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## **London and the Gothic in Leon Garfield's *Smith* and Joan Aiken's *Black Hearts in Battersea***

**Alison Baker**

### **Abstract**

Gothic fiction's recognisable tropes were established in the 18th and 19th centuries through novelists such as Horace Walpole and Ann Radcliffe: supernatural elements, fear, historical settings and the sublime in landscape reflecting the heightened emotions of the protagonist. Gothic fiction's influence is seen in the work of Dickens, Collins and Charlotte and Emily Bronte, into fin de siècle works of Stevenson and Wells and into the 20th Century with Du Maurier and Angela Carter. It continues to be popular in young people's culture and media through television programmes such as *Sabrina* and *Wednesday* (both on Netflix), the fiction of Holly Black and Margo Lanagan and video games such as *Silent Hill* (1999-present). The two novels I discuss in this paper were published during a rise in the popularity of Gothic romance novels by authors such as Victoria Holt and Phyllis A. Whitney, when Gothic had become a more low-brow, though popular, genre. I demonstrate how the historical settings of the novels, the supernatural elements and sublime were transposed to London, and how that, along with the working-class child protagonists, both subverts and works within the tropes of 18th and early 19th century Gothic.

Keywords: *Gothic, Social Class*

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The two novels I will be discussing in this paper were published during a rise in the popularity of Gothic romance novels by authors such as Victoria Holt and Phyllis A. Whitney, when Gothic had become a more low-brow, though popular, genre. I will demonstrate how the historical settings of the novels, the supernatural elements and the uncanny settings were transposed to London, and how that, along with the working-class child protagonists, both subverts and works within the tropes of 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> century Gothic.

### What is Gothic?

Clive Bloom's definition of the Gothic sensibility states that its concerns are "the bizarre and wild", that in art and literature it features the supernatural, "with the inexplicable monsters of the forest and castle". Reyes (2015) quotes Spooner (2006), who identifies the preoccupation with the past and its impact on the present, the divided self, the construction of the monstrous and the preoccupation with bodies perceived as monstrous or grotesque. These tropes are seen in Dickens in *Oliver Twist*, *Great Expectations*, *The Old Curiosity Shop* and *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*. Both Joan Aiken and Garfield read Dickens and his influence on the Gothic nature of their novels is clear.

### The Setting

Both Garfield's *Smith* and Aiken's *Black Hearts in Battersea* open in London: *Smith* on Ludgate Hill, near St Paul's Cathedral. The scene is ominous, with Smith, a 12-year-old pickpocket following an elderly country gentleman who appears unfamiliar with the area. As Smith pursues the man, birds chatter accusingly: "Pick-pocket! Pick-pocket! Jug [jail] him! Jug-jug-jug him!" (1967, p. 7). Garfield describes the city as a "musty, tottering forest" (p. 9) with Smith the pickpocket as a predatory animal stalking the elderly gentleman. This uncanny introduction to Smith and the setting equates London with a forest, the setting of many Gothic novels. However, the forest is far from sublime or awe-inspiring; it is musty, and the animals are accusatory and hostile, unlike

the gentle forest animals that Adeline loves in Ann Radcliffe's *The Romance of the Forest* (1791).

Simon, the 15-year-old protagonist of *Black Hearts in Battersea* (Aiken, 1965) is a former foundling, arriving on Southwark Bridge in South London. He is immediately taken advantage of by an old man who wants to confuse him, a young man who steals his letter of introduction and a woman who takes him away from his intended location, lodging with the Twite family in Rose Alley, Southwark.

### Characters

We could envision these two characters as the Artful Dodger and Oliver Twist- Smith, who is characterised as a young villain, prematurely matured by a hard life; Simon as the former foundling boy arriving in London to seek his fortune. However, Simon is not a naïve innocent, and it is Smith, the Artful Dodger, who lives in the cellar of a pub on Saffron Hill near Holborn, north of the City of London, where Oliver meets Fagin: "a dirty and more wretched place he had never seen. The street was very narrow and muddy, and the air was impregnated with filthy odours". It is an interesting coincidence that this area of London is known as Little Italy, when so many Gothic novels were set in Italy. And it is Smith who finds a home with a benefactor, as Oliver does in Dickens' novel. It is not the inherent nobility of Smith that attracts his benefactor; it is his kindness and offer of assistance to Mr Mansfield the blind magistrate that enables him to become a stable boy and live in the Mansfield's house.

If Joan Aiken's Simon is not quite Oliver Twist, then his not quite Artful Dodger is Dido Twite, the filthy, neglected little girl who lives in a home of plotters against the King (James Stuart 3<sup>rd</sup> in Aiken's alternate history) and the protagonist of Aiken's later books. Dido is an untrusting, aggressive child at the beginning of the book, but Simon's kindness to her leads to her trusting him, and to rescuing him when he is kidnapped by the plotters.

### Missing Heirs and Doubles

The figure of the Doppelgänger or ghostly double is common in eighteenth and nineteenth Gothic literature, as is the stolen inheritance and attempts to murder rightful heirs. Aiken uses this conceit to comic effect in *Black Hearts*, with the Hanoverian plotters' outlandish attempts to assassinate the Duke and Duchess of Battersea foiled again and again by Sophie, Simon's friend from the Foundlings' Home who is now the Duchess of Battersea's maid. Sophie's use of the Duchess's tapestry as a rope, a rescue trampoline and a patch for a punctured hot air balloon demonstrates her quick wits and indicates that heroic rescues need not be the preserve of the strong only, and that traditionally feminine pursuits are not worthless.

Simon's cleaning of a portrait of the Duke's family indicates a strong likeness to Sophie, and eventually a missing nursemaid is able to tell the story of how Sophie and Simon were the twin heirs of Battersea. Her villainous husband has swapped their own child for Simon, and abandoned Sophie in a forest where she was brought up by otters,

in a nod to the Wild Child gothic trope discussed by George and Hughes (2019) after the seminal Open Graves, Open Minds Gothic conference on wolves, werewolves and wild children. George and Hughes indicate that wild children raised by wolves are considered to occupy a liminal space between humanity and animality, and to retain the uncontrolled savagery of werewolves. Sophie, on the other hand, has retained the ability to swim, and, she says, after she was rescued from the otters, she found it strange to eat anything but fish. In the novel that precedes *Black Hearts*, *The Wolves of Willoughby Chase* (1962) Simon is also living wild in the forest on the grounds of Willoughby Chase. Again, Aiken is exaggerating the gothic tropes for humour. If one lost heir is clichéd, two is ridiculous, and therefore funny. However, the ambivalent character of Smith, described as a predatory animal in the opening scenes of Garfield's novel, indicates that this is not a comedy. It is a much more unsettling novel, and more conventionally Gothic.

### Social Class

The protagonists of eighteenth-century novels were aristocrats or gentry, as were the antagonists, along with their sinister retainers, living in ancient castles. The Gothic romantic fiction from the 1960s onwards were frequently the stories of poor but upper-class young women going to live in big houses as companions or governesses to strangers. The settings for these books are rural and often remote. Janice Radway's research (1984) into romance novels and their readers in the heyday of the gothic romance's popularity indicate that, while readers of romance novels insisted on a happy ending, the satisfying part of reading the romance was the journey of the heroine's loss of identity and social status and regaining it through her care and love for the hero.

Aiken and Garfield's protagonists are street children. The novels are urban, and the narrative is from a working-class child's point of view. The concerns and lives of working-class children are given as much weight and significance as upper-middle-class and aristocratic adults in Aiken in Garfield's novels. Reader sympathies are with Smith, who is guilty of pick pocketing, but falsely accused murder and terrified of hanging, Simon is the good-hearted foundling boy, art student and lost heir, but the stand out character of *Black Hearts* is neglected urchin Dido. She was so popular with readers that, instead of heroically dying to save Simon, she was resurrected to her rightful place as a protagonist in the next novel, *Nightbirds on Nantucket*.

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#### Author Biography

Alison Baker is a senior lecturer at University of East London, specialising on Primary English and inclusive literacy across the curriculum. She is completing corrections on her PhD thesis on White Working-Class Children and Children's Fantasy Fiction. She has published on girls' horror comics, stepfamilies in Diana Wynne Jones's novels and social class in Harry Potter and hosts the podcast Fantasy Book Swap.