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Gothic Sexuality: Feminine Expression and Masculine Anxiety

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Abstract:

In this essay I will argue that Gothic fiction relies upon the distortion of gendered and sexual expectations in order to invoke fear and provocation in readers. Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury,* Machen's *The Great God Pan* and Le Fanu's *Carmilla* are all Gothic texts that detail both feminine sexual expression and the masculine anxiety that is felt as a result of this. This thereby provides an enlightening insight into contemporary anxieties regarding acceptable gendered behaviours with regards to sex and the deep cultural shifts this may influence.

Gothic literature, in its articulation of socio-cultural fears, has always been a prime vehicle for authors to communicate sexual and gendered anxieties. This is particularly true of Gothic texts written at the turn of the twentieth century, a period in which patriarchal norms were beginning to be challenged by the emerging prospect of female suffrage. Focusing on Sheridan Le Fanu's *Carmilla* (1872), Arthur Machen's *The Great God Pan* (1894) and William Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury* (1929), this essay will examine the various ways in which the Gothic is invoked as a means of channelling society's growing uneasiness towards female sexual emancipation and the consequential risk of male powerlessness. Although these texts are by authors from Ireland, Wales and the United States respectively, and were written over a fifty-seven-year time period, they are all concerned with a very similar uneasiness regarding female sexual emancipation and the consequential risk of male powerlessness. Anxieties around sexuality have evidently continued to survive within Gothic literature from the nineteenth century into the twentieth as a seemingly inexhaustible and profound landscape of societal fear. I will specifically argue that male anxieties around weakness and feminine sexual expression provide the most prominent skeleton of the texts' Gothicism.

Throughout the texts, female promiscuity is continually presented as an inherent danger that needs to be suppressed. It is important to note, for instance, that all three novels feature absent mothers in various respects, a motif which allows each author to trace the origins of what they construct as monstrous female maturity. Laura is raised by her father alone, Mrs Compson is profoundly feckless and Helen's mother is narratively cast aside after she has served her function as a vehicle for Dr Raymond's experiment. The men who remain in the absence of the mother often struggle to assert the authority they are expected to inherently possess: Laura's father fails to kill Carmilla, the Compson brothers secure the demise of the family name and several men die at the hands of Helen before she is destroyed. The socio-cultural fear alluded to here may be that in the absence of a morally stable female figure of

authority, both daughters and men are at risk of perverting their expected gender roles. It can be suggested that Caddy, Helen and Laura engage in sexualised relationships that defect from the accepted notions of monogamy, female subservience and heterosexuality partially because of their lack of moral guidance through childhood. One need only look at wider cultural and literary examples from the nineteenth century to view the weight attached to moral motherhood; Augustus Egg's 1858 *Past and Present* paintings, for example, succinctly depict Victorian fears around the promiscuity of a woman and the consequences on the future of the family's virtuousness. It is clear that Le Fanu, Machen and Faulkner were each utilising the cultural weight attached to mothers in order to evoke fears regarding both women's sexual deviance and men's powerlessness to prevent it.

This link between women's sexuality and male susceptibility and therefore weakness continues to be a forceful fear, as it manifests itself most notably in the relationship between Laura and the vampire in *Carmilla.* Their bond is frequently interpreted as a homosexual one, as the relationship is so defined by its physicality and eroticism: 'my strange and beautiful companion would take my hand and hold it with a fond pressure…blushing softly, gazing in my face with languid and burning eyes, and breathing so fast that her dress rose and fell with the tumultuous respiration. It was like the ardour of a lover' (Le Fanu, 17). Le Fanu is perhaps utilising fears around sexual 'perversion' in order to invoke a Gothic sense of the uncanny. However, when viewed in comparison with *The Sound and the Fury* and *The Great God Pan,* it becomes apparent that a more indirect anxiety lies around the role of men and their risk of being reduced to sexual ineffectiveness. The fin-de-siècle saw the rise of the so-called 'New Woman' (Hurley, 121) with connotations of independence after systemic changes to, for example, divorce laws that increased women's chances of survival without a male figure of authority (Lavender, 3). This apparent growth in female self-sufficiency was therefore a significant social anxiety for men who had previously enjoyed a position of dominance and is

here articulated by Le Fanu in a lesbian relationship that eludes the need for male presence. Indeed, the male characters in *Carmilla* are all secondary and never of romantic or sexual interest, instead being characterised by 'old' age (Veeder, 203). Le Fanu describes Carmilla's visceral vampiric attack upon Laura one night, after she has locked herself in her bedroom: 'I felt a stinging pain as if two large needles darted, an inch or two apart, deep into my breast' (Le Fanu, 27). This scene features a double enactment of penetration by Carmilla: she first invades Laura's locked room, thus supernaturally defying boundaries as a typical Gothic trope, and proceeds to 'dart' (Ibid) her teeth into Laura's flesh. The phallic imagery of enlarged 'needles' (Ibid) therefore renders Carmilla an uncanny male figure of sexual power, fully realising the anxiety around male superfluousness as readers are presented with a female possessing this power herself.

Furthermore, the relationship that exists between Laura and Carmilla appears to transcend the boundaries of love and affection portrayed elsewhere in the short story. In many ways, their bond is presented as passionate and romantic, to the extent that they are even imagined as one single entity: '[Carmilla] would whisper, almost in sobs, "You are mine, you *shall* be mine, you and I are one forever"' (Ibid, 17). One line of interrogation that must be pursued is the question of the extent to Carmilla's villainy; a feminist or queer reading, may easily find that the sincere, genuine love that exists between Laura and Carmilla is terminated because of its perceived perversity. Indeed, Ina Yee compares Carmilla's death to Lucy Westenra's brutal and sexually violent killing in Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897) because both women are characterised by their powers of seduction and therefore pose a significant threat to men (Yee, 39). It is the men of aggression and reason in *Carmilla* – General Spielsdorf, Baron Vordenburg and Laura's father – that succeed in the visceral destruction of Carmilla without Laura having much power in the decision. The ways in which the men perceive Carmilla and the Karnsteins juxtaposes directly with the romantic gestures exchanged between her and

Laura: "It is hard that they should, after death, continue to plague the human race with their atrocious lusts" (Ibid, 46). The allusion to 'lust' as a site for the vampires' lasting 'plague' demonstrates the threat Carmilla's homoerotic power poses to the older men in the narrative. The love between Laura and Carmilla is therefore never awarded the sincerity it undoubtedly possesses, but is rather seen as a threatening bond which must be abolished in the name of masculine rationality.

The downfall of the Compson family as a result of both Caddy and her daughter's promiscuity can also be related to the weakness of male figures in *The Sound and the Fury,* as we repeatedly hear that 'man is the sum of his misfortunes' (Faulkner, 103). According to old Southern outlooks on gender, Caddy is expected to uphold purity and passivity whilst the men are expected to be strong guardians of the family name. However, none of the Compson children successfully meet these gendered expectations and instead subvert them: Caddy behaves with sexual freedom while the brothers are rather so sexually disordered that they fail to continue the Compson lineage by the close of the novel: Benjy is castrated, Quentin commits suicide, and Jason cannot overcome a deep-rooted hatred of women. Mrs Compson, a character of old values and therefore traditional femininity, looks negatively upon her daughter: 'She couldn't bear for any of you [brothers] to do anything she couldn't. It was vanity in her, vanity and false pride' (Ibid, 261). Mrs Compson, due to her own self-centredness, is unable to empathise with her children and this view of Caddy is largely inconsistent with the one that Faulkner provides. Indeed, Faulkner remarked that Caddy was, to him, 'the beautiful one, she was my heart's darling. That's what I wrote the book about and I used the tools which seemed to me the proper tools to try and tell, try and draw the picture of Caddy' (Baum, 35-6). However, there is a truth in Mrs Compson's reflection, in that Caddy is a more powerful character than her brothers. Since childhood, she is able to act with a liberty that her brothers are refused and although Faulkner does not award Caddy a narrative voice and presents her

only through the perceptions of male characters, she appears as the most self-aware of the Compsons. Caddy is conscious that the concept of virginity to which her family attach so much weight is 'just words' (Ibid, 115) and therefore unnatural. In contrast, Caddy is characterised with a symbolic attachment to nature; the first signals towards her liberal attitudes are provided through a description of her 'all wet and muddy behind' (Ibid, 17) and a consequential repetition of Benjy's belief that 'Caddy smelled like trees' (Ibid, 4). Faulkner therefore suggests that tragedy arises not so much from rebelling against societal values, but rather from ignoring natural human instincts in favour of mere 'words' and mores. Caddy and her daughter are, as a result of this liberal trait and refusal to be confined, the only family members who manage to escape and survive away from the 'cursed' (Ibid, 157) family. Indeed, the brothers' feckless acceptance that 'blood is blood and you can't get around it' (Ibid, 243) serves to cement their fruitless lives. Faulkner expressed faith in Caddy exactly precisely because she is the only character 'brave enough to climb that tree to look in the forbidden window' (Baum, 37), and her daughter Quentin escapes using a similar courage. Freud's theory that trauma was in some way inherited provides a link between the gendered themes of this novel and the post-war backdrop against which it is set, in that white Southern men's military defeat and loss of a way of life that favoured them was a burden passed down through generations and marred the very concept of masculinity (Strawser, 2). The most articulated anxiety would thus appear to regard a newfound inability for men to exert power over women. However, Faulkner's treatment of Caddy as the heroine responsible for exposing the Compson family to the 'new' South (Gunn, 162), a necessary moralistic experience for Southern white aristocrats, in fact places the anxiety in relation to traditional expectations of gendered behaviours being flawed and even fatal.

The Sound and the Fury also brings into question the link between sexual freedom and identity, thus emphasising the extent to which the laws of the old South have suppressed humanity. As the novel begins with Benjy, readers experience various levels of his personal

disassociation. This is sometimes characterised through his obsession with shadows: 'Our shadows were on the grass. They got to the trees before we did. Mine got there first. Then we got there, and then the shadows were gone' (Faulkner, 52). Benjy has no concept of the shadow being in some way a reflection of himself, but rather understands it as a separate entity altogether. This understanding is very much in line with the culture of separation that surrounds him in post-bellum society. Quentin, although characterised by his pessimistic intelligence, is also unable to realise himself as a whole, as is also expressed through a contemplation of his shadow: 'I leaned on the railing, watching my shadow, how I had tricked it' (Ibid, 90). Added to Benjy's disassociation is now an element of deception, as seen in the antagonistic relationship between Quentin and his own reflective shadow that tries to 'trick' him (Ibid). As for Jason, a similar affliction can be seen in the negative way in which he relates with every other character in the novel. He lacks his brothers' sensitivity and instead adheres mindlessly to old-fashioned values: 'I have as much pride about my kinfolks as anybody even if I don't always know where they come from' (Ibid, 222). However, Jason's fate is defined by his dislike for the rest of the Compsons, casting his identity as one of the heirs into futility. This inability to wholly realise and connect aspects of their identity burdens all of the Compson brothers and effectively prevents them from becoming the hero of their own life narrative. Caddy and her daughter, on the other hand, care little for societal values and as a result are able to become a fully-fledged human-beings, even when disowned by the Compson lineage. Feminist critics such as Cynthia Dobbs, who objects to the ways in which Faulkner writes the female body (Dobbs, 41), might take opposition to Faulkner's refusal to give Caddy a narrative voice, but perhaps this is a force of liberation rather than oppression: Benjy, Quentin and Jason have disjointed narratives that serve to underline their disjointed lives – Caddy is free from this and thereby given the distance to make her own narrative. Accordingly, Caddy's sexual freedom

becomes her most powerful means of liberation, allowing her to dissent against the traditional norms of her society.

The Great God Pan is also concerned with gendered anxieties, as the narrative centres around a demonic woman characterised by sexual deviance. It is precisely this trait that she utilises to both lure and kill male victims, suggesting that the anxiety most fervently considered by Machen is that of the danger posed to men by monstrous feminine sexuality. As seen in *Carmilla*, inextricably linked to danger is the deception of beauty, as the feminine object of terror is described in regard to both attraction and fear: 'Every one who saw her…said she was at once the most beautiful woman and the most repulsive they had ever set eyes on' (Machen, 43). Just like Carmilla and Caddy, men are attracted to Helen's exterior, leaving them vulnerable to the truth of her interior which they sense through an inexplicable 'repulsion'. Worth draws attention to the motif of the abyss within the text and interprets this as a symbol of anxieties regarding 'deep time' or primitivism (Worth, 216). However, given the deeply sexual nature of Helen's monstrosity and the crafting of her female body as the site of evil, it is possible to apply a physical analysis of the several 'abysses' (Machen, 6), 'deeps' (Ibid, 106) and 'voids' (Ibid, 6) in relation to yonic imagery. Freud described the commonality of this specific fear in relation to the uncanny: 'neurotic men declare that they feel there is something uncanny about the female genital organs' (Freud, 245). Since Helen sexually engages with men who are then driven to kill themselves, her fearfulness must originate from the sexual experience itself in a way that ultimately reduces men, leaving them weaker than they were before the encounter (Paglia, 13). In a similar vein, Villiers states that he has "known something of the terror that may dwell in the secret place of life, manifested under human flesh" (Machen, 93). As in *Carmilla,* there is clearly a very potent fear regarding monstrous, grotesque or immoral sex. The 'secret place of life' can also be interpreted as yonic symbolism, as the source of all human existence, and is here explicitly referred to as the precise location of fear. A

physical reading in this fashion consequently locates the primary anxiety of the text onto the sexually experienced female body itself, as deviating from the Victorian expectations of domesticity, purity and inherent morality, as well as male dominance over both body and mind (Davison, 125).

Helen's existence is also a source of anxiety because of her pagan origins. As the offspring of Pan, Helen deviates from Christian morality and becomes an antichrist figure; the deliberate naming of her mother as Mary further alludes to this. Helen, as a result of this, suffers a similar fate to Carmilla in her violent destruction at the hands of rational men, as she is literally deconstructed into nothing: 'The skin, and the flesh, and the muscles, and the bones, and the firm structure of the human body that I had thought to be unchangeable, and permanent as adamant, began to melt and dissolve' (Machen, 99). Machen plays on the typical Gothic trope of things being other than they seem, with Helen appearing to be human but in fact existing as a monster. However, there is a notable focus on her body, flesh and anatomy that emphasises both sexuality and the non-human form together, as if to suggest that the demon is somehow 'entrapped' within the female body (Hurley, 119). Since this body must dissolve and cease to exist entirely before the novel reaches its victorious conclusion, it is the tellingly the biological body itself that is the site of terror. Such a reimagining of the antichrist as female is therefore a revealing insight into Victorian masculine anxieties surrounding un-Christian, immoral female behaviours that are most basely structured around the sexualised body.

Overall, it is evident that Gothic literature repeatedly utilises sexuality and gender as aspects of identity to distort the mundane and evoke psychological anxieties. Sex itself as a notion with such historic and cultural weight attached to it is the ideal vehicle through which Gothic fiction can disturb various conventions and unsettle psychological boundaries. I would argue that *The Sound and the Fury* invites a more progressive analysis than the other texts, perhaps as a result of its later publication date after the turn of the century: Faulkner

demonstrates a simultaneous awareness of white Southerners' contemporary anxieties as well as an empathy for those very objects of anxiety, primarily black people and women, but stops short of suggesting that such fears are unfounded. His modernist interpretation of supernatural, haunting entities as psychological traumas rather than, for example, vampires or demons sets his novel apart from *Carmilla* and *The Great God Pan.* These two nineteenth-century texts are traditional works of the Victorian Gothic in that they play on misogynistic anxieties without a comparable attempt to alleviate or disprove them, as partially seen in *The Sound and the Fury.* They nevertheless provide detailed insights into the lasting locations of anxiety haunting fin-de-siècle societies, most notably the threat posed by concealable strangers and the place of men in society once women become empowered.

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