Epitome : International Journal of Multidisciplinary Research
ISSN : 2395-6968

OF HORROR AND HETEROTOPIA : READING THE 'OTHER SPACE' IN THE GOTHIC IN AMBROSE IBSEN'S FICTION

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ABSTRACT

The Gothic in literature has always been a genre that has intrigued as well as repulsed. The literati as well as the readers of the genre have always shared a love-hate relationship with the genre. Ever since Horace Walpole came out with his The Castle of Otranto, the Gothic has embarked on a journey that has never really halted. There have been metamorphoses, but never a cessation.

This paper proposes to take a critical look at some very recent versions of the Gothic that have taken the reader world by storm digitally. E-books have become the buzzword of the day. And these books make for wonderful Gothic reading for the 21st century Generation Z, with a figurative undertone that insinuates volumes.

This paper will zero in on the fiction of Ambrose Ibsen, to analyse the trend he sets off—a trend that is heavily reminiscent of the Foucauldian idea of Heterotopia to a great extent.

KEYWORDS

Gothic, Heterotopia, e-books, Ambrose Ibsen, Foucault

RESEARCH PAPER

The Gothic has forever stood fast with paraphernalia that has remained more or less fixed to the point of being branded clichéd. The haunted castle…the eerie noises…the shadowy depths of the unknown…and the spectral forms from the past—all of these have held pride of place as the apparatus that engenders the Gothic 'feel'. The protagonist who lands willingly or otherwise into the bowels of the gothic hotbed, explores the horrors and terrors of the magnifique and ultimately either runs away from the fearsome spectres of the past, or vanquishes them. This has been the trend of the gothic ever since Walpole brought the genre out into the limelight with his *The Castle of Otranto*. Clara Reeve, Ann Radcliff, Mary Shelley, Bram Stoker, and most of other Gothic authors up to Ambrose Bierce and Stephen King have all toed this line and followed this formula in myriad ways of expression.

The Gothic has always been a continuum of a genre. It has kept evolving. Never perhaps in the canonical mainstream, the Gothic has forever held its own by entrancing the collective unconscious of the reader with its playing around with one of the seminal emotions of man—fear. There have been up and downs. There has been the more sophisticated Gothic of the likes of Clara Reeve, Ann Radcliffe, Mary Shelley, The Brontës, William Hope Hodgson and Edgar Allan Poe. And there has been the spine-tingling goosebumpy rapture of popular Gothic fiction beginning right with the Penny Dreadfuls to the modern day 21st century upsurge of the popular Gothic—many of them on the digital media often in the form of Kindle-version books. These too need to be recorded in the history of the Gothic as this mark a phase—a chapter in the intense journey of the Gothic down the ages.

Yet another Ambrose, after Ambrose Bierce—Ambrose Ibsen—has been writing out Gothic tale after tale and seems to have taken the Kindle generation by storm. There is a rush of the Gothic in the form of Kindle e-books that have captivated the minds of the young reader generation to the quick. When first the Gothic made itself felt in the 18th Century, the world was going through a turmoil of socio-political frustration. The Gothic, with the romantic escape it promised, caught the age by storm. Once again, in a digital era of psycho-somatic stress accentuated by an overtly competitive challenging world, the Gothic seems to have caught on well and proper. There is a slew of Gothic writers in the e-book world who are gaining immense popularity among the young—the digital e-book-toting generation. There are authors like Ambrose Ibsen, Amy Cross, Lee Mountford, Shani Struthers, Samantha Kolesnik, Rockwell Scott, Flint Maxwell, Graham Masterstone and Steve Frech.

This article proposes to take up some of Ambrose Ibsen's novels to take a look at how the Gothic has been processed through the storylines.

Ibsen does follow the set Gothic track of a big, haunted settings with the flitting and fleeting shadows from the past creating that mysterious ambience of fear.

But Ambrose Ibsen has more up his sleeve than meets the eye at first glance.

"Facing your fears can be a dangerous thing, because when you put yourself out there, there's always the chance, no matter how vanishingly slim, that your very worst fears could match the reality." Ambrose Ibsen said in *Whispering Corridors*. And that is exactly what he does in his fiction—make the reader face their worst fears and through that thrill of terror when their worst horrors come true, Ibsen throws in subtly insinuating critique of establishments like educational institutions, hospitals and asylums which, being the repository of power, are supposed to be the vehicles of protection.

Ibsen has an impressive oeuvre of Gothic tales to his credit. Books like *The Sick House, Raw Power, A House By The Sea, The Seance in Apartment 10, Transmission, Whispering Corridors, Asylum, Roaring Blood, In Absentia , Medicine For The Dead , Stirrings in the Black House, The Borderland , In Darkness, The Lonesome Dead, The Amber Light, Forest , Happy End of the World, Darkside Blues: An Occult Thriller, Winthrop House, The Occupant Orchard, Wretchedness, Bonecrusher, The Conqueror Worm* and many more with equally intriguing titles have the Kindle-happy generation hooked to the hilt. With 40 books to his credit, Ambrose Ibsen boasts a hefty 12,465 ratings with an average of 3.86 in the popularity count as per the Goodreads data.
The books, because of their sole availability as e-books and Kindle-version books are probably yet to get noticed by the literary highbrow, simply because e-books and Kindle-version books have still not made it to the favourite list of the strictly bookish intelligentsia. Yet the fact that Ambrose Ibsen has been well able to create ripples in the horror-reading world with elan, merits a deeper-than-perfunctory study in his art.

A close look at Ambrose Ibsen's works reveals a subcutaneous layer of signification that goes a long way in making a silent but conspicuous statement on the various levels in which the power structures of society work in contemporary times.

An avid blogger—that being yet another aspect that marks him out as one of the 'new Generation'— the internet introduces him to his readers as "Apart from horror fiction, he enjoys good coffee, brewed strong", thereby, reinforcing his boy/author-next-door image.

The journey in horror began when a very young Ambrose Ibsen stumbled upon a collection of ghost stories on his father's bookshelf. And ever since, his relationship with horror has remained uncontained.

Ambrose Ibsen wrote stories that bring in both horror as well as terror. What intrigues one, is his choice of settings. The days of yore when the Gothic used to be situated in places far removed from spatio-temporal reality, like remote castles and far away woods seem to have given way in Ibsen's novels places that are much closer to reality.

For instance, thoroughbred terror permeates the storyline of Ibsen's novel *The Séance in Apartment 10*. It seems to be a very contemporary kind of studio apartment that Toni, a student, moves in to as she comes to study in the university. But soon enough she gets the taste of a very rundown existence in the Lamplight Apartment complex, as she discovers that the faucet leaks, the water heater refuses to live up to expectation and worse still, a very sorry state of the air conditioning makes sweltering summer a nightmare. Then comes the Ouija board, and what follows in a terrifying legacy of horror and terror. What is interesting is that Ibsen chooses to set his novel in a modern-day apartment building. But understanding full well that the gothic loses its edge without the liminality that is so central to it, Ibsen moderates and blocks out the modernity by malfunctioning gadgets, which, because of their lack of functioning imitate a pre-gadget olden-day gloom. The apartment building, which is a tiny one-room one, houses Toni alone, thereby making it hang in aporia between a home and not-home.

Again, *The Sick House* and *Asylum*—two books that centre horror in the confines of a long-abandoned infirmary and asylum respectively, plumb the lacunae of a state apparatus that often surreptitiously tries to wipe away traces of negligence and erroneousness with avid alacrity. But history and the Gothic have forever gone hand-in-hand. The past comes back. Memories haunt with the terror of the Gothic. The dead come back with vengeance to tell the sordid tales of wrongdoing and abjection. The Gothic becomes a vehicle to upload the dissatisfaction over the mistakes of the past. The Gothic becomes a vehicle for the stories of the once-tortured, once-oppressed and now-dead souls to speak. The Gothic in Ambrose Ibsen becomes a vehicle for the colonized to voice their grievance for reprieve. The Gothic in Ambrose Ibsen becomes the medium for that long-awaited comeuppance.

In *Sick House*, Ibsen writes about an infirmary of yore, where patients underwent terrible atrocities in the hands of a beastly doctor in the name of medication. Ibsen writes of a doctor who in the name of medical research, performed inhuman experiments on his patients. The story unfurls about how the wraiths of the tortured spirits come back to avenge

themselves as Ulrich, the protagonist steps in to investigate. The story, more than panning on the havoc wreaked by the spirits of the dead, focuses on them more as the underdogs who need vindication. The ghosts in Ibsen are not the colonizing perpetrators but the colonized brood.

The Haunting of Rainier Asylum, the storyline follows Sadie and August as they plumb deeper and deeper into the rather uncomfortable and guilt-ridden history of Rainier Asylum after exploring the dilapidated ruins of Beacon Hill. An asylum houses horror again in Ibsen's novel Asylum, where a college professor Stephen Barlow gets drawn into a new campus Gothic Study organization that dabbles in paranormal research. The novel has Chaythe Asylum as the *mise-en-scene*. Following some terror-driven investigation, the protagonists unearth the horrendous history of the asylum where patients were forcibly made to play scapegoat to unethical experiments.

What is intriguing is that Ibsen purposefully sets his fiction in places that Michel Foucault would call Heterotopia.

When a fan named Rebecka O'Malley asked him about the way he creates the settings, Ibsen interestingly replied about his choice of the mundane to create the Gothic *Unheimlich*—the Uncanny:

> 'When creating a setting, I always try and reach for the familiar. Thankfully, I've never been in any of the haunted places I've written about, but in crafting them I've sought to include details that jibe with places I've actually visited. This, I think, tends to infuse some much-needed realism. Think of the view outside your own bedroom window, or the way the shadows seem to gather in your own living room. If you can apply details like those to your story, you'll write from a more authentic place.
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> When building a setting, I like to aim for a Goldilocks level of detail; not too much and not too little. Going overboard on the detail will overwhelm the narrative and being too sparse won't give the reader enough to work with. I like to highlight the most important fixtures in a given setting as richly as possible, and then to point out an aberrant detail or two that'll prop up whatever atmosphere I'm aiming to create.
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> Example: A character finds himself alone in a small house. It's a generic little thing, with a cramped kitchen and only one, maybe two, bedrooms. The windows have been shut up for too long and the air is sour. The carpet is horribly dusty. And... is that a water-stain on the ceiling? Why, maybe it's just the low lighting, but the shape seems

all wrong—it almost looks like a grinning face...

That's a ham-fisted effort on my part, but the point is to transition as seamlessly as possible from scenery that will be familiar and comfortable to the reader, to scenery that is less-so. This allows a writer to gradually transport a reader from a merely realistic setting into a realistic AND creepy one. Scaring someone in print is very hard to do; the writer of horror tales succeeds at this by slowly transforming a "normal" setting, and, by extension, ratcheting up an atmosphere of impending dread.

Lastly, when I have the broad strokes of a place down, I like to imagine myself there. What is the light like in this space? And the shadow? What's the air like here, and what noises might I normally hear in said place? Peppering a scene with a few minor setting details can really make it pop and bring it to life.'

Foucault talks of heterotopia on various occasions between 1966-67, but his work 'Of Other Spaces' elaborates on the idea in more specific terms. Walter Russell Mead aptly says, 'Utopia is a place where everything is good; dystopia is a place where everything is bad; heterotopia is where things are different — that is, a collection whose members have few or no intelligible connections with one another.' (Mead 17). According to Foucault, heterotopias are different places— 'other'places—neither here nor there. Heterotopias can be of several types. There can be a 'Crisis Heterotopia' related to places like a boarding school or a motel rooms, which are spaces "reserved for individuals who are, in relation to society and to the human environment in which they live, in a state of crisis."

There can be 'Heterotopias of deviation' which are institutions which house individuals whose behaviour is outside the known familiar bounds of normativity. Hospitals, asylums, prisons, rest homes, cemeteries are Heterotopias of Deviation.

Again, there are 'Heterotopias of Time' like museums which blur the gap between the past and the present. And then, there are 'Heterotopias of Ritual or Purification' like saunas and baths and so on.

Now, if we look carefully, at the time when Michel Foucault was elaborating on his idea of heterotopia i.e., around 1966-67, the world was making a gingerly crossover from the old-world lifestyle to a more globalised era with digital days just peering round the corner. If Heterotopia signifies a 'different space', then the entire world *per se* was in reality transforming into a veritable 'different space'. And as Foucault says, Heterotopias are a

dynamic discourse. They keep changing. Many of what would be called Heterotopia in the olden days do not exist anymore. New Heterotopias have filled in the gaps. And Heterotopias of Deviation are always there in society as long as the discourse of normativity survives.

Ambrose Ibsen's novels feature Heteropias of Deviation to a great extent. He reaches out towards places like Asylums as the location of the Gothic. Gone are the days of Otranto-ish castles and troubled princes. Rather, his fiction captures what Homi K. Bhabha or Edward Soja would probably call the Third Space. Just as Soja described his Thirdspace in which 'everything comes together… subjectivity and objectivity, the abstract and the concrete, the real and the imagined, the knowable and the unimaginable, the repetitive and the differential, structure and agency, mind and body, consciousness and the unconscious, the disciplined and the transdisciplinary, everyday life and unending history' (Soja 57), Ambrose Ibsen's horror ropes in the urban Gothic, spiced up with its fair share of jitters and creepiness, to create that space of liminality—the space of Aporia to let the worlds of the dead and the living come together.

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