

“THE OLD IRISH CATHOLIC WITCH”: VICTORIAN ANTI-CATHOLIC AND ANTI-IRISH DISCOURSES IN ELIZABETH GASKELL’S “THE POOR CLARE”

“A velha bruxa católica irlandesa”: discursos anticitólicos e anti-irlandeses no conto “The Poor Clare”, de Elizabeth Gaskell

Camila Franco BATISTA
Universidade Federal de Rondonópolis
camila.batista@ufr.edu.br
<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6991-3674>

ABSTRACT: This article delves into Elizabeth Gaskell's short story, “The Poor Clare” (1856), examining its engagement with Victorian anti-Catholic and anti-Irish stereotypes. Despite Gaskell's usual focus on English social conditions, the narrative provides a distinct lens into Victorian discourses on religion, ethnicity, and gender through portrayals of Irish characters. The analysis contextualizes the story within the nineteenth-century backdrop of Irish immigration to Britain, highlighting political, racial, and religious factors fueling anti-Irish sentiment. Central to the study is the character Bridget Fitzgerald, an “old Irish Catholic witch,” symbolizing Victorian fears surrounding Ireland, Catholicism, and women's societal roles. The article explores Gothic elements in the narrative, emphasizing Bridget as a disruptor of the social order.

KEYWORDS: Victorian literature; Ireland; Catholicism; Racism

RESUMO: Este artigo analisa o conto “The Poor Clare” (1856), de Elizabeth Gaskell, examinando seu envolvimento com estereótipos anticitólicos e anti-irlandeses vitorianos. Apesar de o foco habitual de Gaskell ser as condições sociais inglesas, a narrativa oferece uma perspectiva distinta acerca de discursos vitorianos sobre religião, etnia, e gênero por meio de representações de personagens irlandeses. A análise contextualiza o conto no cenário de imigração irlandesa na Grã-Bretanha, destacando fatores políticos, raciais e religiosos que alimentam um sentimento anti-irlandês. No centro do estudo está a personagem Bridget Fitzgerald, uma “velha bruxa católica irlandesa” que simboliza os medos vitorianos acerca da Irlanda, do catolicismo, e dos papéis sociais das mulheres. O artigo explora elementos góticos na narrativa, enfatizando Bridget como um agente que perturba a ordem social.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Literatura vitoriana; Irlanda; Catolicismo; Racismo

Elizabeth Gaskell (1810-1865) directed her literary endeavors towards Britain, with a focus on depicting “the condition of England” (Engelbien, 2010). Following the Act of Union of 1801, Ireland became part of the United Kingdom, and its political matters were decided by the British Parliament in England. Despite Ireland’s significance in the British political landscape, Gaskell did not set any of her literary works in Ireland, nor is there evidence of her visiting the country or discussing Irish affairs in her correspondences. Nevertheless, her fiction intermittently delves into Irish themes, as evidenced by her novel *North and South* (1854-55), where the Irish are depicted among the workers hired to substitute the striking employees of Frederick Thornton, the mill’s owner. Another allusion to Ireland is discernible in the short story “Lois the Witch” (1859), set in Puritan America, where the narrator references “four babes of grace [that] were bewitched by an Irish witch” (Gaskell, 1995a, p. 161). However, Gaskell’s most explicit engagement with Ireland and the Irish is evident in the short story “The Poor Clare” (1856), originally serialized in Charles Dickens’s magazine *Household Words*.

“The Poor Clare” unfolds as a Gothic narrative set in 1747 Lancashire, with its focus on an Irish woman, Bridget Fitzgerald, and her granddaughter Lucy. The story is narrated through the perspective of an English lawyer who documents in his diary the endeavors to locate the heirs of an estate in Ireland. During the course of his investigation, the lawyer encounters Lucy Clarke, a mysterious woman residing with an elderly companion she refers to as her mother. However, as the narrative progresses, the narrator unveils that Lucy’s actual name is not Clarke, and the elderly woman is not her mother but her maid.

Lucy and her companion have endured a troubled existence, with Lucy carrying a curse that condemns her to coexist with a malevolent double. The narrator discovers that Lucy’s father is actually the Catholic general Gisborne, previously cursed by Bridget Fitzgerald. Notably, Bridget was oblivious of Gisborne’s paternity of her granddaughter. The narrative takes root in the past, when Bridget resided with her daughter Mary at the estate of a Catholic Squire named Patrick Byrne Starkey. With Mary’s departure and the demise of Bridget’s employers, she is left in solitude, accompanied only by a little dog once owned by Mary. The pivotal moment arises when Gisborne, in a hunting incident, kills the dog, triggering Bridget’s curse: “You shall live to see the creature that loves you best [...] become a terror and a loathing to all” (Gaskell, 1995b, p. 38). Realizing the profound consequences of her curse, Bridget leaves England, seeking penance by becoming a Poor Clare in Antwerp.

The short story delves into issues of religion, ethnicity, and gender. While there has been considerable exploration of female sexuality and gender binarism in “The Poor Clare,” as discussed by Reddy (1984) and Schneider (2021), among others, there is a notable absence of studies on anti-Irish and/or anti-Catholicism in the narrative. Despite Ingelbien's (2010) analysis of “The Poor Clare” as Irish Famine literature, his examination does not extensively highlight anti-Catholic and/or anti-Irish stereotypes, contending that the story dismantles racial dichotomies. Shelston (1995, p. 142-43) recognizes that “Catholicism lies at the core of the story,” but his focus leans more towards the supernatural elements within the text rather than delving deeply into the religious aspect.

In this article, I aim to bridge this gap by conducting a more thorough investigation of the anti-Catholic and anti-Irish stereotypes present in “The Poor Clare”. By addressing this aspect, I intend to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the story's nuanced exploration of religion, ethnicity, and the associated stereotypes prevalent in Victorian discourse. To commence, I offer a brief historical contextualization of nineteenth-century Irish immigration to Britain and Victorian discourses about Irish Catholics. Following this, I analyze the short story, placing emphasis on the characterization of Bridget as an “old Irish witch” who is portrayed as a menace to the British Protestant order. Lastly, I present concluding remarks on Victorian discourses on Irish Catholics.

IRISH MIGRATION TO BRITAIN AND VICTORIAN RACIST DISCOURSES

Gaskell wrote segments of “The Poor Clare” in 1845, concluding it in 1856. Despite the narrative being set in eighteenth-century Lancashire and Antwerp, Gaskell's portrayal of the Irish/Catholic characters resonates with the social, political, racial, and religious discourses prevalent in her time. While Ingelbien (2010) contends that “The Poor Clare” should not be interpreted as a racialist religious text, arguing that the story blurs the dichotomies underlying racial and religious stereotypes, I seek to assert the opposite. In this article, my aim is to demonstrate that the characterization of Bridget Fitzgerald reflects Victorian racist discourses against Irish Catholics, and that the dichotomies are not genuinely blurred.

Residing in Failsworth, Lancashire, and later in Manchester, Gaskell was well-acquainted with the challenges faced by Irish immigrants in urban cities, particularly in the industrial north of England (Ingelbien, 2010). In her novel *North and South*, she adeptly

delineates the arduous working conditions experienced by Irish immigrants and other laborers, thereby accentuating the prevailing class tensions of the era.

The political, racial, and religious debates surrounding the Irish in the nineteenth century contributed to the development of racist discourses evident in the literature of that period. The waves of Irish immigration to Britain, which commenced in the eighteenth century, saw a significant increase in the nineteenth century, especially during the Great Famine in Ireland (1845-1852).¹ By 1851, a substantial population of 727,000 Irish-born individuals resided in England, Scotland, and Wales. The primary destinations for these immigrants included the cities of Liverpool and Glasgow, as well as London, the Midlands, industrial cities in southern Lancashire, Edinburgh, and Scotland (Swift, 1987, p. 264).

Mary J. Hickman (1995, p. 1) argues that the Irish experience in Britain was characterized by "both the colonial racism stemming from Anglo-Irish relations and the construction of the Irish (Catholic) as a historically significant Other of the English/Protestant". According to the author, the Irish willingness to take any available job, regardless of skill, was precisely the reason for their segregation. Most Irish immigrants were unskilled laborers, leading to deplorable working conditions they had to endure (Hickman, 1995, p. 71).

Hickman further asserts that Irish migrants were systematically discriminated against in comparison to other working-class citizens, primarily based on two factors: the "fear of contagion" and the "fear of public disorder" (Hickman, 1995, p. 72). The fear of contagion encompassed concerns about the living conditions of the Irish in industrial cities, as they often resided in tenements and overcrowded rooms around city centers, close to potential job opportunities. These areas were marked by disease and violence. The fear of public disorder was directly connected to this, as Irish quarters were believed to be hubs of violence, drunkenness, and immorality, causing anxiety among nineteenth-century British citizens (Hickman, 1995, p. 73; 77). In "The Poor Clare", Bridget Fitzgerald causes fear in her neighbors for her "wild and despotic" words and behavior "to those few people who came across her path" (Gaskell, 1995b, p. 66).

¹ The Great Irish Famine was marked by widespread starvation and disease, primarily due to the potato crop failure, a staple for most Irish people. The potato blight, caused by the fungus *Phytophthora infestans*, devastated crops, and compounded by Ireland's heavy reliance on potatoes and socio-economic conditions, led to dire consequences. Inadequate relief measures by the British government, along with economic policies and social inequalities, worsened the crisis. Approximately one million people died from starvation and disease, and mass emigration further reduced the population.

In addition to working conditions, Roger Swift (1987) argues that Victorian anti-Irish sentiment had political, racial, and religious causes. The history of nationalist rebellions since the eighteenth century heightened the fear that the Irish would bring disorder and violence to Britain. The failed Young Irelander rising in 1848,² an attempt to overthrow British rule in Ireland, influenced the emergence of republican groups in Ireland, Britain, and America, such as the Irish Republican Brotherhood.³ These events later played a role in shaping the Home Rule movement⁴ and the 1916 Easter Rising.⁵ Acts of political rebellion like these suggested to many British people that the Irish posed a threat to the Empire (Swift, 1987, p. 270).

There are echoes of this political tension in “The Poor Clare.” Starkey, Bridget’s employer, is depicted as embodying “an Irishman’s hatred for an Englishman, and an exiled Jacobite’s jealousy of one who prospered and lived tranquilly under the government he looked upon as usurpation” (Gaskell, 1995b, p. 42). Nineteenth-century political discourse in Britain reveals a constant anxiety about the Irish and their potential actions to break free from colonial rule.

Another reason for the anti-Irish sentiment was their racial identity, constructed in and by Victorian discourse as inferior to the Anglo-Saxon race, which was believed to be the cause

² Young Ireland was a movement that emerged during the Great Famine in Ireland in 1848, marked by a failed rebellion against British rule. The leaders of this movement, including figures like Thomas Francis Meagher (1823-1867), William Smith O’Brien (1803-1864), John Mitchel (1815-1875), and John Blake Dillon (1814-1866), drew inspiration from the 1848 February Revolution in France. Their primary goal was to establish an independent Irish Republic. However, the rebellion faced significant challenges due to the small number of participants, and it was swiftly suppressed by the British government. As a consequence, leaders such as Meagher and O’Brien received harsh sentences, including transportation for life to Van Diemen’s Land (modern-day Tasmania). John Blake Dillon escaped to France, while John Mitchel was sent to Bermuda. Notably, Meagher and Mitchel managed to escape to the United States, where they later found themselves on opposing sides during the American Civil War (1861-1865).

³ The Irish Republican Brotherhood (IRB) was a clandestine organization with the objective of establishing an independent Irish republic. Its members were commonly known as "Fenians", a term derived from the Irish word *Fianna*, meaning warriors. Operating in secrecy, the IRB played a significant role in planning and executing a series of attacks in both Ireland and Britain during the latter half of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The activities of the IRB were particularly influential in the organization of the Easter Rising of 1916.

⁴ The Home Rule movement in Ireland, active in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, advocated for self-governance within the United Kingdom. It aimed to establish a devolved Irish parliament to address grievances and nurture Irish national identity while maintaining ties with the British Empire. Despite resistance from Unionists, particularly in the north, the Third Home Rule Bill passed in 1914, but its implementation was delayed by World War I. The subsequent Irish War of Independence (1919-1921) and the Anglo-Irish Treaty of 1921 led to the establishment of the Irish Free State in 1922, marking the end of the Home Rule movement and the realization of Irish self-government.

⁵ The 1916 Easter Rising was a pivotal event in Irish history that took place in Dublin, Ireland, during Easter Week, April 24 to April 29, 1916. It was a rebellion staged by Irish republicans who sought to end British rule in Ireland and establish an independent Irish Republic. The leaders of the Rising were members of the Irish Republican Brotherhood and the Irish Volunteers, with key figures such as Patrick Pearse (1879-1916), James Connolly (1868-1916), and others playing prominent roles. The rising failed and its leaders were executed for treason.

of their superstition, wildness, and violence (Swift, 1987, p. 270). Finally, Swift suggests that religion is another factor contributing to the segregation of the Irish. Since the English, Scottish, and Welsh were predominantly Protestant, the increasing “no-popery” discourse in the nineteenth century influenced British perceptions of the Irish. During that time, being “Irish” and being “Catholic” were often treated as synonymous (Swift, 1987, p. 273).

In the nineteenth century, anti-Catholic discourses in Britain intensified, primarily due to tensions in Ireland and the ongoing process of Catholic emancipation in both Britain and Ireland. The re-establishment of the Roman Catholic hierarchy in Britain in 1850 was perceived as an assault on the Protestant faith and a manifestation of Catholic violence (O’Malley, 2006, p. 7). Simultaneously, in Ireland, the Catholic Emancipation Act of 1829 granted worship rights to Catholics and allowed them to participate in public office, causing anxiety among Protestants. Elizabeth Gaskell incorporates these societal tensions into her fiction, such as in *North and South*, where Margaret’s brother Frederick creates familial discord with his engagement to a Catholic woman and his desire to convert to Roman Catholicism. Similarly, in “The Poor Clare”, the appearance and actions of Bridget, as well as Gisborne, Lucy’s Catholic father, are intricately linked to their Catholic faith, further reflecting the religious anxieties prevalent in Victorian society (Gaskell, 1995b, p. 37).

Patrick R. O’Malley (2006) posits that nineteenth-century British and Irish literature consistently associates Catholicism with evil to depict the perceived threats to Britain’s morals and values. The Gothic genre is particularly suited to this purpose, as it involves a reworking of a traumatic past that appears to erupt in the present through supernatural distortions (O’Malley, 2006, p. 12). O’Malley explores the intricate relationship between the Gothic and Catholicism, suggesting that British and Irish Gothic literature frequently utilizes Catholicism to depict nonnormative sexual practices. He argues that this persistence reveals a struggle for “Britain’s sectarian purity as well as its sexual values” (O’Malley, 2006, p. 3).

Laura Kranzler (2006, p. 49) also contends that Gothic literature revolves around transgression, and in the case of Gaskell’s Gothic stories, the genre is about “the return of the repressed”. The curse Bridget places on Lucy, forcing her to live with “an oversexed and hyper-active she-demon” (Kranzler, 2006, p. 52), is a literary re-imagination of the perceived dangers associated with Catholicism. Bridget, characterized as the “old Irish witch”, symbolizes the perceived threats posed by Irish Catholics to the Protestant British Empire.

THE IRISH CATHOLIC WITCH AND THE VICTORIAN GOTHIC: PERSISTENT STEREOTYPES

Gothic fiction often incorporates elements such as ghosts, vampires, aristocratic and/or religious villains, thieves, murderers, etc., capable of haunting characters both physically and psychologically. According to Jerrold E. Hogle (2002, p. 5), beneath the seemingly straightforward tales of ghosts and villains lies “a deep lingering fear [of] the terror or possible horror that the ruination of older powers will haunt us all”, resulting in a “deathly chaos”. In Victorian society, grappling with significant changes brought about by the Industrial Revolution, including the rise of the urban working class, escalating crime rates, the emancipation of Roman Catholicism, and the previously mentioned Irish threats to the British empire, the Gothic supernatural creature serves to “locate and focus our longings and fears as though they are and *are not ours*, allowing them to be visible as part of our present fearfully threatening us and yet making them either a relic of the decaying past” (Hogle, 2002, p. 6, author’s emphasis).

As O’Malley (2006) suggests, the frequent use of Catholic social types in Gothic literature, such as priests and nuns, represents Britain’s Catholic past that haunts the Protestant present. In “The Poor Clare”, the fear of witchcraft can be interpreted as a relic of the Catholic, superstitious past that bursts into the present. The “old Irish witch” Bridget Fitzgerald is the representation of the lingering “other” religion with archaic practices and prayers that “seem[s] to touch on the borders of madness and blasphemy” (Gaskell, 1995b, p. 45). The selection of an Irish Catholic woman as a “witch” in the analyzed short story is not arbitrary; Gaskell engages with the religious and racial discourses of her time to portray what Victorians perceived as a threat to the established social order.

Despite the prevailing notion that Victorians had disassociated themselves from past superstitions, the emergence of witchcraft as a genuine concern in “The Poor Clare” (Kranzler, 2006, p. 52) suggests otherwise. Julia A. Phillips (2023) contends that references to witches were prevalent in Victorian newspapers, challenging the assumption that belief in witchcraft had waned. Although witchcraft ceased to be a crime in 1736, complaints about “bewitching” and “incantations” were widespread during the Victorian era, particularly in newspaper reports of legal proceedings (Phillips, 2023). Phillips also notes that in Victorian Britain, witches were often perceived as supernatural beings, capable of causing harm (Phillips, 2023, p. 9).

This lingering fear of witches and the supernatural in Victorian society can be linked to broader socio-cultural anxieties. Silvia Federici (2017, p. 305) establishes a connection between the witch hunt in the Renaissance and social change. She argues that the witch hunt was a reactionary movement against segments of the population that obstructed emerging capitalist values and resisted the control of the body in various aspects—sexual, reproductive, spiritual practices, and popular healing. According to Federici, the witch hunt also served to regulate women and their bodies, transforming their reproduction into a state instrument for generating new workers subject to control.

Federici observes that many English witches persecuted until the eighteenth century were typically middle-aged or elderly women who were servants, recipients of public assistance, or beggars. Their purported transgressions included casting the evil eye, cursing, and practicing incantations (Federici, 2017, p. 310). The depiction of Bridget in “The Poor Clare” aligns with Federici’s description: the narrator portrays Bridget as an elderly woman, walking bent, with all her teeth gone, bringing her nose and chin “near together”. Her eyebrows are grey and “almost [hung] over her deep, cavernous eyes,” and her “thick white hair lay in silvery masses over the low, wrinkled forehead” (Gaskell, 1995b, p. 43). The narrator appears skeptical that such a frail woman could engage in the actions attributed to her by her neighbors. Although she appears “wild” and “indomitable”, her face is not “cunning or malignant” (GASKELL, 1995b, p. 44).

However, when the narrator observes Bridget desperately praying to the Virgin Mary, he describes her as almost mad and blasphemous (Gaskell, 1995b, p. 46). Her religious practices and grief over her lost daughter appear to him as “wild” (Gaskell, 1995b, p. 47). O’Malley (2006, p. 5) argues that in Victorian anti-Catholic rhetoric, Catholicism is frequently depicted as excessively passionate, captivating those who witness its practices—a fascination that is, in reality, a desire for evil. The Catholic “passion” and “fascination” are perceived as indicators of perversion.

Bridget is believed to possess supernatural powers that allow her to reward those who are kind to her and punish those who go against her. The narrator’s landlord reveals that the townspeople “did her imperious bidding, because they feared to disobey. If they pleased her, they prospered; if, on the contrary, they neglected or traversed her behests, misfortune, small or great, fell on them and theirs” (Gaskell, 1995b, p. 66). This portrayal of Bridget resonates with Victorian beliefs about witches’ abilities. According to Phillips (2023, p. 9), Victorians

attributed several powers to witches, encompassing spells, charms, control over weather, fortune-telling, and the capacity to direct harm towards specific individuals.

This is precisely what Bridget does in the story. When Gisborne kills her dog, she invokes “the Saints in Heaven” to “ask sorrow on this bad, cruel man” (Gaskell, 1995b, p. 37). She tells Gisborne: “You shall live to see the creature you love best, and who alone loves you – ay, a human creature, but as innocent and fond as my poor, dead darling – [...] become a terror and a loathing to all, for this blood’s sake” (Gaskell, 1995b, p. 37). Bridget sprinkles the dog’s blood on Gisborne, who does not seem to care. According to Phillips (2023, p. 49), “indisputably blood holds a powerful place within a wide range of supernatural practices”, as it was believed to contain a person’s humors. In the story, blood serves as a symbol of Bridget’s curse on Gisborne and his beloved daughter.

Bridget is unaware that she cursed her own granddaughter, as Gisborne had a relationship with Mary Fitzgerald and fathered a girl with her. Victorian Gothic fiction is often preoccupied with “the family curse” and concerns of inheritance and property. The belief that the “sins of past generations” (Kranzler, 2006, p. 49) continue to have effects on the present, and protagonists must break free from them to survive, is a recurring theme. In “The Poor Clare”, this obsession with the family curse is evident as characters twice quote from the Bible stating that “the sins of the fathers shall be visited upon the children” (Gaskell, 1995b, p. 60; 64). The sins in this case are Gisborne’s, who had wronged Mary and caused her death. As Katherine Schneider (2021, p. 71) puts it, the reason for Bridget’s curse is Gisborne’s wrongdoing, so it is he who needs to repent. Gisborne’s behavior in the story is described as typical of Jacobite Catholics, who have no respect for king or faith. Besides Bridget, Gisborne is also responsible for Lucy’s fate.

The consequence of Bridget’s and Gisborne’s sin is the curse on Lucy, which condemns her to live forever with a wicked double. Lucy’s counterpart is “a loathsome demon soul looking out of the grey eyes, that were in turns mocking and voluptuous” (Gaskell, 1995b, p. 59). The double’s behavior is completely different from Lucy’s: although similar in appearance, the double is sensual, lascivious, and maleficent. The narrator insists that Lucy’s soul has not been touched by evil, and he is convinced that “pure and holy Lucy is their [powers of darkness] victim” (Gaskell, 1995b, p. 60). The story contrasts Lucy and her other: one is immaculate, the other is transgressive. Schneider (2021, p. 66) suggests that Lucy’s other is an “internal double”

that works towards exhibiting contradictory personalities, challenging gender binarism and social expectations for women.

The “double” is a Gothic motif used to reveal the presence of the archaic in the present (Hogle, 2002, p. 7), as in Robert Louis Stevenson’s *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1886). The double is the abject, the outcast, the repulsive, the rejected. Julia Kristeva (1982) posits in *Powers of Horror* that abjection is the process through which a child constructs subjectivity by delineating boundaries between the “self” and the “other” through the rejection of what is inherent to oneself. Subjectivity is formed by excluding elements that threaten these boundaries, such as bodily fluids, curdled milk, excrement, vomit, corpses, filth, and more. The Gothic double’s appearance and behavior are repulsive, revealing what has been repressed and thought to be buried.

Lucy’s double is abject because she is the abject repressed coming to the surface, forcing the narrator and those around her to face the uncanny. The sexualized other woman living with Lucy is repulsive to Victorian society because it goes against social expectations for women. Although, according to Schneider (2021), Gaskell’s characterization of Lucy’s double is a “progressive element” that challenge gender binarism, the critic also contends that Gaskell is a woman of her time and cannot fully accomplish a progressive character. As Schneider argues, women in Gaskell’s stories “still must be punished or must properly atone for their fallenness, thus being returned to a patriarchal paradigm” (Schneider, 2021, p. 65). Lucy’s punishment is to be an outcast, and only her grandmother can free her from the curse.

In my analysis, I propose that Lucy’s adversary in the narrative is not her double but rather her grandmother, Bridget. Building on Shelston’s (1995, p. 145) assertion that Lucy embodies a “Victorian heroine of the preceding century”, I argue that Bridget is portrayed as a quintessential Gothic Catholic villain who poses a threat to the pure Victorian heroine. Described as an “old Irish Catholic witch”, Bridget not only menaces the Protestant faith but also challenges Victorian ideals of femininity and propriety with her curse. Federici (2017, p. 324) highlights the prevalent depiction of witches as crones, characterized by infertility and purported sexual inactivity, stemming from societal aversions to non-reproductive sexuality during the transition from feudalism to capitalism. The crone is considered repulsive as she cannot bear children in her old age, making her seemingly useless in a capitalist society. O’Malley (2006, p. 6) suggests that Victorian society viewed non-reproductive sex and other forms of nonnormative sexuality, including celibacy, as potential perversions. Bridget emerges

as a threat to Lucy not only for ending the girl's prospects of marriage and societal respectability but also because she embodies characteristics abhorred by Victorians in a woman.

Lucy's curse, it turns out, can only be broken by the one who initially cursed her. Bridget, upon discovering the disgrace she had brought upon her granddaughter and witnessing the malevolent double, desperately seeks atonement. She goes to Antwerp and takes on the life of a Poor Clare nun, engaging in fasting and embracing humility. However, the curse cannot be lifted through prayer alone. Father Bernard, the Catholic priest aiding her, asserts that "no prayer, no masses, will ever do it [...]. Her former self must be buried – yea, buried quick, if need be, - but never more to make sign, or utter cry on earth!" (Gaskell, 1995b, p. 77). The town's clergyman offers an alternative view, suggesting that Bridget should be "ducked" or burnt, deeming these as appropriate treatments for witches: "I'd carry a fagot myself to rid the country of her!". Both men of faith concur that the only solution for Bridget is death, whether symbolic (representing the death of her past as a witch) or literal. The maid, Mrs. Clarke, also anticipates "the mysterious stirring of blood" as the only means of removing the curse. These opinions align with the Victorian belief that curses and incantations could only be undone by drawing the blood of the alleged witch. Phillips (2023, p. 51) cites Victorian newspaper reports of individuals being arrested for attacking supposed witches in a bid to free themselves from a "hag-spell". The practice of bleeding witches has roots in biblical references, and during the widespread witch hunts in Europe and the Americas, burning women accused of witchcraft was another common method of dealing with them (Phillips, 2023, p. 51).

There is no atonement for Bridget, nothing she could do to free Lucy but die. However, she must try to break free from her "former" self by fasting, and the name she adopts in the convent is representative of her intentions. She becomes Sister Magdalen, a reference to the Biblical character Mary Magdalene, who followed Christ after being freed of seven demons. During Bridget's penitent stay at the convent, political violence breaks in Antwerp, causing a death toll and general famine in the land. Gisborne, now working for the Austrian army, is injured in one of the many street fights and is taken to the Poor Clares to be saved. The narrator finds Gisborne in Bridget's cell, with moldy bread and a cup of water nearby, and against his bed the biblical verse in English: "Therefore, if thine enemy hunger, feed him; if he thirst, give him drink" (Gaskell, 1995b, p. 86). Bridget is dying herself from hunger, only to have time to utter a final sentence: "She is freed from the curse!" (Gaskell, 1995b, p. 87).

Ingelbien (2010) argues that, by orchestrating the simultaneous deaths of the two adversaries, Gaskell effectively dismantles the English/Irish dichotomy. I contend, however, that this scene is insufficient to challenge the English/Irish divide. The mere fact of Gisborne and Bridget dying together does not blur the divide between the English and Irish that they symbolize. Gisborne, being a Catholic, does not represent English Protestant colonial rule, as he is a Jacobean and “abjured his country, and hated his countrymen” (Gaskell, 1995b, p. 81). If there is a figure of the colonizer in this story, it would be the narrator, who is Protestant and desires to marry the heroine Lucy, contributing to another trope of nineteenth-century literature: the union between an English settler and an Irish girl (Ingelbien, 2010, p. 14). However, the story concludes without clarifying if the narrator indeed marries Lucy or if she is genuinely free from the curse.

This open ending suggests that the “evil” may not have been entirely banished, as Schneider (2021, p. 73) observes: “though Bridget may fit into a more traditional schema of returning order through stabilizing patriarchal constructions of femininity, this is complicated by Lucy’s conspicuous absence from the end of the narrative”. The reader remains uncertain about the credibility of the unreliable narrator’s account, and the open ending implies that none of the divisions present in the text (pure women/evil women, English/Irish, Catholic/Protestant) has been genuinely dismantled.

CONCLUSION

A parallel can be drawn between the social conditions that facilitated the witch hunt in the transition to capitalism and the resurgence of Gothic literature in the eighteenth century, continuing into the nineteenth century. Federici (2017, p. 312-13) suggests that the witch hunt arose from a constant fear of losing space and property to the lower classes, and capitalism’s response to witchcraft was an attempt to combat what could not be controlled, generalized, or explained. Similarly, the Gothic genre resurfaces when the established order in Britain confronts challenges from working-class movements, increasing urbanization, mass immigration, and Catholic emancipation. The renewed interest in the supernatural, particularly witchcraft, as portrayed in “The Poor Clare”, goes beyond mere curiosity; it signifies a literary re-imagination of Victorian society and its prevailing anxieties.

Elizabeth Gaskell's "The Poor Clare" portrayal of Irish/Catholic characters exhibits Victorian racist discourses against Irish Catholics. Gaskell's depiction reflects prevailing nineteenth-century debates on Irish immigration and emancipation, contributing to anti-Irish sentiment rooted in political, racial, and religious factors. The narrative mirrors societal tensions, with Bridget's actions tied to Catholicism, reflecting broader anxieties of the time. This article explored the historical context, including political rebellions and anti-Catholic discourses, emphasizing how Gaskell's work fits into broader literary themes in nineteenth-century British and Irish literature.

This analysis delved into the intricate use of Gothic elements in Gaskell's "The Poor Clare" to address and reflect Victorian societal fears and prejudices. Bridget Fitzgerald, portrayed as the "old Irish Catholic witch", emerges as a symbolic figure representing the anxieties surrounding Ireland, Catholicism, and societal expectations for women. The narrative explores themes of religion, witchcraft, and the Gothic double, challenging gender norms and presenting a complex interplay of Victorian ideals and perceived threats. Bridget's attempt at atonement aligns with societal views on witchcraft, adding layers to the narrative's exploration of religious tension. However, uncertainties persist regarding the reliability of the narrator and the genuine dismantling of societal divisions. The open ending of "The Poor Claire" suggests that, despite the simultaneous demise of adversaries, the underlying animosities and sectarian divisions remain unresolved, leaving readers to contemplate the lingering impact of societal fears on the characters and the broader cultural context.

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Recebido em: Fev. 2024.

Aceito em: Abr. 2024.