

Midterm: The Gothic Family

The Gothic family is a common trope within the gothic genre that expresses gender related anxiety. Absent mothers, absent fathers, evil stepmothers and stepfathers, pure, virginal brides, and dangerous husbands are just a few of the common family roles reiterated throughout gothic texts. Each of these differently expresses the tension between women as stabilizing domestic forces and patriarchy as violent and stifling.

In *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, Ann Radcliffe portrays a number of classically gothic family roles. Emily St. Aubert is the epitome of the sweet, beautiful, virginal heroine. She is surrounded by patriarchal danger, most visibly in the form of Signor Montoni, clearly a replacement father figure in the wake of Monsieur St. Aubert's death. Similarly, Madame Cheron, or Madame Montoni, Emily's aunt, embodies the role of evil stepmother in the wake of Emily's mother's death. The role of the absent mother is especially pronounced in *Udolpho*. It is the death of Emily's mother that sparks the turmoil and gothic drama she is thrust into. This emphasizes the importance of women as a stabilizing domestic force in the family. These tumultuous familial relationships highlight the social power imbalance between men and women. Emily is constantly threatened by patriarchal male power and lives in fear of implied male sexual threats. Even Madame Montoni is helpless to Montoni's unchecked authority.

In *Northanger Abbey*, a work that both plays into gothic tropes and satirizes the genre, Jane Austen pokes fun at the gothic family, in many places with specific references to *The Mysteries of Udolpho*. She comically describes Catherine Morland's father as "not in the least addicted to locking up his daughters" (15). However, later on in the novel, Catherine encounters a different patriarchal figure with sinister intent. At first, Catherine imagines that General Tilney,

the father of the man she is courting, has murdered his late wife. Austen undermines the trope of the evil father figure by revealing this to be nothing more than Catherine's overactive imagination. However, General Tilney is still not all he seems—he sends Catherine home, on “a journey of seventy miles,” (211) alone and without explanation because she is “less rich than he had supposed her to be” (228). In a way, he does embody the controlling patriarchal authority seen in other gothic father figures. He exerts severe control over the lives of his children in his quest to ascertain wealth through marriage.

In *Frankenstein*, Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley explores family roles in large part by undermining classic gender roles. Victor Frankenstein creates life through purely scientific means, without a woman giving birth. In doing so, Shelley analyzes the role of women in society through their absence. Frankenstein himself is the product of an absent mother and the toll her death has taken on the family. In trying to create life, perhaps finding the secret to bring her back, he creates a creature with no mother. In this way, Frankenstein's desperate attempts to reunite with his absent mother ends in monstrosity and death. The monster, motherless and unloved, eventually lashes out in vengeance for his miserable and lonely existence. These circumstances, though acted out by men, highlight the importance of women in the family. Simultaneously, Victor embodies the controlling and all powerful patriarchal figure as the father and sole being responsible for the creature's existence. It is within his power alone to grant the creature companionship or love of any kind, which he denies.

In *Jane Eyre*, Charlotte Brontë adheres to many gothic family tropes. Jane is an orphan practically from birth, raised by her aunt, Mrs. Reed, who epitomizes the role of evil stepmother. Much like St. Aubert in *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, the late Mr. Reed acts as the kindly father figure, deceased and unable to help Jane when she needs him. John Reed, though a child, is “like

a slave driver” and “the Roman emperors” in his “violent tyrannies” (14). As Mrs. Reed’s beloved male heir, he represents patriarchal authority to Jane. When Jane does finally meet her other relatives, St. John likewise comes to represent patriarchal authority. He “acquired a certain influence over me that took away my liberty of mind” (372). Jane is desperate to please him and works hard to be obedient to him. Jane’s relationship with Rochester and Rochester’s previous marriage to Bertha Mason both reveal important family power dynamics. In many ways, Rochester is a dangerous husband and authority over Jane. He keeps Bertha locked up in the attic and has considerable power over Jane as her employer and physical and social superior. Jane is aware of the threat he poses to her as a cruel or dominating husband and flees rather than become his mistress. In the end, Brontë subverts the standard power dynamic of husband as master and wife as obedient. Jane only takes Rochester back once she has her own fortune, the physical upper hand, and Rochester’s previous wife is out of the picture.

Each of these texts reveals how gothic familial roles express the importance of women within the family as well as the dangers of unchecked patriarchal authority.