

Bleak Midwinter – The Gothic in *Armada*

A carriage arrives in the dark of night, inside, a dying man—so goes the opening of Wilkie Collins's *Armada*. Though not a Gothic novel, *Armada* is steeped in the themes, motifs, and anxieties of the Gothic, starting with the first tinge of prophecy and continuing with obsession, the sublime, and death. The most succinct way to understand the division of Gothic/non-Gothic in *Armada* is to split it between two characters; in short, Allan Armada Jr and Ozias Midwinter are living in two different genres. While Allan concerns himself with romance, riches, and his fleeting interests, Ozias is burdened by his own mind and the haunting ghost of his father. The centering of Gothic themes and motifs around Ozias heightens the unsettling feeling of his superstition by emphasizing the divide between him and the so-called rational—albeit brash—Allan Armada.

Allan Armada Sr leaves behind his letter as a warning to his son—later renamed Ozias Midwinter—and although the content of the letter is far more explicit and explanative than the vague supernatural warnings of 18th century Gothic, it carries brief lines that point in the direction of superstition. Consider, towards the end of the letter: “Never let the two Allan Armadas meet in this world: never, never, never!” (Collins 48). Tinged with the raving of a dying man, there appears the element of prophecy. It is foreboding because the reader has the capacity to suspect prophecies, at least in novels, are meant to be fulfilled. The tradition of Gothic literature, which had been in full swing for almost a century by the publication of *Armada*, enforces the suspicion that not only will the two Allan Armadas meet, there will be some terrible outcome. The suspense of the story to come paired with the doom of Armada Sr's impending death paints a perfectly Gothic opening. From the outset, Ozias is primed to carry the burden of the supernatural, while Allan receives only the asocial guidance of his mother. Her

apprehension towards Ozias is not because of a prophecy or fear of fate, she merely has "...a merciless distrust of the stranger – simply *because* he was a stranger..." (Collins 63). Her mistrust of people is rooted in the same event as Ozias's superstition, but she does not turn to supernatural explanations, instead taking a rational and worldly caution just a bit too far.

Before even meeting Ozias, the text presents his name in the form of a chapter title—"The Mystery of Ozias Midwinter" (Collins 53). While his name is also dissected in the text in light of the other characters' racial prejudices, the surname "Midwinter" carries a Gothic image. The sublime is suggested through the image of the long trudge through the middle of winter and the turning point of the season at the solstice—a night charged with superstition. By introducing the name first, the text also sets up something adjacent to a prophecy in the reader's mind. Though the chapter title is not a prophecy that the characters within the text engage with, it nonetheless evokes a feeling of suspense that is characteristic of the Gothic.

Ozias's own dehumanization of himself through his description of himself as a dog begins to build him as an uncanny character. In conversation with Mr Brock, Ozias says "The dog's master has whistled...and it's hard, sir, to blame the dog, when the dog comes" (Collins 82-83). Later context reveals that Ozias also considered dogs to be his brothers. He tells Mr Brock of his life after Ozias Midwinter Sr's death, calling his dogs his brothers and once slipping up to say "...These misfortunes drew Tommy and me – I beg your pardon, sir, I mean the dog..." (Collins 92). The familiarity with which Ozias speaks of the dogs is unsettling because it subtly exposes the cruelty to which he was subjected—being treated like an animal—and it suggests Ozias's partiality for the inhuman. The interconnectedness of Fate also comes back into play with Ozias's uncanny favor for dogs—his father claims to have thought when committing the dreaded murder, "Don't shoot him like a man: drown him like a dog!" (Collins 44). While

Allan Armadale Sr may have been calling Ingleby a dog instead of referring to himself as being like one as Ozias does, the connection of man and dog remains. Furthermore, the act of drowning Ingleby was a dishonest one, and Allan Armadale Sr's moral standing was thus reduced just as low as the man whom he called a dog. The theme of lowering oneself to an animal state runs through Ozias's paternal line, which, curiously for Victorian England, aligns his *white* heritage with the "other" and the uncanny.

The house as horror is a fundamental trope of the Gothic, in direct contrast to the house as home in the pastoral. Allan's appraisal of Thorpe-Ambrose is generous and giddy, as he points out it is "...a marvel of luxurious comfort..." and spends a hearty paragraph describing the "...flower-garden, flooded bright in its summer glory..." (Collins 170, 172). He spends a great amount of time admiring the marvels of his newly-acquired country house, in a way reminiscent of the wistful devotion to a place in Æmilia Lanyer's *The Description of Cooke-ham*. On the opposite side of the spectrum, Ozias has to say about Thorpe-Ambrose that "I like the bleakest hill-side I ever slept on, better than I like this house!" (Collins 195). His initial survey of the grounds brings him to the room from the Dream, which forces him "...mercilessly back from the happy present to the horrible past" (Collins 183). In his examination of the room, he notes handwriting from a deceased woman and devolves into a speculation on the past, rather than appreciating the beauty as Allan had (Collins 184). He even explicitly acknowledges the divide between his Gothic experience and Allan's pastoral experience by lamenting that "...the first morning in the new house is the morning that reveals it, not to *him*, but to *me*" (Collins 185). It is because he carries the superstition and obsessive mannerisms of a Gothic protagonist that he cannot look past the trope of the house as horror.

There exists a near-perpetual sense of obsession within the Gothic canon. In Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto*, Manfred is overcome by an immediate, intense, almost farcical desire for his would-be daughter-in-law, Isabella, after his son's death. In Ann Radcliffe's *The Italian*, Vivaldi obsessively turns the shrouded monk's warnings over and over, searching for meaning. There is a constant return to a moment or person which creates a sense of desperation. Ozias holds his own among the gloomy cast of the Gothic tradition, returning to both person and place—Allan and the timber ship—which are inseparable in his mind. Even before the truth of their fathers is revealed, Ozias pledges a great loyalty to Allan—an obsessive fascination which will soon be corrupted. It is due to his obsession that he is so distressed by the omen that the ship presents and Allan's dream aboard it.

The timber ship, with all its ties to death and Fate, is the most pronounced example of the Gothic in the novel. In the first book, Allan Armadale Sr writes "I have pursued you from my grave with a confession which my love might have spared you" (Collins 44). He makes himself into the ghost that will continue to metaphorically haunt Ozias for the rest of the book by insinuating that he will not rest in his grave, as the dead should, but emerge and follow. While the timber ship concerns both men, as both of their fathers were engaged in the fatal confrontation, only Ozias is the victim of a dead man's pledge. When the two sons find themselves on board, Allan experiences a dream that later comes to be known as *the Dream*, due to Ozias's obsession with the circumstances of its happening and the events within (Collins 135-136). When Allan experiences his Dream—a Gothic vision—he is not the character through whose eyes the narrator observes the happening, rather, it is Ozias who speculates on the sleeping torment of his friend (Collins 135). There is nothing inherently prophetic about the

dream until Ozias assigns it that status, and his attempts to avoid the fated events of the dream only seem to lead him closer to them in the way of a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Freud suggested that unconnected things become connected by mere similarity, like seeing repeating numbers and assuming some cause and effect, which thus creates the feeling of the uncanny (11). Both Allan and Ozias come upon similar events to the events of the Dream, but only Ozias experiences the feeling of uncanny. There must, then, be some *willingness* to feel the uncanny in order to be immersed in the Gothic. Ozias's willingness to accept uncanny coincidence as supernatural truth is ascribed in the text to his childhood spent with Ozias Midwinter Sr, a point which reflects the idea that the supernatural in the Gothic is borrowed from what is perceived to be "low-class" fiction: folklore (Hogle 9). Beyond just his upbringing, Ozias believes himself to have "...hereditary superstition..." which he presumably inherited from his father, the prophecy-giver (Collins 131).

The uncovering of the timber ship in book two also carries with it a passage of reflection on the sublime. The landscape is simultaneously beautiful and dreadful, as the awesome ocean and cliffs stand against the angry waters of the chasm (Collins 127). The influence of the sublime, however, is quickly lost as Allan moves on from the view and onto the task of calling for help (Collins 127). Ozias, on the other hand, lingers on the horror of the ship, claiming "Nothing is horrible *out* of this ship...Everything is horrible *in* it" (Collins 129).

Ultimately, Ozias's fears of destroying his friend by his own hand do not come to fruition, yet his Gothic woes and preoccupations drive the emotional intrigue of much of the plot. In order to stop the story from being a true Gothic, Allan exists outside of the realm of the genre as a counterbalance for Ozias's superstition. Together, they form a push and pull between Gothic anxiety and an excess of carefreeness that makes *Armadale* a delightful cross between genres.

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