

The Spirit of The Gothic in *My Antonia* and *Mourning Becomes Electra*

Though it is a tenet of modernism to reject traditional forms and genres, Gothic fiction, which reached the height of its popularity in the 19th century, has had considerable influence on writers of the 20th century. Though, according to Abrams' *Glossary of Literary Terms*, conventional Gothic literature relies on a "medieval setting", a work may also be considered Gothic if it creates "a brooding atmosphere of gloom and terror, represents events which are uncanny or macabre or melodramatically violent, and often deals with aberrant psychological states" (75). Two notable examples of the Gothic's influence on modernist writing are Willa Cather's novel, *My Antonia* and Eugene O'Neill's play, *Mourning Becomes Electra*. Both authors employ a Victorian setting, a time when the Gothic was in fashion. More significantly, both works prominently feature common Gothic devices including a haunted house, a family curse, violent images of death and characterizations of abnormal psychology.

Both Cather and O'Neill suggest the presence of ghosts in their respective works, going against the conventions of the literary modes that they are supposedly situated in. Though *My Antonia* belongs to the traditions of realism and naturalism, there are several supernatural episodes. Early in the novel, the protagonist describes one such episode. Jim Burden recollects being left alone in the house for the first time as a child and sensing the presence of Mr. Shimerda, a man who has just killed himself. But unlike a typical Gothic protagonist in the same situation, young Jim reacts with sympathy and not terror: "Surely, his exhausted spirit... was resting now in this quiet house... I was not frightened... I did not wish to disturb him... It was as if I had let the old man in out of the tormenting winter, and were sitting there with him" (66). Jim continues to be haunted by Mr. Shimerda and frequently revisits his grave and remarks, "I never came upon the place without emotion, and in all that country it was the spot most dear to me" (77). He goes on to say how he "loved the dim superstition" of "the old country" which dictated its placement at the crossroads. The fact that Mr. Shimerda was an immigrant from Eastern Europe and associated with the forests of Bohemia would further reinforce his link with the medieval and The Gothic in Jim's mind. Perhaps in addition to popular fiction such as *The Life of Jesse James*, Jim was familiar with Bram Stoker's Transylvanian vampire in his novel, *Dracula*. It published in 1897, not long before Jim's arrival in Black Hawk at the turn of the century. It also possible that Jim encountered the vampire myth later in life and it colours his childhood memories of Mr. Shimerda. In any event, the Gothic tendencies in this episode are primarily a reflection of Jim's imagination. It is interesting to note that Jim's first description of Mr. Shimerda compares him to "old portraits" (18). O'Neill's play features several ghostly family portraits, one of the most characteristic of Gothic devices. This was a key element in the original "Gothic Story", Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* (1764). But *Mourning Becomes Electra* is modeled on classical Greek tragedy where it is the Gods, not ghosts, whose presence is supposed to be felt. At one point, O'Neill equates the Mannon figures with God in the mind of Lavinia: "her eyes unconsciously seeking the Mannon portraits on the right wall, as if they were the visible symbol of her God" (404). O'Neill uses the portraits as a modern device to replace the classical Gods. They exert their control over the characters through psychology

instead of direct intervention. Because they symbolize their heredity and family environment, the characters project their guilt onto them, especially the portrait of the murdered Ezra Mannon, expressionistically “wearing his black judge’s robe” (284). Christine, Lavinia and Orin all react at one point or another to the portraits as if they were alive, although they are more closely associated with death: “The eyes of the portraits seem to possess an intense bitter life, with their frozen stare ‘looking over the head of life, cutting it dead for the impropriety of living’...” (404). Lavinia, for example, addresses the portraits directly in an outburst of projected guilt, “Why do you look at me like that? I’ve done my duty by you! That’s finished and forgotten!” (386). At the conclusion of this play--the third and final part of the trilogy, which is aptly named “The Haunted”--it is clear that she is unable to forget and shuts herself up in the Mannon house for the rest of her life. Like Jim Burden, she projects herself into the Gothic setting of a haunted house but she is consumed, rather than comforted, by it.

The haunted house and ghostly portraits are closely linked to another Gothic convention, the family curse. Both the Shimerda and Mannon families are haunted by an affair between the man of the house and a servant girl. Antonia is the product of Mr. Shimerda’s transgression. She describes it in the following way: “my father was different from my mother... he lived in his mother’s house, and she was a poor girl come in to do the work” (151). Mr. Shimerda reluctantly agrees to go to America with his wife and he spends most of his time there brooding, in true Gothic fashion, over his memories of the old country. In the end, it is his undoing and he shoots himself as previously mentioned. Antonia is similarly cursed to repeat her mother’s fate of being poor and brought into other houses to do the work but thanks to Jim’s intervention, she does not fall victim to Wick Cutter. Incidentally, he is described in Gothic terms, in that he “liked to have his wife think him a devil” (161). An interesting parallel between *My Antonia* and *Mourning Becomes Electra* is in how the respective families dealt with the forbidden couples. Antonia describes how Mr. Shimerda’s exile was mostly self-imposed: “He did not have to marry my mother, and all his brothers quarreled with him because he did” (151). Similarly, Abe, the jealous brother, expels David Mannon and the servant girl, Marie Brantôme. The product of their union is Capt. Brandt who is described as having a “Byronic appearance” (277), another hallmark of Gothic literature. This also recalls *Otranto* and its protagonist, Manfred, which certainly influenced Byron himself. It is fitting that Brandt, the Bryonic hero, precipitates the violent action in the place through his sworn revenge on the Mannons.

Suicide and murder occur several times in *My Antonia* and in *Mourning Becomes Electra* and other violent images of death figure prominently in both works. These macabre elements are graphic evidence of the Gothic’s influence. Though young Jim is spared the “burden” of seeing Mr. Shimerda’s body, he does recall much “excited talk” from the others regarding the gash on his face which could have suggested murder. He also remembers certain grim facts such as how the body remained in the frozen barn for four days before it was buried and it was necessary “to cut the body loose from the pool of blood in which it was frozen fast to the ground” (62-74). Antonia goes into more graphic detail when telling the story of a Tramp’s suicide: “he waved his hand to me and jumped head-first right into the threshing machine... the belt had sucked him down...he was all

beat and cut to pieces” (115). Critic Lisa Marie Lucenti points out the perverse “bedtime story” quality of the anecdote (38). This quality is echoed in Antonia’s earlier telling of Pavel’s bloody secret and in the story of Wick Cutter’s murder/suicide (232). Young Jim is fascinated by the story of Pavel’s narrow escape from the wolves: “For Antonia and me, the story of the wedding party was never at an end. We did not tell Pavel’s secret to anyone, but guarded it jealously—as if the wolves of the Ukraine had gathered that night long ago, and the wedding party been sacrificed, to give us a painful and peculiar pleasure” (41). When he is much older, and Antonia is about to tell Jim of Wick Cutter’s demise, her own children seem as excited to hear a Gothic tale retold as Jim once was: ‘Hurrah! The murder!’ the children murmured, looking pleased and interested” (231). A similar treatment of murder and suicide is also apparent in *Mourning Becomes Electra* in the outside community’s responses. Of Orin’s suicide, Seth remarks with grave irony, “A darn queer thin’ fur a sodger to kill himself cleanin’ his gun, folks is sayin’” (416). Christine’s suicide is immediately followed by the drunken episode where Seth challenges Abner to spend the night in the “haunted house” (382). The murders of Ezra and Capt. Brant are met with a similar mix of cold skepticism from the townsfolk. Though they may seem cynical, the way in which Seth, Jim and Antonia respond to death in quite healthy ways in contrast to Christine, Orin and Lavinia. Perhaps it is because they lack the psychological defense mechanisms described by Freudian psychology.

There are textbook cases of Freudian disorders to be found in the characters created by Cather and O’Neill. This is consistent with Abrams’ definition of Gothic works in the portrayal of “aberrant psychological states.” The Freudian theory of psychology is principally concerned with repression as a psychological defense mechanism. It is a mental process that actively keeps “anxiety-arousing impulses, feelings, and memories in the unconscious depths of the mind” (Passer and Smith, 19). The structure of Jim Burden’s narrative in *My Antonia* can be seen as an attempt to regain his childhood innocence through nostalgic remembrances. However, he is frequently unable to reconstruct his childhood without being interrupted by the traumatic experiences that keep coming to light (). Perhaps the reason why Jim is so frustrated in his life is due to an over-active repression mechanism. That would explain why he seeks to “unburden” himself in a therapeutic form of self-analysis. A related pair of Freudian concepts, the Oedipus Complex and the Electra Complex are illustrated by Orin and Lavinia in *Mourning Becomes Electra*. Orin experiences severe anxiety caused by the Oedipus Complex: the incestuous desire for his mother and his fear of his father. Lavinia is conflicted by her desire to replace her mother as her father’s wife. Freud believed that these conflicts are normally resolved through a repression of these impulses and natural movement away from “sexual attachment to the opposite-sex parent to *identification* with the same-sex parent, boys taking on the traits of their fathers and girls those of their mothers” (Passer and Smith, 547). Of course, Orin and Lavinia indulge in frightening imitations, not natural identifications of their same-sex parents. The stage directions at the beginning of “The Hunted” describe the warped state that Orin assumes: “He carries himself woodenly erect now like a soldier. His movements and attitudes have the statue-like quality that was marked in his father... He has grown dreadfully thin... His haggard swarthy face is set in a blank lifeless expression” (385). In the next scene, Lavinia’s own “striking” change is described: “At a first glance, one would mistake her for her

mother... Her brown-gold hair is arranged as her mother's had been. Her green dress is like a copy of her mother's...(386). In this way, they have become doppelgangers, the Gothic device in which a "double" character is often used according to critic Otto Rank as "a psychic projection caused by unresolved anxieties" (Dunlap). Certainly, they are both consumed by violent impulses that they are unable to control.

The spirit of the Gothic is profoundly felt in *My Antonia* and *Mourning Becomes Electra*. By turns it is haunting, cursed, bloody and maddening.