

Gothic Temporality: Order and Continuity in *Wuthering Heights* and *The Hound of the Baskervilles*

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Abstract:

The distortion of mundane life is typical of Gothic literature. One of the defining features of mundane life is that of linear time, and the assurance of its regular continuity. This essay will explore how temporal distortion is used in Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* and Arthur Conan Doyle's *The Hound of the Baskervilles* to evoke a sense of unease and unfamiliarity. The analysis will focus on Brontë's and Doyle's use of repetition, circularity, and temporal uncertainty in order to uncover the ways in which the narratives comment on wider themes such as human progression, the nature of morality, and the existence of evil. The essay concludes that the difference between the two novels' use of temporal confusion reflects Brontë's and Doyle's very different thematic concerns and philosophies. On the one hand, Brontë explores the role played by childhood and familial relationships in the duplicability of evil, while Doyle is far more concerned with damning primitivism in order to hail the coming of contemporary civilisation.

Gothic texts rely on the distortion of almost every aspect of mundane life to form their horrifying aspects. One of the defining features of mundane life is that of linear time, and the assurance of its regular continuity. With the ‘stagnation’ of time (Brontë, 39) and a narrative emphasis on temporal instability, the realm of the known becomes undermined, the results of which are multifaceted and thoroughly examined in both Emily Brontë’s *Wuthering Heights* (1847) and Arthur Conan Doyle’s *The Hound of the Baskervilles* (1901). Despite the former being a Gothic romance and the latter being a fin-de-siècle detective story, both novels are very much concerned with the question of why evil exists and how it reproduces itself over time, thus contradicting any sense of moral progression. Where *Wuthering Heights* largely observes the duplicability of evil through learned behaviour and the formative years of childhood, *The Hound of the Baskervilles* heralds Victorian progressivism within a comparatively conservative framework. This essay will analyse both authors’ use of repetition, circularity and temporal uncertainty in order to uncover the ways in which the narratives comment on wider themes such as human progression, the nature of morality and the existence of evil.

The narrative structure of *Wuthering Heights* utilises repetition in order to undermine the logical perception of time. The fuller consequences of the circularity within Brontë’s novel will be examined further in the essay, as the significance of repetition and duplication is the point on which several others must rest (West, 13). This is best illustrated at the beginning of the novel wherein Lockwood continually visits Wuthering Heights. Upon first entering the house, Lockwood describes an attack from one of the dogs as it ‘suddenly broke into a fury and leapt on my knees...half a dozen four-footed fiends, of various sizes and ages, issued from hidden dens’ (Brontë, 7). This moment directly echoes a later experience of Cathy’s as she runs from the vicious dogs at Thrushcross Grange: ‘The devil had seized her ankle...I heard his abominable snorting’ (Ibid, 70). This moment of violence is repeated so as to emphasise the repetitive and animalistic ways in which families operate within the realms of both the Heights

and the Grange. After the respective attacks on Lockwood and Cathy, both characters are forced to spend the night in foreign houses, and from this point onwards their lives become temporally altered. This is a characteristic invocation of the 'Uncanny', in that repressed desires to recreate the past penetrate the narrative and suggest a fearfulness in the blurring distinction between the familiar and unfamiliar (Freud, 220). The same analysis can be attributed to the narrative's repetition of the date the 20<sup>th</sup> March, which marks both Catherine's death and her daughter's birth. This dualistic event concisely reflects the novel's preoccupation not only with the past as a fixed entity, but with the future also being contained in the past and therefore preordained by natural forces (West, 7). The repetition of horrific events therefore refuses to allow trauma to be successfully repressed, but rather insists upon its constant renewal in a typically Gothic fashion that can be seen throughout the novel.

Perhaps the most implicit yet intriguing use of temporal confusion stems from the cyclical nature of the characters' lives and legacies. Throughout *Wuthering Heights*, readers become acquainted with Catherine Earnshaw, Catherine Linton, Catherine Heathcliff, and finally we return to Catherine Earnshaw, thus demonstrating in miniature the cyclical nature of the narrative. The novel is primarily preoccupied with the notions of nurture, the questionable extent to which external forces can shape one's internal nature and ultimately, the fatal inability to mature beyond the liberty of childhood. Catherine and Heathcliff's childhood romance is rooted in wilderness and autonomy, but it is precisely because the constraints of societal order prevent their love from ever maturing and being legitimised that the pain of this must be inflicted on future generations (Thompson, 73). Heathcliff, upon first meeting his son Linton, acknowledges that his pleasure in having a child stems from the 'triumph of seeing *my* descendant fairly lord of their estates; *my* child hiring their children to till their fathers' lands for wages' (Brontë, 310). The notion of succession is thus inextricably linked to that of revenge within the landscape of the Heights, with children mechanised into extensions of their parents'

wrongdoings. The cruelty with which children are treated is to be witnessed everywhere and structures almost all of the events of the novel. Heathcliff's evil stems from his subjection to Hindley's sadistic bullying and commitment to 'reduce [Heathcliff] to his right place' (Ibid, 30), and in turn it becomes his objective to corrupt his son, Hareton under the philosophy that 'The tyrant grinds down his slaves and they don't turn against him, they crush those beneath them' (Ibid, 167). This illuminates the most intricate theme of temporal confusion in that the existence and impacts of evil and cruelty never cease, but rather recreate themselves continuously. Michael Black argues that there is some hope to be gained from the second-generation Catherine and her marriage to Hareton, because through nurture and understanding, they appear to have escaped the infinite cycle of malice in which their parents existed (Black, 145). Although this assessment of Black's is evident in the ending of the novel, the extent to which this is seen as a marker of positive progression is debatable; Catherine and Hareton's love is less defined by all-consuming infatuation, and although this provides hope that their relationship will be one of longevity and will break the repetition of revenge that has haunted their families, there is an underlying suggestion from Brontë that progression can ultimately only occur from a dilution of passion. From the subtle ways in which readers are invited to critique Lockwood and Nelly for their lack of profound understanding (Black, 147), it can also be assumed that lacking in imagination and passion are not qualities Brontë recommends. I therefore argue that Brontë does not wish to condemn the freedom of the human spirit that develops its organic intensity in childhood, but rather the societal conventions of modernity that have made it impossible for them to co-exist with 'civilisation'. Temporal distortion is thus the most fitting literary device with which to demonstrate the tension between nature and progression.

The similarities between *Wuthering Heights* and *The Hound of the Baskervilles* are subtle but nevertheless thought-provoking; their mutual obsession with the concept of a

primitive past that is able to invade the present structures the narratives. However, where Brontë avoids sharp criticism and more emphatically examines difference in a 'pre-moral' way (Cecil, 155), Doyle is far more concerned with damning primitivism in order to hail the coming of contemporary civilisation. Brontë, for example, appears concerned with the nature of evil and its origins in trauma: 'The master's bad ways and bad companions formed a pretty example for Catherine and Heathcliff. His treatment of the latter was enough to make a fiend of a saint' (Brontë, 95). In contrast, Doyle makes efforts to refuse any form of excuse as to why immorality may surface, as is clear in descriptions of Selden: 'The tragedy was still black enough, but this man had at least deserved death by the laws of his country' (Doyle, 82). This clear difference in philosophy alters the ways in which the authors respectively adopt temporal confusion, in that *Wuthering Heights* places evil as a continuous possibility from cruel treatment, whilst *The Hound of the Baskervilles* dictates that evil is, and must remain, an entity of the past. Furthermore, both novels place an emphasis on the future, albeit in differing ways. In *Wuthering Heights*, progression is shown to only be possible after a necessary 'exorcism' (Black, 145), as seen in the diluted union between Catherine and Hareton that has expelled the evil of their ancestors. The inherent 'morality' of their relationship is cast under an uncertain light in that passion, integrity and liberty must first be sacrificed, although there is an implicit promise that future generations will benefit from such an exorcism. Doyle's detective story takes a much more decisive standpoint to equal the rounded conclusion of the narrative itself since progression stems from power, not dilution. Sherlock Holmes and Henry Baskerville are proud men of stable morality and forward-thinking logic, far-removed from the barbarity of their symbolic ancestors Selden and Stapleton and thus forces of good. Therefore, the difference between the two novels' use of temporal confusion once more reflects a greater thematic disparity with regards to the authors' perspective on the nature of progression and its

consequences. Brontë and Doyle's visions of how the future should appear differ greatly, as will be examined further with regards to *The Hound of the Baskervilles*.

As Brontë does in *Wuthering Heights*, Doyle also adopts temporal confusion as a tool with which to examine cultural anxieties around heredity and family history (Fisher, 187). It is revealed that Stapleton's incentive for the murder of Charles was that of inheritance because he is a secret heir to the Baskerville family, but in compliance with Victorian doctrines of morality, his evil nature must prevent him from ownership over the property, or else the Gothic 'dreadful fate' that 'overhung' the Baskervilles (Doyle, 12) will never cease. In contrast, Watson muses on Henry Baskerville's nature and decides upon his suitability as heir:

As I looked at his dark and expressive face I felt more than ever how true a descendant he was of that long line of high-blooded, fiery, and masterful men. There were pride, valour, and strength in his thick brows, his sensitive nostrils, and his large hazel eyes (Ibid, 37).

Doyle communicates that Henry has all of the appropriate physical – and by implication, characteristic – qualities for the role of heir to the 'high' bloodline; he is a virtuous man who aims to lend his features to the bettering of the Baskerville family and property, whilst Stapleton is a mere continuation – or reincarnation (Ibid, 88) – of the first Hugo Baskerville's 'evil', unevolved and 'wicked' (Ibid, 7). This means that inheritance can only be 'right' and 'good' under circumstances where the heir has evolved, but if there is no change throughout time, then the family risks a *Wuthering Heights* form of transgression. There is a later instance wherein, upon seeing Baskerville Hall, Henry remarks that 'It's no wonder my uncle felt as if trouble were coming on him in such a place as this...I'll have a row of electric lamps up here inside of six months, and you won't know it again' (Ibid, 38). Henry's desire to modernise the house and change it from his predecessors' influence is intertwined with a symbolic desire to shed light upon darkened aspects of the past that characterise Gothic fiction, in that the association between light and advancement here refer us back to the notion that knowledge

must be the spearhead of societal progression. In this way, Doyle utilises temporal confusion as a means with which to reflect Victorian values regarding 'proper' heredity and fears regarding the capabilities of evil to survive.

In extension of this, *The Hound of the Baskervilles* focuses particularly on the question of whether or not human morality advances over time, without any self-awareness that Victorian conceptions of morality were subjective and subject to evolution themselves. Darwin's *The Origin of Species* was published in 1859, the year of Doyle's birth, and the consequential Victorian fixation with evolutionary biology formed a crucial conservative context for *The Hound of the Baskervilles* (Taylor-Ide, 55). At the beginning of the novel, Dr Mortimer expresses his enthusiasm for phrenology and is told to have written essays entitled 'Is Disease a Reversion?', 'Some Freaks of Atavism' and 'Do We Progress?' (Doyle, 3). These questions provide a thematic skeleton for the rest of the novel, but Doyle nevertheless avoids providing readers with any distinct answers. The character of Holmes undoubtedly exists to provide an ideal of modern Victorian rationality, capable of solving any mystery and ensuring justice over any criminal (Clausson, 61); his existence would therefore appear to prove as a constant reminder that humans can in fact progress to an enlightened standard. Indeed, Holmes' ability to solve the mystery of the hound and prove the superstitions of the supernatural as false does provide a decidedly un-Gothic end to the supposedly Gothic novel, precisely because logic is heralded as the triumphant force (Ibid, 63). Nonetheless, Holmes fails to answer the real question that is never explicitly stated but rather haunts the central narrative, that of why criminals commit crimes and why evil exists at all in the age of modernity (Ibid, 78), and goes so far as to acknowledge this himself: 'to take on the Father of Evil himself would, perhaps, be too ambitious a task' (Doyle, 15). The criminality of both Selden and Stapleton is inextricably linked to the figure of the hound and the primitivism of the landscape in order to demonstrate that evil is a transgression with its roots in the ancient past of mankind. Nevertheless, its ability

to resurface in the ‘civilised’ present of Holmes and Watson poses a problem in that the durability of evil suggests humans have not or perhaps cannot progress. It is as though the ancient land rests beneath a thin shield, close to the surface on which modern society has built itself, threatening to re-emerge. Watson and Henry travel to the moors – and therefore symbolically back in time – to a primitive age, ‘Prehistoric man lived thickly on the moor, and as no one in particular has lived there since, we find all his little arrangements exactly as he left them’ (Ibid, 46). The landscape of the moor is eternally unchanged, meaning that the lawlessness of the past is able to penetrate the present, as ‘all things are possible upon the moor’ (Ibid, 45), thus contaminating the morality of those inhabiting it. The association between history and moral degeneracy therefore casts doubts over the reigning forces of logic and civilisation that had been proclaimed by contemporary figures such as Darwin and Thomas Huxley (Taylor-Ide, 345). The detailed documentation of various time frames within the narrative allows for the simultaneous existence of all, thereby creating, in effect, a similar endless circularity to that within *Wuthering Heights* in which progression, though signalled at, is no guaranteed certainty.

To conclude, it is evident that the disfigurement of time has been adopted by Gothic authors to evoke a sense of unease and unfamiliarity. Both *Wuthering Heights* and *The Hound of the Baskervilles* utilise temporal confusion in order to craft the simultaneous existence of multiple times, with an implicit suggestion that evil as an innate force prevents the progression of time. However, whilst Brontë’s novel assumes an almost pseudo-psychoanalytical examination of familial relationships and formative experiences in childhood that predict individual behaviours in adulthood, *The Hound of the Baskervilles* is far more preoccupied with a wider view of Victorian sensibility and society’s advancement into modernism. This demonstrates how the same Gothic trope can be used to communicate very different thematic concerns and contemporary cultural anxieties. Nevertheless, one significant point of interest

that must be raised is that both Brontë and Doyle carefully selected the location of moorland as one of primitivism and barbarism, immune to or beyond the influences of modernity. It is, instead, a space of infinite freedom where humans exist in a microcosm of a Hobbesian state of nature, free to love, hate and feel as they will. It is precisely this freedom of human nature from which Gothic fears arise and that can be seen to warp time, but by the close of both novels, it is evident that it is ultimately invincible and capable only of temporary suppression.

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## Further Reading

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