

Milton, Shelley & Brontë – Literary Endings: From Moral Message to Moral Ambiguity

All texts have a final page, line, word. But do they all end conclusively? While we've come to expect ambiguity and playfulness in the works of 20th and 21st-century writers, we might be surprised to see how early writers were resisting the urge to tie up the narrative loose ends.

Stories need a beginning, a middle and an end so the saying goes. It sounds simplistic and perfunctory, but writers often seek more to undermine and unsettle through their use of endings than to resolve and conclude.

Charlotte Brontë – Neat Knots to Unsettling Uncertainty

As David Lodge in *The Art of Fiction* notes, clear, morally unambiguous endings were particularly prized by Victorian publishers and readers. The end of Brontë's *Jane Eyre* is a perfect example:

My Edward and I, then, are happy: and the more so, because those we most love are happy likewise. Diana and Mary Rivers are both married: alternately, once every year, they come to see us, and we go to see them. Diana's husband is a captain in the navy, a gallant officer and a good man. Mary's is a clergyman, a college friend of her brother's, and, from his attainments and principles, worthy of the connection. Both Captain Fitzjames and Mr Wharton love their wives, and are loved by them.

This is strikingly conservative, especially considering the scandalous content of earlier chapters. Jane's deviant independence is neatly 'solved' by marriage, while Rochester's blindness conveniently heals. Her cousins are just as conveniently saved from spinsterhood through happy and respectable marriages. However, such 'rules' are not always adhered to; indeed, Brontë's later novel *Villette* ends with what Lucy Hughes-Hallett calls 'a heart-breaking tease of an ending'. Brontë's father allegedly disliked the draft's conclusively tragic ending; the final version has only heavy clues that the hero M. Emmanuel may have been killed in a shipwreck. The narrator urges the audience to choose:

Let them picture union and a happy succeeding life.

Key here is the auxiliary 'Let' – a wind-up of all the loose ends is wishful thinking only, while Brontë's shifting between past and present tense only serves to unsettle us further.

Gothic Transgressions – Resisting Narrative Closure

Even 30 years before Brontë, an 1818 review of Mary Shelley's masterpiece *Frankenstein* in the *Monthly Review* took issue with the ending:

an uncouth story [...] leading to no conclusion either moral or philosophical.

The ending is unsettled and unsatisfying, accentuated by the alliterative abstract nouns of 'darkness and distance'. However, is Shelley not simply working within the Gothic genre? As Fred Botting notes, in the Gothic,

ambivalence and uncertainty obscure single meaning.

Frankenstein resists the closure that 19th-century society demanded. As Botting adds, the Gothic was characterised by a

fascination with transgression and the anxiety over cultural limits and boundaries.

In *Frankenstein*, the cultural boundary of a novel's ending might also be transgressed, just as Shelley blurs the boundaries between life and death in the ambiguous fate of the creature and Walton, and, indeed, the body of the creature himself.

Victor can be conceptualised as a tragic hero: arguably, he achieves anagnorisis and thereby tragic status when he warns Walton to

Seek happiness in tranquillity and avoid ambition.

Walton's remarkably assertive declaratives

The die is cast; I have consented to return

make it absolutely clear that the moral is learnt by Walton – a fairly unambiguous tragic resolution. However, Victor immediately undermines this anagnorisis, stating that 'another may succeed' – he concedes the possibility of his work being continued; similarly, it takes Walton to be 'surrounded by mountains of ice' to persuade him to return. The novel's moral resolution is still inconclusive: Shelley challenges the conventions of both tragic and Gothic genres by avoiding an overtly didactic ending.

In Our End Is Our Beginning – the Loss of Paradise and the Promise of Heaven

Paradise Lost Book IX, dubbed the 'keystone' of Milton's epic, opens with an ending of sorts, echoing the dramatic division to come between God and man: the definitive punishment for mankind's sin – death. The strikingly spondaic opening of Book IX, 'No more of talk...' is unusual in that, unlike most Books in Paradise Lost which continue the story without comment, Book IX begins with the almost intrusive narrative interlude, warning of 'tragic' notes to come. Of course, the story of the Fall of Man is common knowledge, and perhaps even more so for Milton's audience, but Milton deliberately removes the reader's ignorance: we cannot escape the knowledge that death is the ultimate ending.

This shift in tone is conspicuous, and is even more devastatingly clear in the increasingly gruesome imagery conveying the impact of original sin. The painfully desolate 'w' alliteration of

Earth felt the wound ... through all her words gave signs of woe

after Eve's fall is nothing in comparison to the consequences of Adam's transgression:

Earth trembled from her entrails, as again in pangs.

Not by accident does this echo how Sin, quite literally, gives birth to Death in Book II:

*this odious offspring ...
Tore through my entrails ...
I fled, and cried out Death!*

Book IX ends bleakly, with a distressingly real picture of domestic bickering:

*Thus they in mutual accusation spent
The fruitless hours, but neither self-condemning
And of their vain contest appeared no end.*

Adam and Eve gain nothing, the definition of death in Christian theology: if death is absence of God, and God created everything, then death is an eternity of nothing.

However, Milton goes one step further than Brontë and Shelley, by paradoxically opening Book IX with an ending, and ending it with an opening. We have reason to be hopeful through our cultural knowledge of God's solution to humanity's sinfulness: the final words of Book IX, 'no end' form an ironic reversal of the opening 'No more'.

Closing the Book

As Terry Eagleton notes in *How to Read Literature*,

as the drama draws to a close, its characters and events vanish into thin air, since, being fictions, there is nowhere else for them to go.

After the physical book is closed there is no 'what comes next'; characters only live for as long as the reader continues to think about them. Perhaps an ending that is too conclusive or neat stifles and kills the characters within the pages of the book. An ending that unsettles and challenges our expectation of a 'good' ending will ensure our interest for eternity.

Further Reading

- Eagleton, T. 2013. How to Read Literature. Yale University Press
- Lodge, D. 1992. The Art of Fiction. London: Vintage.
- Fred B. 1996. Gothic. London: Routledge.

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