

OUR GREATEST HORROR: HOW CONVENTIONS OF THE
GOTHIC OFFER AN INSIGHTFUL CRITIQUE ON
THE HORRORS OF GOTHIC

by

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Submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for Departmental Honors in
the Department of English
Texas Christian University
Fort Worth, Texas

May 8, 2023

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, I will illustrate the origins of the gothic genre that we see with Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* and Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, then I will evaluate the manner in which both supernatural and realistic gothic conventions are embedded within Hannah Craft's *The Bondwoman's Narrative* as a transition into viewing how the gothic and slave narratives interacted in early works. Lastly, I will critically evaluate Toni Morrison's *Beloved* to offer a look at how a genre that was once viewed as solely a form of entertainment has shifted over time to be applicable to offering unfiltered commentary on the horror that slavery was to the black enslaved woman.

Introduction

The gothic is a genre that many people throughout history have only valued as a mode of entertainment. With complaints ranging from the violence that can be found within these pieces to the taboo topics that can arise, people were quick to simply brush gothic novels off as low-brow reading meant to entertain and provide some base pleasure. However, this dismissal of the gothic ignores some of the more important social ideas that the gothic can be used to comment on as well as the writing and imaginative skills that one needs to be able to pull off this sort of genre. Additionally, over the centuries one can observe how the gothic has evolved and been adapted to reach beyond the realm of fictional characters to provide much-needed and powerful commentary on such deplorable social conditions as with those surrounding enslaved people and, more specifically, black enslaved women. In this paper, I will illustrate the origins of the gothic genre that we see with Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* and Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, then I will evaluate the manner in which both supernatural and realistic gothic conventions are embedded within Hannah Craft's *The Bondwoman's Narrative* as a transition into viewing how the gothic and slave narratives interacted in early works. Lastly, I will critically evaluate Toni Morrison's *Beloved* to offer a look at how a genre that was once viewed as solely a form of entertainment has shifted over time to be applicable to offering unfiltered commentary on the horror that slavery was to the black enslaved woman.

Origins: Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto*

Before we can fully examine Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto*, it would be helpful to take a step back and examine some of the contexts around the novel's creation. In James Watt's *Contesting the Gothic*, he notes how the inspiration for Walpole to write his novel

can be largely found in Strawberry Hill, Horace Walpole's estate. Intrigued by gothic architecture and ideas, Walpole reconstructed aspects of his estate to best reflect the "ancient" models of the genre. In fact, Watt writes that "Walpole defined his work at Strawberry Hill against the popularity of the modern Gothic, and he exaggerated the fidelity of his project to the 'ancient' models" (Watt 15). It was largely Walpole's obsession with medieval history and artifacts coupled with his desire to bring together the more fantasy-based realm of "old" romance with the "new" romance that is set more in reality that led to the creation of a novel that, at first, Walpole did not even admit he wrote. Additionally, according to Emma Clery's "Horace Walpole, the Strawberry Hill Press, and the Emergence of the Gothic Genre", *The Castle of Otranto* emerged "out of three interlocking literary cultures: the world of the social author and of the manuscript exchange, the gift economy of print based in the court and the *beau monde*, and the commercial publishing industry emerging in London" (Clery 105). It is through these intersecting circumstances that what we have come to know as the original gothic was born as both a product of aesthetic and a product of circumstance.

Moreover, in the introduction of the novel written by editor Nick Groom, we get even more backstory on the origins of the gothic as a literary convention. While Watt talked mainly about the more aesthetic side of the Gothic, through Groom one can see a better focus on the political influence that the gothic had on Walpole as well. According to Groom "[b]y the eighteenth century, 'Gothic polity' (being a 'Government of Freemen' and a model of parliamentary rule that resisted arbitrary power) was not only seen as the driving force of social progress but was central to the political ideology of the Whig Party - deliberately opposing the monarchical, crypto-Catholic of Tory Royalists" (Groom). Similarly, the Whigs themselves were in favor of the "Gothick Constitution" for they viewed it as a document that echoed many of

their same views on issues like freedom and tyranny. It is these elements that Walpole goes on to illustrate through the various gothic conventions that he establishes in his novel. From this novel, the gothic as we have come to understand it in literature today was distributed and popularized. What sets the gothic in its own realm as far as genres in literature go are the certain conventions that we see continuously pop up. There are a few that I feel truly stick out and that help to track the evolution of the genre.

One of the most notable conventions of the traditional gothic style originated through Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* is certainly the supernatural that appears throughout the story. In Walpole's novel, the ghost of Alfonso serves as the main supernatural figure that sets off the main event of the novel. At the beginning of the story, before the wedding between princess Isabella and Conrad, Manfred comes out and "beheld his child [Conrad] dashed to pieces, and almost buried under an enormous helmet, an hundred times more large than any casque ever made for human being" (Walpole 18). No one is able to give a practical answer for how such an event could have occurred, and it is understood as the story continues to develop that this event was the first of a string of supernatural occurrences. The culprit behind these events was the ghost of the past ruler of Otranto, Alfonso. It seems that his motivation for acting in the manner that he does is to begin seeking his revenge and the restoration of his bloodline as the rightful rulers of Otranto through the prophecy made by St. Nicholas. On that note, another layer on top of the supernatural element is the ancient prophecy that looms over Manfred's head in which it is proclaimed that "[t]he castle and lordship of Otranto should pass from the present family, whenever the real owner should be grown too large to inhabit it" (Walpole 18). Again, this idea of an ancient prophecy being the driving force behind the events witnessed throughout only further serves to cement the supernatural and antiquated feel that this story has throughout. This

element, of an otherworldly being actually being present, is one that is important to the more traditional style of Gothic that writers such as Walpole and others after him follow.

Moreover, another convention typically found within the gothic is an eerie or dark setting. This can present itself in a variety of ways from a manor to a castle, the latter of which we see in *The Castle of Otranto*. In conjunction with the primary setting of this novel being a large castle, it is the tone set by such attributes as the dim lighting and the backward passageways that adds to the gothic feeling that the setting is meant to evoke a feeling of uneasiness within the audience. Such elements, while unsettling, also add to the astonishment that one cannot help feeling as they experience the eerie and supernatural setting of the story. This idea is known as the sublime which, according to Edmund Burke in his piece *A Philosophical Inquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful*, is “[w]hatever is fitted in any sort to excite the ideas of pain, and danger, that is to say, whatever is in any sort terrible, or is conversant about terrible objects, or operates in a manner analogous to terror”(Burke). One can see the idea of the sublime employed at the beginning of Walpole’s *The Castle of Otranto* when the helmet first falls on Conrad and the narrator notes the “horror of the spectacle, the ignorance of all around how this misfortune happened, the tremendous phenomenon before, him took away [Manfred’s] speech” (Walpole 19). This sense of spectacle and terrified amazement illustrates the concept of the sublime within this novel, for one cannot help but marvel at such an awe-inspiring disaster.

Furthermore, the idea of a tyrannical male figure serving as one of, if not the sole, antagonists is present in Walpole’s novel through the character of Manfred. While he may simply come off as a concerned father at the very beginning of the story, it quickly becomes apparent that his heart is not in the right place. After the untimely passing of his son due to

supernatural events, Manfred makes the decision, without the consent of anyone but himself, to separate from his current grieving wife Hippolita and force the young Isabella to be his new bride in order for her to bear him a new heir. While it may seem at first that Manfred's manic behavior can be explained by the weight of losing his son and the pressure to avoid the prophecy hanging over his head, his actions throughout become far more sinister. The most glaring evil in his actions is his pursuit of marriage with Isabella without the true consent of the young woman herself or his current wife. Addressing Hippolita, it is immediately and obviously apparent that she does not wish to separate from her husband; though there are many reasons for this, a big one is that, through the eyes of the church, a divorce is a shameful option never to be pursued. Turning now to Isabella, her resistance to Manfred's advances seem to center around both her respect for Hippolita and the simple fact that she does not want to be with Manfred. Nevertheless, Manfred goes to such extremes as actively chasing after her after she runs away, using his own daughter as a bargaining chip to get Isabella's hand in marriage, and attempting to murder her when he believes that she has developed feelings for Theodore. All these actions he does without regard for the impact that they will have on those around him; he exercises his power to get what he desires in true tyrannical form.

Lastly, the final gothic convention that I will explore from *The Castle of Otranto* is the idea of a damsel in distress. This ties directly into the tyrannical male figure, for our damsel is most often the one experiencing some type of oppression and control at their hands. In this novel, our damsel in distress is Isabella, and she checks the boxes for what one would typically expect of a gothic heroine. To begin, her main plight in the story is caused by Manfred and his incessant attempts at gaining her hand in marriage in spite of her very apparent rejection of the idea; she even goes so far as to run away to the church, yet Manfred pursues her with a fervent

determination to make her his. In addition, Isabella has her shining knight in this story in the form of Theodore. Throughout the book we see him assisting her in situations where she cannot fully protect or defend herself on her own such as in her initial escape to the convent and when he finds Isabella when she flees to the woods and defends her from the knight. This image of a young woman as simply a beautiful face that is constantly in need of saving takes away from a lot of the agency that women have in real life. Of course, the damsel in distress trope is mainly a tool utilized to increase entertainment by raising the stakes in a situation, but as we will see later on in the paper, discounting the agency of women in these contexts does them a considerable disservice.

A Woman's Take on Confinement: Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*

Looking now to Charlotte Brontë, her novel *Jane Eyre* was published in 1847 under the pen name Currer Bell. The work is one of the earliest gothic novels to be written by a woman and it is often regarded as a classic text of the genre. Within the novel, the reader follows the story of Jane Eyre as she deals with the struggles of her past along with the mysteries and hardships she faces in her adulthood. While it contains many conventions of traditional gothic texts, there is one concept truly stands out in this text that I will explore: confinement.

With this novel, the concept of confinement is a widely studied aspect of the novel as we see the concept in both an explicit and implicit manner with the character Betha Mason. Her confinement is quite explicit in that she is locked in the attic of the Thornfield estate by her husband, Rochester, due to her rather eccentric behavior. Rochester chooses to keep her locked up and guarded in order to keep their union a secret from those outside of the home in order for him to find another wife to take on. However, his actions towards the woman can be easily seen

as quite barbaric, for it would seem that locking away a woman with a mental state such as hers ultimately did much more harm than good. In the journal article *Jane and the Other Mrs. Rochester: Excess and Restraint in "Jane Eyre"* by Peter Grudin, Grudin notes that "madness is enclosed in a Gothic context and linked to supernatural horror because the specifics it really represents are literally indescribable" (Grudin, 5). As evidenced in the text, Bertha quite literally becomes a madwoman and is described in a manner that presents her as essentially non-human. When Jane is brought up to see Bertha in the attic by Rochester, she remarks when she sees the woman that "[w]hat it was, whether beast or human being, one could not, at first sight tell: it groveled, seemingly on all fours; it snatched and growled like some strange wild animal" (Brontë 338). Even Jane's description of the woman illustrates the animalistic creature Bertha has become as she is referenced as "it" during Jane's first encounter. As remarked by Grudin, this madness we see within Bertha manifests into many of the supposedly supernatural and mysterious phenomena that Jane believes she experiences while at Thornfield. From the violent attack on Richard Mason to the ghastly woman-like figure Jane saw destroy her wedding veil, and even the attempt made on Rochester's life when she sets his room on fire; these events were a result of Bertha's animalistic nature after being locked away by her husband as he sought to find a new bride. Additionally, Bertha is confined to herself in a more implicit way due to the fact that she is simply has no one to truly communicate with. Her state has devolved in such a way that she seemingly cannot even relate to or genuinely converse with another human to the point of fostering a true connection. She simply has herself in isolation and no one to turn to outside of her attic.

A Preview of Gothic Within Enslavement Narratives: Hannah Craft's *The Bondwoman's Narrative*

Turning now to look at *The Bondwoman's Narrative* by Hannah Craft, this book explores the idea of utilizing key elements of the gothic in order to draw attention to the real-life terror that was slavery. Craft employs these gothic conventions for seemingly two reasons. One, the gothic was a very popular and entertaining genre of literature that was sure to draw in a larger audience; and two, only the gothic could serve as the proper writing style to deal with the violent realities of slavery. To properly address the most key gothic conventions found in this novel, I will turn to an article by Vincent Cucarella-Ramon that lays everything out.

In Vincent Cucarella-Ramon's *The Black Female Slave Takes Literary Revenge: Female Gothic Motifs Against Slavery in Hannah Craft's "The Bondwoman's Narrative"* he explores the idea that Hannah Crafts utilizes certain elements of the gothic within her fugitive slave narrative/women's fiction novel in order to best denounce the system of slavery within the United States. Cucarella-Ramón notes that gothic is an ideal style to employ because, as stated by Teresa Goddu, "the Gothic serves to 'focus on the terror of possession, the iconography of imprisonment, the fear of retribution, and the weight of sin' and provides 'a useful vocabulary and register of images by which to represent the scene of America's greatest guilt: slavery'" (Cucarella-Ramón 21). To further this idea and support his argument of the effectiveness with which the gothic works in this novel, Cucarella-Ramón points out five motifs within the piece that best illustrate the horror elements throughout.

The first of these motifs concerns the setting of the mansion and the plantation. As it stands, the mansion itself serves as a standard gothic setting with its large size and unsettling nature giving the time period. In this way, there is certainly some similarity between Walpole

and Crafts, one interesting difference is that Cucarella-Ramón notes how “[t]he mansions itself is a gothic tenet which serves that author to expose the entrapment that slaves were subjected to”, yet “this Gothic scenario makes Hannah invert the slave role and act as an active subject” (Cucarella-Ramón 22). This occurs because it is within the mansion that she first comes across pictures of the ancestors of her enslaver, and she begins to question what type of individuals they are. This leads to even more contemplation of the situation, and, as we know and enslavers surely feared, thinking and reasoning is one of the first steps for an enslaved person to secure some sense of agency. Moreover, the curse that we see in the novel is a directly supernatural element of this story. In essence, Founder Sir Clifford de Vincent advised his descendants to not remove paintings and only add self-portraits to the wall when they are married. Despite this command, Sir Clifford does not follow this command and sets off the founder’s curse that haunts the plantation as well as the life of Hannah’s master (Cucarella-Ramón25). This element is also one that we see employed in Walpole’s narrative in a similar fashion. In both instances, it would seem that the “curse” or prophecy is actually in place to serve as a promise of justice in some capacity down the line.

Furthermore, the conditions of the black women within this narrative as well as the trope of the “sins of the fathers” has roots in the horrific and antiquated nature of many more traditional gothic stories. Looking first to the condition of the black woman, Cucarella-Ramón makes the case that *The Bondwoman’s Narrative* being specifically a female gothic novel by nature assists in understanding the way in which the systems in place during the time victimized women and especially black women. This is because one common convention for the female gothic over gothic novels written by men is giving the female heroines more of a sense of agency and, in some measure, control over their lives. In a narrative such as this one, to have a heroine

who wishes to and understands how to exercise agency yet cannot is truly one of the most efficient ways to illustrate the restriction of freedom in this situation. Additionally, the inclusion of a white gothic villain through the character of Mr. Trappe serves as a central gothic figure, for in him, we see many elements of the typical tyrannical patriarch. This convention is truly a natural fit, for many white enslavers both in literature and in the real world check many of the boxes that naturally come along with their status. They are male figures in a position of complete power and control over another being or beings that he has at his disposal to do with them whatever he pleases. This idea of a white man juxtaposed against a black woman in this setting is really indicative of the full detriment of these women during the time. An intersectional evaluation of these two individuals causes the reader to consider the plight of our heroine as not just a black enslaved person or as a woman, but as a black enslaved woman. She must battle against the constraints and obstacles that emerge against every facet of her identity, thus making this journey much harder than one may have initially imagined. Lastly, Cucarella-Ramón points to the concept of race and being white-passing as gothic motifs, for these elements ultimately set in motion much of the hardship for our female heroine and other black women around her. The author notes that passing or trying to blur the lines of race is presented in gothic terms by Crafts because “Crafts implies that passing, which ultimately is possible if there is miscegenation, evolves in a dangerous practice that ends up leading to trouble and destruction for black women” (Cucarella-Ramón 40). This suffering a black woman can experience as a result of trying to pass for a white woman and being found out is one whose terror is best conveyed through the gothic. While there are certainly many areas of overlap between Walpole and Crafts, it is important to point out the importance of areas where they differ completely. Take the concept of passing, for example; this is not an issue that the characters of Walpole’s narrative would have to find

themselves concerned with. However, for the black women of Craft's story, this idea that was not even on Walpole's mind serves as one of the ideas between life, death, and freedom.

Morrison's Subversion of the Gothic: Toni Morrison's *Beloved*

Looking to Toni Morrison, I find it necessary to first look at how Morrison approaches different genres and ideas within literature as she creates her stories. In Morrison's *Playing in the Dark*, she explores the idea of "Africanism" that can be found in the early writings of many American authors. "Africanism" serves to define the non-white presence that is found in many of these texts, and Morrison's close inspection of the idea reveals the way in which whiteness, both rhetorically and historically, was dependent on the black "other" in order to cement its place in the hierarchy of America. In chapter 2 of the work, titled *Romancing the Shadows*, Morrison notes that in the space of depicting white characters, the "images of impenetrable whiteness need contextualizing to explain their extraordinary power, pattern, and consistency" and that they "appear almost always in conjunction with representations of black or Africanist people who are dead, impotent, or under complete control" (Morrison 33). With this, Morrison calls for the exploration of the common tradition of depicting black characters not as individuals with their own agency and personalities, but instead simply as juxtaposing figures utilized to highlight the power, freedom, and civility of the white characters there are depicted alongside. This reduction of the black character to no more than a shallow caricature is done through employing stereotypes," metonymic displacement", dehumanization, "fetishization", simplifying history, and condescending dialogue (Morrison 69). In all of her works, Morrison makes a conscious effort to subvert these traditions and formulate a fuller, more in-depth narrative around her black characters. She presents them not as means for the advancement of the whiteness around them,

but instead as characters with complex personalities that serve as ends in the narrative on their own.

In *Beloved*, Morrison's subversion of literary traditions regarding blackness is interestingly explored in her novel *Beloved*. Though the work itself discusses the horrifying effects of enslavement in the US, the racialized subject matter does not fall into the trap of reducing its black characters to only be viewed within relation to whiteness. Though white characters are depicted in antagonizing roles in the novel, the main conflict does not solely surround whiteness. While Sethe was forced into making the horrifying decisions that she did due to the institution of slavery, the continued antagonizing that she and her family faced was a result of her reluctance to face her past. Her character was forced to confront these issues, not as a way to highlight the power that whiteness exercised over her, but instead as a way to illustrate the strengthening of herself within a community of her own people. It is her proximity to other black characters in the story that serves as the driving force throughout the narrative, both in conflict and resolution. Even her interactions with white characters in the story, such as Amy Denver, do not paint Sethe as a subservient black character that exists only to advance the interests of her white counterparts. In fact, the scene between Sethe and Amy is one that ultimately culminates in the white character serving as the aiding figure without Sethe having to sacrifice her humanity or needs. In a situation where the only advantage that Amy could have had over Sethe was her whiteness, Morrison did not frame the characters to depict this expected power hierarchy.

Turning now to Toni Morrison's novel *Beloved*, this work explores the ideas of the past, the horrifying impacts of slavery, and the ways in which love manifests itself when set within the confines of an impossible situation. In the story, we follow characters like Sethe, her daughter

Denver, her old friend Paul D, and the manifested spirit of her deceased daughter, Beloved. As the story progresses, each character is compelled in some way by the ghost of Beloved to confront their horrors past and face the ugly truth of their present.

Within the work, one of the most undeniably gothic conventions to be found in this story is the appearance of the supernatural. This supernatural element is witnessed through the ghost of Beloved that takes on different forms as the novel moves along. Our initial introduction to the ghost of Beloved is very early on in the novel when the narrator is recounting the moments that drove Sethe's sons away from their house, 124. Morrison writes that "as soon as merely looking in a mirror shattered it (that was the signal for Buglar); as soon as two tiny hand prints appeared in the cake (that was it for Howard)" (Morrison 3). The presence of the ghost is so strong in their house, that there are even moments where the entire foundation is completely shaken by the child. Sethe even wonders "[w]ho would have thought that a little old baby could harbor so much rage" (Morrison 5). Even beyond the physical signs of a ghostly presence at 124, there is a certain air that hangs around the property that everyone in the town can feel.

In the first form of Beloved's ghost that we are presented with, we are given a figure whose rage and actions seem to be indicative of not just the damaged soul of the lost child, but also the pain in the souls of all of our formerly enslaved characters. One of the most fascinating ways that Morrison employs this gothic idea is by utilizing the anger and havoc of a supernatural being to represent the strong emotions that every individual who found themselves a victim of the slave trade could feel in some capacity or another. Therefore, in her immaterial, spiritual form we are able to see the ghost of Beloved as an entity derived from sadness and pain that seeks to keep those within the house entrenched in these emotions and isolated from the rest of the world. This seems to change, however, when Paul D, a formerly enslaved man who lived on

the same plantation as Sethe for years, arrives. Though he feels the presence of Beloved within the house, he stands firm in his resolve to expel the spirit from the property. With his entrance into the novel, we are able to explore along with Sethe and Denver the idea of having a masculine energy within the house as Paul D quickly establishes himself in the role of “man of the house” as he and Sethe attempt to replicate some semblance of a familial structure. However, when Paul D comes to 124 and seemingly exercises her spirit away, Beloved manifest in a material body when she returns. Although when she first appears no one is quite sure of who the woman who walked out of a stream fully dressed is, Sethe and Denver almost immediately begin to form their own kind of intimate connections with the girl. Though the initial hold and barrier that she had placed on the house seemed to fall, her embodiment as the pain and trauma from our main characters’ lives enables her to come into their lives as a much more present and consistently active agent. When Beloved appears as a young woman at the house, the supernatural element of the story takes a slight shift. Instead of an angry force that no one can physically see, Beloved in her material form is able to interact with the characters in a more physical way while also invoking her other-worldly powers on the residents of 124. Although no one is 100% sure that Beloved is Sethe’s Beloved in the beginning, as Sethe and Denver spend more time with the girl, they are able to gain the sense that she is, in fact, Sethe’s slain baby girl. For Denver, she is able to come to the conclusion that Beloved is her sister due to the strong bond they are able to form. In flashbacks to the events of their past before fully escaping the physical confines of freedom, we learn that there was an instance of Denver breastfeeding from her mother while the blood of her sister was on Sethe’s body. From this, Denver grew up believing that she had a special connection to her sister like no other because her blood found her way inside of her through such an intimate and nurturing way that greatly contrasts the horror of

the scene that happened just moments before (which we will explore later on in this chapter). Additionally, Sethe is not as quick to come to terms with the true identity of Beloved seemingly out of the fear of facing the child whose life she felt forced to cut short. However, she too feels a connection with Beloved that she is not quite able to explain. This, combined with Beloved having knowledge of things such as the earrings that Sethe was gifted by one of her former enslavers along with the fact that the only thing written on Sethe's deceased daughter's headstone was the word "Beloved" push Sethe over the edge of knowing with certainty that Beloved is her daughter. Although the women seem to find joy in once again being in each other's presence, Beloved exercises her supernatural abilities in an effort to drive a wedge between Sethe and Paul D in order to have her all to herself. In the novel, Morrison writes that "[s]he moved him" as Paul D finds himself moving further and further away from Sethe (Morrison 134). He moves from sleeping in the room with her at night to removing himself as far as possible based on nothing more than a feeling. There is something he cannot quite explain that compels him to create this distance and he begins to suspect that the feeling is coming from outside himself. It is remarked that this moving was "[n]ot in the way [Paul D] beat off the baby's ghost", but, nevertheless "[i]mperceptively, downright reasonably, [Paul D] was moving out of 124" (Morrison 134). There is even a moment where Beloved tells Denver to make Paul D go away even though she knows that Sethe enjoys having him around. Beloved efforts seem to culminate in her seducing Paul D, or at least that is how he views their sessions of intercourse. Though he knows what they do is wrong, for he compares the temptation to give in to Beloved to Lot's wife's need to look back at the city they are fleeing in the biblical tale, he cannot resist the strong pull that Beloved has. As she is successful in creating a wedge in the only new relationship that Sethe has forged since their arrival at 124, this alienation and possession

continues to grow around Sethe until she is at a point where Beloved seems to be sucking all the strength and life out of the woman. As noted by Blessing Diala-Ogamba in her journal article *Gothic Elements in Toni Morrison's "Beloved" and Elechi Amadi's "The Concubine"*, "once Beloved appears, she makes herself the center of attraction and controls all discussions" and even "[h]er presence weakens the people in 124 and makes them unable to think properly, act, and even say the right things" (Diala-Ogamba 415). Her otherworldly nature continues to act even when she is physically on the property in such a way that can only be understood through the immense amount of anguish she holds from her short life in the past. Now that we have an overview of the main supernatural elements found in *Beloved*, we can take a look at how the way that this modern gothic novel differs from the supernatural in *The Castle of Otranto*.

As I explored above, the main motivation for Antonio's ghost in Walpole's story is to see that the prophecy meant to right the wrongs of the past is fulfilled. It is with this idea of a supernatural being and their motivation stemming from the past that we see an overlapping similarity between the writing of Walpole and Morrison. In *Beloved*, Beloved's ghost is motivated to act in the story as a response to both her traumatic past and the traumatic past of the formerly enslaved persons around her. Looking more in-depth at this shared connection of the supernatural's tie to the past in these stories, Beloved's presence can almost be seen as a curse for the actions of Sethe in her past. When we are finally provided with a clear retelling of the instant where Sethe killed Beloved, the scene is quite traumatic. It is explained that when schoolteacher and the other men there to take Sethe and her children back open up the door to the shed, they found inside "two boys bled in the sawdust and dirt at the feet of a nigger woman holding a blood-soaked child to her chest with one hand and an infant by the heels in the other" (Morrison 175). Although Sethe did what she did out of love, one cannot deny that such a gory

and traumatic scene is the expected origin of a ghost with such negative emotions as Beloved. While the ghost in *The Castle of Otranto* did not have as bloody of an end at the hands of someone who loved him, he still had his life suddenly and unfairly stolen from him because of the sins of another. In this same way, he sticks around to see that the truth of the past is never forgotten and comes to the surface in the end.

As stated by Ellen Goldener in her article *Other(Ed) Ghosts: Gothicism and the Bonds of Reason in Melville, Chesnut, and Morrison*, Toni Morrison “(re)works gothic conventions into a full, alternative discourse which finds the scientized master discourse that presides over slavery to be Other” (Goldner). To this same effect, “Beloved defines the gothic as real” and applies these conventions as supernatural outlets for the characters to explore the hard truths of their pasts. It is by viewing the supernatural as real, like Walpole did, that our main characters are able to properly face the demons of their time in enslavement.

The exploration of the supernatural within Morrison’s work also ties in very closely with her exploration of another gothic convention: the past. Within this work, the reader is able to see the ways in which multiple characters throughout the novel struggle to come to grips with their past and its connection to enslavement; however, no character’s past is more frightfully impactful than that of Sethe as her past literally haunts her. Even before the birth of her own children, Sethe’s past has a heavy impact on her being. Looking towards her conception, we learn that Sethe was born as the product of her mother’s sexual assault onboard a ship bringing Africans to America to become enslaved. However, Sethe was not the only child that her mother bore from being sexually assaulted; Sethe was just the only child her mother did not kill. This served as the start of her story, and something that must have been relayed to her at a fairly young age, seems to set Sethe up for a life riddled with pain, violence, and heartache. In addition,

her experiences as an enslaved woman shaped her own conceptions of motherhood through past experiences. She was forced to learn never to love her child too much. Because of their status as property instead of actual human beings, Sethe's children could be snatched away from her and sold off at any time. So, she learned not to love them as her own because, as an enslaved woman, nothing was truly hers to have. However, once she finally felt as though she was able to truly love her children, she was put into a place where she made a horrifying decision that resulted in the death of her oldest daughter. As we see in the novel, this is the decision from her past that most impacts her when we see Sethe in the novel, for the ghost of her baby girl has come back, and with her she carries all of the pain, trauma, and anger that Sethe felt in that moment.

Additionally, through Sethe, we also see the idea of confinement, a gothic convention heavily studied in *Jane Eyre*, being deployed. It certainly comes as no surprise that confinement and narratives of enslavement go well together. Within *Beloved*, all of our main characters, aside from Denver, found themselves in the physical and legal confines of slavery at some time in their past. They were viewed as the property of others and had zero agency for themselves. It is not until they make the decision to run away that we see them for the first-time push past this restriction. However, we see that our characters trade out one form of imprisonment for another when 124 becomes a point of isolation for Sethe, Denver, and Baby Suggs. It is revealed that others in the town are aware of the presence that resides of the house as they can almost feel that something is off even standing on the front porch. This, combined with the actions of Sethe in the past, have essentially isolated the women of 124 from everyone else around. They are confined to the four walls of their house and for a long time do not have hope of anything outside of what they know. Even when Beloved comes back in her physical form, Sethe and Denver are still confined to the house with her, though Sethe remarks that “[t]he world is in this room. This

here's all there is and all there needs to be" seeming to convey the idea that she is fine with her isolation (Morrison 215). However, as we see with Bertha in *Jane Eyre*, this confinement begins to take a heavy and deathly toll on Sethe. Though she may feel that it is her choice to be so isolated, we begin to see that it is in fact Beloved keeping Sethe locked away from anyone else the same way that Rochester locked his wife away from the outside world. Though their motivations do differ, with Rochester wanting to keep his marriage a secret to find a new wife and Beloved wanting to keep Sethe all to herself, both women bear the ugly effects of being locked away for so long.

Moreover, another gothic idea that we see throughout Morrison's work is the invocation of terror through rather explicit violence. While the use of violence in the more traditional gothic was seen as no more than a distasteful gimmick to entertain audiences by many critics, violence in *Beloved* takes on an entirely new purpose. In this novel, violence is most often seen in association with the condition of our main characters as slaves; that is to say that most of the violence that occurs to them happens as a result of the institution of slavery. At the beginning of the novel, Sethe recounts a time during her pregnancy with Denver when the nephews of her former enslaver, Schoolteacher, assaulted her in a barn on the plantation where she lived and stole her milk from her breasts in such a way that evokes an image of sexual assault for the reader. When she told the mistress of the plantation what happened to her, the boys and their uncle retaliated by whipping the pregnant Sethe so hard with cowhide that she has large scars all across her back. Taking a step back to evaluate this instance of violence, it is clearly inserted to serve as an absolute example of just how horrible and immoral slavery was. If one was to picture what they would view as the most vulnerable of society, there is a chance that they are either picturing children, the elderly, or pregnant women. Even though pregnant women are supposed

to be a valued and protected class, we are able to see just how dehumanizing and barbaric slavery was, for white men found no moral qualms with physically and sexually assaulting a heavily pregnant woman. This event left scars on Sethe beyond the ones seen physically, for in that moment she faced a level of humiliation and brutality that she had not yet known despite her status as an enslaved person her entire life. It left a callous over her entire being as she had to face the most precious gift she had to offer, nutrients for her baby, being sucked away all while this entire event was witnessed by her husband, unbeknownst to her at the time.

Another instance of the insane amount of cruelty exercised during this time can be seen in the death of another enslaved man on the same plantation as Sethe and Paul D known as Sixo. After a failed attempt at escaping, Schoolteacher comes to the conclusion that he has no use for Sixo anymore and decides to kill him; however, he does not choose to give the man a quick or painless death. Instead, he burns Sixo alive. When talking about the situation, Sethe asks Paul D “[w]as he woke when it happened?” to which Paul D responded, “[h]e was woke. Woke and laughing” (Morrison 269). This surely paints for us quite a gruesome picture of the poor man’s death. In this same fashion, *The Bondswoman’s Narrative* also employs scenes of violence to help get across just how horrible slavery was. It is in this way that we see the use of violence evolve from a tool for entertainment into a device used to help portray the nightmare that slavery truly was. Morrison’s depiction of violence also transcends depictions from the past on the plantation in one of the most gut-wrenching scenes of the entire novel.

After escaping from her plantation to 124, Sethe is only able to enjoy a short period of true happiness and contentment for once in her life; she has all 4 of her children with her, she is with her mother-in-law, and, most importantly, they are all free. However, this feeling is short-lived as her former enslaver, Schoolteacher, his nephew, a slave catcher, and a sheriff arrived at

124 to take Sethe and her children home. In that moment, she made a decision that so many enslaved women were forced to consider as they thought about the future of their children. She took her small children into a shed, grabbed a saw, and tried to save them the only way she knew how. The aftermath of the scene relates how “two boys bled in the sawdust and dirt at the feet of a nigger woman holding a blood-soaked child to her chest with one hand and an infant baby by the heels in the other” (Morrison 175). Like something out of the most terrifying horror film, this scene and the violence it depicts cruelly and clearly conveys to the reader just how traumatizing the institution of slavery was as it forced women to make impossible decisions, especially regarding the ones that they loved most. Sethe’s decision to kill her children is directly reflective of the story of Margaret Garner, an enslaved woman who made the decision to kill her own daughter once her family was caught after escaping enslavement. In the book *Driven toward Madness: The Fugitive Slave Margaret Garner and Tragedy on the Ohio* by Nikki Taylor, chapter five of the reading is titled “Driven by Madness, Badness, or Sadness” and discusses speculations behind the reason for Garner’s actions. It is held that Garner’s daughter’s death “at her mother’s hands best fits an altruistic filicide” since these “murders are committed by a parent who believes he or she is saving the child from ‘some real or imagined..condition, unbearable, inescapable torment or disease, or from the anticipated suffering (Taylor 112). Garner herself even remarked that she ““would much rather kill [her child] at once, and thus end their suffering, than have them taken back to slavery and be murdered”” thereby making explicit the point that “[Garner’s] intention was simply to save her children from suffering in bondage” (Taylor 113). It is clear to see the parallels between this real-life case and the situation that Sethe found herself in. Nevertheless, just as Garner faced and continues to face judgment, Sethe is confronted by countless individuals who cannot understand why she did what she did. Sethe was judged by

everyone for her decision; she was judged by the people of her town, by Paul D, and even by countless readers of this novel as they all wonder why. Why would a mother attempt to kill her children? This is the exact question that Morrison wants us to ask through her depiction of such a grotesque scene. She wants the reader to understand how truly horrible slavery was as it drove a mother who had finally let herself love her children as her own to infanticide. Morrison compels critically engage with the text and come to terms with our country's violent history.

Furthermore, we also see the idea of male tyranny in this piece, however, its implications are certainly different from the implications of tyranny in Walpole's work. In *Beloved*, the stereotypically bad male tyrannical figure can be seen in schoolteacher's character. In contrast to Mr. Garner who is the "nice" slave owner, schoolteacher embodies all of the more typical negative associations that one has with slave owners. We see how he does not view enslaved persons as actual people but instead views them on the same level as animals that one owns. In the context of our narrative, the source of his power differs from the source of power that we see for Manfred in *The Castle of Otranto*. In that story, Manfred is able to exercise his power over others because he is the ruler of Otranto and has all of the power and influence that comes with the title. Even though the title of ruler was stolen by his ancestor, it is still the idea of a title and birthright that gives him power. On the other hand, in *Beloved*, the only thing that gives schoolteacher power is the color of his skin. This provides an interesting contrast as we are able to view the differences between tyranny based on social standing and tyranny based on discrimination and systemic racism. One difference that is at least apparent in these two novels is that schoolteacher is allowed to get away with much more violence than Manfred. In *The Castle of Otranto*, Manfred surely attempts to abuse his power in his quest to divorce Hippolita and marry Isabella, there are certain characters that cause him some trouble. For example, Theodore,

serving as our knight in shining armor is constant there to help protect Isabella. Additionally, even Father Jerome lets his disapproval and reluctance to sanction the divorce between Hippolyta and Manfred be known. In stark contrast with this, we do not ever see someone prevent schoolteacher from doing whatever he wants with the enslaved people under him. From mercilessly beating a pregnant woman to burning a slave alive, schoolteacher is able to exercise his cruelty and exert his tyranny with no barrier aside from his own imagination. It is in this difference that we see another key point of shifting in how impactful gothic conventions are. While the more traditional tyranny seen in Walpole offered more of a criticism of the aristocratic class, the tyranny we see in Morrison's novel further serves to illustrate the absolute nightmare that slavery was on Africans and African-Americans.

Lastly, there is a very stark contrast in how the heroines of the two stories are portrayed. In *The Castle of Otranto*, you get your traditional, gothic damsel in distress with the character of Isabella. She is beautiful, she is in need of saving, and there is a knight in shining armor to save her when she needs help the most. In opposition to Isabella's situation, our heroine of this story Sethe was viewed in a completely different light. As far as her looks, while she certainly is a fairly attractive woman, much of her perceived beauty during her time at Sweet Home was a result of her being the only woman around for the enslaved men to want to be with. Even more removed, when Sethe is in a place where she desperately requires help there is almost no one there to help her. When telling her journey of her escape from Sweet Home while heavily pregnant, Sethe exclaims "I did it. I got us all out. Without Halle too. Up till then it was the only thing I ever did on my own" (Morrison 190). While it is true that Amy, a white indentured servant that Sethe runs in to assist her with the birth of Denver, up until right before that moment and for the time after Sethe is all on her own. She has to face the uncertainty of trying to

steal back her freedom, the pain of traveling on feet and legs terribly swollen by pregnancy, and the fear of what could possibly happen to her if she was caught. Though laws around how to treat slaves were not very strict off the bat, how an enslaver could treat a runaway slave was entirely up to their own discretion.

The Horrifying Reality

In conclusion, through Walpole's gothic one is able to see the traditional foundation of the gothic that is often viewed as a creative and imaginative style of writing that is, ultimately, mainly for entertainment. However, through works such as *Jane Eyre*, which provides an insightful look at the idea of confinement from a female writer's perspective, *The Bondswoman's Narrative* and *Beloved* the gothic was able to truly illustrate the depth of skill that this genre of writing can reveal. By utilizing conventions that may seem completely unrealistic to some (like the supernatural), these women were able to artfully convey the terrors of slavery and the detrimental impact that such an institution has had on the lives of black women and men in America. For, when one really takes a step back to look at history, and not just the history we were taught in secondary school, the practice of slavery truly was one of the most horrifying things to ever occur in the United States. The gothic does not offer a medium that overexaggerates or makes up anything; it simply reveals the horror that was always there.

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