

Arthur Conan Doyle
"The Copper Beeches" and A Case of Identity: The Gothic Archetype

My translation of the Charles Perrault story A Bluebeard is available in .pdf format on the 231 website.

1. "Gothic" as literary/cinematic archetype.

- a. Archetype: in literature, a plot or set of plot elements that is commonly repeated and recreated in a variety of forms. You can also think of an archetype as a story that gets told over and over, with minor variations, throughout human history.
 - i. Example: A Cinderella is the archetype of the A fairy-wishing plot.
 - ii. Anthropologists and students of folktales break down archetypes into elements called morphemes - elements of a story that are repeated. An example of a morpheme would be the making of a wish that transforms the wisher, or the death of a parent and the advent of a step-parent.
 - iii. The word A paradigm is an acceptable synonym for the word A archetype.

- b. **Gothic elements:**
 - i. A young woman trapped in a situation over which she has little control. (Miss Hunter has little power as a governess, and cannot escape from the Copper Beeches.)
 - ii. She is curious, and discovers something, usually pertaining to violence against women that she is not supposed to know.
 - iii. A powerful man, often her husband or lover, threatens to hurt or kill her because of this knowledge.
 - iv. She is a captive in a large, scary house. innocent-looking houses in the story: "You look at these scattered houses, and you are impressed by their beauty. I look at them, and the only thought which comes to me is a feeling of their isolation, and of the impunity with which crime may be committed there" (270). He continues: "the lowest and vilest alleys in London do not present a more dreadful record of sin than does the smiling and beautiful countryside" (270).
 - v. The story focuses on how she manages to escape from this situation.
 - vi. Another woman, or family members, rescue her.

- c. **History of gothic:**
 - i. Gothic elements have been popular for centuries (traces in early texts - ex, *The Duchess of Malfi*).
 - ii. Folklorist Charles Perrault first recorded the story A Bluebeard in 1697 and published it in his A Tales of Mother Goose along with A Sleeping Beauty, A Tom Thumb, and A Puss in Boots, among others.
 - (1) A Bluebeard is the mother of the gothic archetype - the originating story.
 - iii. **Growth/persistence of genre:** Gothic continuously popular since 18thC.
 - iv. Gothic fictions have historically been especially popular with female readers.
 - v. Two major forms in the 19thC:
 - (1) Sensation/horror novels (*Dracula* (1894) is one example). Note in "The Copper Beeches," Watson defending his accounts against charges of "sensationalism" by Holmes (260): "You have degraded what should have been a course of lectures into a series of tales" (261).
 - (2) Detective novels and stories.

- vi. Major forms of Gothic in 20thC:
 - (1) Detective fiction (exs. in this course: Doyle stories, Du Maurier, *Silence of the Lambs*).
 - (2) "Women in jep" movies: nice guy turns out to be serial murderer of women, woman must escape (TV movies, feature films, paperbacks ("Gothics"), even news stories (Nicole Brown Simpson's murder).

d. Popularity of Gothic paradoxically parallels increase in women's social and political freedom. Why do readers enjoy this genre?

- i. Anxiety being articulated in narratives: saying the unsayable: "Patriarchs are malevolent."
 - (1) "Men in general are threatening."
 - (2) "Even husbands, fathers, and lovers can't be trusted."
 - (3) "Women need to be wise, not innocent."

2. Gothic archetype: female unruliness threatened by (specifically sexual) violence. Orphaned, resourceful women rebelling against threat of male violence.

- a. Violence takes place within relationship between man and woman - and usually within a shared house that hides forbidden knowledge.
- b. "Marriage contract" requiring the wife to pledge her obedience to her husband is violated when she expresses curiosity about forbidden knowledge.
 - i. Woman's inappropriate curiosity makes her detective-like: she seeks to expose forbidden knowledge. (Compare creation story: Eve's mistake.)
- c. Forbidden knowledge turns out to be that men sexually destroy women - especially disobedient women.
- d. Woman protagonist saved by "sisters" and "brothers" (sisters/good patriarchs).
- e. Woman protagonist survives, is reassured that not all patriarchs are malevolent.

3. "The Copper Beeches" as Gothic story.

- a. **Isolated, independent heroine:** Violet Hunter is orphaned, independent: "She was plainly but neatly dressed, with a bright, quick face, freckled like a plover's egg, and with the brisk manner of a woman who has to make her way in the world" (262). Her lack of family means that she has to make her own living.
 - i. **Offered new position:** Governess has responsibilities of wife, except sexual. Rucastle says: "Your duty would be as I am sure your good sense would suggest, to obey any little commands which my wife might give, provided always that they were such commands as a lady might with propriety obey" (265).
- b. **By powerful, wealthy, mysterious man:** Her "Bluebeard," Mr. Rucastle, compliments her "attractions and accomplishments" extravagantly (263), offers her new place with much money. She responds: "It seemed to me I had never met so fascinating and thoughtful a man" (264).
 - i. **Hint that something's wrong:** Rucastle requests Hunter cut her hair, unusual and de-sexing for that time; Rucastle rejects her when she refuses.

- ii. **He pursues her nonetheless, and out of penury, she accepts.**
 - c. **Rucastle suspected of something bad, especially concerning women.**
Watson: "The unusual salary, the curious conditions, the light duties, all pointed to something abnormal, though whether a fad or a plot, or whether the man were a philanthropist or a villain, it was quite beyond my powers to determine" (268). Sherlock confirms: "no sister of his should ever have accepted such a situation" (268).
 - i. Sherlock suggests, on first hearing account, that Rucastle's wife may be mad (267). They later find out she isn't, but that she is pale and silent, much younger than her husband, and that he had a previous wife (271). Violet calls her "a nonentity" (272).
 - ii. Daughter Alice, because of suitor, is in fact locked up in attic.
 - d. The boundaries of the house are enforced with violence: the dog Carlo, handled by Toller, is sicced on outsiders such as the "impertinent young man" who watches Violet during her soirees with the Rucastles.
 - i. Others can't get in; Violet can't get out.
 - e. Finding key in forbidden door to forbidden wing of the house, Violet seeks knowledge (276).
 - i. Rucastle upbraids her: "what an observant young lady we have come upon!" (277). After her second offense, he warns her: "If you ever put your foot over that threshold again, I'll throw you to the mastiff" (279).
- 4. House is filled with memories and realities of silenced or imprisoned women: Alice's dead mother, the "nonentity" current Mrs. Rucastle, Mrs. Toller, Violet Hunter, and Alice Rucastle.**
- a. Women who are directly associated with Rucastle (and his equally brutal associate, Toller) are either silenced or destroyed.
 - b. Alice and Violet together comprise the narrator figure who gets away from the evil source.
 - c. Mrs. Rucastle afraid of her husband: a nonentity:
 - d. Yet Mrs. Toller has already arranged, for money, for Alice to be ransomed; Holmes is late to the scene, and the escape has already taken place.
- 5. Doyle incorporates the gothic archetype into many of his stories, always slightly altering it to give it a new flavor.**
- a. In *The Copper Beeches*, Doyle identifies Violet Hunter as a co-detective who shares many of Holmes's qualities.

- i. She is responsible for making her own way, who has to be resourceful and creative in order to survive
- ii. As a hunter she is one who pursues evil (and in this story, is partly responsible for stopping the cycle of violence).
- iii. Unlike the heroines in other gothic stories, such as Miss Stoner in *The Speckled Band* and Alice Rucastle in this story, she is not shuffled off to marriage at the end of the story, but remains independent and runs her own business (headmistress of a school).
- iv. The Bluebeard paradigm sets up the nameless heroine as an inheritor and vanquisher. Though she must rely on others to help save herself from the murderous Bluebeard, it is her curiosity and disobedience which effectively stop the cycle of violence.
- v. Like Clarice Starling in Thomas Harris's late gothic story *The Silence of the Lambs*, she is a hunter who is able to overcome the animal violence of Rucastle, a violence embodied by his dogs but part also of his personality. Harris's narrator says, late in *The Silence of the Lambs*, "problem-solving is hunting. It is savage pleasure, and we are born to it."