

An Eye for an Eye: Anthony Trollope's Gothic Novel?

The name of Anthony Trollope is not usually to be found in a list of nineteenth-century Gothic writers – Mary Shelley, Sheridan Le Fanu, Robert Louis Stevenson, Brams Stoker – yes, but Anthony Trollope? This article, however, will argue not only that there is a justification to reach beyond the more obvious categorisation of Trollope as a realist novelist, but also that by viewing his novel *An Eye for an Eye* through a Gothic lens a particularly telling pattern emerges which reveals a great deal about Trollope's relationship with Ireland.

Granted, it is with obvious glee that in *An Autobiography* he quotes Nathaniel Hawthorne's assessment of his work as:

“solid and substantial, ...and just as real as if some giant had hewn a great lump out of the earth and put it under a glass case, with all its inhabitants going about their daily business, and not suspecting that they were made a show of.”

But he also rails against restrictive definitions and categorisations: ‘I am realistic’ he writes, seeming to mean that this is how he is generally (and perhaps too easily) categorised while by contrast his ‘friend Wilkie Collins ‘ is generally supposed to be sensational.’ He continues:

“The readers who prefer one are supposed to take delight in the elucidation of character. Those who hold by the other are charmed by the construction of plot. All this I think is a mistake, - which mistake arises from the inability of the imperfect artist to be at the same time realistic and sensational. A good novel should be both, - and both in the highest degree.”

It is partly in this resistance to categorisation, this insistence on the good novel as a combination of elements, that I locate my justification for a Gothic reading of *An Eye for an Eye*. Cases could be made for the novel as sensational, tragic, even comic at points but, laying a Gothic template over the text allows some particularly interesting patterns to emerge.

To explain how this can be argued it is useful to pause here to establish the stock features of the Gothic in literature. Historically, the Goths were a Germanic tribe who settled in much of Europe from third to fifth centuries AD but Gothic fiction, far from being some sort of authentic recreation of them and their world draws on associations of the Goths with barbarism (linked in part to their role in the fall of the Roman Empire) and, more broadly, notions of wildness, otherness, a fantasised version of a less civilized past and less civilized people and places. In terms of setting, in fiction it translates into stock locations such as castles, monasteries, and convents, ancestral homes- often faded, decaying, ancestral homes- and medieval ruins. Edgar Allan Poe's 1839 tale ‘The Fall of the House of Usher’ is a useful example of how the Gothic explores once-grand families brought low by inbreeding, self-absorption withdrawal from the world. The twins Roderick and Madeline are the last of the line holed up in the house which bears their name and which crumbles when they die bringing an end to the **house** of Usher in both meanings of the term. Frequently, these

castles, monasteries and so on are placed in foreign, potentially hostile, locations which are worryingly remote – the sort of place where no one can hear you scream, where central characters are not just physically but also socially isolated and the locals operate by a different set of beliefs and values and speak a different language. You might think, for example, of Jonathan Harker travelling to the distant Carpathians and Count Dracula's remote and craggy castle. The Harker of Stoker's novel is very much the modern, educated English gent who understands his world in terms of the rational, the factual, the documented and is thus spectacularly ill-equipped to read and understand the place and people around him. As every well-equipped traveller should, he tries to research the area but significantly discovers that it is uncharted territory. He is not able 'to light on any map or work giving the exact locality of the castle Dracula, there are no maps of this country yet to compare with our own Ordnance Survey maps' and so is left without the customary means of navigation. Local beliefs (including Roman Catholicism) he largely dismisses as superstition and so endangers himself by ignoring pleas not to go to the Castle. A local woman tries to stop him as he is about to leave:

“Finally she went down on her knees and implored me not to go; at least to wait a day or two before starting. It was all very ridiculous, but I did not feel comfortable. However, there was business to be done, and I could allow nothing to interfere with it. I therefore tried to raise her up, and said, as gravely as I could, that I thanked her, but my duty was imperative, and that I must go. She then rose and dried her eyes, and taking a crucifix from her neck offered it to me. I did not know what to do, for, as an English Churchman, I have been taught to regard such things as in some measure idolatrous, and yet it seemed so ungracious to refuse an old lady.”

Competing impulses are at work here. Jonathan in the end does reluctantly accept the crucifix but he is also driven by thoughts of ridiculous superstition and that there is business to be done, there are duties to fulfil, and he insists on continuing to the Castle.

At the latter end of the eighteenth century when enhanced value was being placed on emotion and imagination and how these inform the intellect, Gothic also began to exploit a contemporary preoccupation with the sublime and in particular what constitutes the sublime in landscape. Here the ideas presented by the Irish politician and philosopher Edmund Burke in his 1757 work *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful* (a text which Trollope read and annotated) became very influential. In this work Burke drew an important distinction between the beautiful and the sublime, seeing the beautiful in the benign in nature - green rolling hills, a sparkling stream-, but the sublime in highly dramatic encounters with nature – with vast tempestuous seas, towering mountains, sheer precipices, encounters which excite: awe and terror, intimations of mortality, a sense of human insignificance. The sublime is something that Mary Shelley puts to good use in the dramatic alpine landscapes of *Frankenstein*. It is there too in the remote mountainous for Count Dracula's castle.

With the monasteries and convents come monks, nuns, priests (And it is worth noting that there is a concentration especially in some early Gothic tales on a capacity in these monks, nuns, priests to perform the most outrageous acts. It is a concentration which both exploits and fuels anti-Catholic bigotry.) Aristocrats and elite equivalents of various kinds populate the castles and ancestral homes possessing power but also the capacity to abuse it. Other stock characters include the predatory (perhaps aristocratic) darkly attractive male, dead or absent or ineffectual parents, and the vulnerable female. In the conventional Gothic tale, parents are absent, or cruel, or neglectful and beautiful young daughters in particular are made vulnerable as a result.

Thematically, deranged states of mind, the supernatural, and transgressive sexual behaviour make frequent appearances. Think, for example, of Poe's obsessive and homicidal narrator in 'The Tell-Tale' heart who kills the old man because of his evil eye. Consider also vampires of all sorts who perform bodily penetrations which mimic and disrupt ideas of sexual 'norms'.

A number of critical approaches are routinely used which illuminate further characteristic features of the Gothic. Building on Freud's definition of the uncanny, Gothic is seen to deal in a very particular way with ideas of identity – personal and national. The uncanny here is understood as a disconcerting sense of the familiar becoming worryingly unfamiliar and as a disturbing breach of apparently solid boundaries. It is evidenced, for example, in the undead state of the vampire which renders ideas of life and death frighteningly uncertain and in the deployment of the double in Stevenson's *Jekyll and Hyde* which undermines trust in the stability of the unified single identity of the apparently respectable Dr Jekyll. Gothic texts are also approached as being covertly expressive of anxieties of the time of their creation and as reflecting and interrogating prevailing values and attitudes. It is thus, for example, that *Jekyll and Hyde* has been read as reflecting late nineteenth-century concerns about degeneration, the city and homosexuality.

So, how does all of this relate to Trollope and *An Eye for an Eye*? Admittedly, we might struggle to find elements of the supernatural but if pushed could insist that Kate's deranged mother functions as a haunting presence in the text. Other Gothic elements, however, are certainly evident:

- Scroope Manor as the gloomy ancestral home with a threatened blood line;
- The Irish location ready-laden with suggestions of the untamed, the atavistic, the violent and the alien;
- A dangerously influential Roman Catholic priest;
- An initially absent and later hostile, self-serving father;
- An abandoned and therefore disempowered mother;
- A vulnerable and beautiful young woman;
- Fred, an irresistibly attractive but dangerous hero, seducer of the innocent Kate;
- The remote cottage of the marginalized mother and daughter so close to those sublime Cliffs of Moher;
- Transgressive sexual behaviour;
- A deranged asylum inmate.

The genre can be used to invoke and then lay ghosts, to breathe life into and then slay monsters, transform virtuous maidens into sexually aggressive vampires and then safely stake and decapitate them so that they can do no more harm. Alternatively, at the end of some Gothic tales the coffin lid is not securely nailed down with the result that the anxieties which have been aroused, are left to haunt and terrify the reader. Thus, Trollope might employ the Gothic to animate an alarmingly wild and dangerous Ireland only to reassuringly disarm, defeat or expel it, or use it even more straightforwardly to reinforce ideas of Ireland as threateningly uncivilized by merely exploiting unsettling stereotypes. But what he does is something rather more complex and intriguing. For instance, Scroope Manor, the gloomy ancestral home in this text is English, not Irish and is showing signs of becoming obsolete and irrelevant. Its library full of “old books which no one ever touched”. The Earl, once handsome, popular, and respected has withdrawn behind the walls of his domain to a house whose windows face away from the village, defeated by the grief and disappointment caused by the loss of his first wife, of his daughter and a son who married ‘a wretched painted prostitute from France’, was banished and then died childless. His nephew Fred becomes the heir because the continuance of the line is under threat but not from an aggressive Irish Catholic source but, arguably, from its own failure to grow and adapt, a failure to recognize the true nature and value of the other. Scroope unthinkingly rejects Kate as a wife for the heir on the grounds of her nationality and religion. Lady Scroope is instantly appalled at the prospect of this “wild Irish girl”; “A Roman Catholic – one whom no one knew but the priest – a girl who perhaps never had a father! All this was terrible to Lady Scroope.” But this is employed to expose Lady Scroope’s bigotry, when Kate is revealed as unfailingly virtuous, loyal, and better educated than Fred.

The whole basis of racial/national purity is arguably signalled as fallacious in that Mrs O’Hara, Kate’s mother, automatically treated as Irish because of her name, is actually English. Moreover, if she can be charged with endangering her daughter’s virtue by allowing her to spend time with Fred, this is also offered as her doing the best she can as a lone parent in the most trying of circumstances, forced to the edge physically, socially, mentally, and not as a display of predictable Irish maternal fecklessness and loose sexual morality.

Furthermore, Trollope in his Irish Catholic priest employs but then defies Gothic stereotypes, when he exposes Fred’s erroneous preconceptions:

“He [Fred] had not yet escaped from the idea that because Father Marty was a Roman Catholic priest, living in a village in the extreme west of Ireland, listening night and day to the roll of the Atlantic and drinking whisky punch, therefore he would be found to be romantic, semi-barbarous, and perhaps more than semi-lawless in his views of life.”

Father Marty befriends Fred, places trust in him but refuses to accommodate his irregular request. Further, he confronts him with the consequences of his moral dissembling, causing Fred to face the wall “speechless and sobbing.” So, if Ireland proves fatal for Fred it is not because of an inherently dangerous otherness, but rather Fred’s misreading of it as a place where the usual rules need not apply, his failure to appreciate its true worth. Significantly, Mrs O’Hara becomes insanely murderous because of Fred’s refusal to fully respect and marry her daughter. What is being recommended here, therefore, is a re-evaluation and incorporation of the other, the formation of a particularly thorough and openly validated

union which benefits both parties – rejuvenating the house of Scroope, legitimizing Kate and her child. Transfer this to the national political stage and the threat is not Irish nationalism but the failure on England’s part to value and fully incorporate Ireland.

The choice of the Gothic mode by some of its more prominent Irish exponents among the group which used to be called Anglo-Irish writers- the likes of Sheridan Le Fanu and Brams Stoker and Elizabeth Bowen - has been read as growing out of a sense of displacement, marginalisation, out of an anxiety about or sensitivity to issues of identity. *An Eye for an Eye* would seem in a sense to place Trollope in this company – as using the Gothic to explore and express but, at least in his case, ultimately ease anxieties about his English-Irish identity. If we examine some of Trollope’s other works we find more examples of the deployment of a marital metaphor to represent the Union of Britain and Ireland. Notably, in *Phineas Finn*, it is explicitly invoked by the narrator, apparently reflecting the views of Phineas’s friend Mr Monk to insist on the continuance of the Union.

“[I]f it was incumbent on England to force upon Ireland the maintenance of the Union for her own sake, and for England’s sake, because England could not afford independence so close to her own ribs it was at any rate necessary to England’s character that the bride thus bound in a compulsory wedlock should be endowed with all the best privileges that a wife can enjoy. Let her at least not be a kept mistress. Let it be bone of my bone and flesh of my flesh, if we are to live together in the married state.”

This reinforces the symbolic significance of the relationship between Fred and Kate portrayed in *An Eye for an Eye*. While *An Eye for an Eye* is not an obviously political work, it has a place in Trollope’s unionist literary project. An examination of the novel simply at the level of plot might seem, of course, not to bear this out. Fred Neville, Trollope’s English nobleman, far from achieving a happy union with the Irish Catholic Kate O’Hara, is pushed to his death by her maddened mother. On closer investigation, however, a reading is possible which points not to the impossibility of successful union but rather the desire for a more thorough and respectful integration, an insistence on Ireland as the wife and not the mistress. In Trollope’s reworking of the Gothic, Fred is no moustache-twirling villain. He struggles to reconcile competing familial and personal, social and moral imperatives but he dies because he offers the Irish woman he has seduced only an irregular, unsanctioned, incomplete union which in her mother’s eyes would leave Kate a “harlot”. In this reading, the novel is not a cry of despair but a call for clear-sighted, responsible treatment of Ireland. It contests wrong-headed, romantic notions of Ireland as the location for reckless adventures which incur no consequences. The novel recommends instead that the English establishment, in the shape of the moribund House of Scroope, could have benefited from the intellect, vitality and charm of an Irish Catholic Countess.

Importantly, in doing so it secures the Irish component in Trollope’s identity. For it was during the eighteen years that he was resident in Ireland (1841-1859) that he became a husband, a father, a valued Post Office official. In Ireland he was transformed from “hobbledehoy” to one of the nineteenth-century’s foremost writers. He knew that young men who learned to read and respect the country could go to Ireland without ending up smashed to smithereens at the bottom of a cliff. If, as he explains in his autobiography, he had in his youth learned to think that Ireland was “a land flowing with fun and whiskey, in which irregularity was the rule, and where broken heads were looked upon as honourable badges’,

he learned to read Ireland more accurately, noting “the Irish people did not murder me, nor did they even break my head.” His early experience of Ireland is in one way a complete contrast to that of Fred - if Ireland tests and breaks Fred, it makes Trollope. And he incorporates an Irish element into his sense of self: “When I meet an Irishman abroad”, he declares in *North America*, “I always recognize in him more of a kinsman than I do an Englishman.” To contemplate the end of the Union was, for him, to be confronted by the truly uncanny disturbance created when his Irish and English identities threatened to tear asunder.

This union, however, in both senses would prove unsustainable. In 1882 in the last months of his life Trollope, like Fred Neville, was travelling between England and Ireland. He was gathering material for that last unfinished novel, *The Landleaguers*, and balancing conflicting loyalties and impulses. Under Charles Stewart Parnell calls for Irish Home Rule were growing and William Gladstone, in Trollope’s eyes, was exacerbating the situation through appeasement. The *Landleaguers* is a bitter and resentful work. Feeling rejected by Ireland, it repudiates the treasured land of his youthful transformation as an “accursed, unhallowed, godless country.”

In *An Eye for an Eye*, however, that state of disenchanting rage is yet to come and Trollope brilliantly deploys the dark potential of the Gothic genre to covertly recommend the sunnier prospect of a union which need not end in vengeful mutterings of “an eye for an eye.”

The above is adapted from a talk given at the Anthony Trollope International Summer School, 2013.