

A fantastic text tells of an indomitable desire...." (R. Jackson) How useful do you find this defini

Using the fantastic as a medium to express states of mind or unwritten desires has been a popular form for many writers since the Romantic era and still is today. However, it has also been used, in my opinion, to articulate fears and, and communicate feelings of cultural unease. In this essay, I will attempt to determine to what extent both are true and which is the more significant explanation for the common use of fantasy as a medium. I will also consider the question of why it appears to be a particularly important form for many female authors.

During the late eighteenth century there was a proliferation of what we term Gothic texts. These "horrid" novels are said to have been particularly popular with a female readership and usually featured young, vulnerable women in life-threatening or terrifying situations. Varying degrees of the fantastic were to be found in these novels, ranging from haunted castles and giants to sinister Counts and imprisoned wives languishing in madness in secret towers. Examples of these novels include Anne Radcliffe's *The Mysteries of Udolpho* and *The Romance of The Forest* and later, rather different works such as Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*. These novels can be viewed as expressing a deep sense of cultural unease, as they were written at a time of great upheaval and metamorphosis when society was changing from an agriculturally based village system to what would become an almost unrecognisable industrial society. Power was passing from the landed gentry to a money-oriented middle class oligarchy. The American and French Revolutions had placed fear in the hearts of the ruling classes and draconian measures such as the suspension of Habeas Corpus and widespread censorship were being implemented to attempt to quell revolutionary groups in society. People were also witnessing the advancement of a utilitarian industrial society and increasing secularism which threatened to destroy the way of life and the values they were accustomed to, and rather than replacing it with the egalitarian society the French had hoped for, a horrific life in a polluted city working in the sweat shops of the new rich appeared to be all that was on offer for the large majority of the population. This naturally led to a great deal of political unrest and in order to limit the threat to their position that this presented, the reign of the terrified became a reign of terror, which threatened the freedom of all areas of society, not least that of writers. However, the Gothic text also expressed the fears and frustrations felt by the almost powerless female half of society. It is not difficult to see the powerless position of the typical Gothic heroine as representing very clearly that of a woman at the peak of the Gothic novel's

popularity. The heroine is prey to unscrupulous men who wish at the least to rob her of integrity and at worst to rape or kill her. In a society where women passed directly from the control of their fathers to that of their husbands (usually chosen for them) against whom they had virtually no redress or right of divorce, despite the fact that their

husbands could, if they so desired, put them away, make their lives miserable or indeed have them killed without much difficulty. Banished wives imprisoned in towers represented in an extreme form, the deep seated anxieties of many women and their resentment at their lack of power. However, the fact that the Gothic heroine generally overcomes the almost unsurmountable odds to escape and live

happily ever after demonstrates the fulfilment of the woman's

indomitable desire that Jackson writes of. These novels,

the forerunners of the contemporary fantastic text, can

therefore be seen to both express the fears and

frustrations of their readers whilst also offering a

satisfaction of the desire for autonomy and

self-determination that they felt. In *The Romance of The*

Forest by Radcliffe, Adeline the heroine eventually escapes

incarceration in a castle, literally and metaphorically in

the middle of nowhere, and the evil intentions and sexual

desires of the Count, to marry the good soldier and live

happily ever after. Her virtue in the face of oppression is

rewarded:

Their former lives afforded an example of trials

well endured-and their present, of virtues greatly rewarded; and this reward they continued to deserve-for not to themselves was their happiness contracted, but diffused to all who came within the sphere of their influence. (363)

Some critics such as Pitt (1973) have suggested that if marriage is substituted for murder in the Gothic text, we can see expressions of a fear of being forced to marry and assume a role in life that society had designated for young women. The fact that the Gothic heroine is often unaware of the true danger facing her and is always looking the wrong way when she could discover what is really going on demonstrates the frustrations that many women may have felt at being unaware of what society was forcing them into until it was too late.

This dual operation of both fear and desire can also be seen in many contemporary works such as Doris Lessing's *The Memoirs of a Survivor*. This novel is set in the last days of the breakdown of a society that we can recognise as that of contemporary North America. Social order is collapsing and society is reverting to a more primitive structure of the survival of the fittest. Food is scarce and murder, gang warfare and looting are common place. The disenfranchised and brutalised such as the horrific gangs of children we meet towards the end of the novel are returning to wreak chaos and vengeance on the world that has let them down and forced them to the margins of society. Whilst we can see this as a fear of what the future might hold for western society as we know it, there

are also some very positive aspects to the collapse of the

old order. There is still an elite within the community, the administrating class or The Talkers, which some members benefit from such as the Whites who live in the same block of flats as the narrator, but they are a group who are in danger and must keep their status secret; their power is diminishing. In a time of crisis, love, loyalty and responsibility become essential and eventually the narrator, Emily and Gerald, escape into the other world behind the wall, symbolic of the past, and whilst not idyllic, certainly a long way from their brutal, empty present. This novel operates on many levels, some of which are unfathomable to many readers, but the coexistence of both horror and a positive outcome are clearly visible. Even in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* which offers a view of a dreadful future (with flashbacks to a recognisable present) in which fertile women are few and far between due to environmental pollution and so are given as property to "The Commanders" and have no rights at all. They live in a brutal totalitarian state which classifies all people and punishes with death any that transgress. Sexual behaviour is severely controlled and there are informers everywhere who prevent almost any chance of resistance to the State. It is not difficult to see how this fantastic world might be an expression of anxiety at the direction the author sees North American society to be taking, but despite the overwhelming repression, the narrator, Offred, is able eventually,

through great personal danger, to find a member of the underground resistance and through this female solidarity she is presented with an opportunity to escape and work for the overthrow of the repressive system she is forced to live under. Although we never discover whether she does in fact escape, the fact that even under this degree of repression she is able to achieve solidarity and have a chance of liberation is very positive and demonstrates the overwhelming desire for this.

The disintegration or metamorphosis of civilization as we recognise it is a frequent theme in women's fantastic writing, and the most obvious explanations for this would appear to be twofold; an anxiety that the patriarchal system which oppresses and excludes women will become even worse and an expression of the frustrations felt by the author at the present situation of women within it; as in *The Handmaid's Tale*, and also that the collapse of society and the creation of a new order by the author offers new opportunities and the removal of the constraints to limit oppressed groups such as women in the real

world. In a fantasy world anything is possible, and this is therefore a very attractive situation for the creative writer. (We see this effected in Angela Carter's *The Passion of New Eve* where Evelyn, the male protagonist of the novel is turned into Eve, the 'ideal' woman of his masturbatory fantasies. He has to face the trials and tribulations of being a woman in the society he has helped to sustain. In another view of the North America of the future, Carter

envisages different groups which are diametrically opposed struggling for control of society. These range from ultra-radical Christian groups to the extreme feminist group which is wreaking revenge on the male half of the population and which takes Evelyn and turns him into a woman as an experiment to prove that "Mother" can do it as part of the master plan they have to feminise the world. They have created the beginnings of the opposite of the male oriented and controlled society of the present which allows Evelyn to use to his own satisfaction ~and then discard the young woman he has impregnated. ~

Although it is debatable whether what the women have created is particularly desirable, it is certainly a society outside patriarchy which they run and in which they make the laws and are completely free of the oppression of men. The creation of a space outside patriarchy is frequently found in the fantasy writing of women and this may be one of the main reasons that it appears to be an important genre for women writers. Fantasy is used in Marilynne Robinson's *Housekeeping* and in Jeanette Winterson's *Oranges Are Not The Only Fruit* to express states of mind and to illuminate the protagonists' quest to achieve an existence outside the strictures of the society they find themselves in. In *Housekeeping*, Sylvie has to return from her life of vagrancy to look after her orphaned nieces. Whilst small town life goes on around her she sinks further and further into a fantasy world in her need to create a space for herself outside the civilization that

surrounds her. ~ittle by little Ruth, one of her charges, is drawn into this world and as the pressures to conform increase on them, Sylvie takes Ruth into the hills. When they are there, both women escape into an imaginary world where they start to see the children and life of a now derelict cottage. Once Ruth is able to see as Sylvie does, they are ready to escape and finally they fake their own deaths and disappear into the life Sylvie has created for

herself, living as a vagrant outside the society she cannot

fit into. Sylvie is not the only person to live this way

and the author gives the Impression that many other unseen~

people also exist like this. Fantasy is used here as a

means of effecting escape into a space outside patriarchy,

and in *Oranges* it is also used to the same ends in a

slightly different way. In Winterson's novel, fantasy is used at times when the heroine of the story, Jess !- iS in transitional periods and states of mind in her struggle to escape her ultra-religious upbringing and create an identity for herself as an individual and as a lesbian. There are two distinct fantasies displayed here; the fictional accounts of the princess who is led by the wizard to another, better land, and the visions of the orange demon that Jess sees at moments of importance in her development.~The princess expresses the state of mind and the stage Jess has got to in her mental escape from her surroundings)and the demon is an inversion of the demon that the Pastor claims has invaded her when he is told of her lesbianis~. The demon becomes a positive force which is really her own mind guiding her through times such as the cleansing of the spirit the church members inflict upon her.~It expresses what she cannot yet say or consciously think: it is an externalisation of her unconscious.

The expression of that which the muted group within society (in this instance women) are not allowed to feel or express by the society around them may indeed be one of the most powerful points of fantasy. It becomes the voice of the "Madwoman in the Attic" that Gilbert and Gubar write of. It is the metaphorical equivalent of Bertha Mason, Jane Eyre's alter ego, escaping, rather than being consumed by

the fire she has started. Helen Zahavi's Dirty Weekend ,~ demonstrates what happens when the madwoman's fantasies ~ that she supposes to be within all women become reality. It is a fantasy of revenge against the people who oppress the protagonist. Men who transgress the boundaries that she now

sets, as opposed to the ones patriarchal society sets for her, meet with the ultimate punishment; humiliating, painful death. The humiliation and pain that awaits the woman who transgresses societies repressive limits is turned upon its head and now befalls the perpetrators of these sanctions. Whilst the fantasies of a large part of the female population probably do not include serial killing, the expression of these desires for revenge and the wish to set the limits themselves seems to touch a nerve in many women. However, the book was met with a very mixed, if almost always passionate response. The disgust

that many women felt at the externalisation and putting into effect of these desires may indeed show a deep seated fear of how we all might behave if the restrictions of (society fell away; if we all had a dirty weekend of carryin~ out our own inne~ ost fantasies, if the madwoman within us was let loose. Therefore, whilst Dirty Weekend appears to be a fantastic novel which is best served by the statement of Jackson's in the title, it may indeed express an even deeper fear of no longer being able to behave in the way society deems acceptable. The truly shocking aspect of the novel may indeed be that one woman's fantasy becomes, reality in the story recounted. The protagonist of the v novel (it is even difficult to call her the heroine) also defends the tramp woman that she encounters; the attack upon her is symbolic of attacks upon all women who fail to abide by society's strictures.

A vision of the possibility of being in control of one's destiny and no longer a victim of the controlling | groups (in this case men s) desires is what the novel ! above offers, and in my opinion this maxim can be widely ~' applied to women's fantasy writing in general. It expresses '~ the~unexpressable and in the world created by the author, old limits no longer apply. Anything is possible. The fantasiser can create her own identity and control her own destiny. This is the~indomitable desire written of by Jackson and also the reason why the fantastic text is and will continue to be a central and crucial medium for any muted, oppressed group within a civilization.

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