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## Spooky tenebrism and gloomy chiaroscuro:

how light shapes the landscape to crystallise a Gothic atmosphere in *Frankenstein* and *Dracula*

Eline de Mathuisieulx

Gothic fictional narratives are fraught with intricate references to light, from the pale saffron moonshine to flickering candle flames, not forgetting lurid dawns and sunsets red as blood. The “agent that stimulates sight”<sup>1</sup> can be construed as the very essence of Gothic landscapes; it contributes to creating an eerie aesthetic, a dreary environment charged with tension by allowing the reader to catch a glimpse of malevolent monsters, merciless malefactors barbaric murderers or dangerous vampires hiding in every nook and cranny of haunted castles, shadowy graveyards or dark mountainous caves. Yet, light may embellish these harrowing surroundings. As Freud states in his article “The Uncanny”<sup>2</sup>, aesthetic is generally associated with beauty and attractiveness, and triggers positive connotations, but on the other hand, it may emphasise creeping horrors and unpleasantness, what arouses dread and repulsion in the reader’s mind.

We shall focus on the use of luminosity as a means to generate an emblematic Gothic atmosphere in *Frankenstein* and *Dracula*. Paradoxically, its appearance is meant to increase the overwhelming presence of darkness, while the revealing rays of the moon become ominous harbingers of death.

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1 *Oxforddictionaries.com*, accessed August 27, 2020, s.v. “light”.

2 Sigmund Freud, “The Uncanny” (Penguin Books, 2003) 2.

## Spooky tenebrism: how lamps paradoxically highlight prevailing darkness

Luminescence is part and parcel of the Gothic chronotope<sup>3</sup>, as it contributes to creating a bleak setting. In *Frankenstein* and *Dracula*, light is seldom bright and warm, it is rather feeble and cold to make the surrounding shadows even greater. In this way, it acts as a foil to Stygian darkness and paradoxically does not correspond to its traditional reassuring function. In her article “Gothic Light: Vision and Visibility in the Victorian Novel”, Stern reminds us that an indistinct environment remains “a trope for danger” where threatening characters can lurk and loom.<sup>4</sup> Villains fade into and emerge from relative obscurity, and the latter especially crystallises our deepest fears when it is associated to macabre sceneries:

Within the Gothic genre, a seemingly inexhaustible series of graveyards, catacombs, burial vaults and hidden passageways find their attendant lighting effects in the lightning storm, the dying fire, the flickering candle, and, conversely, the sudden flare within a supposedly vacant space.<sup>5</sup>

In the beginning of *Dracula*, most of the main characters believe that young Lucy Westenra has died of an unknown and incurable illness. Professor Van Helsing tries to convince his friend Dr. Seward that she has actually turned into an “Un-dead”<sup>6</sup> by the Count. They both wait outside her vault in the dead of night to investigate. As soon as a “distant clock strike[s] twelve”, the corpse awakens.<sup>7</sup>

It was then very dark, and the scattered lamps made the darkness greater when we were once outside their individual radius.<sup>8</sup>

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3 Mikhail Bakhtin, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist, “Forms of time and of the chronotope in the novel”, in *The Dialogic Imagination* (Austin: Univ. Texas Press, 1981), 431.

4 Rebecca F. Stern, “Gothic Light: Vision and Visibility in the Victorian Novel” (South Central Review, 1994), 28.

5 Stern, 27.

6 Bram Stoker, Nina Auerbach, and David J. Skal. *Dracula: authoritative text, contexts, reviews and reactions, dramatic and film variations, criticism* (1st ed. A Norton critical edition. New York: W.W. Norton, 1997), 180.

7 Stoker, 177.

8 Stoker, 175.

Dr. Seward records in his diary that a tenebrous night has fallen, and that the potentially reassuring glow emanating from the street lamps cannot dissipate the obscureness. On the contrary, it renders sinister shadows thicker and more menacing. It becomes a new enemy that allows the vampire to creep out of her crypt under cover of darkness, allowing her to treacherously attack the two men by surprise.

The sophisticated combination of complete darkness and subdued lamplights shapes Gothic landscapes, while the lucent moon is another overwhelming element heightened through personification.

### **Gloomy chiaroscuro: the ambivalence of sinister moonlight**

In most Gothic novels, the fulgent moon is an omnipresent source of light which very frequently turns into a character through the process of personification. The celestial body usually emerges as a benevolent ally for the protagonists when it casts its soothing gleam. Moonbeams are a symbol for safety and even enable the empowerment of heroes. This reassuring presence lets them see, defeat or break away from, their enemies. This is notably the case for Victor Frankenstein, who avoids the creature in the mountains, and for Jonathan Harker who escapes the clutches of Dracula's nefarious siblings. Nonetheless, this valuable radiation is never to be taken for granted, as inconstancy and variation are considered to be characteristics of the moon. Shakespeare reminds us of this conception in *Romeo and Juliet*:

O, swear not by the moon, th' inconstant moon,

That monthly changes in her circled orb,

Lest that thy love prove likewise variable.”<sup>9</sup>

Moonlight is ephemeral, as it changes night after night, and may be obscured from one minute to the next. Whenever a force endangers defenceless characters, scudding clouds will infallibly overshadow the natural satellite and plunge the setting into darkness. The vulnerable protagonists fall prey to the villains lurking in the shadows. Unfortunately, the personified moon is unable to help as it cannot voluntarily influence the plot. This feeling of powerlessness brings Gothic novels closer to Greek tragedies, in which the heroes are condemned to follow their fate, whatever they do to avoid it.<sup>10</sup> A parallel can thus be drawn between the moon and the reader who are forced to suffer the agony of suspense in silence.

Far from always being depicted as a static, empathic entity, the heavenly body sometimes turns into an unwanted trespasser, for it enters rooms uninvited, penetrates through windows and invades the characters' personal space. At the same time, this unsolicited guest usually makes horrible scenes visible and sheds light upon tragic developments. We can mention for instance Mina Harker when Dracula forces her to drink his own blood: “The moonlight was so bright that through the thick yellow blind the room was light enough to see”.<sup>11</sup> Once she has tasted the vampire's sanguine fluid, the young woman is cursed and gradually metamorphoses into a creature of the night, just like him. Likewise, the moon shines upon the corpse of Elizabeth Lavenza, Frankenstein's bride, whom the creature strangled her on her hymeneal bed: “The windows of the room had before been darkened, and I felt a kind of panic on seeing the pale yellow light of the moon illuminate the chamber”.<sup>12</sup> The moon becomes a fateful messenger delivering the sombre news that occurred during the night.

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9 William Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet* (J. B. Lippincott & CO, 1871), 103.

10 Aristotle, trans. Charles Gattnig, “Poetics” in *Dukore, Dramatic Theory and Criticism: Greeks to Grotowski* (Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1974), 31–55.

11 Stoker, 246.

12 Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein; or the Modern Prometheus* (W.W. Norton, 2011), 141.

To finish with, the moon violently gives away the results of the man's hubristic experiment. In the following passage, Frankenstein finally succeeds in giving life to his giant. Yet, when the enthusiastic young man meets the monster's eyes, he is so panic-stricken that he falls down into a swoon. When he wakes up, he contemplates his creation and immediately regrets his demiurgic action:

I started from my sleep with horror; a cold dew covered my forehead, my teeth chattered, and every limb became convulsed; when, by the dim and yellow light of the moon, as it forced its way through the window shutters, I beheld the wretch—the miserable monster whom I had created.<sup>13</sup>

Thus, light can be seen as an ambivalent entity, a thing of beauty in contrast to the most loathsome Gothic stereotypes, or a treacherous evildoer that either supports darkness or makes plain the most atrocious peripeteias. In the end, light may always be preferable, as J. R. R. Tolkien writes in *The Fellowship of the Ring*: “May it be a light to you in dark places, when all other lights go out.”<sup>14</sup>

+/- 1160 words

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13 Shelley, 36.

14 J. R. R. Tolkien, *The Fellowship of the Ring*, 491.

## **Biography**

Eline de Mathuisieulx is ATER at the University of Strasbourg and is a member of SEARCH UR 2325. In October 2019 she started a PhD supervised by Professor H el ene Ibata entitled “*The Lord of the Rings* by J. R. R. Tolkien, from illustrations to cinema adaptation, Alan Lee, John Howe and Peter Jackson, a quest intertwining the sublime and the spectacular”. Her master’s thesis is entitled: “The translation of light in 19<sup>th</sup> century Gothic novels: *Frankenstein, or the Modern Prometheus* (1831) by Mary Shelly and *Dracula* (1897) by Bram Stoker”.

<https://langues.unistra.fr/search-dev/membres/doctorants/eline-de-mathuisieulx/>

## **Publications**

- T emoignage de doctorante dans “Le Carnet de recherches de la SAES”, 2019.
- “La triple menace eschatologique dans *The Lord of the Rings* de Tolkien”, Caliban n o63 : Dynamiques de l’effondrement dans le fantastique, la fantasy et la SF, 2020.

## **Communications**

- “La paradoxalit e des marges : une  tude interm ediale des adaptations visuelles du roman *The Lord of the Rings* de J. R. R. Tolkien” Universit e de Metz, October 2020.
  - “Concerning pipeweed and the addiction to the spectacular”, “Mapping addiction: deviant bodies and marginal spaces”, Unistra, early 2021.

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