A Genealogy of the Uncanny in Scottish Literature

From James Hogg and Robert Louis Stevenson to Muriel Spark and Ali Smith

B.A. Essay

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Abstract

This essay explores the unique properties of the Gothic and the uncanny in Scottish literature through the contemporary novels *Memento Mori* by Muriel Spark and *The Accidental* by Ali Smith as well as the 19th century works *The Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner* by James Hogg and *The Master of Ballantrae* by Robert Louis Stevenson. It discusses the importance of the Scottish split psyche and how this influences the treatment of Gothic and uncanny elements in Scottish literature, with an emphasis on these four texts. An analysis is offered of the novels’ approaches to authenticity and objective truths and to what extent the authors believe such objective truths even exist. Although these novels were published at different times over a period of almost two centuries, they all demonstrate a persistent struggle with the elusive nature of reality and identity through portraying characters of questionable reliability. The uncanny is employed in such a way that it provides characters that exist both as symbolic archetypes and regular people, as the coexistence of the two defies conventional storytelling and human recognition. All this is employed, along with Gothic devices such as portents of doom and mysterious strangers from afar, to create unnerving works that question the reader’s beliefs in singular or absolute truths, as devotion to such singular truths is shown as destructive in many instances across these works. The essay also highlights the usage of these uncanny elements to propel the plots of these four novels, as both fear and fascination of the unknown and the unusual push the characters towards their destinations against their better judgement.
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