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ORIGINAL

Gothic imagination: mapping the cultural memory and remembrance of the epidemic plague

La imaginación gótica: cartografía de la memoria cultural y el recuerdo de la peste epidémica

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ABSTRACT

Narratives about the epidemic plague create a sense of mystery and fear associated with the cultural landscape. Incorporating the backdrop of the plague, the first part of this research explores the portrayal of the epidemic as the setting against which a Priest engages in a ritualistic transgression to safeguard his soul. The second part focuses on the enigmatic events that unfold when the tomb of the priest inside the church is disturbed, giving rise to a series of mysterious occurrences. By employing Linda Hutcheon's historiographic metafiction, the study focuses on remembering the epidemic plague in the novel *A Shadow on the Wall* by Jonathan Aycliffe. It examines the interplay between memory and the construction of narrative. This research article delves into the fascinating realm of memory and its profound influence on human consciousness through the novel. It explores how memory can create an imaginary experience, allowing the protagonist to briefly revisit a past that haunts his present and might alter his future. Moreover, the article delves into the intricate operations of cultural collective memory associated with the church, shedding light on its ability to articulate the complex relationship between the past, present, and future within the human psyche. By investigating these themes, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of the intricate workings of memory and its role in shaping human consciousness.

Keywords: Gothic; Plague; Cultural Memory; Historiographic Metafiction and Remembrance.

RESUMEN

Las narraciones sobre la peste epidémica crean una sensación de misterio y miedo asociada al paisaje cultural. Incorporando la peste como telón de fondo, la primera parte de esta investigación explora la representación de la epidemia como escenario en el que un sacerdote lleva a cabo una transgresión ritual para salvaguardar su alma. La segunda parte se centra en los enigmáticos acontecimientos que se desarrollan cuando la tumba del sacerdote dentro de la iglesia es perturbada, dando lugar a una serie de misteriosos sucesos. Empleando la metaficción historiográfica de Linda Hutcheon, el estudio se centra en el recuerdo de la plaga epidémica en la novela *A Shadow on the Wall* de Jonathan Aycliffe. Examina la interacción entre la memoria y la construcción de la narrativa. Este artículo de investigación se adentra en el fascinante ámbito de la memoria y su profunda influencia en la conciencia humana a través de la novela. Explora cómo la memoria puede crear una experiencia imaginaria, permitiendo al protagonista visitar brevemente un pasado que atormenta su presente y podría alterar su futuro. Además, el artículo ahonda en las intrincadas operaciones

de la memoria colectiva cultural asociada a la iglesia, arrojando luz sobre su capacidad para articular la compleja relación entre el pasado, el presente y el futuro dentro de la psique humana. Al investigar estos temas, esta investigación contribuye a una comprensión más profunda del intrincado funcionamiento de la memoria y de su papel en la formación de la conciencia humana.

Palabras claves: Gótico; Peste; Memoria Cultural; Metaficción Historiográfica y Recuerdo.

“Many a mile comes plague, a winged wolf who loathes always”
(Percy Bysshe and Shelley, 2015)

INTRODUCTION

Literature mirrors human experiences from reality through which the author reflects the impact of epidemics on individuals, families, and society. Epidemics are frequently used as metaphors to explore broader themes such as mortality, societal collapse, existential issues and the human condition. We are studying how historical pandemics and their symbolic counterparts continue to influence our thoughts, actions, and societies. They symbolise aspects of the human condition, such as mortality, vulnerability, isolation, or the fragility of civilisation. Epidemic plague, in the form of devastating pandemics or metaphorical affliction, has left an indomitable mark on our memories, shaping our societies and individual psyche. “Plague narratives can be seen as literary creations that imitate historical plague stories, shedding light on the literary culture and historical consciousness of different periods.” Narratives constructed around disease, survival and resilience, such as leprosy and bubonic plague, reflect medieval and early modern literature. The gothic genre, deeply influenced by cultural and religious perspectives, connects mortality to its vital factor.⁽⁴⁾ This research focuses on how the author utilises epidemic plague and the role of the priest as a human transgression, exploring plague narratives as literary creations imitating historical plague stories.

In addition, medieval literary works, such as *The Decameron* by Giovanni Boccaccio (1313-1375) and *The Canterbury Tales* by Geoffrey Chaucer (1343-1400),⁽³⁾ highlighted human conduct: the apprehension of contagion amplified vices such as avarice, greed, and corruption, which ironically resulted in infection and consequently, both moral and physical demise.⁽³⁾

Plague narratives in medieval and more recent times offer realistic descriptions of the disease and its effects, providing solace and lessons from past experiences.⁽⁸⁾ It shows how literary authors interpret illness and reflects the socio-cultural historical connection from the Middle Ages to the Renaissance. According to Michel Foucault, the plague is neither an image nor a metaphor but an unknown reality that one imagines as familiar. Gothic narrative fiction, thriving on mystery, the uncanny, and the macabre, becomes a captivating platform for exploring human emotions and fears. This research focuses on the narrative’s emotional depths and foreboding atmosphere, using epidemic plague as a gothic trope, intertwining elements like church and tomb.

The immense fright was also fueled by a belief in the supernatural origin of pandemics, which were often believed to be provoked by offences against divinities.⁽¹⁰⁾ In the Bible (e.g., Exodus 9:14, Numbers 11:33, 1 Samuel 4:8, Psalms 89:23, Isaiah 9:13), the plague was viewed as one of God’s punishments for sins, so the frightening description of its spread was interpreted as a warning to the Israelites to behave morally. This causal relationship between plague and sin is seen also in Greek literary texts, such as Homer’s *Iliad* and Sophocles’ *Oedipus the King* (429 BCE) (Hassoon, 2021).⁽⁵⁾

Use of Church and Tomb Setting as a Cultural Memory

Place as a memory also can be identified as residual haunting. A tomb is a remnant of a past traumatic event at or near the location before someone’s death. The place stands as the vortex where divergent views about the memory can be felt and expressed. “Architecture and memory inclusion of narrative structures in cognitive architectures suggest that narrative is not only a successful way of communication but also a fundamental way of structuring knowledge and memory”⁽¹⁾. Put forward the idea that a sense of place when space has been named and rendered in architectural form embodies the population’s symbolic and imaginary investments.

Memory is recalling facts or experiences associated with the sense of place. The remembrance of an event or events is a valuable identifier of space and its history. The research examines the contradictory religious life of a corrupt priest who takes on a demonic appearance after losing his inner light. This identity duality invites an exploration of the intricate relationships within the framework of spiritual narratives between moral decay,

religious devotion, and the symbolic conversion of the sacred into the profane.

The church at Thornham St Stephen is one of the finest in the region but much neglected on account of its surroundings, which are indifferent, and its position in a remote part of the fens, in the Isle of Ely. The main building dates from the fourteenth century: the foundations were laid in the reign of Edward II. However, there is evidence of earlier structures. the crypt is Norman, and some graves date back to the eighth century.⁽²⁾

Church as an ideological structure reflects the religious transgression represented in gothic fiction. The church is a setting in gothic fiction for pry, intrigue, and ambiguous familiarity with a priest using the confessional for lust, avarice, ambition, and malice.⁽⁹⁾ The priest's life, initially dedicated to the sacred duties of worship and guidance, takes a malevolent turn. The church's sacred space becomes a stage for moral decay, and the confessional—a symbol of penance—transforms into a clandestine chamber for the indulgence of lust, avarice, ambition, and malice. Gothic fiction strategically utilises churches as settings to cultivate an atmosphere characterised by mystery and gloom, effectively capitalising on the inherent strangeness of sacred spaces. This intentional decision functions as a literary technique, emphasising the emptiness and intensifying the otherworldly aspects of the story, effectively turning the church into an eerie setting that magnifies the psychological and emotional suspense for readers. The seclusion of the church serves as a potent instrument, enabling Gothic writers to capitalise on the inherent eeriness of such environments, crafting a complex fabric of suspense and supernatural fascination in their literary creations. Churches have played a crucial role in the Christian tradition, serving as sites for worship, community gatherings, and the remembrance of the deceased. Tombs, however, serve as a tangible and symbolic connection to the deceased, embodying the concepts of commemoration and spiritual perpetuity. The presence of tombs within churches signifies the confluence of religious and funerary customs, highlighting the interdependence of existence, mortality, and the divine.

In literature, the tomb serves as a repository for the dead and is a symbolic location where themes of redemption, rivalry, mortality, and memory are woven into the story. With its narrative presence, the tomb functions as a dynamic symbol that enables detailed exploration of how death affects memory, the conflicts arising from competition, and the possibility of redemption. It gives authors a potent means to delve into the complex interplay between life and the afterlife. In gothic literature, tomb inscriptions and letter writing are potent forms of the written word that affect redemption among the text's characters, author, and readers.⁽⁶⁾ The tomb symbolises a site of mystery, a place of reflection, past, eternity, and resurrection. Tombs in fiction add depth to the narrative and contribute to exploring the human experience, our relationship with the past, and our contemplation of mortality. In the novel, "St Stephen's is possessed of several notable features, among which is to be numbered a group of tombs built in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries". The author establishes a strong correlation between the church and the Lindsey tomb, attributing to the religious structure a sense of heritage and contentment that is closely associated with this commemorative monument. This correlation highlights the narrative in which the church serves not only as a place of worship but also as a protector of historical legacy, symbolising an intricate interplay between sacred spaces and the significance of family burials.

This is especially gratifying in the case of the largest tomb, a marble structure built in 1359 for one William de Lindsey. De Lindsey was at one time prior of a small religious house at Thornham St Stephen, when it was a dower church of Thornham Abbey. In later life, William himself became Abbot of Thornham. He left instructions in his will that he was to be buried in the chancel of St Stephen's, together with large sums of money for the construction of the tomb and prayers for his soul.⁽²⁾

Lindsey's tomb serves as a symbol of eternity and resurrection: "Edward thinks... He is certain that he has disturbed something that should have been allowed to rest."⁽²⁾ The ongoing occurrences during the construction work indicate a possible disruption of sacred or foreboding factors, resulting in severe repercussions for the workers involved. The occurrence of a serious accident that caused a worker to lose their leg, followed by a subsequent death, raises interesting questions about the existence of hidden forces and their impact on the well-being of construction workers. It warrants a thorough investigation into the site's supernatural or metaphysical aspects. The act of disturbing a tomb acts as a mysterious trigger, revealing a hidden history that resonates across time, prompting a reassessment of the recurring patterns of the past. The past repeats itself and spreads the illness again; death continues through the plague. The tomb serves as a site of paradox and revelation as the plague delves into the paranormal phenomena that establish a connection with the past, prompting the priest to reflect on mortality. Additionally, it serves as an emblematic representation of forgotten or overlooked history, symbolising the concealed truths and transgressions of the priest during his

era. The tomb also serves as a crucial element in the decisive events of the novel.⁽¹²⁾

The intentional inclusion of church and tomb settings in cultural expressions is a deliberate act of cultural remembrance, cultivating a collective repository of Christian principles, convictions, and societal contemplations. The author effectively captures the shared thoughts and feelings of the characters by vividly describing the settings. This reflects the cultural history and enhances the current comprehension of heritage and identity.

The Priest Engages in a Ritualistic Transgression to Safeguard his Soul

Religious studies in literature through religiously marked allusions serve as carriers of religious information and activators of religious knowledge structures in the literary text.⁽⁷⁾ It plays a significant role in understanding rituals and ceremonial context in cultural and religious practices.⁽¹¹⁾ It symbolises and enacts transformative processes or symbolic acts. Rituals involve a clear demarcation between the sacred and the profane. This ritual transgression occurs in a sacred space or time, allowing the readers and characters to explore the unknown beyond conventional boundaries. Atherton, motivated by his religious beliefs, aims to renovate the church, starting with the tomb—a task he has been warned not to disrupt. “Edward thinks... He is certain that he has disturbed something that should have been allowed to rest”.⁽²⁾ Rector Edward Altherton, leveraging his family connections, involves himself in religious activities, leading a lifestyle within the church similar to that of a parishioner while actively contributing to its restoration. “He decided to begin by restoring the chancel since that is the most sacred part of the church. The most prominent feature of the chancel at St Stephen’s is the de Lindesey tomb”.⁽²⁾ After the tomb was disturbed, a sequence of malicious events occurred, causing Altherton to comprehend the malevolent nature behind them. While trying to warn and interpret the mysterious writing within the tomb, which had puzzled everyone before, he ultimately fell victim to the evil forces and died. At the novel’s end, Asquith obtains this revelation by solving complex puzzles, comprehending the priest’s actions’ fundamental nature and exploring the mysterious past. The individual words, taken from Scripture, come together to form a final expression that deviates significantly from the original scriptural context. The linguistic choice made by William stimulated Asquith’s curiosity, motivating him to carry out a process to unravel the subtle significance hidden within the familiar yet enigmatic language Asquith’s insightful perception becomes evident as he unravels the enigmatic message: “I am not deceased, but rather alive; you will discover me in the location where I am situated, beneath the physical representation of Christ’s body.”⁽²⁾

Asquith understands that the priest’s soul persists, conserved as a sacred object within the church. The complexities of this understanding reveal the deep spiritual bond between the priest’s being and the sacred area, prompting Asquith to explore more deeply the mysterious interaction of life, death, and the lasting holiness within the church’s revered walls

“A relic,” I said. “A small statue in the shape of a seated man, perhaps with a goat’s head. It was brought to de Lindsey when he was Abbot of Thornham. I am convinced that all his strength for evil resides in it. We have to find it and render it harmless”.⁽²⁾

Asquith commits an act of sacrilege by disassembling the altar. His hands trembled and tore at the remnants of the fabric. Its descent to the ground exposed the substratum. His eyes fixed on it, and he recognised the form of an inhuman and satanic monstrous head. They immediately recognised that he had previously observed one similar at the Fitzwilliam Museum. An elongated head supports a wooden statue of the ram-headed Egyptian deity Knem, adorned with entwined horns and protruding ears. It appeared in that dim light as the very embodiment of evil. A sound emanated from behind. He turned this time around. With a swift return to the altar, He raised the statue in both hands and caused it to collide with the stone’s side. It disintegrated into dozens of pieces and was no longer required to strike with it. As a result of the great scream that followed into the church, every candle was extinguished, leaving in the utmost darkness. Thus, it describes how the demonic activity caused by the priest’s soul’s transgression in the relic manifested itself in the form of the plague and human death.

Remembrance of the Epidemic Plague: Linda Hutcheon’s Historiographic Metafiction

The plague in “A Shadow on the Wall”, represented by characters such as Warren Huge Lindesey is interpreted as the illness and seen as a form of punishment or indication, by Susan Sontag’s view on the illness being metaphorical. The novel skillfully weaves together the story of the plague, placing it within the historical backdrop as seen through the church and tomb, thus exploring the symbolic significance of the disease within the broader thematic framework. Jonathan Aycliffe’s novel skillfully combines historical facts and imaginative storytelling to delve into the plague theme, blurring the lines between reality and fiction. Persecution is a central theme in the narrative, representing the manifestation of malicious authority commonly linked to dungeons and imminent peril. It offers a distorted view of religious or political conformity, embodying the

quintessential elements of the gothic genre.

The presence of dream narration acts as a powerful mechanism for evoking the recollection of past events. This literary technique skillfully integrates the elements of memory into the narrative, enabling the subconscious to gradually unveil the various layers of the past in a way that surpasses conventional chronological storytelling. Dreams serve as a means for both characters and readers to explore and connect with the intricate intricacies of historical and personal experiences, leading to a greater comprehension of the narrative's time-related and emotional aspects.

In my dream, I would find myself standing there in the nave of the church. Ruined walls, empty windows, moss-covered stones—just as it is, just as I remember. And all round, the whole countryside, bleak, empty. No one anywhere, not even a bird in flight. Just empty fields, and trees without leaves, and bare hedges, and a wind blowing cold across it all, the way it does sometimes at home in winter. So it is winter in your dream? Always winter. Always cold. Always a black wind.⁽²⁾

In this dream, it is important to note that although no one has explicitly informed me, I am still cognizant of the issue. All the monks have passed away. I am currently in a church that deceased individuals exclusively occupy. Plague-infested settings become allegorical landscapes where humanity's darkest instincts are laid bare. The paper explores the understanding obtained from these texts, regardless of whether they are based on facts or fiction, emphasising the symbolic and symbolic use of the plague. This narrative device reveals profound insights into diverse societies and the shared human experience. Linda Hutcheon challenges the clear separation between fiction and history, encouraging an investigation into how historical events are reinterpreted within the framework of fictional gothic stories. This study centres on using the plague as a historical context, highlighting the lasting interconnectedness between the past and present that influences the historical account and human experiences. The study delves deeper into the complex interaction between memory, the construction of narratives, and human consciousness.

Gothic Illusionary Experience that Connects the Past and Present to Forecast the Future

The gothic illusionary experience establishes a connection that spans the past, present, and future. Pretending to be Mary to attract and distract Asquith, the illusion emits a ghostly fragrance that lingers, creating a connection to a previous event where he encountered the same enigmatic smell. This complex narrative blurs the boundaries of time and predicts a path where the past and present come together in a haunting and continuous manner. "Not a young woman's perfume, nor the smell of her unperfumed body, but that rank odour of decay I had encountered twice before, most recently in Atherton's rooms".⁽²⁾

The church connects a shared cultural memory, particularly depicted in a ghostly encounter where the entity communicates using the phrase "Guillielmus sum" - "Why do you doubt me?".⁽²⁾ This linguistic utterance, articulated in a lucid variant of Latin, specifically Church Latin from the Middle Ages, emphasises the historical and cultural significance linked to the religious context. The shift from Latin to Middle English in the spectral dialogue is a significant example of the cultural and linguistic heritage embedded in the church's symbolic importance. It contributes to a detailed examination of linguistic authority and historical continuity in the research argument.

This study explores the complex interplay between the past, present, and future in the human mind, examining the various temporal indicators that reveal this connection. During the Middle Ages, the narrative of that period heavily focused on themes of death, such as the deaths of choir boys and the widespread presence of illness. The current situation reveals a remarkable similarity as the main character faces the reappearance of the identical ailment that had affected his predecessors, mirroring the historical encounters of Edward, his mother, and Atherton. The protagonist's familial challenges through his son's dangerous encounter, serve as a reminder of his past as a choir boy. The narrative is enhanced by auditory stimuli, represented by the eerie chant sung by monks, symbolising a ghostly link between the past and present. As the main character endeavours to decipher the enigmatic sounds mentioned by his spouse, the inquiry transforms into a metaphorical examination of the enduring reverberations of the past. This undertaking involves a tense confrontation in which the main character questions a presumed identity, highlighting the unsettling interaction between reality and the ghostly presence. The research argument reaches its peak with a focus on the future as the protagonist embarks on a mission to protect his family. It entails recognising and eliminating a violated spirit contained within an artifact, symbolising a definitive action to end the pattern of suffering. The narrative thoroughly examines the psychological progression, demonstrating how past experiences influence the present and how present actions shape future paths within the intricate realm of the human mind.

CONCLUSION

The Gothic genre serves as a repository of cultural memory by encapsulating and perpetuating societal

perspectives on mortality through its evocative use of settings and narratives. The Gothic settings employ churches and tombs as symbols to visually depict the intricate relationship between life, death, and the spiritual domain. It exemplifies the collective consciousness haunted by a shared awareness of mortality. When incorporated into the literary structure, plague narratives surpass mere historical records by encompassing a blend of creativity and historical consciousness. These narratives exemplify the enduring impact of literature by showcasing the interplay between imitation, cultural enlightenment, and the unveiling of historical awareness.

The Gothic narrative profoundly explores the mysterious and unsettling aspects of human emotions and fears. This genre functions as a reflective surface that portrays the most sinister facets of the human psyche by obscuring the boundaries between actuality and imagination. Gothic narratives engage readers by skillfully blending language and darkness, compelling them to confront their deepest fears. This experience provides an opportunity to acquire a deeper understanding of the intricate nature of human existence.

The Gothic patterns effectively depict the symbolism of a widespread plague, skillfully capturing the terror of solitude and confronting mortality. As the characters navigate the intricate and sophisticated passageways of the Gothic setting, the enduring and unsettling consequences of the plague profoundly affect both the narrative and the reader's psyche. This symbolism surpasses the boundaries of fiction, inciting contemplation on the profound human experience of encountering the unknown, the consequent isolation, and the unavoidable inevitability of death. Gothic narratives, similar to alchemical wonders, consistently convert historical events into lasting stories, offering a poignant reflection on the past and a profound exploration of the human spirit as it confronts the grim aspects of epidemics.

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