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Writing Project

Gothic literature rose to prominence in the 19th century with dark themes that often involved death and madness. Edgar Allan Poe was an innovator of gothic literature. His many short stories and poems are commonly known today and he is most associated with the genre. An author less commonly associated with gothic literature is Emily Bronte. Bronte only wrote one novel in her lifetime, *Wuthering Heights*, but it has strong gothic and Victorian influences. Edgar Allan Poe’s “The Oval Portrait” and Emily Bronte’s *Wuthering Heights* use anagnorisis and ekphrasis to enforce overarching gothic themes of death, insanity, outsiders, and twisted love.

Death is a principal theme in gothic fiction. In *Wuthering Heights*, many characters meet an untimely death including the two main characters: Heathcliff and Catherine Earnshaw. Most deaths in the novel were caused by disease or for the women, childbirth. In “The Oval Portrait,” the girl who was painted in the portrait dies once the portrait is finished. Both authors were influenced by their own lives in their writing. Both were affected by grief and suffered the loss of loved ones throughout their lives. Bronte’s life was filled with darkness and gloom. She lived in the bleak Yorkshire moors where the skies are often rainy and overcast with gray clouds. Her mother died young, as did two of her older sisters. Her father was a quiet man who spent most of his time alone, allowing Emily and her siblings to amuse themselves. Poe also lived a life of tragic events. Both of his parents died when he was a young child and Poe and his two siblings were sent to separate homes to life. Poe lived in poverty for most his life since he lived in a time where writers were paid very little. He did marry and spent a few happy years with his wife Virginia, until she got tuberculosis and died. Poe lived only two years after her death and moved from one place to another. The tragedies in both author’s life may be the reason that death plays a prominent role in their respective works. Ekphrasis is used in both of these stories to describe portraits of the dead. Bronte writes of Catherine’s portrait hanging in Thrushcross Grange when Lockwood arrives. This description gives the reader an image of what Catherine looked like and how others perceived her. Poe describes in detail the portrait of the woman since it captures the attention of the narrator. Both portraits have life-likeness to them, which is important to the stories. This feature creates tension in the story as the portrait gives the illusion of life even though the subject is dead. This tension is especially strong in “The Oval Portrait” since the portrait was painted as the subject was dying. The use of ekphrasis in the texts also allows the subjects to live on through their paintings. This furthers the tension between the life likeness of the portraits and the death of the subjects.

An important theme in both stories is the presence of an outsider. In *Wuthering Heights*, Lockwood travels to the countryside for a long rest and is told the story of the two houses by the housekeeper, Nelly Dean. He learns even more through written letters and diaries. In “The Oval Portrait,” the narrator reads the story of the girl in the portrait after stumbling across the painting in the room he is staying in for the night. Both meetings of the outsiders with their respective stories seem accidental. Lockwood could have rented many houses in the countryside and never encountered the story of the two houses. The narrator in Poe’s story could have stayed in another room or he could have never seen the portrait at all. These unintentional meetings give an air of mystery to the stories themselves and also to the portraits of the stories’ protagonist. The mystery adds another layer of tension in the text because it seems as if the narrators aren’t suppose to see the paintings. They weren’t for their eyes. The portraits both seem to attract the outsiders and cause them to search deeper for the story of the subject. The life-likeness of the paintings gives the outsiders a more emotional connection to the subjects and their stories.

Insanity is a powerful theme in gothic literature; it can immerse the reader deeper into the novel. In “The Oval Portrait,” there are two characters that suffer from some type of insanity. The wife and subject of the portrait is driven to despair and depression from a lack of attention from her new husband that eventually leads to her death. The husband and artist of the portrait is obsessed with his work so much that he completely ignores his new bride and fails to see her suffering until it’s too late. In *Wuthering Heights*, the two main characters also experience forms of madness. Catherine Earnshaw becomes hysterical several times in the novel, including near the time of her death. Heathcliff, who creates great stress for Catherine, always causes these hysterics. For example, after Catherine learns of Heathcliff and Isabella’s relationship she locks herself in her room for two days without eating. Heathcliff himself is driven to madness with the death of Catherine, who he considered his one true love. In his last days he refuses to eat and only wanders around the house looking for Catherine’s ghost. For all of these characters, anagnorisis plays a large role in their suffering. The young bride sees her mistake in marrying the artist when she discovers his obsession with his art and the artist doesn’t apprehend his wife’s illness until she is already dead. When Heathcliff returns, Catherine realizes her mistake in marrying Edgar. Heathcliff recognizes his mistake of his treatment towards Catherine just before she dies and he is too late to save her. Anagnorisis is an important climax in tragedies. It adds suspense to the story since the reader knows the character’s mistake but they have to wait for the character’s realization. In *Wuthering Heights*, the story focuses around the turbulent love between Heathcliff and Catherine, specifically the mistakes they made that lead to the climax of the story.

The last strong theme seen in gothic fiction and Bronte and Poe’s writings is misplaced love. For the artist and his new bride, their love should be filled with happiness and security like most newlyweds but it is the opposite. The bride is in love with the artist but he is too concerned with his art to give her attention and love. Anagnorisis is seen again here with both the bride and the artist. The bride doesn’t see her mistake in loving the artist until after they are married. *Wuthering Heights* has several storylines of misplaced love. The most obvious is between Heathcliff and Isabella. Isabella thinks she loves Heathcliff but in reality she doesn’t know him and Heathcliff clearly does not return her love. This is a great example of anagnorisis in Bronte’s novel. Isabella doesn’t discover her mistake of marrying Heathcliff until she takes the vows. While this is not the main anagnorisis in the story, it adds to the anticipation to the climax of the story. The other example of misplaced love in *Wuthering Heights* is between Heathcliff and Catherine. They grew close in childhood but separated after Catherine’s marriage. Some in the town found their closeness improper due to Heathcliff’s social class, which prompted Catherine to marry Edgar, something she later regrets. The ups and downs of Heathcliff and Catherine’s love build the story to the climax of her death.

When anagnorisis is used in writing, it often leads to catharsis. This is especially true in gothic novels since they have dark and tragic storylines. In Poe’s “The Oval Portrait,” the story has a cathartic ending. The artist must accept his wife’s sickness and understand his role in causing her death. The reader feels pity towards him for losing his love but understanding that he caused it, lessens this feeling. Bronte’s novel does not have a cathartic ending but the end of Heathcliff’s storyline does. The ending of *Wuthering Heights* gives the readers a satisfying closure with Catherine Linton and Hareton finding happiness and leaving Wuthering Heights for Thrushcross Grange. Heathcliff dies before this in a peculiar manner. He spends the days before his death without eating and without sleeping. He has seen Catherine’s ghost and wants to join her. Readers feel pity for Heathcliff because it seems as if he cannot live without Catherine, so he will make sure he joins her. There is also a feeling of fear towards supernatural aspects of the novel after Heathcliff’s death. Earlier in the novel, Lockwood reported seeing Catherine’s ghost outside of Wuthering Heights and after Heathcliff’s death; villagers reported seeing Heathcliff and Catherine’s ghosts.

Emily Bronte’s *Wuthering Heights* and Edgar Allan Poe’s “The Oval Portrait” have strong gothic themes that are enhanced by the use of anagnorisis and ekphrasis. Both authors lived in the same time period where gothic literature was at its height, which greatly influencing their writings. The author’s own personal tragedies motivated them to include tragedy in their works. Bronte and Poe died early deaths, most likely caused by disease, that leaves the world wondering what else they would have written if they had lived.