Wuthering Heights: Themes And Form Experiments

Wuthering Heights experiments with form, attempting to find ways to unify and/or correct it. A pair of very conventional lovers is pitted against a pair of highly unconventional ones, thus highlighting the differences between the two styles of characterization. In terms of the novel's two plots, one story is markedly absent of traditional literary tropes while the other is fraught with devices from a wide variety of genres. The coupling of these two methods allows Brontë's real formal genius to be seen. In the first story, two people fall in love but cannot be together; then, one of them dies. This is a tragic story, but that in and of itself does not make it Gothic. It does contain a few, select Gothic elements, including foreboding architecture, awe-inspiring landscapes, and characters who are doubles and/or dark doubles of one another. The reader may be surprised to realize these as the only true Gothic conventions in the first, more-memorable half. Others make weak appearances, including the damsel in distress, as demonstrated by Isabella, and the supernatural. These two tropes, however, are problematic due to their lack of emphasis. Isabella is not a central character. Cathy is the heroine of the first story; therefore, Isabella cannot be the Gothic heroine, for she merely occupies a subplot. Also, her woes are encouraged to be viewed as deserved. Thus, her status as a Gothic heroine is further jeopardized, because by traditional standards, she is supposed to be completely innocent.

Troublingly, the most definitive and consequently important Gothic theme, the supernatural, after introduced at the beginning of the novel, disappears from Nelly's ensuing narration. In the introductory chapters in which Lockwood meets his neighbors at Wuthering Heights, he is visited by a spirit, the spirit of Cathy as a child, who tries to return to her home. This scene is markedly supernatural, and it is the presence of ghosts and other supernatural occurrences that particularly defines the Gothic genre. Thus, Lockwood's outer narrative sets up the novel to be a traditionally Gothic one; however, the story quickly changes with Nelly's narrative into something completely different. Heathcliff and Cathy's love story, in its own right, is not Gothic at all; rather it is a tragic love story superimposed with a few, trifling Gothic elements.

The novel does not become Gothic until the second half, when Heathcliff becomes more akin to a Gothic villain. In the first half, he is vengeful and angry, but he becomes truly villainous when he holds Catherine, an innocent victim, against her will in his home. Additionally, a savior love-interest does not take shape until the end of the novel in the form of Hareton. Only when the story of Heathcliff and Cathy is supplemented by that of Catherine, Linton and Hareton does the novel truly become Gothic.

Strangely, however, the novel not only becomes Gothic in the second half, it also simply becomes more generally conventional. Tropes of various genres, not just the Gothic, show up in the second story. Catherine and Linton's correspondence through love letters is decidedly sentimental. Catherine's evolution from a naïve young girl to the angry, violent woman Lockwood meets at the beginning of the novel and, finally, to a content woman after having discovered her love for Hareton suggests the genre of the bildungsroman. The lack of emphasis in the sublime power of nature and in the power of the ominous architecture of the house becomes less centralized; thus, the second story also belongs to the tradition of realism.

Loaded with literary conventions, the novel's second half represents an intricate layering of genres, a cacophony of tropes. Generically, the novel becomes so clouded that, towards the end, the battling motifs reach a catharsis, which is only resolved when the most definitive and decidedly absent Gothic convention, the supernatural, reappears. At the conclusion of the novel, Heathcliff becomes more and more desirous of death. He digs down to Cathy's grave with the help of a sexton, pulls back the coffin lid and gazes into her visage, which, remarkably, has barely been altered by time. Heathcliff spends most of his remaining nights out on the moors, searching for Cathy. He returns with the most blissful expression on his face, ranting that he can feel her presence, his eyes focusing on some being just in the distance. Finally, when he dies, Heathcliff's face is absolutely jubilant; he grins at Lockwood, who tries to in vain to close his elated eyes. The novel closes with a poignant meditation on the beauty and peace of the graves:

I lingered round them, under that benign sky; watched the moths fluttering among the heath, and the hare-bells; listened to the soft wind breathing through the grass; and wondered how any one could ever imagine unquiet slumbers for the sleepers in that quiet earth. (300)

Emphasis in the spiritual world and the afterlife recalls the heretofore remised supernatural elements of the introductory chapters of the novel. With such a poignant, supernatural conclusion, the novel comes full circle, ending on a Gothic note. This can be interpreted as the conclusion that, better than any other narrative form, only the Gothic ultimately captures this inexpressible, eternal love.

In Wuthering Heights, the ways in which the genres and generations compliment, distort, and dismantle one another are complex. No one is an exact double or foil to another character; each character enhances or perverts its predecessor in some way. The plots of the two love stories can be read as oppositional ones that bring a conservative resolution to diegetic tensions. In terms of generic motifs, Wuthering Heights exhibits both a great lack and a great proliferation of literary conventions. At the end, however, the Gothic is redeemed as the rightful class to which Wuthering Heights, with all its divisive, complex attributes, belongs.