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Inside and Outside: Terror's Penetration of the Indoors in *Wuthering Heights* and 'The Room in the Dragon Volant'

Freddy Lowe

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'Let me in, let me in' ~ (Cathy's ghost, Wuthering Heights, Brontë)

Indoor and outdoor settings are highly symbolic in Gothic texts. Specifically, in Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* and J. Sheridan Le Fanu's little-known 'The Room in the Dragon Volant', indoor and outdoor settings are symbolically linked with the characters' psychologies. A dichotomy is established between the peaceful, psychologically safe indoor settings and the more tumultuous, psychologically disruptive setting of the outdoors. This essay examines the intertwining of natural outdoor settings with psychological turmoil in both tales, and the comparison each text makes with its (comparatively) safer indoor settings. This ultimately highlights why Gothic texts are so preoccupied with the indoors: much of the fear and suspense arises from whether the terror-laden outdoors will penetrate the safety of the indoors.

Robert D. Hume defines the 'fundamentally psychological' Gothic effect as 'evil and brooding terror' and claims that 'settings exist to convey [that terror]' (286). Settings clearly exist to convey the terror in Le Fanu's 'The Room in the Dragon Volant', as evidenced by the symbolism of moonlight. Moonlight symbolises dramatic romance but also danger. In Chapter 4, Beckett describes the 'pleasant moonlight' and how it 'heighten[s]' his 'sentiment'. 'What a drama, if she turned out to be...in love with me!' (Le Fanu 131). Beckett does not yet know how dangerous the Countess is; thus, the natural setting intoxicates him with feelings of romantic excitement that will later prove fatal. Consider also his outdoor rendezvous with the Countess: 'As she thus spoke, she drew her glove off, and extended her hand, back upward, in the moonlight...' (195). The Countess's hand is symbolic not only of romance (Beckett kisses it) but also of murder: the drug Beckett drinks later is administered by her hand. Therefore, Beckett is in the presence of something that will seek to bring about his doom, but he is blind to the danger. All he notices is the hand's beauty, helped by its illumination by the moonlight. There is also a sexual symbolism in the hand being degloved, in the pulling back of clothing to reveal bare skin. The moonlight illuminates this

sexually tantalising image, highlighting to Beckett the Countess's intoxicating beauty while drawing attention away from the oncoming danger. The outside setting, then, serves to highlight the Countess's beauty, which, despite its seductive qualities, will ultimately transpire to be a source of terror, not safety. This is Le Fanu's intertwining of the outdoors with the Gothic terror.

Le Fanu renders this effect more psychologically fraught by having the natural setting *conceal* the terror as well as convey it. The moonlight evokes terror but also masks it with romance and lust. Therefore, part of this novella's Gothic effect is the reader's powerlessness to stop Beckett from blindly proceeding towards the source of terror. Moonlight acts as a symbol of Beckett's approach towards danger when Beckett journeys to his near-fatal demise and writes of the 'silent, moonlighted, solitary road' (190). In a rare moment of clarity, he wishes he had 'never entered the labyrinth that was leading [him], [he] knew not wither' (191), but continues down the 'moonlighted' road regardless. Le Fanu depicts moonlight as capable of intoxicating the mind to the extent that characters will journey towards their doom, even if this journey simultaneously terrifies them. The natural setting is, therefore, bound up with the protagonist's psychological tumult.

Likewise, the natural setting in *Wuthering Heights* is intertwined with the characters' tumultuous psychologies, though Brontë's use of nature is less seductive and more *overtly* violent than in Le Fanu's novella. For instance, the characters' psychological turmoil is often symbolised by violent storms. On the night Heathcliff runs away, 'the storm [comes] rattling over the Heights in full fury,' and Cathy's 'state of agitation' rises with the 'growling thunder' and the 'great drops that began to plash around her...' (Brontë 75). Here, Brontë links Heathcliff and Cathy's interrupted desire with Nature's violence. By contrast, when Heathcliff and Cathy are (implicitly) united beyond the grave, the natural setting is stiller: Lockwood observes the 'soft wind breathing through the grass' of the 'quiet earth' (300).

Brontë thus associates Cathy and Heathcliff's love as bound up with the natural environment surrounding the Heights. When their desire is interrupted and enraged, storms hit the Heights, and when the two are united, nature is softer. Outdoor settings thus indicate the presence of a source of terror (in this case, the psychological terror Cathy feels at being apart from Heathcliff), or whether the characters are temporarily safe.

Heathcliff's name is symbolic here too. His name comprises elements of the natural world, 'heath' and 'cliff', implying that he has a strong connection to Nature. As critics have highlighted, Charlotte Brontë called her sister's novel 'wild, and knotty as a *root of heath*' (Brontë: Potter 35:20, my italics), and based on this, Potter suggests that Heathcliff has an 'affinity' with the wildness of the landscape (Potter 36:10). This suggests that the storm at the Heights is prompted by his fury upon hearing of Cathy and Edgar; the natural landscape mirrors his emotions. Brontë thus achieves Hume's 'psychological' Gothic effect (Hume 286) by associating Heathcliff's tumult with a violent storm. Outside natural settings are sources of psychological Gothic terror in both Le Fanu and Brontë (and in Le Fanu, the terror is compounded by the outdoors' seductive moonlit veneer, which can lure in an unsuspecting protagonist).

This prompts examination of the texts' indoor settings, because while the indoor settings are not impenetrable (to be explored later), they are nevertheless presented as safer and psychologically more peaceful than the outdoors.

Consider Cathy's ghostly cries in *Wuthering Heights*: 'Let me in – let me in!' (20). The crucial point is that she is *not* let in. The source of Gothic terror remains outside, implying that the domestic walls have formed a barrier between terror and safety. Note this chapter's stark contrast with Edgar Linton's death, which takes place securely in his bedroom. Ellen does not dare enter until Catherine and Edgar are ready (251), symbolising the sanctity of the indoor setting. Edgar's death is also psychologically less fraught: he tells

Catherine that ‘you darling child shall come to us’ (251), his confident belief in the afterlife demonstrating his inner and spiritual peace. Gothic terror is (for now, at least) relegated to the outdoors, while the indoors remains the haven for spiritual and psychological safety.

Likewise, it is highly symbolic in ‘The Room in the Dragon Volant’ that Beckett has to be lured outside for the Countess’s plan to work. She gives him detailed ‘instructions’ on how to escape from his room (Le Fanu 214). The Gothic source of evil can only achieve her goal by removing Beckett from the enclosed safety of the indoor bedroom and luring him into the night. Le Fanu compounds this symbolism when Beckett investigates the secret passage, opens the outside door, and ‘the night-air, floating in, puff[s] out the candle’ (214). The candle – Beckett’s source of light and comfort – only works in the safe indoors. Once exposed to the outdoors, this comfort vanishes.

However, whilst the safe indoor settings juxtapose with the tumultuous outdoors, the texts by no means present the sanctity of the indoors as guaranteed. Both texts reflect anxieties about the permeability of indoor spaces. The previous examples illustrate this. Lockwood’s anxiety about the security of his bedroom against the outside terror is so extreme that he ‘pull[s] [the ghost’s] wrist onto the broken pane, and rub[s] it to and fro till the blood ran down and soaked the bedclothes...’ (Brontë 21). Only through extreme violence is the sanctity of the indoor space reinforced. Likewise, the swiftness with which the wind blows out Beckett’s candle displays the ease with which the outdoor Gothic terror can penetrate any gap in the indoors’ defences. The psychological safety of the indoors is undercut by anxiety about how guaranteed that safety is.¹

Anxiety about the permeability of indoor settings is also seen in the contrast between *Wuthering Heights*, a farmhouse, and *Thrushcross Grange*, a more upper-class residence.

Wuthering Heights is more integrated with Nature. The ‘flagged causeway’ is beset with

¹ This could speculatively explain the popularity of the ‘haunted house’. Anxiety is triggered by dangerous ghosts appearing in supposedly ‘safe’ indoor home spaces.

‘straggling gooseberry bushes’ (Brontë 6), and Lockwood guesses that the house suffers ‘pure, bracing ventilation...up there at all times, indeed: one may guess the power of the north wind blowing over the edge, by the excessive slant of a few stunted firs at the end of the house...’ (2). Contrastingly, Grange’s upper-class status is symbolised by its having a ‘flower-plot’ rather than straggling bushes (41). Rather than Nature taking control by having the bushes grow in a ‘straggling’, uncontrolled manner, a flower plot symbolises human control over Nature, the coercion of Nature into a more aesthetically beautiful form. Thus, the Grange is more insulated from Nature’s violent agency than the Heights. This explains why Edgar Linton’s indoor death at the Grange is undisturbed by psychological terror, whereas the Heights are beset with ghosts demanding to be ‘let in’ through the windows. Similarly, Brontë associates the tumultuous and violent outdoor settings with Heathcliff’s rage because he is a product of the Heights, not the Grange. He has grown up in a house with less security against the wild outdoors. This demonstrates the novel’s anxiety about the permeability of indoor spaces: if an indoor setting, like Wuthering Heights, provides insufficient protection against outside terrors, that house’s residents have the potential to become as monstrous as Heathcliff.

Opponents of this interpretation may argue that Le Fanu’s conspirators are inside, not outside, when they poison Beckett and trap him in the coffin, but this is merely another example of anxiety about keeping the indoors safe. The indoors are where Beckett is poisoned, but also where he is rescued. The symbolic role of the police is to enter the indoor domain and dispel the source of evil from the house: ‘...lying and raving, he was *removed from the room*, and placed in the same [outside] coach with his beautiful and abandoned accomplice...’ (Le Fanu 238, my italics). The terror temporarily penetrates the indoors before being swiftly returned to the outside. Just as Brontë hints that the penetration of indoor settings by outside Gothic forces can breed people like Heathcliff, Le Fanu’s story shows

how an intrusion of Gothic evil into the domestic realm almost leads to the protagonist's death.

This essay has mostly been concerned with psychological terror, but there is an element of religious terror too. Before the police expel the Gothic terror from the house, Beckett 'trie[s] to pray to God in [his] unearthly panic, but only thoughts of *terror, judgement, and eternal anguish*' come to him (Le Fanu 233, my italics). The violation of the indoor setting has led to Beckett feeling 'judgement' and 'eternal anguish', language reminiscent of Hell. This religious theme links with the 'sublime' theory of Gothic terror: 'The Sublime is...that which comes or comes back from *'elsewhere'*...to terrorise [people] in the negative forms of the *demonic*...' (Khair 157, my italics). The Sublime is both 'elsewhere' (outside) and demonic (from religious Hell). Outside settings, then, are bound up with Hell. In the presence of the moonlit Countess, Beckett feels 'eternal anguish', evoking Hell with its eternity connotations. Likewise, Heathcliff, the product of the wild landscape, becomes reminiscent of a 'ghoul or vampire' (Brontë 293), creatures cited by Khair as examples of the hellish Sublime (Khair 157). Outside settings are the source of the psychologically Hellish sublime: therefore, Nature and Hell are intertwined. These texts thus depict indoor settings as crucial protection from the terrors of Nature's demonic forces. The suspense derives from anxiety about whether people can truly feel safe in these protective spheres, and fear of the consequences if outside evil does penetrate the indoor realm.

Thus, these Gothic texts are deeply concerned with the sanctity of safe indoor settings, and to what extent that sanctity could be disrupted by outside terror. The outdoor natural settings are manifestations of the characters' psychological tumult: in *Wuthering Heights*, the violent storms symbolise Heathcliff's inner torment, whilst in 'The Room in the Dragon Volant', the moonlight symbolises the simultaneous seduction and terror induced in Beckett by the Countess. By contrast, indoor settings are domestic spheres of (supposed)

spiritual peace and psychological safety, yet they are fraught with anxiety about how secure they truly are. Gothic suspense in these texts derives from the fear of the demonic terror, literal, religious, or psychological, that could arise for us if the outside evil is successfully 'let in'.

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