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Loving in Plain Sight: Amish Romance Novels as Evangelical Gothic

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Abstract

This article examines Beverly Lewis's highly popular trilogy *The Heritage of Lancaster County*, a series often cited as inspiring the Amish romance novel trend. Although Lewis did not invent the Amish romance, the high visibility that her work enjoys in the media, and the conventional wisdom that she was the first to develop the genre, means that subsequent novels are necessarily responding to and adapting Lewis's texts. Looking at Lewis's trilogy as a foundational text, this article analyzes the ways in which it draws on Gothic conventions to perform evangelical cultural work (to use Jane Tompkins's phrase). Considering the trilogy as a Gothic text within the context of Christian publishing highlights the ways in which it functions as an extension of evangelical outreach: the narratives both celebrate Amish community values and adherence to tradition while using Gothic tropes of confinement and escape to emphasize the idea that the Amish are narrow-minded and overly rigid. Ultimately, this article argues that Lewis's novels use the Gothic to argue that the antidote to Amish rigidity is evangelicalism.

Keywords

Amish romance novels, the Gothic, Evangelicalism, Beverly Lewis

Introduction: The Cultural Work of Amish Romance Fiction

There is little doubt that the last decade has seen enormous growth in the popularity of Amish romance novels. Rows of paperbacks with covers featuring young women in Amish dress against an agrarian backdrop are prominently displayed not only in mainstream and Christian bookstores, but also in non-specialized outlets like Target and Wal-Mart. Amish-themed novels have brought in such reliably strong sales in the last decade that, as Jana Riess puts it, “suddenly publishers are attracted to all things Plain like bees on shoofly pie” (2008, S8). The popularity of Amish-themed romances has spilled over into other categories as well, and publishers are increasingly offering Amish-related titles in other publishing divisions: recipe books like Georgia Varozza’s *The Homestyle Amish Cookbook*; prayer books, such as Beverly Lewis’s *Amish Prayers: Heartfelt Expressions of Humility, Gratitude, and Devotion*; and mysteries like Laura Bradford’s *Hearse and Buggy*. Seasonal offerings, including *An Amish Christmas Wish* by Samantha Jillian Bayarr and *An Amish Christmas* by Cynthia Keller, reveal both the ways that Amish culture is associated with tradition and its marketability.

Though Valerie Weaver-Zercher has demonstrated that Amish romance as a genre dates back to the early nineteenth century, Beverly Lewis is frequently credited with having started the recent trend with her trilogy of Amish-themed romances, *The Heritage of Lancaster County*, beginning with *The Shunning* in 1997 (Weaver-Zercher 2013, 27; Thurlow 2011, 25). According to Riess, “When Beverly Lewis first published her adult novel *The Shunning* [...] there was no such subgenre as Amish fiction” (2008, S8). When *Romantic Times* gave Lewis the 2009 RT Book Reviews Career Achievement Award, it announced that “Lewis is not only the leading author of Amish fiction, but also its pioneer: She largely developed the genre beginning with the release of her first adult novel, *The Shunning*” (CBA 2010). In its first year in print, *The Shunning* sold 100,566 copies, and it has remained in print and popular ever since (Bowker 1998, 624). In 2008, over 4.5 million copies had been sold of Lewis’s Amish fiction for adults (Riess 2008, S8). While hundreds of Amish-themed romance novels have been produced by a wide range of authors since *The Shunning*, they are all, to some extent, working in the shadow of Lewis’s initial success, working and re-working the formula that Lewis established—and it is for this reason that I focus my attention on Lewis’s “foundational” trilogy. My analysis of *The Shunning* highlights the elements of narrative and thematic structure that subsequent authors (including Lewis) have re-worked in developing the genre. This article examines *The Heritage of Lancaster County* series as an evangelical Gothic narrative that reflects its historical moment and Christian publishing context. Considering the series as a Gothic text within the context of Christian publishing highlights the ways in which it functions as an extension of evangelical outreach: the narratives both celebrate Amish community values and adherence to tradition while using Gothic tropes of confinement and escape to emphasize the idea that the Amish are narrow-minded and overly rigid. Ultimately, Lewis’s novels use the Gothic to argue that the antidote to Amish rigidity is evangelicalism.

Literary and cultural critics have long been interested in the “cultural work,” to use Jane Tompkins’s phrase, of romance novels. Tompkins’s idea of the cultural work of novels and stories refers to the ways these texts “offer powerful examples of the way a culture thinks about itself, articulating and proposing solutions for the problems that shape a particular historical moment” (1986, xi). According to Tompkins, attending to the formula of popular fiction uncovers the ways in which a culture is working through the issues of its day. Janice Radway’s foundational study, *Reading the Romance* (1991 [1984]), directed critical attention toward romance fiction, analyzing romance novels and their readers and firmly establishing American Studies as a discipline interested in popular culture and consumers’ responses to it. Radway’s interviews with Midwestern readers uncovered what romance novels meant to those women. Although we have infinitely more resources today than we did in the past for gathering reader responses through blogs, online reviews at sites like *Amazon*, and social networking sites like *Goodreads*, Radway’s work continues to be important because of her attempt to understand the connection between the popularity of a genre and its cultural meaning. Another important foundational study of romance fiction is Tania Modleski’s *Loving with a Vengeance* (2008 [1982]), which used a psychological approach to analyze what romance fiction meant to (primarily female) readers. Romance is one of the bestselling genres in book publishing, and Amish romance novels have sold millions of copies in the United States. Despite the recognition in literary and cultural studies that romance is an important genre for cultural critics to examine, as well as recent work by Lynn Neal (2006) on Christian romance as a genre, we are only beginning to take Amish romance fiction seriously as a sub-genre worthy of sustained critical attention. Valerie Weaver-Zercher’s (2013) reader-response-based analysis of Amish romance novels is the first extended study of the genre.

This oversight is problematic because it misses an opportunity to unpack the multiple cultural meanings of this genre of “escapist” fiction. To some extent, romance fiction reflects what a culture fantasizes about and fears. In Lisa Sigels’s study of Victorian pornography, *Governing Pleasures: Pornography and Social Change in England, 1815-1914* (2002), Sigel argues for the importance of studying pornography, another genre that is often dismissed as “trashy,” because it reveals an aspect of the social imaginary, or “what the culture sees as possible” for sexuality (2002, 2). Likewise, romance novels grant an insight into the social imaginary not just of romance, but, in the case of Amish romance fiction, also of a radical rewriting of American life and values. If romance is a genre about fantasy, the question can equally be asked, what exactly is the fantasy in Amish romance fiction?

At the same time, romance is also a genre that reflects the ways in which a culture is changing, or, at least, the ways in which the possibilities for fantasy are changing. Just as Harlequin romances in the late 1990s began featuring romances with men who were willing to stay home and help take care of the children in an historical moment when men were taking on increasing roles in the household (such as in Donna Alward’s *Little Cowgirl on His Doorstep* and Ray Morgan’s *A Father for Her Sons*), and the wars of the first decade of the twentieth century

spawned a boom in military romances (such as Dee Henderson's *Uncommon Heroes* series), romances reflect in the aggregate how a culture is changing and adapting to that change. As Amira Jarmakani points out in *The Sheik Who Loved Me': Romancing the War on Terror*, sheik-themed romance novels reveal the ways in which the genre is "imaginatively engaged" with dominant political and social narratives (2010, 995). Jarmakani's work provides a particularly useful analogous case because of the ways in which she reads romance novels as imaginatively working out cultural politics in a post-9/11 world; likewise, one can usefully read Amish romance fiction as working out a host of questions related to modernity, sexuality, environmentalism, and religious mores. As Jarmakani asserts, "Precisely because romance novels adhere to a formulaic scheme, the moments of divergence from the formula and from stock orientalist tropes reveal much about the ways in which the romantic fantasy articulates larger cultural realities" (2010, 995). In this article, I am particularly concerned with the ways in which Lewis is establishing the conventions and tropes of Amish romance fiction. By examining Lewis's use of Gothic tropes to paint the Amish as repressive, and the ways in which some authors depart from those key tropes, the genre's imaginative and cultural work becomes visible.

Multiple Mediations: Reading and Writing the Amish Romance

The cultural work of Amish romance fiction is inextricably bound up with its complicated relationship to production and consumption. Amish romance novels are almost never produced by Amish writers, nor are the bulk of its readers Amish. One of the only Amish writers of Amish romance novels is Linda Byler, whose *Lizzie Searches for Love* series is marketed as "based on true experiences from an Amish writer!" (2010, cover). While Lewis also advertises her Amish connections, especially the fact that she was born in Lancaster County and has a Mennonite background, she is, essentially, an outsider.

Thus, despite the authors' frequent claims to have thoroughly researched, and even consulted with, their subjects, they are producing a mediated version of Amish life. Some of the emphasis on research may be attempts to inoculate against charges of inaccuracy. According to Beth Graybill, for example, Lewis's first novel was "widely criticized for its inaccurate depiction of shunning" (2010, 2), and it is not surprising that she and her publishers would feel the need to preempt future criticism. This emphasis on research is important both to authors who wish to establish their credentials and to readers who see these books as offering a true picture of Amish life. Profiling Lewis in Lancaster's *The Intelligencer Journal*, Justine Maki emphasizes both Lewis's research (as demonstrated by her living with plain families "three different times," as well as her collaboration with Amish friends who critique her books) and her "connection" to the plain community (2004, 1). Readers on *Facebook*, *Amazon*, and *Christianbooks* often say that they read Lewis's books, and other Amish-themed romances, because they want to learn more about Amish culture. As Marilyn Grumblin puts it, "It's a way to understand them" (Maki 2004, 1). According to Maki, readers like Milly Natale read Lewis because "she trusts her stories to learn more accurate portrayals of the Amish" (2004, 1).

These “accurate portrayals” are, in fact, predominantly created by evangelical Christians, the most common background of Amish fiction writers, and the books are published by Christian publishing houses, such as Bethany House (which publishes Beverly Lewis’s work), and inspirational imprints put out by mainstream publishers, such as Avon Inspire. Introducing Avon Inspire, the HarperCollins imprint that publishes Shelley Shepard Gray (author of the *Sisters of the Heart* and *Seasons of Sugarcreek* series), publisher Liate Stehlik explained that the novels would have “engaging stories that Christian readers can trust and love” (Harper Collins Press 2006). The books are also frequently marketed through Christian book clubs like *Crossings*. As Graybill points out, in general, “the authors are evangelical white women of middle age—which is also the demographic for readers of Amish romance fiction” (2010, 1, emphasis in original). Graybill argues that both Lewis and Wanda Brunstetter, another popular Amish fiction writer, “genuinely view their writing as evangelistic outreach” (2010, 2). Beverly Lewis’s *Facebook* page reflects the interconnectedness of publicity and evangelical outreach, and her posts include both announcements of new releases and events, as well as inspirational anecdotes and Biblical passages.

Until Valerie Weaver-Zercher’s (2013) recent work interviewing Amish romance readers, we have had only a partial picture of why readers are attracted to this genre. Weaver-Zercher has found a wide range of responses to the novels, including many who find themselves inexplicably attracted to reading them, as well as many who critique them for being inaccurate, even referring to Lewis as “Beverly Clueless” (2013, par. 18). According to those who produce Amish romances, many of their fans consider it a “safe” subgenre because it includes all the elements of romantic love without the sex or explicit language. Shelley Shepard Gray (2010) explains what she sees as the attraction of Christian romance fiction:

I really firmly believe that a lot of people reach out to inspirational romances because they are looking for something positive and uplifting for themselves. They don’t want to be offended by too much language that’s offensive or—of course, there’s no sex in these books, so they don’t want anything like that.

This idea is also backed up by readers’ reviews on sites like *Amazon* and *Christianbooks* where they often note their gratitude that the novels can be trusted not to offend them and will reflect Christian values. In Lynn Neal’s study of evangelical readers of Christian romance—a study modeled on Radway’s analysis of mainstream romance readers—she emphasizes the ways in which the readers she spoke with saw Christian romance fiction as an extension of their faith, something she calls “fictional devotion” (2006, 12). For these readers (and authors), their interactions with evangelical romance novels are “a way to demonstrate and maintain their religious identities” (2006, 12).

The multiple mediations of Amish culture that these novels present matter because of the cultural work that they perform in the context of evangelicalism; in other words, the key question raised by these Amish-themed romances is not whether or not they are accurate, but what story

does the Amish setting let these evangelical authors tell their mostly evangelical readers? While it may be tempting to identify details about Amish life that they misinterpret or just get wrong, this very slippage makes Amish romance novels, and their reliance on the Gothic, a useful illustration of a cultural fantasy about Amish life. This fantasy, I will argue, serves a particular cultural end for its authors and readers by affirming the values of evangelical Christianity. Although it would be inaccurate to treat evangelicalism as a monolithic identity—and scholars like Christian Smith (2002) and Sally Gallagher (2003) have paid careful attention to the vast differentiation in views on social issues held by evangelicals—Lewis’s trilogy reflects and ultimately draws on the Gothic to affirm three main tenets of evangelical belief: an emphasis on conversion, the assurance of salvation through Jesus’s crucifixion, and the literal interpretation of scripture.

An Evangelical View of the Amish

In what sense, then, might these novels be said to be extensions of their authors and readers’ religious identities? Or, to put it another way, what form of religious identity comes through in a novel such as *The Shunning*, and how does Lewis’s portrayal of the Amish further this identity? In *The Heritage of Lancaster County* trilogy, Lewis presents a paradoxical view of the Amish: she both romanticizes the plain lifestyle as more deeply rooted in agrarian community values and condemns the rigidity of the *Ordnung*. The novel features extensive, loving descriptions of Amish cooking and community gatherings, such as quilting bees, presenting them as valued traditions that hold the community together. Lewis celebrates the Amish community for its stability and adherence to traditions, traditions that are seen as providing an important grounding for the community. In describing the protagonist’s family home in *The Shunning*, Lewis emphasizes the ways in which the building itself represents both history and the community’s ability to withstand change:

The sprawling house had been built in 1840 by [...] Joseph Lapp, and his stonemason friend. Now, over a century and a half later, the house was little changed. It stood—stately and tall—untouched by the outside world and its gadgets and gimmickry. Here, things went on as they always had—slow and tranquil—pacing out the days like an Amish *Grossmutter*, with serenity and grace (21).

Here Lewis emphasizes that the house has been “untouched” by “gadgets and gimmickry,” language suggesting that technological change is a fleeting novelty to be resisted in order to maintain the “slow and tranquil” quality of Amish life. As opposed to the rush of modern life, Amish households move slowly and deliberately, a pace that is associated with the spiritual qualities of “serenity and grace.”

In this way, Lewis celebrates Amish resistance to changes that technology might bring, especially because of the ways that resistance holds the community together and thus echoes a value shared by evangelicalism. As one character reflects, “Families in Hickory Hollow always

worked together. They *had* to. Without the convenience of tractors and other modern farm equipment, everything took longer. But it was the accepted way [...]” (1997, 41). This emphasis on working together is seen both in the field and in the home. In describing a quilting frolic, Lewis highlights the ways in which shared work creates a community bond:

[T]he women, ranging in age from eighteen to eighty, would sit on straight-backed chairs, sewing thousands of intricate stitches and chatting about vegetable gardens and flower gardens, new babies, and upcoming work frolics. [...] They would have contests over who could make the shortest stitches as they laughed and sang hymns and babbled endlessly. Later, there would be oodles of food, perhaps some of Abe and Rachel Stoltzfus’s delicious pineapple ice cream—the crowning moment of such an event (54).

It is clear from this description why Amish culture represents an ideal for evangelical writers like Lewis: it is grounded in traditional, community values that are seen as creating a rich life. These characters have little need of modern conveniences or mass entertainment because they take pleasure in their work, togetherness, and sharing traditions.

At the same time that Lewis presents the Amish emphasis on community and agrarian values in a positive light, the Amish church is presented as overly rigid, as exemplified by the practice of shunning, a practice designed to bring wayward members back into the fold. An interview with David Weaver-Zercher, author of *The Amish in the American Imagination* (2001), in the evangelical magazine *Christianity Today* reflects this paradoxical view of the Amish. The interviewer, Randall L. Frame, concludes with two key questions: “If you were given the authority by Amish leaders to change one thing about their beliefs or practices, what would it be?” and “What can all followers of Christ learn from the Amish way?” (2010, 69). These two questions sum up the vexed ways in which Amish culture is seen by outsiders in both starkly negative and positive terms. David Weaver-Zercher has elsewhere identified this paradox in representations of the Amish: on the one hand, the Amish are often idealized and made to stand in for a host of values which are perceived as lost in modern society; at the same time, the Amish are often seen as “backward, cruel, and sexually obsessed” (2001, 5). In *The Amish in the American Imagination*, Weaver-Zercher explores this paradox, as well as the ways in which the Amish are “domesticated” for economic and cultural reasons.

The Heritage of Lancaster County novels emphasize Amish culture as rigidly adhering to rules and present its tradition of shunning as arbitrary and destructive to the group solidarity so valued by Lewis and other novelists working in this genre. When Katie Lapp, the trilogy’s protagonist, rebels against her Amish upbringing and is eventually shunned, her rebellion stems from her desire for the forbidden: “fancy” things (like satin and other luxurious fabrics), music (the guitar and singing), and the opportunity to base her choice of a marriage partner on romantic love rather than obligation. Considering that these books are marketed to a Christian, as opposed to strictly Amish, audience, many of Lewis’s readers will have an outsiders’ view of these restrictions, especially of those luxuries that are not only not condemned, but also often

celebrated, as in the case of Christian music, which is seen as integral to faith. Likewise, when Katie is portrayed as being pressured into a marriage to the bishop, a much older widower who is both attracted to young Katie and seeks a woman to take care of his children, Lewis suggests that this pressure is wrong and, further, that there is something wrong with the sexual dynamics of the Amish community. This sense of wrongness is reinforced by the bishop's dual role: he is the one who enforces the rules when she disobeys, and that disobedience is directly tied to her unwillingness to marry him. Thus, when she is shunned for this action, as well as for her decision not to destroy the long-cherished guitar given to her for safekeeping by her love, Daniel, the narrative suggests that her desires are reasonable and that the decision to punish her is unjust.

As a central source of tension between characters in the novels, the punishment for disobedience—shunning—takes on a significant narrative role. Lewis often explains that her interest in the practice of shunning comes from the fact that her maternal grandmother was shunned by her Mennonite community because she married outside the faith (Maki 2004, 1). In Lewis's novels, shunning as a tool of regulation is presented as cruel and unjust, not only because it is imposed for desires that are widely shared and even celebrated by her target audience, but also because it separates families and friends and, in effect, destroys one of the core qualities of the Amish community held up as a model by the novel. In an inset note, Lewis describes the practice of shunning in the following way: "*Die Meinding*—the shunning—is practiced in Plain communities to this day. And while it is intended to bring the wayward back into the spiritual fold, it continues to spawn heated debate and to divide families and churches as it has for more than three hundred years" (1997, inset note). Katie's mother is portrayed as suffering greatly from the forced separation from her daughter, and the family's divergent sympathies create a rift between those who agree with the shunning and those who do not. Furthermore, the bishop's motive for shunning Katie is necessarily suspect because of his anger at her decision not to marry him. When he begins courting her best friend, Mary, she (Mary) asks him to lift the harshest part of the shunning: forbidding anyone to be in contact with Katie. When he agrees to lift the speech ban, he confesses that he had done it because his heart "was filled with anger, wrongly so" (1998, p143-44).

In addition to the ways in which Lewis presents shunning as a problematic practice, she also underscores that adherence to the rules is more highly valued than empathizing with an individual's emotional difficulties, priorities that necessarily appear oppressive within the context of a genre that places a premium on feelings. When Katie tells her parents that "Ever since I was little, being Plain has been burdensome to me . . . More burdensome for me than most, it seems" (1997, 31), they respond by emphasizing her duty to suppress her doubts about her Amish identity. Because she has already taken the vow of baptism, and has thus publicly declared her decision to stay in the church, her expression of doubt is seen as particularly wrong. As her father tells her, "Plain is how the Lord God meant you to be. You ought to be ashamed, saying things such as that after bein' baptized . . . taking the kneeling vow and all" (1997, 31). In this exchange, Katie's father is more interested in seeing her conform to the expectations and beliefs

of the Amish church than in exploring her personal feelings about her choice. His “unemotional yet definitive” (1997, 31) mode of speaking highlights his rejection of her emotional anguish. Instead, he is entirely focused on following the rules and ensuring that his daughter does so, too.

Not only is Katie expected to suppress her doubts about her Amish identity, but she also must eschew behaviors that do not conform to the rules of the church, such as singing or listening to music other than hymns. In this case, her love of music prompts her disobedience because she is unable to stop herself from humming the tunes that she and her childhood love, Daniel Fisher, wrote together. When one of the bishop’s children reveals that Katie has been humming songs that she wrote, Katie’s father decides that the bishop—who is also her betrothed—must be informed of her disobedience. Uninterested in her explanations, he says, “I have no choice, daughter. I’ll be speakin’ to Bishop John first thing tomorrow” (1997, 96). Two powerful men primarily interested in enforcing her obedience thus regulate her behavior.

Ultimately, Lewis’s image of Amish traditions as regulated by rigidity elevates an evangelical Christian spirituality, and it is through this contrast that the genre’s central cultural work is performed. For a book that is advertised as focusing on Amish culture, there is a surprisingly rapid move away from the Amish plot, except as an opposing force that Katie flees in order to attain more fulfilling familial, romantic, and spiritual relationships. In that sense, it is also only tangentially a romance: Lewis’s trilogy is ultimately as much about Katie’s discovery of Christ and a gentler religion as it is about her romantic relationship with her childhood love, Daniel. This reading of Amish romances, in fact, is true to the ways in which, despite its widespread application, the “romance” label seems a misnomer to some readers and authors: as Lewis told Valerie Weaver-Zercher, “I’ve never thought of my books as being romance novels” (2013, xvi). Despite rejecting their baptism and the central tenets of Amish faith, Katie and Daniel find a way to renew their connection to the community by joining the Mennonites on the outskirts of the district where they grew up.

Speaking about Cindy Woodsmall’s novels, Eric Miller makes a point that also applies to Beverly Lewis’s depiction of Amish beliefs: “As the story unfolds, it’s clear that for Woodsmall, what Hannah needs is what her whole community needs: to embrace a freer faith, one more personal, spiritual, biblical. In short, they need to become evangelicals” (2011, 40). Lewis depicts the Amish as misguided in their religious beliefs and missing out on the opportunity to know God’s word. When the shunned Katie returns to visit her mother (“mam”), she sees her childhood community through the eyes of one who has “seen the light:”

The subject of her newfound joy came naturally, though Rebecca seemed mighty skeptical, hearing her daughter call herself anything but Amish. ‘Saved isn’t for us to know,’ mam argued.

Refusing to upset her mamma on this topic, she let Rebecca speak her mind, not interrupting. She could only hope and pray that in time, Mam would see the light of Jesus

in her shunned daughter's eyes and want it, too (1998, 255).

Although the bishop agrees to lift the speech ban in order to let Mary and others attempt to convince Katie to return and confess, it is equally useful for Katie as she works to evangelize her former community, although she has little luck at the outset. Far from convinced that she should adhere to the conventions of the plain community, she tells her mother that "following the Ordnung isn't what matters. Don't you see, being a follower of *Jesus* is what counts" (1998, 280).

Katie is not the only character in the community who expresses a view that the Amish faith is misguided. In the third novel, *The Reckoning*, Ella Mae Zook, the elderly wise woman of the community, reveals that many years earlier she discovered "the good news of Jesus Christ," but kept it to herself because she was afraid of being shunned (1998, 233). Felled by a stroke and close to death, she is overcome by guilt for not having shared her faith. As she tells Katie:

'I never told you about Jesus' [. . .] 'All these years I kept it to myself. Oh, I showed God's love to folk, sure, but I didn't say nothin' about the way He changed my life, forgave my sins . . . gave me joy.' She paused, her eyes on Katherine. 'Now I'm tellin' everybody I know. 'Course, the People think I'm Dummkoppf-clear off my rocker' (1998, 243).

Her fear of reprisals from the community kept her silent for many years, and this silence, the narrative implies, prevented her from fully living her life or from enlightening others. Even though she is on the point of death, those still faithful to the Amish tradition refuse to recognize her enlightenment as anything other than proof that she has lost her sanity.

The Shunning as Evangelical Gothic

Lewis thus presents a vision of the Amish faith as spiritually misguided, and it is through that vision that the novels can be read as tools of evangelism. This evangelization is also visible, at a narrative level, in the resonances between Amish-themed novels and Gothic romance. In this sense, Lewis's version of Amish culture works perfectly for a Gothic narrative: it creates a rigid order against which the characters can rebel, and it offers the ideal formula for romance because it creates a barrier between the lovers that is a key element in romantic fiction. This framework translates across genres, and mysteries such as Laura Bradford's *Hearse and Buggy* illustrate how Amish culture as a narrative hurdle is easily adapted for the detective fiction genre by creating a barrier between the detective (formerly Amish and now shunned) and his Amish suspects.

Situating a romance in the Amish community parallels the Gothic in multiple ways. First, because Old Order Amish communities eschew modern technology, Amish-themed romances are, effectively, set in an earlier period, a common element in Gothic romance dating back to Ann Radcliffe's *Mysteries of Udolpho*. Likewise, the Amish emphasis on rules and the *Ordnung*

creates the atmosphere of confinement that is common to Gothic novels such as *Jane Eyre*. Symbolically, the heroine can be said to be imprisoned in the Amish household because she wants to resist the rules, but cannot do so without being punished for it. Two other key Gothic figures are also found in *The Shunning*: the domineering father figure and the cruel lover. Katie's father refuses to listen to her doubts about following the *Ordnung* and enforces the shunning; likewise, the bishop is both in a position to punish her for transgressions that conflict with his desires and has a romantic interest in her. One of the few times that Lewis grants the reader the bishop's point of view is when he is thinking of Katie as his future wife:

As for himself, he'd admired Katie Lapp from the day he'd become aware she'd grown into a young woman. From the day she'd knelt before him there in Preacher Yoder's barn in front of all the People. [...] he'd not been prepared for the silky feel of her auburn hair beneath his fingers.

Waiting for Katie to reach marrying age had not been easy for a man whose children needed a mother and whose own bed had been long empty. More than three years he had waited. And soon, very soon, she would belong to him (1997, 97-98).

In this passage, the bishop's desire for Katie is inextricable from his position as bishop: he first discovered his sexual attraction to her when she knelt before him to receive baptism. The passage also emphasizes the age difference: he is already an established leader in the community when he realizes that she has come of age; likewise, he must wait for her to be old enough to join him in the "long empty" bed. Through the bishop's relationship with Katie, Lewis intertwines authority, sexual desire, and punishment, and Katie breaks away from the bishop's spiritual *and* sexual authority when she runs away.

Through the efforts to regulate Katie's romantic, material, and spiritual desires, Lewis sets up a quintessentially Gothic scenario: Katie has sinned by cherishing the musical memory of her first love, Dan, and by longing for "fancy" fabrics (and this desire for fancy fabrics reveals that she is not, in fact, Amish by birth, but one of the English). When Katie leaves the bishop at the altar, there is a clear parallel with *Jane Eyre*, who also flees a marriage that she realizes is wrong and finds herself alone and wandering. Although she does not ultimately return to the bishop (and the key difference is that Katie is not in love with her abandoned bridegroom, as Jane is with Rochester), she does live out the fantasy of discovering a birthright that makes her rich, complete with an enormous mansion and new family. When she must be punished by the church, it is her future husband who will be in charge of punishing her and making her obedient. Even within the context of a more traditional Christian worldview, the narrative invites readers to recognize the bishop's conflict of interest, especially when he later admits he was wrong to impose the speech ban.

In some ways, it is tempting to read the sexual dynamics in Amish-themed romances, and the ways those dynamics are expressed in Gothic terms, as engaging in a feminist critique. Tania

Modleski has identified the emergence in the 1940s of Gothic stories such as *Rebecca* and *Gaslight* as reflecting women's anxieties about having their newfound freedom taken away and "being forced back into the homes after the men returned from fighting to take over the jobs and assume control of their families" (2008 [1982], 12). Likewise, Amish romance novels in which women must contain their own desires in favor of community rules largely enforced by men also seem telling, especially considering the extent to which the protagonists rebel against the rules that confine them. While many of the frictions in the novels can be put down to the necessary rebellions of growing into adulthood, including the questioning of one's faith, the gender component is difficult to ignore. According to Modleski,

Gothics probe the deepest layers of the feminine unconscious, providing a way for women to work through profound psychic conflicts, especially ambivalence toward the significant people in their lives—mothers, fathers, lovers. And furthermore [...] the genre is used to explore these conflicts in relation to a society which systematically oppresses women. (2008 [1982], 75)

At the same time, the broader context of the trilogy's evangelical message suggests a more conservative attitude toward social issues. As Sally Gallagher points out in her study of *Evangelical Identity and Gendered Family Life*, while some evangelical groups are reframing the tradition of submission to the male head of household as a shared submission to God, evangelicals "often talk about family and gender in ways that seem baldly patriarchal" (2003, 5). Considering the variety of viewpoints among readers, and among evangelicals, it would be overreaching to read these novels as symbols of feminist rebellion. However, the ways in which the novels imagine Amish culture, and its alternatives, does, at one level, represent an imaginative working out of a gendered relationship to the faith. Within the context of evangelical Christianity, they ask, what does it mean to be obedient? To what extent do women have to suppress their own desires in relation to both worldly and spiritual demands for their obedience?

On the whole, rather than arguing for feminist subversion, the Gothic overtones in these novels serve the narrative by establishing the need for escape from what is presented as a tyrannical set of beliefs and social structure toward a less oppressive religious faith. In addition, the narrative draws on one other motif of the Gothic—doubling—to imaginatively play out multiple possibilities for this cultural narrative. Throughout the trilogy, characters and scenarios double, and sometimes even triple, one another: Katie has two mothers, her adopted mother and a birth mother; and Katie also has two father figures, the bishop and her adopted father. Perhaps most significantly she has three lovers—the bishop, the painter, and her true love, Daniel Fisher—and each one represents a radically different path that she could follow. Even Katie is doubled by Mary Stoltzfus, who lives out the marriage to the bishop and fidelity to the community that was destined for Katie. One function of such doubling is to imagine multiple resolutions and possibilities for the plot. When Katie imagines that she is not really Amish, another mother (her birth mother) appears just in time to assure her that she is meant for another life. Likewise, when Katie leaves her community because she cannot face marrying the bishop,

the reader is granted, though Mary Stoltzfus, a glimpse of what a more receptive courtship would have looked like. Thus, the doublings in the plot function to play out different imaginative possibilities for the central character.

The use of Amish culture as a Gothic motif is not limited to Lewis's novels, and appears elsewhere as well, including Wanda Brunstetter's *Plain and Fancy* (2006 [2002]). In this novel, Laura, a non-Amish woman, simultaneously falls in love both with Amish handicrafts and with an Amish man. When she decides to join the Amish church in order to get married, she finds it much more difficult to adjust than she had expected, and feels confined and trapped within an Amish household. For Laura, leaving her "fancy" life and living with the Amish is closely akin to being locked in a crumbling Gothic house against her will. When, after her marriage, she gives birth to a child with Down Syndrome and discovers that she is expected to stay home and take care of it, she flees her husband and the plain way of life to return to her parents. Although she ultimately returns to her husband (after a last-minute religious conversion experience), her marriage initially appears to her like a nightmare, and she feels oppressed by all aspects of Amish life. In these ways, Amish romances draw on Gothic tropes in ways that paint the Amish tradition as an oppressive force from which the heroine must escape—and, within the logic of the novels, escape takes the form of discovering a more evangelical relationship to faith. Thus, in this way, Lewis's Amish romance performs a kind of double rhetorical move: it sets up a celebration of Amish culture through its depiction of community and agrarian values, but it also paints it as an oppressive force that the protagonist must flee. This double move is what I have identified as the evangelical "work" that this trilogy performs—or attempts to perform. Whether or not that work is effective is a question for future research.

Conclusion

In examining the Gothic dimensions of Amish romance novels, this article has not tried to take a comprehensive survey of all novels in this category, but rather to read Lewis's foundational work as a text that other Amish romance novels are in conversation with. While, as is pointed out above, Beverly Lewis did not invent the Amish romance novel, I have treated *The Shunning* as a foundational text because its popularity established the commercial viability of the genre and inspired other authors to follow its lead. Subsequent authors have capitalized on the success of the Amish as a theme, but that does not mean that they have simply copied Lewis's formula. There is plenty of work left ahead in analyzing the ways in which later texts (even Lewis's) have adapted and played with the tropes that I have described above.

Likewise, in this article, I have not sought to account extensively for how readers respond to these novels, but rather focused on analyzing the texts. Much suggestive work is being done on reader response, most notably by Valerie Weaver-Zercher. A thorough accounting of the genre's reception needs to be attentive to the multiple audiences (Amish, evangelical, and others) who are attracted to these texts while avoiding overgeneralizations about groups of readers based on a single aspect of their identity. While it is crucial to examine readers' attitudes toward these

texts, at the same time, a full discussion of the genre and its social and cultural importance needs to analyze the texts themselves as well to understand what readers are responding to. As I have argued, Lewis's novels draw on Gothic motifs to emphasize an image of the Amish as "fallen" because of their rigid adherence to rules, a rigidity that can be salvaged through a turn toward evangelicalism. Without an understanding of what cultural work the novels are attempting, we miss a crucial element of this cultural phenomenon's significance.

Endnote

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