



CONFLICT OF FEAR AND HOPE IN *CASTLE OF OTRANTO*

REJOICE DAIMARI

MA in English

Tezpur University (2019-2021)



Article information

Received:17/01/2022
Accepted: 05/02/2022
Published online:12/02/2022
doi: [10.33329/ijelr.9.1.39](https://doi.org/10.33329/ijelr.9.1.39)

ABSTRACT

This paper aims to analyse the role of fear in the development of the plot of Walpole's *Castle of Otranto* thus culminating into a commentary on the moral question of fear, hope, and virtue. The characters during several occasions and under varying circumstances are forced to confront the supernatural within the text. Further, every character has hope and therefore, fear of ultimately losing it. If a person has a hope to achieve something better than the current, he will be afraid of failure and of dreams being destroyed, but the one who is without hope is fearless. In the text, hope plays an important role alongside fear. Manfred, the prince of Otranto hopes to keep his position, Hippolita hopes for a happy marital life, and these hopes culminate into fear in these characters. Thus, leading to their downfall.

Keywords: Fear, Gothic, Supernatural, Authority, Megalomania.

I. Introduction

Fear, like other features of the Gothic genre of fiction, is an important part of the narrative process and in *Castle of Otranto*, it serves as an integral part of the plot design. As Milton in his *Paradise Lost* said, "where no hope is left, is left no fear" (Poetry Foundation), hope is the reason for someone's fears. If a person has a hope to achieve something better than the current, he will be afraid of failures and dreams being destroyed, but the one who is without hope is fearless. In this particular text, hope plays an important role. Manfred, the prince of Otranto hopes to keep his position, Hippolita hopes for a happy marital life, and these same hopes culminate into fear in the individual characters of the novel. This paper aims to analyse the role of fear as an important element in the development of the text as a Gothic fiction, by looking at different forms of fear experienced by the characters.

II. The Megalomania or the Fear of Losing Authority

According to Barbara, "fear of power loss is positively related to...[the] self-serving behavior" in the individuals (Barbara et al., 2019). Manfred, the Prince of Otranto's decision to push for his son's marriage, even while he was unwell, is driven by the fear of an ancient prophecy that stated, "the castle and lordship of Otranto should pass from the present family, whenever the real owner should be grown too large to inhabit it" (Walpole 17). His son Conrad's fragile health had been the biggest barrier obstructing the ceremony until now. Nevertheless, he decides to conduct the marriage and not wait any longer for Conrad to get well. No one dared challenge his decision and only his servants in their private discourses uttered about the prophecy that Manfred

was 'suspected' to be afraid of. It can be derived that he was afraid of losing the castle and the authority he held among his subjects. But he, being the master of Otranto at that moment, should not have had any reason for fear of someone else taking over unless Manfred was afraid of some secret being unraveled.

Moreover, the giant casque falling from the sky on the day of the marriage is a supernatural element that was supposed to create fear in Manfred, as it did with other people present on the occasion. But even in this time of loss and grieving, he was more amazed rather than be mournful for his son. He "seemed less attentive to his loss, than buried in meditation on the stupendous object" (Walpole 19) despite "his partial fondness for young Conrad." It may also be possible that he was trying to keep his authority and be impregnable in front of his family, friends and servants. But it was his pride that prevented him from shedding his tears for his dead son. He was afraid of losing his government over his subjects.

His further ordered for the servants to "take care of lady Isabella" (Walpole 19) instead of worrying about his wife and daughter. His affection and care towards lady Isabella, who is neither her daughter nor a blood-relation, creates suspicion about Manfred's intentions towards her. First, it can be considered that Manfred had a genuine concern for Isabella, who has recently lost her husband to be, and feared she would be miserable, considering the norms of the time. However, Conrad's mother and sister, to whom he never showed his affections, had greater reasons to mourn than Isabella, so this can hardly be considered. Moreover, his decision of marrying off his son was not out of filial love as it later turns out, but because the situation demanded of him an heir to keep his authority. Secondly, with the death of his son, he feared losing his authority and power since he had no male heir, therefore he wanted to marry Isabella himself. Moreover, he was abusive towards his wife for being sterile anyway; a fact that can be debated upon as instances suggest. Despite his said 'fondness' for his son, he declares that "he was a sickly puny child, and heaven has perhaps taken him away that I might not trust the honours of my house on so frail a foundation" (Walpole 23). As he was so blinded by his megalomania, his emotions and concerns as a parent failed to manifest even during his only son's death. He rather appears happy as now he could act to 'save' his lineage himself. This is made certain when he confesses to Isabella, "Since I cannot give you my son, I offer you myself" (Walpole 24). But the question remains at this point, why would he want to marry Isabella and not anyone else, when she was like a daughter to him?

Another incident that acts as evidence of Manfred's fear of losing power appears in the event of his conflict with Fr. Jerome. He tries to confront Manfred that his plan of marrying Isabella is not right and that Isabella was only promised to Conrad and not to him. Then, Manfred declares that "my own and the safety of my people demand that I have a son" (Walpole 46) in his defence. Indicating that he was determined to turn his designs into reality. Further, he decides to divorce and send Hippolita to the monastery to validate his would-be marriage with Isabella. He even requests Fr. Jerome's assistance with the task, as Hippolita might have taken his council out of respect. This shows how low Manfred could dive to 'save Otranto'. He does not even give a second thought about his actions and continues to fall in his character as the plot progresses. He stoops so low in his scheming that he presents his and Hippolita's marriage to be incest, against the church, and her to be his fourth cousin.

Later, a secret that holds the answer to the previous question is revealed, when a messenger arrives accusing Manfred of usurping onto the throne of Otranto and declares that the real owner has returned to claim it. He could return it either peacefully or fight the knight in a "single combat to the last extremity" (Walpole 57). This revelation puts his grandfather at fault, for taking over the castle that is now his dishonestly. We also learn about Isabella's real father and the reason Manfred insisted on marrying her even though she was like a daughter to him. "The sins of the father" was about to fall on him and he was on the verge of losing his 'ownership' of the castle to Fredric, who had a better claim than him.

However, Manfred is an ambitious man; he is coy and can go to extreme ends to try and keep his power and authority. Therefore, without considering the feelings or consent of the women concerned he proposes an inter-marriage to Fredric; Matilda with Fredric, and Manfred with Isabella. But the impediments to their marriage and ultimately to his ambition of securing the ownership of the castle were inevitable. On the same night of his agreement with Fredric, he goes to the monastery on his servant's report to prevent the speculated

meeting between Theodore and 'Isabella'. Upon his arrival he strikes 'Isabella' with his sword wounding her fatally, only to discover it later that she was Matilda, disguised as Isabella. Later she dies in Theodore's arms, troubling Manfred's conscience for killing his daughter. Thus, his fear of losing his authority led him to lose his beloved son as well as his daughter, and it was too late when he realized his fault. This becomes a striking commentary on the folly of human nature.

III. Fear of Authority

The plot of the novel is set in the Medieval period and various aspects of the age are reflected in the scenes and settings. The setting is gothic and filled with horrifying imageries, that are sublime at times. Among the features of the age that reflects, is the division of hierarchical status and power among gender and class, leading to the fear of the upper class among the lower ones.

The first instance of this is present in the very first line of the novel. The line "a most beautiful virgin, aged eighteen" (Walpole 17) describes Matilda, who despite being praised for her beauty and virtue wasn't loved by her father because of her gender, contrarily her brother Conrad received more affection from him. She represents the image of 'good and virtuous', which women of the time had to subscribe to and yet were considered as second-class citizens. Moreover, children, especially girls, were bound to obey their parent's or guardians' commands to all extents (British Literature Wiki, n.d.). Here, Matilda obeys her parents in everything even suppressing her feeling and desires, despite never receiving any genuine care or *storge* from her father.

Moreover, despite fearing his father's coldness, she goes to enquire about his state hesitantly, after her brother's death, upon her mother's charge. But even after her obedience, she only received grief, as his father didn't even acknowledge her as his daughter. Instead, he rebuked her; "Begone, I do not want a daughter" (Walpole 22). Later on, she develops affections for Theodore but has to try and dispose of them at her mother's behest. She reluctantly does what her mother required of her. In obeying her mother's and father's commands lies a degree of differences. She submits to her father's authorities in fear of his wrath, on the other hand, she loves her mother and this is the reason for her obedience towards her. Thus, marking the different kinds of obedience she displays. She further confesses to her mother, "A frown from thee can do more than all my father's severity" (Walpole 85).

Hippolita too was afraid of Manfred's authority and never thought of going against him even when situations developed to be against her. Due to the age, she lived in, she viewed her husband as the master of her life. But it was just congenial respect for her husband which was devoid of any love. She repeatedly addressed him as 'lord' but he never reciprocated her affection or respect in any manner. Manfred took her wife for granted as one of his subjects and no further affection whatsoever was ever entertained. Moreover, Manfred declared, "I do not wish to let my wife be acquainted with the secret affairs of my state; they are not within a women's province" (Walpole 45), alienating his wife from the affairs of the household. But Hippolita was ever dutiful, despite her husband's repeated dishonour and disrespect, and says, "it is my duty to hear nothing that it pleases not my lord I should hear" (Walpole 46). She's either a fool to trust her husband entirely and ignore all the preceding incidents leading to that moment or because she was bound by social norms and conditions and decided to keep mum. She must also have been afraid of her husband's wrath and authority as she knew she would be left alone against the world to fend for herself if she dared to rebel. Her rebelling would have also affected her daughter's future.

Additionally, Hippolita was so devoted to her husband that she even agreed on Matilda's marriage with Fredric and Manfred's with Isabella, and she would have joined a monastery. Manfred may have coerced her to agree on the proposal but, this was an extreme sacrifice on her part and she could have disagreed with him. But perhaps she was concerned with her daughter's future and saw a good prospect in her marriage with Fredric. Fearing her husband's authority, she says, "It is not ours to make elections for ourselves; heaven, our fathers, and our husbands, must decide for us" (Walpole 84), submitting everything.

Isabella's fear, on the other hand, is different from Matilda and Hippolita. Manfred, whom she viewed as her father and whose authority she respected, gave her the biggest shock when he tried to force himself on

her. She rationally escapes protecting her virtue. It was hard for her to accept that a father figure would try and attempt rape on her. She further feared Hippolita's wellbeing. This fear of her led her to Fr. Jerome's monastery, where she hoped to be safe from the world, in a religious sanctuary. But she has to flee even from this sanctuary too after the rumour of Hippolita's death. According to medieval romance idealism, women were supposed to put themselves under the protection of a knight or a man of authority. Manfred, being a knight was supposed to protect Isabella but he turned into a villain and she now required a new 'protector'. Thus, she meets her father Fredric and she puts herself under his protection. Albeit all the trauma she experienced, she couldn't rebel against her new-found father and is compelled to marry the one who tried to defile her. The horror she faces in this situation is beyond comprehension. Her father is unknown to the truth and she doesn't have the courage, to let him the truth. But luck favours her and she's saved from marrying the person she abhors.

There's also a fragment of the fear of the authority of the church, a sovereign institute of the time, that appears in the novel. Manfred, despite the insatiable urge to marry, required the church's approval for the marriage to be recognized as a legally binding contract. For this, he first had to divorce Matilda, a task that wasn't easy. But the church neither allows polygamy nor divorce under normal circumstances, he knew about it. Therefore, in hopes of convincing Fr. Jerome, Manfred lies to him that he and Hippolita are related and their marriage is incest. This is why the church is compelled to immediately help him correct his mistake and allow repentance for his sin by divorcing her.

IV. Fear of Supernatural

Another important theme is the fear of the supernatural that drives the plot. The novel being gothic in nature creates an eerie and mysterious picture that influences the actions of and interacts with various characters. The first emotion of fear we encounter is in the very beginning of the story when one of Manfred's servants appears in the scene to inform us about an unfortunate incident that had occurred. To everyone's surprise, there was a giant casque in the courtyard that killed Conrad. This supernatural event manifested fear among all except in Manfred. This mysterious helmet helps in moving forward in the plot and adds elements of consternations to it. Although he didn't express any sign of fear, he was affected by this unexplainable phenomenon. This is why he detains Theodore, even without any evidence of being a 'traitor'. But later it is understood that he did this because he got terrified when Theodore mentioned Alfonso, the prophecy must have rung in his head at that instant and in haughtiness, that he was the sole owner of Otranto, and in revolt, decided to punish him to keep his authority.

Further, the novel is filled with numinous elements. When Manfred was chasing Isabella after she escapes from him, the scene is filled with frightening imageries contributed by supernatural occurrences:

"The moon, which was now up, and gleamed in at the opposite casement, presented to his sight the plumes of the fatal helmet, which rose to the height of the windows, weaving backgrounds and forwards in a tempestuous manner, and accompanied with a hollow and rustling sound" (Walpole 24).

This horrifying scene is followed by even more petrifying events. A portrait of Manfred's grandfather crawls out of the frame and leads him to a room that was locked, Manfred gets filled with "full of anxiety and horror" (Walpole 25). But, in fear he gives away a hint about how he became the owner of Otranto. Another instance is when an uncanny phenomenon aids Isabella's escape, helping her find the key to the trap door, in presence of Theodore in the "subterranean passage" (Walpole 26) of the castle. Perhaps the owner of the giant casque or the good Alfonso had assisted her escape.

There's so much fear in characters that they even mistake human activities for something extraterritorial. For instance, when Bianca the maidservant, and Matilda were in a room discussing recent happenings of Otranto, the former repeatedly complains about hearing a voice beneath their chamber. "Does anybody lie in the chamber beneath? Said the princess. Nobody has dared to live there, answered Bianca, since the great astrologer that was your brother's tutor drowned himself" (Walpole 34). Bianca deduced that the ghost of Conrad has met with his former tutor and now they were talking. But Matilda reprimands her and instead

decides to pray because if it were a ghost, they wouldn't have been safer in any of the rooms of the Castle. Later they find out that the sound was the result of human activity; it was Theodore locked in the room below them.

The fear of the unknown also turns in favor of Isabella's escape from the castle of Otranto. While all the servants and Manfred himself were searching for her, two of his servants complains about a strange sighting of a giant in the great chamber. Sceptical about the report he goes to check it himself but finds nothing. But the servants who reported the event were genuinely afraid and positive of what they saw. What they saw in that chamber is hard to meditate upon and there's no explanation about the same within the text. But the intensity that this event garnered, helped Isabella's escape and adds gothic mystery to the novel.

Moreover, when Fredric was being treated in Manfred's castle after his dual with Theodore. Manfred arrives to enquire about his health but is shocked at the sight of Theodore. He complains in "terror and amazement... Ha! What art thou, thou dreadful spectre! Is my hour come?" (Walpole 76) to Theodore, who was donned in armour. Manfred pointed out that he looked like Alfonso in his armour and the thought about the prophecy must have hit his memory and terrified him. He even questions if it was already time for him to give up his authority, meaning the end of his reign. He may have even feared death or some other kind of suffering as punishment, despite after Theodore had shared his story about his unfortunate past, though he was touched, because of his "resemblance to Alfonso, his admiration was dashed with secret horror" (Walpole 77).

Furthermore, Fredric, the valiant and brave knight too encountered a moment where he trembled with fear of the unknown. Persuaded by Manfred's proposition of inter-marriage of their daughters, he goes to Hippolita's chamber to know if she didn't have any objection against the arrangement, as stated by her husband. He wanted to know if she agreed to "the disposition her lord had promised" (Walpole 97). But instead of her he finds a figure in "a long woollen weed" (Walpole 97) facing opposite to him and seemed to be praying. He then apologises for his interference in the ritual and asked if that holy father knew where he could find Hippolita. But the figure revealed to him to be "the fleshless jaws and empty sockets of a skeleton, wrapt in a hermit's cowl" (Walpole 98). This was the same hermit whom he encountered after his release from former captivity and the one who directed him towards his daughter. He had buried the hermit himself after their encounter. But this version of the hermit isn't the same as he had encountered long ago. This one was terrifying and Fredric was 'trembling' (Walpole 98) in fear. He thought that he might have caused some displeasure to the hermit while conducting his last rite and asked, "Can I do aught for thy eternal peace?" (Walpole 98). But the figure had not come for that purpose and only to warn him against pursuing carnal pleasures of the world, which in this case is trying to marry Matilda, and then it vanished.

This, of course, hurt Fredric's emotions but more than that the incident contributes towards the progression of the plot, to aid the fall of Manfred and installing Theodore as the rightful ruler of Otranto. However, the fear of supernaturality reaches its peak when Isabella, Hippolita, Fr. Jerome, Fredric, Manfred, and Theodore were in the castle and they hear a loud "clap of thunders... that shook the castle to its foundations" (Walpole 103) and everyone rushed to the courtyard. They stood there trying to figure out what had just happened. Then

"the walls of the castle behind Manfred were thrown down with a mighty force, and the form of Alfonso dilated to an immense magnitude, appeared in the centre of the ruins. Behold in Theodore, the true heir of Alfonso! Said the vision" (Walpole 103), accompanied by another clap of thunder. Then a figure of St. Nicholas was seen in clouds receiving Alfonso's spirit, at this sight "the beholders fell prostrate on their faces, acknowledging the divine will" (Walpole 103). This was followed by a long scene of revelations of personal histories and secrets proving Theodore to be the true heir of Otranto. At this point, it becomes certain that all the unnatural events and sightings reported were intended by some supernatural entity. Thus, the manifestation of fear and horror in each character was a catalyst to ultimately make Theodore the owner of the castle of Otranto. Thus, fulfilling the prophecy.

V. Conclusion

Therefore, all of these instances contribute to the development of the plot as a gothic text as well as, comments on the character flaw and fears of the individuals. Moreover, the text puts forward the idea that evil cannot thrive for long and in the end, will crumble before virtue. Theodore represents virtue in everything he does or says and Manfred as his counterpart does everything wicked in his capacity, but in the end, it is the truth that wins. It also serves as an instrument in enquiring into human nature and his fears. Moreover, fear can be harmful to us, as is seen in Hippolita, Isabella, Matilda, and even Manfred's character development. But, hope on the other hand can be instrumental in recovery from fear as in the case of Isabella. While it can also be detrimental as false hope as it brought about the fall of Manfred.

Works Cited

British Literature Wiki. (n.d.). *Women in medieval literature and society*. University of Delaware. Retrieved October 1, 2021, from <https://sites.udel.edu/britlitwiki/women-in-medieval-literature-and-society/>.

Poetry Foundation. "Poetry Foundation." *Poetry Foundation*, 2019, www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/45751/paradise-regaind-book-3-1671-version. Accessed 5 Nov. 2019.

Walpole, Horace. *Castle of Otranto*. Oxford World's Classics, 2014.

Wisse, Barbara, et al. "Fear of Losing Power Corrupts Those Who Wield It': the Combined Effects of Leader Fear of Losing Power and Competitive Climate on Leader Self-Serving Behavior." *European Journal of Work and Organizational Psychology*, vol. 28, no. 6, 2019, pp. 742–755., <https://doi.org/10.1080/1359432x.2019.1635584>.