

Griezelig gewoon : gotieke verschijningen in Nederlandse romans, 1980-1995

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SUMMARY

Gothic Appearances in Dutch novels 1980-1995

The main question this dissertation wants to answer is: what does gothic *do* in late-twentieth century Dutch novels? It is in fact a twofold question: firstly, what are the effects of the gothic in literary terms? I analyse how the gothic makes its appearance in six Dutch novels from the period 1980-1995: Frans Kellendonk's *Letter en Geest* (Letter and Ghost, 1982); Gerard Reve's *De vierde man* (The Fourth Man, 1981); Thomas Rosenboom's *Vriend van verdienste* (Friend of Honour, 1985); Renate Dorrestein's *Noorderzon* (Moonlight Flit, 1986) and *Het perpetuum mobile van de liefde* (The Perpetuum Mobile Machine of Love, 1988) and Vonne van der Meer's *Spookliefde* (Ghost Love, 1995). By analysing these novels in detail, I explore the potential of a gothic frame of interpretation, which is a relatively new approach in Dutch literary criticism. Each chapter contains an analysis of the way in which elements from the 18th and 19th century gothic tradition create literary effects in these six novels. Although none are considered classic gothic or horror stories *à la* Bram Stoker or Stephen King, gothic elements appear in all of them: a locked room in the attic, a ghostly apparition in the library, crows in a graveyard, corrupt monks on a remote island, a metamorphosis into a vampire and so on.

My close readings of these six novels serve to answer my second question: what is the gothic doing there and then, at that time, in that place, or, in other words, what kind of cultural work is being done by the gothic in these novels? In this dissertation the gothic is taken to be a cultural strategy to stage the ambivalences which are caused by modernisation processes. These are ambivalences produced by a perceived breach between present and past. When things are labelled as gothic, an opposition between a (modern) present and a traditional (gothic) past is staged – whether by Italian Renaissance humanists, who called the medieval cathedrals 'gothic', or by present-day 'goths' who self-consciously want to distance themselves from modern life. Thus, the dynamic of progression and lagging behind – in other words, of modernisation – is crucial to the gothic. Every period has its own gothic past; the contrast between a modern present and an archaic past can, and is being staged time and again, with differ-

ent accents for different periods and aspects of modernisation. I understand the gothic as a resilient cultural strategy for the representation of conflicts of modernisation; the gothic, as a form of excess, stages the tensions that modern society is unable to deal with.

The novels studied in this dissertation were all published after the 'sixties', a period of modernisation which greatly influenced The Netherlands in many ways. A remarkable aspect of that modernisation, as the historian James Kennedy (1995) has noted, was the dominance of a 'rhetoric of progression', which caused social changes to happen smoothly and swiftly. The Netherlands became an icon of sexual liberation, women's emancipation and individualisation. One could wonder what cultural conflicts the gothic still has to rework in a society that has experienced such a smooth transition to emancipation. The analysis of my case studies, however, shows that the gothic still has its work cut out for it.

In chapter 1 I outline my perspective on the gothic, as discussed above, and also present an overview of historical meanings of the term 'gothic' in Britain and The Netherlands, and of the history of gothic literature in The Netherlands.

Chapter 2 contains an examination of Frans Kellendonk's *Letter en Geest* (Letter and Ghost, 1982). I argue that this novel represents a friction between old and new articulations of homosexual identity through the gothic. *Letter en Geest* shows the tensions between private life and public life, which are expressed in the blurring discourses of sexuality and of working life. The source of these tensions is what Eve Sedgwick has called male homosexual panic: the fear of being perverted. I suggest that it is the specific *modern*, that is late twentieth-century, form of homosexual identity and the way it is acquired which accounts for the gothicism in *Letter en Geest*. Kellendonk rewrites the classic ghost story and critically comments on the effects of sexual emancipation, two issues which are related in this novel. While the classic ghost story derives its narrative tension from an 'existential problem' (does the ghost exist?), the male protagonist in *Letter en Geest* immediately solves the problem of having seen a ghost in the library by bending the rules of what counts as knowledge to his will, thus foregrounding the "problem of knowledge". This is analogous to the effect of the modern coming-out strategy for homosexuals: knowledge (knowing and being known) precedes being (homosexual).

Sexual liberation has undoubtedly increased the freedom for homosexuals to "come out of the closet". But *Letter en Geest* shows a possible drawback to this emancipation. When being (existing as a homosexual) is dependent on knowing – either through making yourself known, or through being recognized

(known) by others—, sexual identity becomes less a matter of private choice. It is an identity that has to be claimed and performed in public. In *Letter en Geest* Kellendonk uses gothic strategies for an apt representation of the potential panic that accompanies this necessity to claim a sexual identity. Kellendonk presents a character who struggles with the modern demand to claim a sexual identity or else not to be.

The novel I analyse in chapter 3 is the comic gothic *De vierde man* (The Fourth Man, 1981) by Gerard Reve. *De vierde man* is clearly inspired by the gothic novel, but it gives gothic conventions a comic turn. I argue that Reve uses the gothic as a suitable cultural strategy to represent the fragility of the achievements of the sexual revolution of the late sixties and seventies. In this novel women's sexual pleasure, i.e. sexual autonomy, is portrayed as gothic, as a threat to traditional masculinity. Using Judith Butler's work on the performativity of gender, I examine the protagonist's parodies of heterosexual masculinity. I interpret them both as parodies of gender – the faggot who plays a man, in his own words –, and as parodies of sexuality – the homosexual who plays the heterosexual. Depending on the perspective one takes, these parodies may be read as a critique or a confirmation of the heterosexual romance plot. The position of the male protagonist is ambivalent: on the one hand, he connects gender and sexuality in a hetero normative way. On the other hand, he undermines the notion of naturalness and authenticity because of his successful parody of a heterosexual.

The subversion of authenticity in *De vierde man* concentrates on sexual identity, which is often considered the core of one's self. In the case of Gerard Reve, it is also the core of his authorship. Using Peter Brooks' theory of narrativity and sexuality, I analyse the connection between sexuality and authorship in *De vierde man*. The novel asks the questions 'what is a man?' and 'what is a story?'. Both questions are answered through an opposition of hetero- and homosexuality. Heterosexuality and the romantic plot are (still) closely related, I conclude, although Reve effectively exposes the seeming naturalness of the romantic plot.

The fourth chapter presents an analysis of the novel *Vriend van verdienste* (Friend of Honour, 1985) by Thomas Rosenboom. The motifs of the gothic mansion, with a locked room and a mad woman in the attic, are reworked in this novel, which is set in a seemingly archaic past, on the threshold of the 1960s. The novel's main sources of gothic tension are class and masculinity. The suggestion of a possible class mobility is violently suppressed in this novel.

Excessive violence is released when the main protagonist literally crosses boundaries by locking himself up in the gothic mansion of the rich boys he wants to befriend. I analyse the rivalry between the four protagonists with the help of Eve Sedgwick's work on homosocial bonds. The boys are engaged in a power struggle for male dominance. Both the privileged position of the higher class and the values of the self-employed class – in this case servitude as a matter of honour – are put under pressure. The tensions between dependence and independence, between power and powerlessness are central to this novel. The gothic stages the blurring of boundaries in terms of purity and the abject. The main character – the least masculine of the boys, in terms of age and class – becomes abject. Paradoxically, in this position he is able to subvert the social order most effectively.

Chapter 5 presents an analysis of two novels by the 'queen of Dutch gothic literature', Renate Dorrestein. I read her *Noorderzon* (Moonlight Flit, 1986) and *Het perpetuum mobile van de liefde* (The Perpetual Mobile Machine of Love, 1988) against the background of the lively international feminist debate on female gothic, in which terms Dorrestein's work has mainly been analyzed so far. This 'female gothic' frame of interpretation interprets gothic first and foremost as a quest for female autonomy. Using Nancy Armstrong's work on the gothic as an alternative way of imagining a community, I present a new way of interpreting the gothic in these two novels by Dorrestein. I argue that the gothic serves to show the limitations of *individual* agency, and not specifically female agency.

In *Noorderzon*, an ethical world view of the honest life is confronted with metaphysical Evil. Thus, this gothic novel shows that moral virtue cannot prevent evil from happening. The power of the narrator/writer is not strong enough to avert evil. I examine cross-connections between second wave feminist discourse and gothic narrative strategies, in particular the metaphor of the female voice. The professional voice of the protagonist, who is a producer of radio plays, leads to ambiguity between professional narration and personal report, between reality and fiction. My investigation of the novel shows that this blurring of borders causes gothic excess.

In my reading of *Het perpetuum mobile van de liefde* I discuss a case of gothic monstrosity that turns upon feminism itself: the novel shows (feminist) sisterhood as monstrous, and artistic failure as liberating. *The Perpetuum Mobile of Love* explores what happens when the monster shows an uncanny similarity between Self and Other, rather than a marked difference. Both in the narrator Renate's dual relation with her dead sister, who casts her vampiric shadow over

her work, and with the fictional character Godelieve – her ‘monster of Frankenstein’ – it is identification rather than difference, which is the source of gothic monstrosity. I argue that Dorrestein investigates the feminist notion of sisterhood through the autobiographical narrative about her sister’s suicide and the fictional story about Godelieve, thereby showing feminism to be a multifaceted enterprise. Dorrestein finds modes to express the unspeakable rivalry and competition between sisters – and that includes feminists. The vampiric collective of sisters emerges as a serious threat to the female individual.

The sixth chapter focuses on a novella by Vonne van der Meer, *Spookliefde* (Ghost Love, 1995). In this text the gothic serves to represent issues of (female) sexual desire as friction between tradition and modernisation. The recognition of female sexual autonomy is a relatively recent phenomenon. This novel deals, via the gothic, with the friction between determinacy and surrender: how do the two relate? Desire may be dangerous, and cannot be pursued without loss. The many gothic repetitions and doublings in the novel form a counterweight to notions of linearity and progression, and show the ambiguity of modernisation and the modern subject’s doubts. Future generations of young women will be haunted by the fear of not becoming sexually active, of not finding romantic love. In the midst of all repetitions, it is notable that the non-repeatable does not happen in this story: the first time, the loss of virginity. The analysis of anachronism in *Spookliefde* shows the potential connections between historical context and modernisation processes. The remote and archaic Irish island forms a meaningful gothic setting for this story, in which the protagonist develops a catholic sensitivity. *Spookliefde* thereby defies the idea that modernisation leads to secularisation.

In chapter 7, I conclude that the gothic is alive and well in Dutch literature; these six novels employ it in a great variety of ways. The first advantage of a gothic frame of interpretation is that it connects these particular authors for the first time. Moreover, reading gothic also makes it possible to study Dutch literature in an international context. Until now Dutch authors have often been studied in isolation or are only compared to each other. But of course literature has become more than a national enterprise. Reading gothic offers new views on international influences, kinships, and traditions. Finally, reading gothic is a plea for interpretation, or as Brewster (2000) claims: ‘reading gothic makes you see things’.

As far as my second research question is concerned – the cultural work gothic does – I conclude that in all novels under discussion the gothic is a way

of staging ambivalences about the achievements of the 1960s. My analysis focuses on issues of gender and sexual emancipation, which include new ways of defining masculinity and femininity, sexual equality, sexual autonomy of women and gay emancipation. The ambivalences about modern achievements operate on two levels in these novels. Firstly, they contain ambivalences about the *dominance* of new power relations: how firmly rooted are these new values? Have the old values really disappeared? In *Vriend van verdienste* class mobility leads to a violent struggle. Topaas in *Noorderzon* and Renate in *Perpetuum mobile* have to fight for their independence. The second level of ambivalence refers to the *value* of those new relations: is the new really better than the old? The protagonists of *Letter en Geest*, and *Spookliefde* seem to doubt it. The two levels are sometimes inseparable: in *De vierde man* the protagonist tests the dominance of the new power relations through parody, but in the meantime he prefers 'old fashioned' masculinity.

My interpretations have brought to the fore two remarkable correspondences between the six novels. Firstly, all novels relate in some way or another to Catholicism. I make a distinction between the function of Catholicism in these Dutch novels and in classic British gothic novels. In the latter, strong anti-catholic sentiments helped shape certain concepts of British national identity. In these twentieth-century Dutch gothic novels, Catholicism appears to be a suitable vehicle for the expression of desires of fulfilment and salvation. In these texts, secularisation is not the self-evident outcome of modernity.

The second remarkable correspondence between the novels is that they question the capability of their protagonists to truly lead their own life. I interpret the abundance of the gothic Doppelgänger and stand-ins in these novels in terms of the appeal to fulfil oneself and be an authentic individual. The philosopher Charles Taylor has called this ethics of authenticity a typically modern phenomenon.

These gothic novels show the insecurity of individuals as to who they can be in times of historical change. When meanings of gender and sexuality change, articulations of the self change as well. Manifesting oneself as 'modern' entails choices that vary historically, i.e. after the sixties these choices have changed considerably. The protagonists of the six novels all feel the appeal of being modern individuals, but do not know how to respond to that appeal. What does it mean to be a man (Reve, Rosenboom), a bachelor (Kellendonk), a homosexual (Reve en Kellendonk), a woman (Van der Meer), a feminist (Dorrestein), a friend (Rosenboom)? In the new societal relations the answer to those questions is not clear at all – and at that point the gothic appears.