

“Rude as Savages”: The Hypocrisy of Imperialism in Selected Gothic Literature

Sally Parsons

July 2021

Abstract:

This article explores how Victorian concerns of reverse imperialism can be revealed and critiqued in Emily Brontë’s *Wuthering Heights* (1847) and Sheridan Le Fanu’s *Carmilla* (1872). ‘Reverse Imperialism’ rose to prominence in the British social psyche in the mid-to-late 19th century and centred on the idea that immigrants from the British colonies who gained wealth and social status within British cosmopolitan society threatened the existing social order and were taking wealth away from British men. Brontë’s novel draws attention to the ‘imperial gaze’ by positioning Heathcliff as a personification of the colonised who emigrated to Britain. He is scrutinised and marginalised by his “superior” white counterparts (Brontë 5). Similarly, in *Carmilla*, our titular character is able to use her pale complexion to integrate into Laura’s English family, whose prejudiced attitude towards local Styrian knowledge and folklore makes them ignorant of Carmilla’s vampirism. The colonised characters inhabit Freud’s concept of the ‘uncanny’: they are human yet are different from the rest of British society in the white colonial mindset, thus making readers feel uncomfortable and evoking gothic horror. Both authors use ideas of imperialism to highlight the negative effects of colonial prejudice on both the colonizer and the colonized. The novels can act as a warning for contemporary British readers; the ‘antagonists’ Carmilla and Heathcliff subvert the English imperial ideology, such as the imperial gaze, assimilation policies, and eugenic prejudice, in order to damage colonial families. Le Fanu and Brontë suggest that British imperialism is not sustainable by drawing on the darkest fear of British Imperialists – that they will lose power over their colonies.

Both Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* (1847) and Sheridan Le Fanu's *Carmilla* (1872) were published when ideas of eugenics and orientalism were at their height (Said, *Orientalism*, 9). British colonialism influenced these ideas as the English perceived their conquests as a civilising mission, bringing enlightenment and morality to the colonies. Although *Wuthering Heights* plays out in the isolated northern-English moors, the introduction of "dark-skinned" Heathcliff draws attention to the 'imperial gaze' - he is scrutinised by his 'superior' white counterparts (Brontë 5). In contrast, in *Carmilla*, Laura's English family are the colonisers living in colonized Styria. Carmilla's pale skin and the English scorn of the supernatural and folklore enables her to infiltrate the family. These characters subvert imperial policies of forced assimilation, enlightenment knowledge, and the imperial gaze. Thus, the paradoxical hypocrisy of imperial ideology is revealed and uncanny gothic horror is created for contemporary English readers (Freud, *The 'Uncanny'* 1). The 'uncanny', is frequently employed in gothic fiction because it is "that class of the terrifying which leads back to something long known to us, once very familiar" (Freud 1). In this case, colonial people can be both familiar – because they are human – yet different – because they speak a different language or have a different appearance – to the Victorian metropole, whose experience of empire would be limited, through adventure stories and newspaper articles. Both stories highlight a deep-rooted Victorian fear of reverse colonization – that the colonised could overrun British society. The novels act as cautionary tales that critique the contemporary state of colonialism.

In *Wuthering Heights*, Heathcliff's ethnicity is unclear; both critics and the novel's characters speculate his origins. Found in Liverpool by Mr Earnshaw at the beginning of the novel, Heathcliff is described as 'a little Lascar, or an American or Spanish castaway' (Brontë, 40). Nelly the nurse tells him that "who knows but your father was Emperor of China, and your mother an Indian queen, each of them able to buy ... *Wuthering Heights* and

Thrushcross Grange” (45). We are given five options of Heathcliff’s heritage. Critics have offered their own takes; Howard Malchous considers Heathcliff as the offspring of a British sailor and an enslaved African woman (quoted in Küçük, *The Political Unconscious*, 1248). Terry Eagleton reads Heathcliff as an Irish immigrant (*Myths and Power*, p.xix). However, the ambiguity of Heathcliff’s origin allows Brontë to highlight the ignorance of those around him; they are unable to tell the difference between these nationalities. No character asks Heathcliff where he is from - instead, he’s expected to hide it and form a new, English identity. Heathcliff’s exact ethnicity does not matter; what is important is that he is not English. These countries are all closely tied to European empires, through trade and colonization. Liverpool docks, where he was found, was a key port for the imperial slave trade in the 19th century, with 70 to 85% of the English slave trade passing through it (Meyer, *Imperialism at Home*, 98). Therefore, although keeping Heathcliff’s heritage ambiguous, Brontë makes it clear that Heathcliff is a product of empire – and other characters treat him as such.

The aforementioned quote from Nelly highlights her world view –the way to gain property is through inheritance. She does not propose that Heathcliff could gain property by himself, or that his adoptive family would ever leave it to him as an heir. Once again, the imperial gaze plays its role; in trying to be comforting, Nelly unintentionally dismisses the prospect of Heathcliff living in a middle-class house of his own. She encourages Heathcliff to imagine “high notions” of his birth, dismissing any possibility of hereditary familial wealth and resorting to make-believe (Brontë 46). Of course, as the novel plays out this becomes ironic, as Heathcliff manages to take possession of both these homes. He reinvents himself as a Victorian gentleman, earning mysterious wealth, and uses legal loopholes against the family. Heathcliff’s story arc undermines imperial rhetoric of England as a caring parental figure to her colonized people – Earnshaw adopts him with a sense of moral superiority,

“determined that he would not leave it [Heathcliff] as he found it” (30). Like the British colonisers, Earnshaw believes he is helping by ‘civilising’ Heathcliff and introducing him to a better life in his English household. However, Heathcliff becomes ‘successful’ only when he leaves the Heights. Thus, Heathcliff can be read as symbolizing colonized people; Brontë seems critical of the Victorian ‘mission’, implying that the colonies may also become more ‘successful’ if they were not a colony (Meyer 100).

As such, Brontë highlights a key concern of the British people - reverse colonialization. In the late Victorian psyche, colonial immigrants who gained wealth were increasingly seen as a threat to British society. Wealth inevitably led to power – a man could buy a seat in parliament if he had the funds (Nechtman ‘Nabobs Revisited’ 649). Heathcliff’s character development follows this trajectory – after leaving the household, he returns to subvert the imperial gaze that was consigned to him. This is epitomised in his relationship with Isabella. When Isabella meets Heathcliff, she compares him to a “gypsy” and asks him to be thrown into the cellar (40). ‘Gypsy’ is a stereotypical derogative term for darker-skinned people in this period, and her request to lock Heathcliff up is an extreme reaction of imperial irrationality (Meyer 7). Locking him up is only a temporary solution to the ‘problem’ of Heathcliff. The Lintons highlight the paradox of imperialism – they are haughty and arrogant, but also threatened by Heathcliff. The contrast in their treatment of Catherine highlights this. Even though she laughs at them, they take her in and look after her, and make Heathcliff cross the moors alone and in the dark. Once Heathcliff gains his wealth, the roles are reversed and Isabella becomes subjected to Heathcliff’s gaze – Heathcliff takes advantage of her naivety to solidify his new social position: he admits that Isabella married him “under a delusion”, “picturing [Heathcliff] as a hero of romance” (117). Upon marriage, he treats her similarly to how he was treated by Hindley, locking her up and terming her “slavish” (117). Nelly describes him as looking at Isabella like “one might do at a strange repulsive animal: a

centipede from the indies perhaps” (83). This subversion of the imperial hierarchy - the colonized Heathcliff now taking power over the coloniser Isabella – would have been shocking for Brontë’s readers, to such an extent that one review described the novel as a “disagreeable story” (Chorley in *Athenaeum*, 1847). Isabella is a victim of Heathcliff’s manipulation, but it is worth remembering that she entered this marriage out of choice. Marriage itself was a western, Christian idea implemented in colonies by early European imperialists, so Heathcliff’s subversion of this important lifestyle milestone in colonial powers is the epitome of reverse colonization (Hyam, *Empire and Sexuality* 97). Similarly, Isabella’s decline internalizes the Victorian fears of English devolution to a more morally degraded state. Thus, with this relationship, Brontë utilises ideas of the uncanny to highlight not only the hypocritical morality of imperialism – her readers would be fine with the mistreatment of Heathcliff but become uncomfortable when the treatment is reversed on Isabella – but also the implications of reverse imperialism on the increasingly fragile British Empire.

The struggle for Catherine to associate with Heathcliff as an equal in *Wuthering Heights* parallels Laura’s perception of English superiority in *Carmilla*. Although the vampire Carmilla is our ‘antagonist’ in the microcosm of Le Fanu’s novella, the true ‘outsider’ is our narrator, Laura, and her father. They are English, living in rural Styria where they can afford a more comfortable way of life (Le Fanu 424). It was not uncommon in this period for lower-middle class families to move to the colonies where the price of living was less expensive, with families like Laura’s being recognisable to contemporary readers (Hansen 53). Le Fanu emphasises that family fulfil many of the English stereotypes – they read Shakespeare, drink tea, and speak English “partly from patriotic motives” (Le Fanu, 245). Yet it is clear that because of their choice to maintain a strictly English way of life, Laura socialises with “occasional visitors” from her own class and racial origin (245). As the

‘coloniser’, and therefore the eugenically superior in the eyes of the imperial English, it would not be acceptable for Laura to befriend girls from the village. Therefore, not only is Laura physically isolated - “the nearest inhabited village is about seven of your English miles” away (244) – but she is ideologically separated from those around her. As a result, Laura is left craving company. R. Smart interprets Laura as fulfilling the orphan trope in gothic literature. She lacks a sense of self and identity, making her susceptible to Carmilla’s advances (Smart 18). Laura says that “I forget all my life preceding that event” suggesting that her relationship with Carmilla shaped her identity (Le Fanu 5). Thus, Le Fanu shows how imperialist ideas shape Laura’s ‘colonizer’ identity, much like Heathcliff’s experiences treated as ‘the colonised’ sets up his character development and reverse colonization plotline.

The imperialist idea of English superiority is heightened further by the disease rhetoric of Le Fanu’s novella. Instead of applying supernatural or superstitious rhetoric to consider Carmilla’s vampirism, it is referred to as an illness. In the village, local girls are dying from the illness, and hints that Carmilla could be the source of this are revealed when we learn that she is not English, as at first presumed, but in fact a descendent of the Karnstein family, like Laura’s Styrian mother. Like Heathcliff and the Earnshaws, Carmilla does not tell Laura of her origins – “What she did tell me amounted, in my unconscionable estimation- to nothing” (263). Carmilla does reveal that her home is “to the west” (263), which can not only reflect Carmilla’s desire to appear ‘western’ to assimilate into Laura’s family, but also hints at her origins – the abandoned village where her body rests is “three miles westward” of the castle (244). It is only upon finding her painting that we begin to understand Carmilla’s true origin, forcing her to reveal her ethnicity: “so am I, I think, a very long descent, very ancient” (273). Initially we think the uncanny lies with the paintings similarity with Carmilla, but we realise it is the other way around as we begin to draw connections between Carmilla and the vampiric ‘disease’ that’s plaguing the area. Laura feels pity for the dying girls, but

does not imagine herself at risk due to her superior heritage. Her father confirms that “these poor people infect one another with their superstitions” (269). When faced with Carmilla’s vampirism, rational English men, embodied by Laura’s father, fail to identify the cause as they dismiss the local superstition of vampires. He scorns the local doctor for suggesting it, believing vampires to be a creature of local superstition believed by gullible locals (270). It is then ironic that her father’s ignorance to local knowledge causes Laura’s physical degradation.

The idea that a foreign threat could infiltrate and damage the English mirrors the Victorian fear of reverse colonisation in the novel, but rather than them overtake the English in England like Brontë illustrates in *Wuthering Heights*, here Le Fanu draws attention to instability within the colonies themselves. His readers would likely remember events such as the Indian Rebellion of 1857, where Indian rebels came dangerously close to overthrowing British colonial rule and taking back control (Marshall, *The Making and Unmaking of Empires* 197-198). As an ancient Karnstein herself, Carmilla’s infiltration of Laura’s home subtly illustrates a transfer of power back to the colonised people, symbolised by Carmilla. Although not stated outright, the Schloss’ proximity to the ruined Karnstein Castle and the abandoned village “three miles westward” where Carmilla was buried insinuates that it could have been an ancestral property during her life (244). Her return thus underlines imperial concerns of revolt in the colonies, where old powers could return to take back their power.

Martin Willis is one of several critics who consider Styria as a version of Ireland in the novella (Willis, *Le Fanu’s ‘Carmilla’, Ireland, and Diseased Vision*, 112). The anxiety of disease draws heavily on perceptions of the Irish as diseased. The European cholera epidemic of 1832 hit Ireland badly, and became one of the key reasons for ‘future stereotypes of the Irish as disease-ridden’ (115). Willis points out how Carmilla’s death at the end of her story is likened to ridding the land of a plague. Her ashes are “thrown upon the river and borne

away, and that territory has never since been plagued by the visits of a vampire” (316).

Carmilla’s Irish identity, as opposed to Laura’s Anglo-Irish identity, is key. Le Fanu employs Irish folklore and superstition (such as vampires), that the locals in his story would be aware of, but naïve Laura, who has been so sheltered from her Irish/Styrian surroundings, does not understand. This highlights the imperial relationship between colonizer and colonies -

English readers would typically dismiss Irish superstition in favour of English enlightenment rationality. It is symbolic that Irish/Styrian characters such as the hunchback are the first to notice Carmilla’s true identity: it is only with hindsight that the reader can identify why the hunchback was “amused” at Carmilla’s purchasing of an “amulet against the [vampire]”

(268). For Le Fanu, ethnic difference implies disease; as the cause of the ‘disease’, Carmilla has to be ethnically different from Laura. As Carmilla is Styrian, as opposed to Laura’s Anglo-Styrian status, Willis argues that Le Fanu ‘locates disease as Irishness’ (Willis, 116).

To conclude, both authors portray a story of reverse colonialism with reference to real colonial settings to highlight the issues of European colonialism. Ireland, the basis for Styria in *Carmilla*, is one of the first ‘colonies’ established overseas by English imperialism, with the plantations in the Pale in the sixteenth century (Lennon, *Sixteenth Century Ireland, the Incomplete Conquest*, 213). Carmilla’s long history of vampire activity in Styria/Ireland illustrates the turbulent history between the Britain and the Irish colonies. Likewise, in *Wuthering Heights*, Brontë ambiguously positions Heathcliff as a product of empire, aligning him with various colonial provinces. Both authors use ideas of imperialism in their novels to highlight the issues in colonial practices and their negative effects on both the colonizer and the colonized. The novels can act as a warning for English readers; the ‘antagonists’ Carmilla and Heathcliff subvert the English imperial ideology, such as the imperial gaze, assimilation policies, and eugenic prejudice, in order to damage colonial families. Le Fanu and Brontë

suggest that British imperialism is not sustainable by drawing on the darkest fear of British Imperialists – that they will lose power over their colonies.

Works Cited

- Brontë, Emily *Wuthering Heights*. 1847; Norton Critical Editions, 2003.
- Chorley, H. F review in the *Athenaeum*, 25th December 1847 found in 5th Norton Critical Edition of *Wuthering Heights*, ed. A Lewis. p. 272-3 2003.
- Eagleton, T. *Myths of power: a Marxist study of the Brontës*. (2nd ed.). Macmillan Press. 1988.
- Freud, S. The 'Uncanny'. 1919. *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, Volume XVII (1917-1919): An Infantile Neurosis and Other Works, 217-256.
- Hansen, Jim *Terror and Irish Modernism: The Gothic Tradition from Burke to Beckett*. State University of New York Press. 2009.
- Hyam, R. *Empire and sexuality: the British experience*, 1988.
- Küçük, Hale. 'The Political Unconscious in Jane Eyre, Wuthering Heights, and Great Expectations', *Gaziantep University Journal of Social Sciences*, 18.4 1242-1254, 2019.
- Le Fanu, Sheridan. 'Carmilla' *In a Glass Darkly* 243-319.1872; Oxford World's Classics, 2008.
- Lennon, Colm. *Sixteenth Century Ireland, the Incomplete Conquest*, Gill Books. 2005.
- Meyer, Susan. *Imperialism at Home: Race and Victorian Women's Fiction*. Reading Women Writing. Cornell UP, 1996.
- Marshall, P. J. *The Making and Unmaking of Empires: Britain, India, and America c.1750–1783*, Oxford UP, 2007.
- Nechtman, Tillman W. 'Nabobs Revisited: A Cultural History of British Imperialism and the Indian Question in Late-Eighteenth-Century Britain' *History Compass* 4/4: 645–667, 2006.
- Said, Edward. *Orientalism*. First published in 1978 by Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd: Redwood Burn Limited, 1980.
- Willis, Martin. "Le Fanu's 'Carmilla', Ireland, And Diseased Vision." Chapter. In 'Literature and Science', ed. Sharon Ruston, 61:111–30. Boydell & Brewer, 2008.

Further Reading

Horner, Avril, and Zlosnik, Sue. *Women and the Gothic*. Edinburgh UP, 2016.

Ledger, Sally. 'The New Woman and the Crisis of Victorianism.' *Cultural Politics at the Fin De Siècle*, edited by Ledger, Sally, and Scott McCracken, Cambridge UP, 1995.

Jerrold E. Hogle ; Robert Miles. *The Gothic and Theory*. Edinburgh UP, 2019.

Midgley, Clare. *Gender and Imperialism*. Manchester UP, 1998.

P. Levine, 'Sexuality and empire' in C. Hall and S. Rose (eds.), *At home with the empire: metropolitan culture and the imperial world*. Cambridge UP, 2006.