Transcending the Gothic: 'The Extravagancies of Blackwood'


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Abstract

Most critics who mention the particular breed of terror fiction found in the early issues of Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine in the beginning of the nineteenth century, them as being extremely influential on writers as famous as Charles Dickens, the Brontë siblings, Henry James and especially Edgar Allan Poe. Robert Morrison and Balick in their 1995 collection Tales of Terror from Blackwood’s Magazine describe these tales as the missing link between the Gothic tradition of the late eighteenth century and Poe’s short horror fiction. However, there exists today next to no analyses on the actual tales themselves.

This thesis focuses in detail on the problems that arise when comparing the Blackwood’s tales of terror with the eighteenth-century Gothic. By identifying the narrative modes, the themes used, as well as the contemporary political and cultural motivation of the writers, this study endeavours to understand the reasons for why these tales appeared and also flourished, when and where they did. The author explores the idea that the Blackwood’s tales were not so much a continuation of the Gothic tradition as a conscious move away from it; a shift in the genre from a mode of stylised romance and elevated virtue, to a deeply psychological interest in the darker sides of the human mind that foreshadows famous Victorian works like Stevenson’s The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr Hyde and Wilde’s The Picture of Dorian Gray. By looking at contemporary ‘street literature’, here in the form of broadsides, the analysis identifies popular themes that were used to great success in the Blackwood’s tales. The thesis shows that the early tales of terror in Blackwood’s Magazine were sensationalist pieces of fiction elaborately constructed to suit the magazine format and tie in with its Tory politics.
Gothic fiction, which is largely known by the subgenre of Gothic horror, is a genre or mode of literature and film that combines fiction and horror, death, and at times romance. Its origin is attributed to English author Horace Walpole, with his 1764 novel The Castle of Otranto, subtitled "A Gothic Story". Reeve's contribution in the development of the Gothic fiction, therefore, can be demonstrated on at least two fronts. In the first, there is the reinforcement of the Gothic narrative framework, one that focuses on expanding the imaginative domain so as to include the supernatural without losing the realism that marks the novel that Walpole pioneered. Secondly, Reeve also sought to contribute to finding the appropriate formula to ensure that the fiction is believable and coherent.