

The Nightmare From Below

The groan of the great wooden door filled the hall. Stepping over the rotting threshold and patches of damp vegetation, she lifted the bottom of her white skirts. The stale air was saturated with decay and abandonment. The light of the moon spilled in from the tall, shattered windows. She walked deeper into the castle, curiosity overpowering reason and the howling of distant wolves chilled her bones. The echo of a tormented moan rose from below. Gingerly stepping down the crumbling hallway, she is summoned like a sailor to a siren.

Tattered tapestries depicting days gone by hung askew from the tall ceiling and revealed a concealed passageway. She stepped inside, and her feet found a stone staircase descending into the dark cellar. Her mind wondered what secret could lay in the belly of this place. Another laboured moan surfaced from below. Her cold feet inched gently, step by step, lower and lower into the darkness. The moss-ridden, cobblestone seemed to be closing in around her. She took a deep breath and decided not to retreat. An immense iron door laid at the bottom of the final step, ever so slightly open. It called to her to look within, to know the source of these haunting sounds. She slipped through the small crack and entered the chamber.

The pale stone ceiling hung high above her head, and stacks of marble coffins lined the crumbling walls. The morose rain of gloom and decay dripped from the vaulted roof. A rattled breath escaped from within a single casket which stood in the center of the floor. She stepped closer, petrified by fear and riddled with macabre interest. The heavy lid slowly began to scrape

and slide. Fingers from within wrapped around the cold marble and pushed it to the side. The hand reached upwards out of its prison and into the air. The fingers twisted and stretched as if chains had been freshly removed.

She stepped backwards until she felt the damp wall freeze her skin. Her shaking hands refused to reach for the door. Slowly, the owner of the hand began to emerge. First an arm, then appendage by appendage, it came to stand beside its tomb. The man who stood before her was none other than the man she had buried only weeks ago; her beloved who had perished just days before they were to be wed. There he stood, donning the suit intended for their wedding day, with an inviting arm outstretched towards her. The lily in his lapel was the one she had placed there before he was buried and blessed. He was just as she remembered him. No trace of death could be found anywhere on him.

“You’ve finally come, my love.” he whispered.

“How can this be, Philip?” she managed to utter. “

His familiar and sincere smile stretched across his face.

“Don’t be afraid.”

He extended his hand once again. Overcome by emotion, she found herself walking to him and taking his warm hand. He pulled her close and they began to dance. It was a magnificent waltz they had practiced for their wedding. They stepped and whirled around the crypt as she held him close and breathed him in. He brought her in for a dip and softly kissed her. She closed her eyes and fought any creeping feelings of reason. Just holding him again was all that she needed. As she opened her eyes, she gazed upwards to him. Unfortunately the look she got in return was from cloudy, gray eyes. She pulled away, screaming, and held her chest as she took in the rotting corpse which stood before her in a torn and faded suit. The lily in his lapel had

decayed just like his pale flesh. She fled to the door, but it was locked. As she turned her horrified gaze back to the remnants of her lover, he spoke through a brown smile.

“Do not be afraid, darling. You’re home, now.”

Short Story Reflection

I thoroughly enjoyed writing this Gothic short story. It’s been years since I’ve had to write fiction so this was a fun challenge. I knew that I wanted to include the elements of a decrepit castle, a pure heroine wearing white and a mysterious overarching tone. For this story, I imagine it being a dream-like sequence that the heroine may have. However, I chose to leave her appearance in the castle at the beginning and her entrapment at the end ambiguous. I think it was the right call to leave these moments up to the reader to pin down the details. It would have felt cheap to me if I were to do a sort of, “it was all a dream” ending. It’s just as possible that she really does become locked in the room with the living corpse of her fiance. It’s a supernatural Gothic short story, anything could happen!

I specifically tried to reflect the overarching Gothic theme of decay in this work. From the distant howling of wolves, vegetation on the floor of the castle and it’s shattered windows, I wanted to encapsulate the feeling of something that was once grand but now is a graveyard of sorts. It mirrors her encounter with her lover, he was once beautiful but now is rotting. Another trope I sought to emulate is the virginal heroine who is motivated by curiosity. She wears white and never got to marry her beloved, hence her purity. Though the environment of the castle is terrifying, she presses on in the hope of discovery. The supernatural is an element of the Gothic which I attempted to showcase here as well. The scene in the crypt is overflowing with the supernatural. I think this is a great part of the Gothic genre because however unrealistic her waltz

with a corpse may be, it has the potential to be logically explained through being a nightmare.

Fear, curiosity, death and decay were my motivations for this piece and I hope that it conveys a Gothic fiction experience!