ESJ Humanities Peer-reviewed

Gothic Experiences in *Jane Eyre*, *Wuthering Heights*, and *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*

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Doi:10.19044/esj.2024.v20n11p69

Submitted: 23 January 2024
Accepted: 04 April 2024
Published: 30 April 2024

Cite As:
Tine E. P. (2024). *Gothic Experiences in Jane Eyre, Wuthering Heights, and The Tenant of Wildfell Hall.* European Scientific Journal, ESJ, 20 (11), 69.
https://doi.org/10.19044/esj.2024.v20n11p69

Abstract

This paper thoroughly analyses the theme of the gothic imagination in the works of Charlotte, Emily, and Anne Bronte, specifically in Jane Eyre, Wuthering Heights, and The Tenant of Wildfell Hall. The novels portray romantic and sublime scenes with elements of terror, horror, and the uncanny, which intensify the expression of the gothic feelings experienced by the characters. The study also explores women's suffering in the context of gothic thought. Various factors inherent to the gothic genre contribute to the 19th-century readers' fascination with the supernatural and thrilling emotions. This work explores gothic experiences depicted in novels using gothic tropes and critical approaches such as Marxism, feminism, or psychoanalysis. The use of the framing narrative technique remains a distinctive aspect of this study which worthily includes The Tenant of Wildfell Hall, a book that many critics have wrongly overlooked when interpreting the Bronte sisters' novels in the light of the gothic trend. The analysis considers the common gothic features that characterize the novels, rather than treating them separately. This reinforces and enhances the scope of the analysis of the Gothic vision of these Victorian novelists.

Keywords: Fear, sublime, love, terror, horror, the uncanny, madness, emotion, ghosts

 ISSN: 1857-7881 (Print) e - ISSN 1857-7431

Introduction

The keen interest in the realistic English novel has not abated since the early 18th century despite the influences of other genres that have invaded the 19th-century literary space. Indeed, that novel has undergone some changes. One noticeable effect came from the introduction of gothic elements, which seemed to make the novel divert from its prime purpose of providing a faithful description of reality. The gothic romance trend stemming from the larger romanticism genre gained attractiveness fuelled by people's awe-inspiring fascination with dark and mysterious themes (Cadillo, 2021). The success of Emily's *Wuthering Heights*, Charlotte's *Jane Eyre*, and Anne's *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* seems to rest upon the emotions they evoke in readers, such as pity and fear. The stories of Heathcliff, Jane, and Helen provide ample opportunity to explore an inordinate literary dimension through a great number of scenes that are imbued with terror, horror, the sublime and eerie happenings. These works display the Victorian female novelists' capacity to *address themes indirectly through Gothic fiction which couldn't be spoken of in polite society*' (O'Reilly, 2023).

This study will identify and analyze some main characteristics of the Gothic novel and its influence on 19th-century literary works, with a particular focus on the Brontë sisters' novels. The analysis will then examine three of their novels to explore prominent issues such as aspects of love, the fears associated with terror, horror, and the uncanny, in their gothic forms and manifestations. The gender issue is also raised, displaying the emotional predicament of women in Victorian society. In addition to the use of the various gothic tropes of the narratives, some critical instruments are employed to probe into the characters' minds and attitudes. The psychoanalytic interpretation will help to explore the hidden dark faces of human nature. The feminist approach, combined with Marxist ideas, underscores the depth of female trauma as related in the stories.

1. Emergence of the gothic novel and its influence on the Bronte sisters' novels

The Gothic novel entered the literary scene during the second half of the 18th century. It appeared before the advent of romanticism but later, nearly developed simultaneously, despite the rivalries noted by Phelps who said that '*...the words "gothic" and "romantic" were in bad odour...*' (Phelps, 1927, p. 20). That genre which initially developed in England was later exported to other countries like France and the USA. The Gothic novel established itself in the literary scene through the publication of *The Castle of Otranto* in 1764, and *Vathek* in 1786 by Horace Walpole. Other novels such as Ann Radcliff's *The Mysteries of Udolph* in 1790, Mathew Lewis's *The Monk*, or Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* issued in 1818 followed, initiating a new stage in that

 ISSN: 1857-7881 (Print) e - ISSN 1857-7431

fiction by emphasizing '… *tragedies of the soul, revealing deep, human conflicts, the struggle between good and evil for ultimate mastery in human life'* (Varma, 1966, p. 153). This form which aimed to explore the depths of human nature soon became fascinating to readers.

The previously neglected form has now gained a significant influence on the Victorian novel. The Gothic novel is characterized by '*dark and gloomy settings*' (Al-Malki, 2014, p. 13) made of ruined buildings, old monasteries or convents, medieval fortresses, cemeteries, unusual noises, large spaces, atmospheric elements, etc. They create a favorable environment for ghosts and spirits, as popular belief and the Gothic imagination suggest. The protagonists in the stories are often solitary wanderers, taken to meditation and dreaming, and preyed upon by fears. The unknown constantly appeals to them. The predominance of female writers, readers, or characters in the stories, is noteworthy. The characters are often represented as innocent victims, persecuted by men, in a hostile and aggressive environment.

The gothic offers an environment conducive to meditation, but essentially to distressing dreams, which fits in the English soul's taste. One may wonder how people can become so passionate about these apparently charmless, frightening stories when one thinks of the ruins, and the bloodshed, among others, which rather arouse feelings of sadness and worry. As paradoxically as it may seem, the bourgeois, aristocrats, and the ladies with refined taste make up the majority of the readership of this Gothic novel.

As a literary trend, it has not lasted long but has managed to produce its effects and has also demonstrated its importance to book enthusiasts. Similarly, it influenced many writers of the era, particularly the Victorian novelists, as it is exemplified by the Brontë sisters. Indeed, Charlotte, Emily, and Anne were early imbued with different thoughts and topics addressed in translated Germanic writings. The influence of Gothic elements from bildungsroman and other genres on the novels of these inquisitive young intellectuals is undeniable. Their solid background knowledge in literature appears plainly in their fiction works because of the various literary and philosophical fields they have visited. Their novels display common features with the gothic genre, particularly through the settings adorned by an environment that looks highly haunted and full of mystery, such as the lonely crossroad of Whitcross and the isolated *'red room'* (Brontë, Charlotte, 1999, p. 8) in *Jane Eyre*, or the cemetery in *The Professor* where William reunites with her beloved Frances still in mourning. It sounds awkward but it is the way the gothic goes, as Anna and Andrew explain: *'Gothic stimulates ambivalent kinds of pleasure as desire and dread work on us in tandem*' (Powell & Smith, 2006, p. 2). The Gothic atmosphere is also evoked through the images of ancient castles, manors, and moorlands found in *Wuthering Heights*, along with the calls of sinister nocturnal birds and the presence of

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animals such as the barking dogs or the vicious horses in *Villette, The Tenant of Wildfell Hall, Jane Eyre,* and *The Professor*.

The appeal to pathos and sympathy predominantly comes from women struggling alone to earn a living or against terrors from malevolent men. The Bronte girls' novels demonstrate the claimed involvement and expertise of the writers in the feminist movement. The majority of critics examine their works in the light of cultural feminism and the doctrine of social spheres. The girls share their different perspectives on women which diverge '*... from the societal norm as projected by Queen Victoria, which was to be a faithful wife and productive child-bearer first and foremost'* (Nitschke, Lauren. (2021). The female Gothic approach scrutinises the behaviour of female characters and highlights their specific, often hidden, traumatic experiences. Lee A. Talley notes relevantly that *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* is the only novel with *'no supernatural elements, no character who recounts extraordinary dreams or nightmares*' (p.129), but he contends it is still a gothic work due to its narrative structure - *the nested narrative* - which is inherited from the Gothic and aims to explore the unknown. The focus is on Helen, that veiled woman who is a newcomer to the community. Jacobs states that the structure of that novel is '*appropriated and modified from the familiar gothic frame-tale'* (p. 204).

The Bronte sisters resort to a variety of specialised terminology including gothic vocabulary words to describe the unknown and emotions, or hyperbolic adjectives to create a gothic atmosphere, as they appear in this sentence: '*... my mind like a rayless dungeon, with one shrinking fear fettered in its depths ...*' (Charlotte, *Jane Eyre,* p. 357). There are also onomatopoeic words like '*...the flutter and chirp of the sparrows, the gleeful twitter of the swallows*' (Anne, *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall, p.* 175). That terminology enhances the expression of gothic feelings related to love, horror, terror, the supernatural, etc. in Bronte's novels and particularly in *Jane Eyre, Wuthering Heights,* and *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*.

2. Love and the Gothic in the three novels of the Brontë sisters

The love stories that take place in the narratives portray the major theme of Gothic romance or Gothic novels, formerly called Romances. They display the importance of love and its different dimensions in gothic fiction. To study *Jane Eyre, Wuthering Heights,* and *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* in the light of the gothic trend, it seems necessary to achieve a thorough identification of the feelings which act so powerfully upon characters. Heathcliff, Jane, Gilbert, or Helen can help to describe those '*Acute emotions, many of them sexual or psychopathic*' (Frank, 1987, p. 4), which foster '*extreme behaviour'* among human characters in the Gothic novel. They may

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even develop demonic and spectral personalities. This analysis focuses on both gothic villains and sincere lovers.

It is noteworthy that most of the characters are moved by that powerful emotion which leads them to a life-or-death commitment. Helen has lived in sorrow for years because of her tragic love with Arthur. Millicent has had a similar experience with her husband Hattersley. Both men are violent partners and display a gothic aspect through their excesses of emotions and passion. Such emotional excesses are noticeable with Gilbert who does not hesitate to assault Lawrence whom he suspects of being Helen's lover. He hits *'the other'* so violently that he thinks he's acted unnaturally. After reconsidering his act, he accuses the devil, *'some fiend at my elbow*' (Bronte, Anne, *The Tenant of Wildfell*, 2001, p. 91). In reality, Lawrence is regarded as a menace for his love with Helen. Consequently, his *'combination of offenses'* is *'too unpardonable*' (p. 91). Gilbert appears as a knight. His mission is to protect Helen and keep her secure in the Wildfell Hall castle. So, he attacks Mr Lawrence whom he regards as a supernatural danger to the lady he must save. According to the gothic code, he is the villain who needs identifying and fighting before he commits his destructive acts. The reader is aware that all these actions are not solely motivated by the desire to help her, but also to convince her of his love. As in the medieval romance, Arthur mainly sets out unreservedly to find her wife again.

Unfortunately, all the risks he takes are in vain, which readers can interpret as the due retribution for all the emotional damage he had caused to Helen. Anne Bronte keeps Helen safe until Arthur's death before marrying her to Gilbert. Some critics have attacked Helen's decision as lacking rationality because it deprives her of all the benefits of inheriting her husband's property. Such a decision must be analysed from an emotional perspective. It demonstrates to which extent love can drive individuals to make an *'extreme'* decision.

Likewise, in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, Gilbert's love for that widow looks irrational, given all the challenges he faces in his community and his family. The reader may wonder why he chooses to barter his first love interest with Eliza Millward for a *'mad dream'* (p. 372), as he confesses it. The information that Helen is married to Arthur Huntington does not decrease Gilbert's passion for her. He can't admit that she still loves her husband who has indirectly forced her to flee due to his infidelity, frequent absences, lies, and violence. Helen takes refuge at Wildfell Hall. She disguises herself as a widow to keep suitors and men away from her. Anne lets readers discover the true story of the woman's life with all the horrors of her marriage through Gilbert's voice. So, Anne implements the framing narrative, a technique which is familiar to gothic romanticism for exploring the unknown. The trope helps to unravel the mystery hidden behind the widow's veil. Helen, *'the unknown*

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fugitive' (p. 372), also schematises women's emotional ordeal. That frame narrative technique is also used by Emily in her novel.

In *Wuthering Heights*, love is the main source of the prevailing conflictual atmosphere. The narrative is essentially built upon Heathcliff's love story with Cathy. Their love is complex because it is regarded as impossible, from the social view of Hindley, Catherine's elder brother, and the Lintons. For some critics, it appears as an incestuous love since Catherine's father is Heathcliff's adoptive father. They have lived together since they were young, but that is not a very convincing obstacle for Cathy. She claims that no creature can separate them (Brontë E., 1992, p. 58**)** and '*…he's more myself than I am. Whatever our souls are made of, his and mine are the same…*' (p. 58). Heathcliff also professes his unfailing reciprocal love for Catherine. The lovers' conviction comforts the reader's illusion that they intend to live that fusional love through an inordinate channel, like Jane and Rochester in *Jane Eyre.* However, Heathcliff faces a strong opposition to his love for Cathy, which urges him to disappear. Later, he returns unexpectedly with a fortune and starts courting Isabella, the sister of his former rival. He ultimately convinces her to marry him despite Edgar's warnings. Weirong explains:

The revenge he put into force was extremely devastating and rebellious. Isabella is pure, innocent, romantic, and totally helpless when she was maltreated. Being beautiful, sensitive, and naive, she was seduced, caged and tortured by Heathcliff. She finally escaped and raised her son by herself, died miserably and sacrificed for Heathcliff's revenge (Qiao 2019, p.1579).

Edgar guesses that it's only a revengeful strategy after he was deprived of Cathy's hand. Isabella ignores Heathcliff's plans and allows him to reach his mischievous objective.

In the case of both couples, the reciprocity of love is ambiguous and the marriages end tragically. Isabella and Cathy are overwhelmed by the emotional pressure and die. Heathcliff's love turns into a gothic passion, ultimately ending in a tragic necrophilia. Throughout the story, he is haunted by the duality of his feelings towards Cathy, as an object of love and revenge, which drives him to commit the horrible act of profanation after the woman's death.

The relationships between the dwellers of Heights and Grange are undermined by tensions opposing Heathcliff to the other protagonists. They all hinge on love and are taken to extremes. Indeed, the split in Heathcliff's character represents the frustrated man's obsession with taking revenge on society which has turned him into a gothic monster.

Emily uses the framing narrative to make the curious visitor explore the two estates which can be seen as castles or old mansions. Through Nelly and Lockwood's views, readers discover the prevailing power of love and particularly how it is used to serve patriarchy to the detriment of women.

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Through this trope, Emily probes men's attitudes to unveil their dissimulated intentions. She urges society to address women's fears.

In *Jane Eyre*, Charlotte exposes the pressure upon women. Jane is particularly moved by her emotional quest. She early experiences the hardships of life due to social class conflict and people make her believe that she can't marry anyone she loves. When she meets Rochester, it does not take her long to notice that the man is emotionally affected. Shortly after, he declares his love for her and his wish to marry her. Indeed, she discovers by herself that her master is married. The woman locked in the attic is Rochester's sick and violent wife, which makes it impossible for them to marry. The other insuperable obstacle is the social class difference. Still, Rochester seems convinced that only Jane can get him rid of her lunatic wife before she commits crimes. Charlotte uses love as a pretext to draw Jane near Rochester to assist the man in dire straits as soon as necessary. Her presence saves Rochester's life when Bertha sets fire to his bed, and she uses water to put out the fire. The religious language related to water like *'deluged the bed*', '*baptised the couch'* (p. 130), lets Charlotte suggest that Jane is endowed with spiritual or supernatural power through her intention to purify the man. '*God's aid*' (p. 130) blesses her efforts which are solely motivated by pure love. '*Love is real, spiritual, and cannot be determined by position, strength or land, etc. in Jane Eyre's interpretation*' (Husain 2020 p. 4181). Those attributes plainly express the power of love.

After fulfilling her first mission, she decides to leave the house to take a new job in another town. Still, readers can guess that the main reason for her decision is to avoid being responsible for the separation of the duly married couple. Despite the distance, she cannot stop thinking of Rochester, particularly the day her cousin St. John River overtly declares that he wants to marry her. She irrationally declines, preferring Rochester, her former employer whom she has not seen or even heard from for years, unless they communicate through telepathy or mysticism. For readers, that must be the case because of Jane's mad decision to reject the offer of a good match. it is similar to Gilbe rt's choice. In the role of a knight, she decides to go to rescue him. She undertakes a perilous, surrealistic journey back to Rochester's house. In addition to all the pains, such as losing her money, spending the night under the stars, being hungry, etc., she also manages to resist the unbearable pressure of '*the torture of her thought' (*p. *286).* At a certain point in her progress, when she experiences destitution, she even calls for death. However, she decides to keep on struggling to *'retain a valueless life …. Because I know, or believe, Mr Rochester is living*' (p. 291). She appears to be more concerned with *'Mr. Rochester and his doom'* than her own life; he prays ceaselessly to God *'Mr Rochester was safe: he was God's*' (p. 286). The words she uses sound romantic, but also premonitory, when she imagines meeting a man '*impotent as a bird with both wings broken*' (p. 286). Like Helen, she appears to

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be blind to reality due to her irrational choice, as the intensity of her emotions has taken her to the extremes of Gothic dimensions.

She is right in her surmise because Rochester is still alive. However, according to the information she receives, his house is burnt down by Bertha, causing him to move out to his modest estate in the country. She fortunately manages to find him again. She feels happy, regardless of his distressed situation. Rochester is like the *'bird'* with *'broken wings'* as the accident has left him partially blind, but that ever rekindles her love. She accepts to marry him and gives him a child.

Charlotte, Anne, and Emily exalt true love by reuniting true lovers, but also denounce the extremes love can take people to. In the novels, female characters like Helen, Millicent, Cathy, Bertha, and Jane, happen to be victims of gothic destructive effects instigated by male characters who have been turned into monsters due to their emotional passions.

3. Terror, horror and the uncanny in the novels

The concepts are inherent to gothic literature in which writers aim basically to stir up emotions, fears, suspense, and mystery and expose characters and readers to tension. Some critics refer to them as *'terrorists'* due to the scenes they depict. They make *'... the flesh creep and the nerves thrill*' (Moers, p. 91), but give satisfaction to the readers in their quest for extremes.

These feelings are different, though not contradictory, especially when it comes to distinguishing horror and terror. The former is a physical emotion deriving from external or sensational factors and the latter is a psychological emotion coming from factors within. The uncanny relates to figments of the mind which tend to transform *'the familiar into something strange, unknown and even sinister*' (Bacon (ed.), 2018, p.2). Most of the protagonists of the stories live in psychological unrest due to uncontrolled passions.

Some readers or critics may wonder why Emily has created Heathcliff who appears to embody terror and horror in the story. That is the impression that Lockwood, an unknown visitor of Wuthering Heights, gets on seeing Heathcliff's physical appearance and his rather unwelcoming attitude. Heathcliff is uncommunicative, which makes it difficult to obtain information about the estate and its occupants. Like Heathcliff, the servants also display a suspicious attitude towards Lockwood. The first signal of terror is given by the presence of snarling dogs positioned near him upon his arrival in the sitting room. At the end of the visit, Joseph looses the dogs on him, mistaking him for a thief when he takes a lantern from the house because there is a blizzard. The savage attack causes him a serious nosebleed (Brontë E., 1992 p. 12). The atmospheric conditions are bad and even ominous as if the cosmic forces have come into play for the achievement of the predicament. As he must spend the night, Heathcliff asks Zillah to give him a room. Lockwood and the reader are terrified and horrified at the devilish plot epitomised by the attribution of the haunted room to the guest. Consequently, he has a sleepless night, with terrible nightmares and the vision of Catherine's ghost.

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Lockwood discovers the ghosts' world and goes further, integrating and participating in the gothic setting when he states "*Terror made me cruel"*, because he seized the dead Cathy's wrist and pulled it '*on to the broken pane, and rubbed it to and fro till the blood ran down and soaked the bedclothes'* (Brontë E., p. 17). By shedding blood, the narrator contributes to increasing the gothic fear among readers. Similarly, Gilbert Markham, who is just supposed to report Helen's journals, makes Mr Lawrence's head bleed. Emily and Anne seem to alter the narrator's role when the characters' attitude is analysed on the basis of the principles of the framing narrative technique they use.

The frame narrative technique has reinforced the idea of mystery prevailing in *Wuthering Heights* and *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*. Traditionally, the frame narrator is supposed to relate the barbarity or horror in the story in a declarative way, but Jacobs notes a slightly different type in Bronte's novels. He underpins that the reader is not only *'shocked'* (p. 206) by the reported *'gothic evils'* of the story, but he also happens to face a situation where the narrators, namely Anne Bronte's Markham and Emily Bronte's Lockwood, *'are shown to be in part the cause of the shocking reality they encounter'* (p. 206). The novelists enhance the expression of terror by multiplying the sources of the fear which affects both the victim protagonists and the readers of the stories.

The frame narrative, also called *'the story within a story*', is used *'to explore something deep, dark and secret at the heart of the narrative*' (Southward, 2015, p. 2). The trope reinforces the impression that Heights and Helen's life are mysteries to be explored. Unravelling the unknown goes with dreadful, gothic perils, as Lockwood experiences it. Indeed, he spends the night in a room that epitomises the historical memory of Heights, with its visible realities represented by the old books and the mysterious face he discovers in his dreams. The room reminds readers of Jane's experience in *'the red room'* (chapter 2) in *Jane Eyre*. She was terrified at the idea that she had to stay in the room where her uncle died, with the deathbed and all the objects which were still in their places. They *'appear to be animate, sentient, alive*' (p.2), as Bacon says. The little girl is frightened by the idea that his uncle's ghost may come and visit her at night. She has the impression of seeing ghosts through the looking-glass:

Returning, I had to cross before the looking-glass; my fascinated glance involuntarily explored the depth it revealed. All looked colder and darker in that visionary hollow than in reality: and the strange little figure there gazing at me, with a white face and arms speaking the gloom, and glittering eyes of fear moving where all else was still, had the effect of a real spirit: I thought it like one of the tiny phantoms, half fairy, half imp, Bessie's evening stories represented as coming out of lone, ferny dells in moors, and appearing before the eyes of belated travellers. (Brontë C., 1999, p. 9)

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It is rooted in popular belief that ghosts of the dead and spirits wander in the country. Indeed, popular beliefs have strongly influenced this novel: '*It is easy to recognise a gothic novel, for it is characterised by a specific collection of motifs and themes, many of which come through folklore, fairy tale, myth and nightmare*' (Howell, 2005, pp.52-3).

Everyone fears them, as Emily explains throughout chapter 244. Heathcliff used to be, and still is, a feared character in the story; they all believe that his ghost is still wandering. A *'little boy, he was crying terribly'* because *"They're Heathcliff, and a woman, yonder, under t' Nab,' he blubbered,'un' Aw darnut pass 'em'* (Brontë E., p. 244). The boy reports to Nelly that he has met Heathcliff on his way on the moors with a woman who was probably Cathy. He would not let him pass. Like Jane, the little boy is out of his wits after his frightful experience which unfortunately is not grounded in rational facts. People's obsessive feelings of anxiety reassert their dreadful consideration of the past but also remain linked to their fear of death. Admittedly, ghosts are associated with the idea of duality. They inspire fright as they are supposed to belong to the world of the dead but keep on haunting the living. As Kandji explains, fantasy is born from the moment man becomes aware of the fact that he is mortal, yet refuses to accept death as his lot in life (Kandji, 1997, p. 18).

As a young girl, Jane is particularly traumatised by the idea of death through her uncle's death, the trial of the *'the red room'* (8), and her proximity to Helen on her deathbed. Jane's fears at the time of sleeping under the stars in open fields are motivated, even though she does not speak plainly when she alludes to the birds' cries during the night. At Whitcross crossroad, located in the dead middle of the moorlands, she faces the unknown. She does not know about the right direction to take and remains particularly exposed to the insecurity of this lonely place. Like any crossroads, according to popular beliefs, this place can be haunted.

The intersection of roads and pathways are dark, dangerous, uncanny places, offering two or more options at once. According to ancient superstitions, crossroads are unhallowed grounds, haunted by vampires, demons, witches, and trolls or '*Malevolent spirits who like to lead travellers astray*' (George, 2018). Sam also explains that a crossroad used to be a burial place for murdered people, or those who died by suicide, etc. There is Jane solely left to nature, but to fantasy as well. She believes herself to be exposed to dark forces, monsters, and even his fellow men (sportsmen, poachers). The slightest noise caused by the wind participates to generate dread for her until she finds those '*apprehensions unfounded'* (285). Her fears result from similar factors or the idea of death. That night, she is like an outcast and decides to seek comfort in '*the universal mother, nature*' and be her '*guest'* (285). Indeed, Jane complains overtly about her supernatural fears which are partly due to her real awareness of popular beliefs. She is superstitious and sometimes happens to live in serious psychological unrest due to on simple dreams she often has in the story.

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Indeed, the oneiric plunges her deeper into the supernatural awareness fuelled by her seven dreams in *Jane Eyre*. For example, she once dreamed of seeing before her '*a terrible red glare*' which, in reality, was only '*the nursery fire*' (Brontë C., 1999, p.13). Another dream is about an infant. It deeply worries or terrifies her when she wakes up:

I did not like this iteration of one idea—this strange recurrence of one image, and I grew nervous as bedtime approached and the hour of the vision drew near. It was from companionship with this baby-phantom I had been roused on that moonlight night when I heard the cry (Brontë C.,1999, p.13).

As indicated by the gothic terms that Charlotte uses to convey Jane's trauma, the dream is actually terrifying. The girl feels all the more concerned as she remembers the day when Bessie was explaining to Abbot that dreaming of children is a sure sign of trouble, either to one's self or one's kin (193). As Jane feared, a few days later, Robert comes to announce to her that his uncle John died at his chambers in London (C. Brontë, *Jane Eyre* 194). The story corroborates the terror associated with popular beliefs and the premonitory nature of dreams.

Charlotte moves Jane from the horror and terror of her aunt's house and Lowood to Thornfield. On her journey to that unknown town, the heroine comes across various difficulties. For example, Charlotte emphasizes Jane's unsettled mind in the room she rents at the George Inn in Millcote. She highlights the suggestive features of the room including the faltering light, the prints on the wall, the portrait of George the Third, and a tableau representing '*the death of Wolfe*' (Brontë C., p. 80). These elements evoke lingering gothic fears and past trauma experienced by Jane. That's '*a very strange sensation to inexperienced youth to feel itself quite alone in the world*' (p. 81), but she never accepts to relapse into past negative memories. She is convinced that:

'... the charm of adventure sweetens that sensation; the glow of pride warms it; but then the throb of fear disturbs it; and fear with me became predominant when half an hour elapsed and still I was alone.' (C. Brontë, p. 81).

Charlotte makes the reader discover the core of Jane's state of mind on her way to Thornfield. She shares the girl's concerns about what and who she will find there. Facing the unknown raises gothic feelings among protagonists and readers.

In *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, these ideas appear through the main character's quest. Helen is the target of Gilbert and Arthur Huntingdon. They seem to fight against the psychological and emotional effects of isolation. They require Helen's presence to restore their masculine identity, for example. Helen lives under the cover of a veiled widow. Under that mask, she must be willing to conceal a past tinged with mistakes and suffering which rather gives her the female image of the fallen angel. The terror Helen has experienced makes her feel

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distrustful of men. To clear past fears and reconcile with her true personality, she needs to avoid male presence.

Terror, horror and the uncanny take different forms and manifestations in the novels. The characters' experiences of physical, moral, and psychological suffering reveal to what extent the gothic imagination can affect people's lives.

4. A female gothic reading of the novels.

The active presence of women in *Jane Eyre*, *Wuthering Heights,* and *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* is evidence of their significant role in the development of gothic fiction. Critics often highlight this aspect through various female approaches. In this respect, a subgenre known as '*the female gothic*' was initiated by Ellen Moers and emerged in the late 18th century and continued to the 19th century. She defines it as follows:

What I mean by Female Gothic is easily defined: the work that women writers have done in the literary mode that, since the eighteenth century, we have called the Gothic. But what I mean or anyone else means-by "the Gothic" is not so easily stated except that it has to do with fear. (p.90)

It focuses on the experiences, fears, and societal constraints women face. It often explores themes related to the oppression of women, their confinement, and the supernatural.

In the late 18th century narratives, *'the central figure is a young woman who is simultaneously a persecuted victim and courageous heroine'* (Moers, p. 90), even though Mary Shelley demonstrates in *Frankenstein* that the Gothic narrative can do *'without even an important female victim*' (pp. 91-2). In their respective novels, the Brontë sisters predominantly portray brave female characters resisting containment and domination, as exemplified by Jane, Cathy, and Helen.

Young women live in constant fear and pressure. Cathy and Isabella in *Wuthering Heights* or Helen and Milicent, are persecuted by men who are solely motivated by their interest. The bone of contention with their oppressors is love which often leads to terrible scenes and the detriment of women. Cathy cannot engage in a physical confrontation like Jane or Bertha; she resorts to marrying Edgar. She is also subjected to unbearable pressure from society and Heathcliff. Emily links her persisting illness to that situation. Cathy becomes '*ill*', and '*delirious'* (Brontë E., p. 91), which makes Mrs Linton *'horrified'* (p. 92) when she observes the extent of her suffering. It seems that her attempt to alleviate her mental state has not been successful. Isabella succeeds in escaping far from her oppressor but by that time, she is deeply affected and ultimately dies.

In Anne's novel, Helen is also affected by that gothic love. fortunately, she benefits from the support of a young man who helps her dispel the fear of violence she used to be subjected to. She narrowly avoids philophobia. Her veil helps her to protect against unwanted suitors and male domination. In *Jane Eyre*, Bertha experiences emotional problems and reacts violently to achieve her liberation. Like Jane, she may be regarded as a monstrous challenge to

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patriarchy because she represents an unconventional female archetype in their society. Her acts of rebellion result in a horrible fire and a violent, bloody attack. When Bertha's narrative is read in the light of the gothic, it seems to imply a correlation between love and illnesses like hysteria, consumption, or madness.

Hysteria is often associated with women and Ioana Boghian says, in *Illness in the Brontë Sisters' Novels,* that it derives from '*social and emotional isolation, injustice, and lack of love*' (p. 642). Conversely, madness remains intricately linked to mystery and often portrays gothic imagery. It is compared to a monster, '*the most terrifying monster of all*' (Peele, 2015) that lurks inside our minds. It is also regarded as "*one of the most common themes in Gothic literature*" (Peele, 2015). In *Jane Eyre,* the Attic and '*the red room*' (8) resemble lunatic asylums or madhouses. Similarly, when Cathy and Isabella were seriously affected by stress disorder and illness, they stayed in bed. So, their rooms may remind readers of those specialised places. In *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, Annabella's relationship with love and sex highlights a lack of control over her passions. This may represent an illness, according to Boghian's view who notes that '*images of vampires and ghosts are interwoven with illness – with "consumption" and "intemperance" being two of Brontë's most symbolic illnesses.*' (Boghian, *A Semiotic Approach to Illness in Emily's 'Wuthering Heights'*, 2015, p. 69). Her mad emotional feelings for Helen's husband portray her as an intemperate character. As a married woman, her conduct is unfortunately characterised by a negative emotional excess, as it is evidenced by her confessions. Her behaviour may be seen as subversive and even irrational, given the moral aspiration of the Victorian era. Romantic relationships are not just for entertainment purposes and are often intended to lead to marriage.

The gothic female sub-genre generally includes the presence of children to explore the themes of innocence, vulnerability, and the impact of societal expectations on women. There is no doubt that children are traditionally a source of joy, but they may also cause anxiety for mothers, as it is well exemplified in the three novels. Moers's analysis of Female Gothic texts seems also to underscore the fact that women are entrapped '*within the domestic and within the female body, most terrifyingly experienced in childbirth'* (Smith & Wallace, 2004, p. 1). Their fear needs explaining by cultural feminists who think that women's '*free space*' is invaded by men. This argument alludes to the opinion of Psychoanalytic critics which is based on Freudian sexuality and social relationships. For Dworkin, intercourse is a form of a '*gothic crime*' of transgression even though women could be blamed as *'collaborators'* in that offence. In heterosexual intercourse, the biological aspect of the female body predisposes women to *'male predation'* (Meyers, 1977, p. 11).

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Following childbirth, the education of children is a particular concern for many mothers, including Helen, who is particularly mindful of her child's future. She bears in mind that if she fails, little Arthur will be as monstrous as his father. This partly justifies some of her incomprehensible or even unreasonable decisions regarding her child**,** particularly when she once opposed little Athur's request to let him go horse riding with Gilbert. Helen appears to fear the animal, possibly due to repressed desires or emotions related to sexuality and masculinity that she is trying to dispel. This powerful and instinctual animal is interpreted by psychoanalysts as a symbol of masculine sexual domination, based on Freudian theory.

Jane Eyre, Wuthering Heights, and *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* portray prominently women's suffering from that captivating domination. Childcare burden is one of the female chores in the domestic sphere. The female gothic focuses on the influence of motherhood which makes women's condition more traumatising. The novels paint persecuted heroines like Helen who escapes from Arthur's tyranny with her child, and Isabella who is subjected to physical, moral, and psychological trauma. Fortunately, her son survived. Motherhood provides happiness in the sense that it exalts women, elevating them to the status of creators of human life (Moers, 1976, p. 93). But this angelic image seems to be toned down in gothic narratives where motherhood is also displayed as a source of misfortune. It shows some demonic side to women which emerges in certain circumstances. In Anne's other novel, *Agnes Grey*, Rosalie displays an irrational hatred for her baby girl. Indeed, it is an expression of the disgust she feels for her mad, intemperate husband, Sir Thomas Ashby (*chapter 22*). That could be interpreted as a manifestation of the syndrome of *'the trauma of the afterbirth'* (Moers, 1976, p. 93). Indeed, it emphasizes the contrast with the common cultural attitude towards motherhood which is joyful. Childbirth and childhood are associated with an underlying feeling of fear. In the female gothic view, women are victims of male exploitative acts through intercourse which *'makes all women into Gothic heroines, virgins awaiting, fearing, and, perhaps, desiring their defilement*' (Meyers, 1977, p. 11). Femininity is often seen as a symbol of male domination and female inferiority, according to Marxist feminist critics. Paradoxically, it seems that Rochester is defeated by his wife.

Rochester is willing to marry another wife but he faces Bertha's tacit but strong opposition. She ultimately punishes him severely. It seems that Bertha seeks revenge by planning to destroy his physical appearance so that he cannot love or be loved by another woman. She partly succeeds since Rochester has lost one eye after the fire that burnt down his house. However, this handicap does not remove his charm in Jane's eyes. Like Helen, both Bertha and Jane refuse to give up their love for Rochester and make irrational decisions. They are viewed as characters symbolising women in confinement

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and living under the pressures of the domestic sphere. The difference lies in the fact that Helen cannot afford to respond violently to aggression like Jane and Bertha because she is concerned about her baby's physical, moral, and psychological integrity. Children need protection.

Often orphaned and alienated, children are subject to exploitation and corruption. Emily uses them as a means of manipulation and control through Heathcliff's marriage arrangements between his son Linton Heathcliff and Catherine's daughter Catherine Linton. He aims to gain control of the Grange to exact his revenge against Catherine, Hindley, and society.

The anxieties and fears associated with motherhood are substantiated in the three novels. A mother cannot predict her baby's future, as Mary Shelley symbolises it in her novel. Her creature is horrible and can be assimilated to Emily's Heathcliff. Both of them seem to escape from the control of their creator. The difference lies in the fact that in *Frankenstein*, the creator displays remorse, while Heathcliff, despite his morally questionable behaviour, remains a true portrayal of society and human nature.

Charlotte and her sisters deal with a widely debated issue concerning the condition of women in Victorian society, and in this respect, they emphasise the gothic sentiments that seem to haunt women through the fears related to female status, male domination, and motherhood. Their objective is not, as Miles says about Wollstonecraft, a '*wish to encourage women in this mistaken bid for power; she wants women to have power over themselves, not men*" (Miles,1953, 81). Their heroines don't have any ambition to dominate their husbands but to get rid of the fears that spoil their lives.

Conclusion

The Gothic has provided significant inspiration for the 19th-century narratives. In *Jane Eyre, Wuthering Heights* and *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall,* Charlotte, Emily, and Anne take love to an irrational dimension, through the excesses it drives their characters to. Some of them engage in unreasonable relationships in the name of love, without any limits, to achieve their goals; they even resort to shedding blood, committing incest, or profanation. In their respective novels, the Bronte sisters emphasise fear through multiple terror and horror-inspiring scenes. The constant evocation of ghosts, spirits, phantoms, and other supernatural beings by Jane and the country folks (p. 244) in Emily's novel, or by Arthur Huntingdon, shows how popular beliefs predispose the English people to an interest in gothic stories. This work closely analyses women's conditions in the light of the gothic literary trend which has a substantial female readership. Some tools from literary criticism are used for an efficient reading of the novels as gothic works. The theory of female gothic has significantly contributed to reconsidering the sources of female suffering and underscores women's feelings associated with childbirth and motherhood,

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as exemplified by Helen's tribulations. The gothic aspects are also enhanced by the frame narrative helping to explore the unknown and unravel mysterious happenings in *Wuthering Heights* and *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*.

Indeed, the prospect of new emotional experiences which used to foster enthusiasm among the 19th-century readership continues to resonate with today's passion for horror or vampire films. It seems that the rising tendency to dramatize and adapt gothic novel stories for the screen is meant to compensate for the decline in people's interest in reading.

Conflict of Interest: The authors reported no conflict of interest.

Data Availability: All data are included in the content of the paper.

Funding Statement: The authors did not obtain any funding for this research.

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