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Trapped

Throughout the semester we have been introduced to several pieces of gothic literature, as well as several elements that make a piece of literature gothic. An element that comes as important in essentially every text presented to our class has been structure in which the stories have taken place. Whether they are simply just eerie, harboring someone, or assisting our villain in holding someone captive, the houses and mansions we have seen all semester have played a vital role to the story. Though the terror of the gothic mansions have been brought up in a wide variety of texts, I would like to focus, for the purpose of this essay, on “The Adventure of the Speckled Band” by Conan Doyle. The house, more specifically the rooms, being featured in this short story plays a pivotal role in the plot. The rooms presented to us do more than function as a place in which our main characters simply lay their head at night. While the stepfather Dr. Grimesby Roylott is the murderer of the story, I would like to suggest that he is not the most terrifying aspect in the text. I am attempting to assert that the rooms in “The Adventure of the Speckled Band” are a symbol for the entrapment of someone (usually women) in gothic literature and that, though they try to escape, it is the room (or house) that ultimately results in characters demise.

It is in the retelling of the death of her sister that Helen alerts the reader to the significance of the house. Holmes, as one would expect, asks Helen to be very specific in the details of what she remembers. The first instance in which there is an illusion to the horror of the house is when Helen mentions that they always insist on locking their doors at night. She says “we had no feeling of security unless our doors were locked” (Doyle 217). This passage may come off as Helen showing that, when locked inside, the house is going to keep her safe. While this seems logical, it goes against everything presented to our class throughout the course of the semester regarding gothic literature. Partway through the semester we were introduced to the concept of the “double room.” Ellis argues that, in gothic literature, there is the idea of a “double room” which keeps our heroines trapped. They often lock one door, feeling as though they are safe, yet there is almost always another way to get in to the room. Using this theory, it is not unjustifiable to think that just because Helen feels safe that the room is not going to betray her feelings of solitude. Thus is the irony presented in the gothic in regards to its homes. Just as much as they are supposed to protect a character from outside forces plotting their demise, they too are aiding in the characters downfall.

Holmes, of course, does not trust that the room is every bit as safe as Helen would believe it to be. You can sense from the beginning that he believes the room was a key element in the murder of Helens sister. Holmes begins to ask very detailed questions about the room, specifically about the bell and the rope, which we later know to be the instrument in which the snake is able to enter the room. Due to his suspicions, Holmes does what any great detective would do and go right to the source. He and Watson decide to spend a night in the terror-filled room in which Helens sister died. Ironically, they have to kick Helen out of the room in order to do this. There are “renovations” being done to the area of the house in which Helen used to sleep, and she now sleeps in her late sister’s room. When asked about the significance of the renovations, Helen simply replied “there were none. I believe that it was an excuse to move me from my room” (Doyle 226). This further suggests that there is something sinister about the room in which Helen’s sister used to reside. One could argue that this is all the stepfathers doing and that the house has no significance. I would like to disagree. While it is obvious that the stepfather was behind the plan to move the girl, this further illustrates my point that the room is a symbol for the entrapment of women. She felt safe in her old room and was taken away from it. Helen has no say in what she does and the house is further aiding the murderous nature of Helen’s stepfather. She tried to keep distance by staying in a room away from him, yet she was drawn in closer.

Holmes in fact finds his suspicions of the room to be correct. Quickly upon entering the room, Holmes notices the bell. Equally as quickly, he notices that is a dummy; the bell will not ring. Soon after that, he notices the ventilator, which Holmes notices is strange considering one would normally position a ventilator to reach the outside room. Further, there is the issue of the bed being fastened to the floor. Holmes notes “the lady could not move her bed. It must always be in the same relative position to the ventilator and to the rope-or so we may call it, since it was clearly never meant for a bell-pull” (Holmes 231). All of these items, clarified Helen, had been recently added to the room. Clearly they did not appear out of thin air, and we later find out that the stepfather put them in the room. This does though, go along with the “double room” theory suggested earlier. While Helen and her sister occupy the room believing that they are a safe distance away from anything meaning to harm them, the room is hiding a secret that is aiding their stepfather in his attempts to murder his stepdaughters. They are trapped, and while it is their stepfather attempting to murder them, we get a sense in the image of the fastened bed that it the house preventing their escape from their clutches.

Several articles in academia have been written in regards to the significance of the mansions in gothic literature and what they could potentially symbolize. In a discussion of Edith Warton’s writing, Monika Elbert too discusses the use of the gothic mansion. While focusing her discussion from the angle of the aristocrats in gothic literature, Elbert attempts to show that that Edith Warton depicts gothic mansions as more than simple structure that plays no role in the fulfillment of a gothic story. Elbert begins saying “instead of depicting mansions peopled with social climbers, Wharton creates mansions haunted by ghosts who stand in the way of social climbers” (Elbert 51). This is not an uncommon theme in the world of the gothic. In several readings we have seen throughout the semester, it is often a character not originally positioned in the house to begin with that ends up being the target. They are sucked in to the house with its grand appeal and the money which goes along with it. Take, for example, another Doyle classic The Hound of the Baskervilles. Our man in need is not native to the area, yet is summoned because he is the next in line to receive the great mansion. It soon becomes clear that the house is harboring a great secret that is sure to be the end of our character seeking its fortune. This is the sort of thing that Elbert claims Edith Warton is attempting to point out. There is a certain irony in about traveling across the country to come in to fortune just to have it be the death of you. When character after character becomes murdered, it adds to the mystery of the great mansion and a sense of dread falls over the reader. The house seems to be sucking victims in and leading them to their demise.

So is the same in the course of “The Adventure of the Speckled Band.” The Roylotts were a well-known family in the area, and Helens stepfather was next in line for the great fortune that comes along with the family name. Upon Holmes recalling that the name does sound familiar to him Helen says “the family was at one time among the riches in England, and the estates extended over the borders into Berkshire in the north, and Hampsire in the west. In the last culture, however, four successive heirs were of a dissolute and wasteful disposition, and the family ruin was eventually completed by a gambler in the days of the Regency…..when Dr. Roylott was in India he married my mother, Mrs. Stoner….she had a considerable sum of money-not less than a thousand pounds a year-and this she bequeathed to Dr. Roylott entirely while we resided with him, with a provision that a certain annual sum should be allowed to each of us in the event of our marriage” (Doyle 214-215).

This is a superb example of someone trying to gain access to money and having it be the demise of them. As I had stated before, usually the house embodies the entrapment of women. Here though, we have a different case entirely. In this instance, the house has sought out the stepfather. Using the premise Warton embodied in her writing, it was the pursuit of wealth that brought Dr. Roylott in to the mansion he is living throughout the duration of our story. The money and the land was intriguing to Dr. Roylott and, having been kicked out of his own fortune, attempted to wipe out another family in order to gain a new fortune. The irony is that the house did as expected if we believe the premise Elbert says Warton is working with. Eventually the room which trapped his first victim turned on him and he was murdered in his own room, the place in which he was supposed to take sanctuary.

This is a stretch from my thesis a tad, though let me elaborate. The room still, in this premise, embodies entrapment. Here though, it is not simply in just the physical sense. The stepfather is trapped by greed. No matter how hard he tries to get what he wants (the house and fortune), that is what will ultimately be his downfall.

In relation to this concept, Misty Jameson discusses the concept of Carpenter’s gothic in her piece “The Haunted House of American Fiction: William Gaddis’s ‘Carpenter’s Gothic.” Jameson begins saying “a brutal husband terrorizes his frail wife while scheming to take her inheritance” (Jameson 314-329). This is clearly pertinent to the concept of “The Adventure of the Speckled Band,” and draws a parallel with my previous point made by Elbert. Jameson suggests that Carpenter’s gothic relied on the “trappings of the haunted house” and goes on to say that the house is “designed from the outside…with good intentions” (Jameson 314-329). This seems to be the case for the mansion in our story as well. Looking in to the house from the outside, no one would suspect that something violent or out of the ordinary was going on within its walls. Helen says that the bedroom windows open up to the front lawn. With this image, it seems as though the house has nothing to hide. This is keeping with the theme that a characters real demise truly comes once they are inside the house. If Carpenter’s gothic relies on the trappings of the haunted of the house, and the appeal of the wealth that comes along with the mansion, it suggests how evil gothic architecture is presented throughout gothic literature. One person after another comes to inherit the fortune of the house and they will perish, yet the house lives on untouched, waiting for its next victim.

Jameson also points out that Carpenter’s gothic “intertwines the architecture (i.e., plot) of his house of fiction with its characters” (Jameson 314-329). This shows us that the mansions in gothic literature are not meant to be merely a setting that is described at the beginning of a story, only to be forgotten by then end. Quite the opposite, in fact. The house is supposed to act almost as if it is itself, a gothic character. The mansions in Carpenter’s gothic are meant to further the story and help with the plot. They trap the “frail” women who have fortunes and allow for a man to come in to take advantage of their weakness. By intertwining the allure of the house with the wealth that the female character possesses, Carpenter’s gothic illustrates how a woman can be trapped by more than just a man. She can be trapped by her wealth and the house that was purchased with her wealth. Seemingly the only way to get out of the predicament of men trying to steal your fortune is to die because the house is going to continue to tempt people to come and steal everything away from you.

“The Adventure of the Speckled Band” exemplifies the concept of Carpenter’s gothic. When describing the first sight of the mansion Watson notes it as “a heavily timbered park stretched up in a gentle slope, thickening in to a grove at the highest point. From amid the branches there jutted out the gray gables and high roof-tree of a very old mansion” (Doyle 225). This seems to be an example of how the house is designed from the outside with good intentions, yet gets vastly creepier as you approach its fixture. The image of a “gentle slope” or “park” is not inherently terrifying to most people. The further you approach the mansion though words such as “jutted” “grey gables” “high roof-tree” and “very old mansion” strike a sense of dread in many a readers heart. Not to mention the fact that this mansion is in possession of a baboon. All of these things should signal to the reader that things out of the ordinary are going on inside the home you would not expect.

Further, the house clearly contains a “faire” woman in possession of a great fortune that a man is trying to take from her. He appears to be her just her stepfather, yet he is positioning her in a room of death so that he can steal her fortune. This is a less literal view of the house seeming good on the outside and becoming more twisted the further you investigate its story. It, again, may be a stretch but most of the time one does not view a stepfather as something that is inherently bad. Unless, of course, he is trying to kill you for your fortune.

An article written by Michael Levine touches on the subject of the house concealing more than someone believes it to, as well. Though in this article, Levine is specifically speaking of examples of this in relation to Sherlock Holmes. While he primarily discusses the story of “The Empty House,” the concepts that are brought up in this article can also be applied to “The Adventure of the Speckled Band.”

Levine opens by telling the reader what “vanishing point” is supposed to mean. He says Webster's Dictionary defines a vanishing point as "a point at which receding parallel lines seem to meet when represented in linear perspective." As a secondary meaning, it offers a less technical and more literal definition: "a point at which something disappears or ceases to exist” (Levine 249-273). This is something that is not foreign to a Holmes novel. Levine attempts to draw a parallel between the definition of what a vanishing point is, and a typical plot line of a Doyle novel. There is a point in all Sherlock Holmes novels in which everything that goes on in the story begins to make sense and Holmes finally tells the reader who did what and why, notes Levine. This point eventually comes full circle in to speaking of the significance of the houses provided in Sherlock Holmes stories. More specifically, this article shows us how Holmes stories portray mansions in such a way that they are meant to make us think they are harboring secrets.

An emphasis is placed on the windows when Levine describes the structure of the house in “The Empty House.” Levine notes “Consider then the windows of the empty house. They are said to be so "thick with dust" that Watson and Holmes "could only just discern each other's figures within" (302). Consider as well the window of Holmes' apartment across the street which is also only semitransparent since the "blind" has been drawn. Not only is the shade said to be down, but "the shadow of a man seated in a chair within is thrown in hard, black outline upon what is described as "the luminous screen of the window" (303)” (Levine 249-237). This is suggestive of a house that is trying to enclose its occupants and keep the outside world from knowing what is going on inside it.

We are no stranger to Holmes harboring his own secrets inside a house, though as Levine points out in his article. In “The Empty House” as well as The Hound of the Baskervilles Holmes is hiding away in a house not too far away from the action. Holmes could not come full circle to tell us “whodunit” if he were not able to go in to hiding. The house, and the secrets of Holmes it conceals, plays a vital role in the story. Thus is the same for “The Speckled Band.” Levine may not say it outright, but the stepfather would not be as masterful of a villain if he could not rely on the house to be a part of his evil plan. As previously stated, the house does not seem to be a threat on the outside, yet on the inside it is filled with terror.

In another interesting take on the terrors of places in which people live and the reality of them keeping one captive, Catherine Wynne discusses the time Doyle spent helping out in an infirmary. When reading the article, one gets a sense that this could be where Doyle draws his inspiration for making the houses which house his characters so terrifying. Wynne states that when asked to describe the conditions of the infirmary, Doyle could do nothing but describe it as something outrageously horrible. He said “the only thing I can like it to is a slaughter-house. I have seen dreadful sights in my life; but I have never seen anything quite equal to this—the place was saturated with enteric fever, and patients were swarming in at such a rate that it was impossible to attend to them all” (Wynee 29-53). These patients, much like the characters presented in Doyle’s novels, are trapped with nowhere to go, seemingly waiting to die.

While “The Adventure of the Speckled Band” does not address the issue of war, one can surely see a parallel between the infirmary situation and our situation in the novel. The mansion was the home of Helen and her sister, they had nowhere else to go. At their age, not being married, they had no option but to stay in the house with their stepfather. Seemingly women are always confined to a house, whether it be with their parents or their eventual husbands. They are always trapped in one house. Even in their locked rooms they were subject to horror, with a bed preventing the girls from even an attempted salvation. Just as the doctors could not save all the patients in the infirmary, so is the same for the sisters in “The Adventure of the Speckled Band.” Holmes does come in to the story in time to save Helen, but he could do nothing to save her sister from her fate.

In keeping with the theme of women being confined to the realm of the household, Jasmine hall discusses the female gothic in her article “Ordering the Sensational: Sherlock Holmes sand the Female Gothic.” Conveniently for my thesis, Hall does talk about the significance of a female character being trapped inside a gothic mansion. Hall says in her article “being trapped in the gothich house is, then, both a fear of being trapped in the mother’s body, and a fear of being trapped in the mother’s role” (Hall 295). This is an interesting take on being trapped, and an ironic one considering the person who had the fortune to begin with was Helen’s mother.

The role of the mother is one that is portrayed in stereotypes in all sorts of fiction in the past and today. A women is “supposed” to stay in the house taking care of the family and cooking. In this way, the house is trapping you in that role. You are not meant to leave the house because that would mean you are not doing your part as a woman and taking care of the family. This is personified through Helen when she is unable to get a home of her own because it is inappropriate. She must wait until she is in the mother role before she can socially be allowed to have a home of her own.

“The Adventure of the Speckled Band” exemplifies what is so terrifying about horror stories, even today. It is unsettling enough to think that if we leave our homes we are going to be murdered, but in the realm of the gothic you can be trapped in the sanctuary of your own home as well. This idea of being trapped can be more than just the physical-it can be trapped in your greed, trapped in a role, or trapped in a relationship. Through Helen feeling like she can be comfortable when her door is locked, we see that it is often when one is most comfortable that you are the most vulnerable. This often leads to a character being unable to see something, like a fake rope or ventilator, that ultimately traps them and leads to their own demise.

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