertaking becomes almost unavoidable if one takes into consideration Radcliffe's considerable impact on this subgenre. As Robert Miles points out in his book *Ann Radcliffe: The Great Enchantress*, "...[Radcliffe] bore some responsibility for the 'Gothic' tale...her success was not simply critical – it was also popular" (Miles 1995: 7-8). Ann Radcliffe's prose had strongly influenced the style of the "Gothic novel" and she is considered a pioneer of the Gothic literary genre. She drew inspiration mainly from Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* (1764), which is regarded as the first Gothic novel. She also got inspired by Clara Reeve's *The Old English Baron* (1777) and by Sophia Lee's *The Recess; Or, a Tale of Other Times* (1783). What makes Radcliffe's writing style so distinctive and notable is the fact that she was able to blend successfully the traditional sensibility of Romantic literature with terror and suspense.

### **Gothic romance: significance, characteristics, nature**

The first thing this paper will analyse is the Gothic romance, and more precisely, its significance, characteristics and nature. In order to do that, it's best to first provide a clear definition of what Gothic romance actually is. According to Dennis Walder, "Walpole's *Castle of Otranto* (1764) is usually thought of as the first fully fledged example of the Gothic novel, introducing the familiar elements of a medieval setting in which sensational and supernatural events take place, as a sinister aristocratic hero tortured by a guilty secret tries to capture a beautiful heroine" (Walder 1995: 30). Walpole's contribution to the term Gothic was immense and led to the recognition of a new genre in the British context, which Ellis summarizes in the following way:

It is clear that to eighteenth century readers, the term 'gothic' identified a complicated and slippery topic connoting a number of related but distinct judgments about medieval culture, national history, civic virtue and the enlightenment. Judgments about the propriety and value of the gothic lay behind Horace Walpole's decision to rename the second edition of his novel, *The Castle of Otranto*: when it had first appeared on 24th December 1764, the anonymous novel was subtitled "A Story". (...) In later decades, the other writers followed Walpole by identifying their work as "gothic", such as Clara Reeve's *The Old English Baron: A Gothic Story* (1777).

(Ellis 2000: 17)

Another aspect of Romanticism worth mentioning is Dark Romanticism, which together with Gothic Romance are considered subgenres of Romanticism. Dark Romanticism tends to be gloomier and much more pessimistic compared to both Gothic Romance and Romanticism. A notable representative of Dark Romanticism is Edgar Allan Poe. But for the sake of this paper and the research I am conducting, I will keep the focus on the Gothic Romance and Ann Radcliffe, respectively. What is important to note is that Gothic Romance, as a subgenre, is very closely related to the beliefs of Romanticism. Nature was a very important element in both. Romantic writers were immersed in the beauty and power of nature, while Gothic writers were leaning more towards the dark side of it and the supernatural elements and phenomena. The power of nature in both is evident. But it's a slightly different aspect of nature that is represented. Nature was attributed healing qualities but what Gothic writers were focusing on was nature's ability to be destructive and more specifically the power of destruction. Another peculiar feature of Gothic literature is the representation of one's mood through weather. The

intensified nature of emotion was equally important for both Romanticism and the Gothic novel. Overall, Gothic romance can be described as a fusion of the Romantic and the Gothic.

In his treatise *The Stones of Venice*, John Ruskin discusses the main themes of the Gothic and provides a detailed explanation of what each one is about. According to him, the six main characteristics or “moral elements of Gothic”, as he calls them, are “1. Savageness, or Rudeness. 2. Love of Change. 3. Love of Nature. 4. Disturbed Imagination. 5. Obstinacy. 6. Generosity.” (Ruskin 2009: 155). Ruskin lists them in order of importance and also points out that “...the withdrawal of any one, or any two, will not at once destroy the Gothic character...but the removal of a majority of them will” (Ruskin 2009: 155).

Another important theme of Gothic Romances is the “sublime” or Gothic Sublimity. The sublime is a concept which originates from the philosophical branch of aesthetics. One of the most famous and notable names when it comes to sublimity is that of Edmund Burke. In his treatise *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Sublime and Beautiful*, Edmund Burke distinguishes between two categories – the category of the beautiful and the category of the sublime. He represents the category of the sublime as the more influential one. In the first category, beauty is believed to be found in surrounding objects that are aesthetically pleasing. In the category of the sublime, an experience of immense pain and terror results in some form of delight or pleasure. According to Burke, terror is a key element of the sublime. He describes the sublime in the following way: “Whatever is fitted in any sort to excite the ideas of pain and danger, that is to say, whatever is in any sort terrible, or is conversant about terrible objects, or operates in a manner analogous to terror, is a source of the sublime; that is, it is productive of the strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling” (Burke 2005: Section 7, 111). Burke also mentions some other significant characteristics, such as obscurity, vastness, power and also infinity. Edmund Burke came to the conclusion that “[t]error is in all cases whatsoever, either more openly or latently the ruling principle of the sublime” (Burke 2005: 131). One of the most powerful and influential studies in this field is Thomas Weiskel’s *The Romantic Sublime: Studies in the Structure and Psychology of Transcendence* (1976). In it Weiskel talks about the Romantic Sublime and how it is very closely related to meaning. Weiskel believes that “[t]he Romantic sublime was an attempt to revise the meaning of transcendence precisely when the traditional apparatus of sublimation – spiritual, ontological, and (one gathers) psychological and even perceptual – was failing to be exercised or understood” (Weiskel

2019: 4). In his article called *Gothic Sublimity*, David B. Morris says the following about Weiskel's interpretation of the sublime:

Provisionally I want to accept this simplified sketch with its contrast between periods and modes: an eighteenth-century sublime, fundamentally affective and pictorial, and a Romantic sublime, fundamentally hermeneutic and visionary. What this sketch conceals, of course, is not only the diversity within periods and modes but also the perplexing question of literary change.

(Morris 1985: 299)

The concept of the sublime was especially popular during the Romantic era. Romantic poets were fascinated by it and wanted to incorporate it into their works. Many of them turned to the sublime as a counter reaction to rational thought. As previously noted, considering that Gothic romance is basically a subgenre of Romanticism, it only makes sense that the concept of the sublime was easily applied to the genre of the Gothic novel. Two very important aspects of the sublime, when it comes to Gothic literature, are the experience the reader is supposed to go through and the concept that is represented in the text. As already discussed, Edmund Burke was convinced that terror is an inseparable part and the main source of the sublime.

Ann Radcliffe, who became the epitome of Gothic writers and who was one of the most popular Gothic novelists at the end of the eighteenth century, drew inspiration from Burke's theory of the sublime and incorporated it in her essay called *On the Supernatural in Poetry*. Radcliffe is representative of the Gothic school of terror. As previously mentioned, there are two schools in total, namely, that of terror and that of horror. The school of horror is represented by Matthew Lewis. Radcliffe comments on the differences between horror and terror by saying the following:

Terror and horror are so far opposite, that the first expands the soul, and awakens the faculties to a high degree of life; the other contracts, freezes, and nearly annihilates them. I apprehend, that neither Shakespeare nor Milton by their fictions, nor Mr. Burke by his reasoning, anywhere looked to positive horror as a source of the sublime, though they all agree that terror is a very high one.

(Radcliffe 1826: 150)

Radcliffe's purpose was to create in the reader the feeling of terror and suspense. She was able to do so through her writing style and technique. Her readers were supposed to experience the kind of terror that would inevitably lead them to the sublime. She did this through a feeling of

terror in her characters, which created such an emotion for the reader as well. Radcliffe also leads the readers to the sublime with her tendency to include and describe female characters who are fascinated by the beauty of nature and often tend to spend a copious amount of time wandering around nature, mountains and picturesque scenery marvelling at the beauty of the world around them. One good example of this is Emily from *The Mysteries of Udolpho* and Julia from *A Sicilian Romance*.

### **Types of Gothic schools: terror versus horror**

Even though terror and horror appear to be similar, there are differences between the two terms. Terror is usually described as an immense feeling of fear. Horror is also described as a strong feeling of fear but with the added elements of shock and very often disgust. Horror imposes, forcing onto the audience absurd grotesqueness while terror withholds, teasing them with an unsettling atmosphere. Horror is often about the disgust a sight of a corpse would evoke, the stabbing pain caused by a sharp object or the copious amount of blood. Terror, on the other hand, is what makes one's skin crawl, the unsettling feeling that one is constantly being observed and the sick feeling in one's stomach. Terror is closely connected to a strong feeling of anxiety and the feeling that something terrible might be happening. It is also the hint of an unsettling possibility and the remaining uncertainty surrounding it.

The first writer who actually differentiated between the psychological states of terror and horror was Ann Radcliffe. In her essay *On the Supernatural in Poetry*, Ann Radcliffe argues that obscurity and the unknown are characteristics of terror when horrible affairs are in question, and that those characteristics are the ones that guide the reader to the sublime. On the other hand, horror directly forces the reader to face the brutality depicted in it (cf. Radcliffe 1826: 150). Radcliffe clearly states her position on the topic by providing a compare-and-contrast analysis of the two terms. This is important to consider, since it establishes a clear distinction between terror and horror provided by the author of the novel discussed in this paper. Many scholars share her position. One of them is Devendra Varma, who was an expert on Gothic Literature. In his *The Gothic Flame*, Varma further explores the topic by providing his insights on it. According to Varma, “[t]he difference between Terror and Horror is the difference between awful apprehension and sickening realization: between the smell of death and stumbling against a corpse” (Varma 1923: 150). Varma's statement provides good support for Radcliffe's position on the clear distinction between terror and horror, which further outlines the

significance of understanding the differences between the two schools. Another perspective that could be taken into consideration is that of Robert D. Hume. In his *Gothic Versus Romantic: A Revaluation of the Gothic Novel*, Hume talks about Radcliffe's technique and how she manages to generate the feeling of terror by using the so-called "dramatic suspension". Hume comments that "[s]he raises vague but unsettling possibilities and leaves them dangling for hundreds of pages" (Hume 1969: 285). A good example of that is the black-veiled "picture" in *The Mysteries of Udolpho*. After Emily's encounter with the black veil, which is interrupted very abruptly by her fainting, the reader is left with the vague and unsettling possibilities mentioned above. This feeling then stays with the reader until the revelation of the black veil's true nature in the end of the novel, establishing it as a good paradigm of the school of Terror in Radcliffe. Hume later on adds that there are other writers who are also able to grasp and then keep the attention of their readers without so heavily relying on the elements of dread and suspense. He says about them that instead of doing that, "they attack him [the reader] frontally with events that shock or disturb him" and "[r]ather than elaborating possibilities which never materialize, they heap a succession of horrors upon the reader" (Hume 1969: 285). A good example of that technique is Matthew Lewis with his *The Monk* (1796), which uses the elements of shock and horror acknowledged by Hume. As previously commented, Lewis is the representative of the Gothic school of Horror and Radcliffe is the representation of the Gothic school of Terror.

Ann Radcliffe is considered the matriarch of the Female Gothic movement. When she differentiates between horror and terror, she presents horror as a fear of something concrete while she describes terror as something obscure and unknown. She talks about the anxiety that the unknown evokes in us. She believed that the right way to the sublime was through terror, not horror. The Sublime was the ultimate goal of the Romantic poets and many Gothic writers. Their goal was to achieve a state in which fear and amazement were intertwined. Radcliffe did that by implementing the feeling of terror into her characters, mainly young heroines who were usually trapped inside old and spooky castles, exposed to supernatural phenomena and tortured by mysterious sounds and shadows. A good example of that is Emily from *The Mysteries of Udolpho* who faces similar hardships and experiences familiar emotions. But I will discuss the novel in the next section. Radcliffe's condemnation of the school of Horror was most likely due to her rivalry with Matthew Lewis, who was

representative of the school of Horror. His most notable and influential work in the field is *The Monk*, which is the epitome of gore and horror.

### **The Mysteries of Udolpho and the Gothic Tradition:**

*The Mysteries of Udolpho* is Ann Radcliffe's fourth novel and it was published in 1794. The novel contains four volumes. It is a Gothic novel and it was considered one of the most popular novels of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. It is also said to be one of the most influential works in the field of the Gothic style. The scenes that Radcliffe describes are very dramatic, full of terror and suspense and they follow the Gothic style very closely. Radcliffe was greatly inspired by Horace Walpole and his novel *The Castle of Otranto*. She adopted and implemented several gothic elements into her novel *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, more specifically:

- 1) The presence of an old and spooky castle (the castle of Udolpho), typically situated in a fairly remote and wild landscape somewhere in Southern Europe (the Apennine Mountains, Northern Italy).
- 2) The choice of characters: an endangered heroine (Emily), the lover of said heroine (Valancourt), and a tyrannical older man (Montoni).

Walpole's first Gothic novel, *The Castle of Otranto*, and his writing technique inspired authors like Radcliffe, Shelley and Stoker by inaugurating the tone and format for all gothic novels to come. Walpole's choice of Naples as the main location for his novel set a trend among other authors and led them to choosing Europe as their preferred location because of its mesmerizing beauty. Walpole laid the foundations of the Gothic novel and authors like Radcliffe, Shelley and Stoker implemented those by adding their distinct imprint on it by further expanding, differentiating and defining the genre of the Gothic novel. What differentiates Radcliffe from Walpole is her decision to be more descriptive and extensive in her narration of the story. What is also specific about her style is that she implements the element of revelation, especially when it comes to the relationships between her characters.

The main action in the novel takes place in Catholic Italy, in the eponymous castle of Udolpho. The castle is described as enormous and spooky. The atmosphere is gloomy and eerie. Radcliffe describes the location of the castle by saying that "...steep rose over steep, the mountains seemed to multiply, as they went, and what was the summit of one

eminence proved to be only the base of another” (Radcliffe 2001: 162). This description of the surrounding landscape is a reference to the sublime in nature. The sublime and Edmund Burke who outlined it in his treatise *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757) have already been discussed above. According to Burke, the sublime is an occurrence that is so extensive and grandiose that it creates a sense of amazement, wonder and terror (at the same time) within those who witness it. The nature, the mountains and the forests that Emily is able to observe on her way to Castle Udolpho are typically sublime and are often found in many Gothic narratives. Radcliffe manages to implement Burke’s ideas into the description of the castle, as well. She does so by outlining it as “...[s]ilent, lonely and sublime, it seemed to stand the sovereign of the scene, and to frown defiance on all who dared to invade its solitary reign” (Radcliffe 2001: 163).

The main protagonist of the novel and the next focus of the paper is Emily. She is described as a young, bright lady who possesses refined sensibilities, who is highly aware of her surroundings and who is very sensitive. Her character has a lot in common with the characters of both her father, St Aubert, and her lover, Valancourt. All of them find pleasure in the beauty of nature and enjoy observing it and talking about it. The element of emotional sentiment is present in their characters. It was a technique used by many authors whose goal was to present to their readers characters of ‘fine feelings’. Later on, the genre of Sentimental Fiction or the Novel of Sensibility was formed. The character of Montoni, on the other hand, is the complete opposite of Emily. He is indifferent to his surroundings and he fails to enjoy the beauty of the picturesque Italian countryside. He is the epitome of the Gothic villain and his character was later on used as an inspiration for the creation of other literary antagonists. He has imprisoned Emily and her aunt in the castle and the only thing he cared about was getting his hands on the estate that belonged to Emily’s late father.

A noteworthy detail is that of the black veil which is one of the biggest mysteries in the whole novel. Emily’s curiosity leads her to lifting the veil in order to see what is behind it but “perceiving that what it had concealed was no picture; and before she could leave the chamber she dropped senseless on the floor” (Radcliffe 2002: 178). Emily faints multiple times throughout the novel, which is a typical characteristic of sentimental heroines. Even her father, while on his deathbed, tells her that “...we become the victims of our feelings, unless we can in some degree command them” (Radcliffe 2002: 57). This is his warning to his daughter that she needs to learn how to control her emotions and to not let them cloud her mind and



sense of judgment. Another mystery in the novel is the unlocked door. It is a secret passage that leads to Emily's room. One could, in a way, interpret the unlocked door as a symbol of how vulnerable and exposed she is in the castle of Udolpho having no one to guard her and to look after her. An instance of her being vulnerable is the moment when Morano sneaks through the door and tries to kidnap her. His attempt is unsuccessful because Montoni catches him and prevents him from reaching his goal.

Last but not least, it is important to talk about the revelation technique that Radcliffe managed to successfully implement into her work. Revelation was often used in Gothic fiction in the eighteenth century. Radcliffe's narrative includes many revelations. What is peculiar about her is her so-called "supernatural explained" technique. She provides rational explanations to supernatural phenomena that the heroine goes through. She tends to give the explanation at a later moment, usually by the end, in order to keep the feeling of suspense and terror in her readers till the very last moment. The biggest revelation in *The Mysteries of Udolpho* has to be that of the woman in the miniature. Emily quickly recognizes that woman as "[t]he same, ... my father wept over!" (Radcliffe 2002: 75). The woman in the picture turns out to be her father's sister who was murdered by her husband. She was murdered because her husband's lover, Signora Laurentini di Udolpho, pressured him to do so. Signora Laurentini di Udolpho turns out to be the former owner of Udolpho. The type of revelation where there is an unclear family connection, shrouded in mystery, was also very common in Gothic literature. Last but not least, what Emily actually saw behind the black veil also gets revealed and by the end of the novel, it becomes known that behind the veil there was a "...face...partly decayed and disfigured by worms...and she[Emily] would have perceived that the figure before her was not human, but formed of wax" (Radcliffe 2001: 468).

*The Mysteries of Udolpho*, which is often referred to as the archetypal Gothic novel, has granted Ann Radcliffe a significant position in the field of Gothic fiction. This novel is the perfect example of the Gothic style and manages to incorporate the different elements and techniques typical for this type of fiction. Radcliffe was able to draw inspiration from other influential names in the genre and to successfully implement it in her novels. She was also able to provide the "supernatural explained", which as abovementioned, is observable in the revelation of the black veil. All of this combined together renders *The Mysteries of Udolpho* a good example of the Gothic tradition.

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