

## *Gothic Elements in Representations of a Pandemic: Borislav Pekic's Rabies*

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**Abstract.** The paper deals with the Gothic elements in the representation of a pandemic based on the 1983 novel *Besnilo* ('Rabies') by Serbian author Borislav Pekic. The authors start from the premise that the elements 'borrowed' from the Gothic genre play a key role in creating the main plot of the novel: a catastrophe caused by an extremely contagious and deadly man-manipulated version of the rabies virus. The theoretical framework is based on Fred Botting's (1995) and Jerrold E. Hogle's (2002) views of Gothic writing as a diffused mode that exceeds genres and categories and contributes its various elements to various literary forms. Furthermore, Gothic elements characteristic of Gothic science fiction, such as madness, monstrosity, the Mad Scientist, people meddling with nature with catastrophic consequences, the apocalyptic vision of human future and "the removal of man from his natural, living state and entry instead into a state of being neither completely human or monster, and neither fully alive or completely dead" (MacArthur 2015: 79) are traced in the novel and analysed in the context of literary representations of a pandemic. As Pekic's novel is a mixture of various genres and is often defined and described as a horror thriller novel, an attempt is made to offer a new reading that would consider its constituent Gothic elements against a backdrop of the deeply and inherently human drama of the everlasting struggle between good and evil. Thus, pandemics are represented as a kind of catalyst that exposes both deeply human and rational, and deeply inhuman and irrational, impulses, leaving the final outcome of that struggle uncertain.

**Keywords:** Gothic; horror; science fiction; pandemic; *Rabies*; Borislav Pekic

### Introduction

Recently, the global pandemic, a phenomenon that deeply marked our era, has affected our everyday routines, our way of living and our way of thinking and perceiving reality. It seems the entire world was caught unprepared for a global catastrophe of such epic proportions. However, taking a close look at the world of literature, the Gothic genre, and especially Gothic science fiction, reveals

that there have been many books, many authors who foresaw our present circumstances and provided us with these peculiar “guidebooks” to a global pandemic.

This paper is an attempt to consider a popular novel by a Serbian author from multiple perspectives: as a piece of Gothic science fiction, a book dealing with an epidemic/potential pandemic and a work of art. Our focus is on the Gothic elements and their use in the narrative structure of the novel. The main argument is that the author used certain elements of the Gothic genre, such as the tropes of the Mad Scientist, the Monster and the Gothic Body, to depict an outbreak of a dangerous disease that could potentially turn into a pandemic. Apocalyptic, biblical and dystopian overtones are emphasised by elements of horror that mask the archetypal story of the struggle between good and evil and make it ring more true and more in line with the state and the expectations of contemporary men.

### The Gothic and Its Limits

Since its beginnings in the eighteenth century, Gothic has proven to be a diverse category, undergoing various transformations, and at the same time influencing and being influenced by other literary forms and genres. This heterogeneity of the Gothic is the reason why many contemporary critics moved away from generic definitions and adopted a broader approach, viewing the Gothic as an amorphous, diffused or hybrid literary mode. In other words, most critics now recognise that the Gothic has continued to the present day, appearing in constantly evolving forms (Spooner and McEvoy 2007: 1). For instance, Fred Botting (1995) explains that the diffusion of Gothic elements makes the definition of a homogenous category difficult, and discloses Gothic writing as a mode that exceeds genre and categories. Moreover, Sage (2009: 149) mentions the decentring of the Gothic mode and its application by writers of various genres. Jerrold E. Hogle (2002) expresses a similar opinion, stating that the Gothic genre scattered its ingredients into various literary forms, such as, for example, short stories. Furthermore, Allan Lloyd-Smith (2004) states that the Gothic may include particular conventional features or that it can be produced in the mode of treatment, an atmosphere or mood. In the same manner, David Punter and Glennis Byron (2004: xviii) propose the view that the Gothic is more to do with particular moments, tropes and motifs that can be found throughout the modern Western literary tradition, instead of being a closed category. Thus, the result of Gothic’s potential for hybridisation has spawned various combinations of once distinctive genres. In other words, the Gothic mutates “across historical, national, and generic boundaries as it

reworks images drawn from different ages and places" (Smith 2007: 4). In Botting's (1995: 9) explanation of this process, certain stock features of Gothic fiction are diffused among the multiplicity of different genres which, in turn, transform and displace those stock features or tropes prompted by different cultural anxieties.

One of those hybrid genres is Gothic science fiction, which combines or blends certain characteristics of both the Gothic and science fiction. According to MacArthur, Gothic science fiction is a sub-genre of the Gothic that can be recognised by its interest in science, industry and technology "within a Gothic structure" (2015: 2). In other words, Gothic science fiction appropriates and transforms traditional Gothic tropes and combines them with certain themes and preoccupations of traditional science fiction. For example, Wasson and Alder (2011: 4–5) state that Gothic science fiction explores the darker functions of technology and urban environments in modern life, and generates narratives of human-created horror through unbridled science and technology, operating at the level of institution and state as much as the individual. It is precisely due to this imaginative exploration of anxieties and darker possibilities of modern science and technology that this subgenre carries the word 'Gothic' in its name. Furthermore, early science fiction tropes of time travel, genetic experimentation and alien invasion are intertwined with traditional Gothic tropes of the monstrous, the grotesque and the corporeal (Mousoutzanis 2011: 57–8). Thus, familiar Gothic figures of menace, destruction and violence emerge in the form of mad scientists, psychopaths, extra-terrestrials and a host of strange supernatural or naturally monstrous mutations (Botting 1995: 9). In addition to these observations, MacArthur (2015: 10–16) notes that Gothic science fiction is marked by a renewed interest in the traditional Gothic convention of restoration of order, relying on Gothic's traditional aesthetics of terror and excitement, dealing with Gothic's core theme of the desire to survive in the face of persecution or annihilation, and the fundamental struggle between good and evil.

## Gothic Tropes

Two of the most recurrent aesthetic elements that the Gothic relies on for its effects are horror and terror. Simply put, terror holds characters and readers in anxious suspense about threats to life, safety and sanity kept largely out of sight or in shadows, while horror confronts the characters with gross violence that has widely shocking consequences (Hogle 2002: 3). Consequently, horror becomes an aesthetic examination of human limits.

The character of the Mad Scientist is often a misguided villain in Gothic fiction – a Dr Faustus-like and Frankenstein-like literary figure pursuing his goals no matter what. His common traits are: arrogance, fanatical belief in his own righteousness, monomaniacal dedication to research that is supposed to help all of humankind and blindness to the consequences of his abuse of science (MacArthur 2015: 25–7). Different forms of madness are usually gendered in Gothic fiction, where males are driven to insanity by obsessive ambition or lust (Small 2009: 200). The character of the Mad Scientist is another example of a transformed trope from earlier Gothic villains who nevertheless retain the same preoccupation in some form of madness. Moreover, madness or insanity is a fundamental source of terror in Gothic fiction (Small 2009: 199). The devastating effects of the Mad Scientist's pursuit of forbidden knowledge often account for the apocalyptic end in (Gothic) science fiction (MacArthur 2015: 48). These apocalyptic overtones can be summed up as: "The theme of loss however is not simply limited to the physical decline of humankind; rather it encompasses the greater loss that is the death of all that man has achieved; all of the knowledge, all that makes him human." (MacArthur 2015: 50) In apocalyptic science fiction, humanity is very often wiped out by the plague or some other disease or by the abuse of science, weapons, etc. Alternatively, the remnants of the human species are left to deal with the aftermath of a global catastrophe, often resorting to selfishness, numbing fear, irrational and even uncivilised behaviour (MacArthur 2015: 52). Thus, apocalyptic fiction can often be viewed as a psychological study of individuals and groups and their respective responses to a pandemic or some other global disaster (MacArthur 2015: 55).

The theme of nature that has been meddled with is one of the central topics of Gothic science fiction (MacArthur 2015: 59). The diabolical villain of Gothic is replaced by scientists determined to dominate and manipulate nature (Wasson and Adler 2011: 3). Another common Gothic theme often found in science fiction and apocalyptic literature is the threat to the world as we know it – to its order, civilisation, laws, customs, everything man-made (MacArthur 2015: 76).

Monsters are also a common trope in Gothic literature. The monstrosity usually lies in the state between human and animal, a grey area between instinct and reason, but nonetheless emphasising that man is the ultimate monster (MacArthur 2015: 79). Monstrosity functions to define and construct "the political of the 'normal'" (Punter and Byron 2004: 263) through difference, pointing to those lines that must not be crossed. In other words, monsters, as representations of degeneration, emphasise "the horrible proximity between primitive or beastly natures and civilized, moral human characteristics"

(Botting 2009: 189–90). Moreover, the presentation of an animal, bodily and sexual nature that humans can never cast off, points to a view of human nature as unstable, prone to degeneration, with physical corruption a sign of spiritual or moral decline (Botting 2009: 189). Gothic fiction repeatedly emphasises the mechanisms of monster production, and reveals precisely how the other is constructed and positioned as both alien and inferior (Punter and Byron 2004: 264). The notion of the Gothic body is closely connected to this concept. In both Gothic and Gothic science fiction, common theme is the sanctity of body boundaries (Wasson and Alder 2011: 8). The Gothic body is often represented as in pain, violent, out of control, usually an ugly and a grotesque whole constituted of many parts (Bruhm 2009: 128). Otherness and monstrosity, then, in their literal and symbolic forms, conjoin Gothic and science fiction (Wasson and Alder 2011: 5).

One of the most effective objects of horror is a body in the process of decomposition. What Botting names “the Thing” is a “complete decomposition from a solid body to a vile, oozing mass”, that is vaguely discernible as human (2009: 191). This image is so horrifying because it represents the decay of a being’s constituent elements, causing uncertainty of bodily identity and erasing all differences in a process of general corruption (Botting 2009: 191). As a result, “the Thing” exceeds the powers of reason and understanding, refuses the symbolic boundaries that shape everyday reality, and thus outlines “the limits of the human, limits that are moral and emotional, in the evocation of horror” (Botting 2009: 192). In other words, horror is all-consuming because it introduces to the human mind something that is ineffable or excluded from it. In turn, what is ineffable or excluded challenges and threatens that very same mind, and threatens its disintegration or annihilation. In fact, horror’s presentation of what in the human remains indefinable, ineffable or even essential, points to that which is “most resistant to culture, rationality, morality and classification” (Botting 2009: 192). Thus, horror becomes an aesthetic category that points to the limits of human minds and human societies.

Another common Gothic motif is that of lycanthropy, i.e. literal or metaphorical transformation of humans into animals, most commonly wolves, both as a “medical condition, a morbid delusion” and the belief that the change has taken place (Rath 2009: 198–199). This conjunction of human and animal characteristics evokes horror because it resists stable symbolisation and discomposes what should be a definite and absolute distinction (Botting 2009: 190). Due to its disruption of boundaries, animalism threatens the security of human identity and is often attributed to a diabolical cause (Botting 2009: 190).

Many of these tropes and motifs are used in Pekic’s novel to describe the situation of an impending global pandemic, as will be discussed further.

*Rabies (Besnilo)*

Pekic's novel *Besnilo (Rabies)* published in 1983 is described as a genre novel by its author: it is an intersection of various genres, modes and elements that includes elements of thriller, horror, apocalyptic fiction, even detective novels. We argue that it uses the interplay of various Gothic elements, tropes and motifs to convey the horrific effects of an epidemic and a potential threat of a global pandemic. The two most prominent Gothic elements the novel encompasses are its traditional aesthetic of horror and a fundamental struggle between good and evil.

The story is set at Heathrow Airport, during the busiest hours, against the backdrop of the Cold War and revolves around a few major characters: doctors, a writer, policemen and military personnel, a grey-haired man and a dog. A genetically engineered mutant rhabdovirus finds its way to the airport: its incubation period is extremely short and a mortal outcome is inevitable; it is airborne and could possibly destroy the entire human civilisation if uncontained. The airport soon becomes a quarantine and a microcosm representing all of humankind: people of all origins, statuses, professions, shapes and interests find themselves milling around trying to survive – just like in real life. Heathrow Airport is also a setting for individual character's stories and dramas: a murder and a murder investigation, a sensitive diplomatic mission and defection, a terrorist attack, an unexpected love story causing mass ethnic conflicts, a doctor's moral dilemma between medical ethics and love for his family, a writer doing research for his book, a mysterious old man on a mission to save the world, a rigid police major with a wish for unlimited power and many more whose fates are intertwined and bound forever by the fact that they found themselves at Heathrow at the moment of the virus outbreak.

People's behaviour and reactions to their situation: shock, disbelief, doubt, anger, aggression, selfishness, selflessness, worry, conspiracy theories, acceptance and fury can be compared to a realistic pandemic scenario. An important quality of the book is the multiple perspective of the narrator. Through constant shifts in point of view we are able to see and experience the horror of the situation from various perspectives, whereas numerous Gothic tropes serve the purpose of recreating a potential global pandemic situation. The narrative structure of the novel resembles that of a detective story as the reader slowly pieces together the puzzle of all the characters, events and their causality until the final realisation that the fates of everyone at Heathrow were sealed once the plane from Rome carrying a smuggled dog named Sharon landed. The doctors and the airport personnel whose jobs are to protect and serve are faced with a seemingly impossible choice: to contain the virus by sealing the terminal and effectively condemning thousands of people who found themselves there

to death, or to allow the virus to spread further to London and endanger the whole world. Soon, death sentences are passed to all those showing symptoms of rabies: they are shot on the spot, literally like mad dogs. The dramatic irony that inhumanity is necessary to protect humanity is at the heart of the dramatic tension of the novel, along with the process of human transformation into animals as the main motif.

### Gothic Tropes in the Novel

Apart from the rhabdovirus, the main villain of the novel is a scientist, Siegfried Stadler, known under the aliases Professor Frederick Lieberman, Lohman, and 'Messiah'. He made the virus in an attempt to create a super-species of humans that would integrate the best human and animal features. At the beginning of the novel, Lieberman is introduced as a renowned albeit mysterious professor with somewhat dubious genetic research, currently presumed dead. However, as the novel progresses it becomes obvious that the 'professor' is a former Nazi involved in horrendous experimentation on humans and responsible for thousands of deaths at Heathrow, but also hundreds of deaths in Auschwitz. The trope of the Mad Scientist is invoked: Stadler/Lieberman is convinced that he is entitled to do any research, that there should not be any ethical considerations. His belief that "WHAT CAN BE DONE HAS TO BE DONE" (Pekic 1985: 453) is the Mad Scientist motto, a Faustian thirst for the ultimate knowledge and man's dominance over nature. Stadler's madness is not apparent or overtly symptomatic: it lies in the cold rationality with which he treats all of his human victims and the aftermath of his research. As the character of the writer Daniel Leverquin notices, for Stadler/Lieberman, the entire human race is inferior, his mission is to create a superhuman who would realise what he believes could be the full potential of the species. In the ironic twist at the end of the novel, his anti-rabies serum turns people into superhumans who only feel hatred and an impulse for destruction and want to kill each other off. Ironically, Stadler/Lieberman's super-serum fails because the super-human race born of genetic engineering is guided solely by an impulse for destruction making procreation and life impossible. A man perfected with animal genes turns out to be deprived of compassion, reason, weakness, anything that actually makes people human. Therefore, it is no wonder that the ultimate scene is a final stand-off between a super-man and a super-woman holding an axe and a spear ready to kill each other. It is highly ironic that the alleged super-race resorts to primitive tools and self-destruction instead of creating and building a new, better world. In the apocalyptic vision, man's search for dominance over nature brings him self-destruction.

Apart from the (ab)use of science, another important characteristic of the novel are its biblical overtones. As already mentioned the Mad Scientist is nicknamed Messiah, and his disciples the Evangelists, a group of doctors and researchers most of whom choose medical practice and helping people instead of following their leader. Furthermore, Stadler/Lieberman's last residence and the origin of the virus is Harmageddon, the place of the final battle between God and Satan. The forces of evil are epitomised in Stadler/Lieberman, whereas the forces of good are represented by the doctors who try to help people and a lonely grey-haired man who insists on everyone calling him Gabriel. Gabriel, a mysterious man, is the only one immune to the disease and the only one who realises that the real source of the virus is the dog named Sharon smuggled on a flight from Rome. What is more, he is the only character who resists all selfish and egotistical impulses and acts only for the benefit of others – in fact this is what makes him resistant to genetically induced rabies. Gabriel moves around Heathrow amidst the raging contagion, unafraid, unprotected, using archaic Biblical language, looking like a confused homeless person. He occasionally faints and has visions in which he sees and feels the coldness, the "Shadow", which he is compelled to follow and destroy. It is unclear whether he has a vision of his past life or is simply deranged, but he seems to remember the great European plague and his belonging to an order which propagated self-punishment as a means of redemption in the midst of death. The reader is left uncertain whether Gabriel is merely a madman or the figure of the

Archangel Gabriel named guardian angel by Christ himself who is here to send the Beast back into the primordial abyss. (Pekic 1985: 536)

Writer Daniel Leverquin is certain that he is the Angel Gabriel sent to save the world and leaves his account of events at Heathrow with a mysterious old man. Gabriel and Sharon are the only two survivors of the rabies outbreak at Heathrow: both of them go towards London after the airport is bombed and destroyed, Sharon following the Lucifer star, the morning star, and Gabriel being taken to a mental asylum as he appears to not have any recollection of previous events. The narrator of the story is, however, convinced that he is the one in charge of taking care of mankind as he soon disappears from the institution signalling that the world is in trouble once again. Thus, the Gothic theme of the fundamental struggle between good and evil is incorporated into the narrative structure of the novel and combined with the motif of the nature–science dichotomy.

Nature that has been meddled with, and the theme of an outbreak of genetically modified rabies, provide a suitable context for an interplay of Gothic

tropes related to monstrosity, lycanthropy and the body. The most visually horrifying images in the novel are the descriptions of people turned into animals by the rhabdovirus. The motif of lycanthropy is introduced early on in the novel when the aeroplane arriving from Rome carrying the first infected passengers is described as

a northern wolf with a pointy muzzle covered in foam. (Pekic 1985: 48)

The contrast between an image of a rabid dog (there are posters throughout Heathrow warning passengers of rabies) and a cute puppy named Sharon that no-one suspects of being the culprit for the contagion, is reflected in the descriptions of infected patients. What is more, the fact that “man’s best friend” and one of the most beloved pets can quickly turn into an extremely dangerous wild beast and that the process is virtually the same in humans is one of the central dramatic tenets of the novel. Symptoms of the HMRR (Heathrow Mutant Rhabdovirus Rabies) include: unusual behaviour, hypersensitivity to light, rigidity followed by tremor and uncontrollable convulsive motions, inclinations to bite, bark and howl, a feeling of extreme happiness and exaltation after a violent episode (unusual and unrecorded in regular rabies), and finally, a comatose state with the patient foaming at the mouth. The incubation period is extremely short and the illness progresses very quickly (1.5–2 hours after exposure). Once the virus gets to the central nervous system, death is inevitable.

At one point, the main criterion for the execution of rabid patients becomes unusual, suspect behaviour. When one of the doctors notes that any normal behaviour is unusual under the circumstances, he is executed for unusual behaviour by Major Lawford, nicknamed ‘Ironheel’, the Chief of Airport Security, a military official who deals with everything in a resolute manner, without much concern for nuance or doubt. We follow Lawford’s transition from a man into a monster as his methods become more and more ruthless. Once he takes over the airport, he introduces executions as the main means of resolving the crisis and even seriously considers concentration camp methods such as mass murder under the pretext of showering to deal with potentially infected people. His transition from a competent and rational soldier to a beast is quickened by his sense of duty and authority until the symptoms of rabies become obvious during a television broadcast when he starts howling in front of cameras and is immediately neutralised. Lawford keeps a picture of his favourite dog in his office, underlying the symbolism of the dog: on one hand, a symbol of friendship and companionship, and on the other, if meddled with, a symbol of irrational primal fear of the unknown, a true horror of the soul that fuels the

killer instinct. Lawford thus falls victim to rabies even before he is infected because he fails to apply basic human instincts and prerogatives, which makes his character a very poignant example of a monster.

Many other characters whose stories we follow through the novel exhibit this duality of nature: the dark animal side is brought to the surface by the virus, literally and metaphorically. Those infected with rabies describe their state as:

I feel strange...like something is about to happen, something terrifying... something I can't stop, even though it concerns me. (Pekic 1985: 256)

That nameless and inexplicable horror motivates many of them to become rabid and leads to their inevitable deaths. However, the known fear and horror of the disease also turns uninfected people into beasts. Such is the case of Dr Matthew Laverick, one of the "Evangelists" who left the original group and opened private practice and at the beginning of the novel we find him as Sir Matthew Laverick, a rich man whom the outbreak caught in the middle of his honeymoon. We follow his transition to monstrosity through his hopeless attempts to protect his pregnant wife. Misguided by self-interest and selfishness, Laverick breaks his Hippocratic Oath and refuses to join the medical team at the airport and goes as far as committing a murder in order to secure safety for his wife. However, in an ironic twist, Laverick brings his wife to what seems to be an abandoned plane on a runway believing she would be safe there. It turns out the plane is full of rabid zombie-like anesthetized patients and we realize that this is exactly what Laverick's selfishness turned him into. Ultimately, he even abandons his pregnant wife and even resorts to rabid behavior and biting people so that other rabid patients would not kill him. His "unpardonable sin" is valuing his own life more than other people's lives and his story is among the most tragic ones as he dies uninfected by virus but completely deprived of his human qualities.

As the airport further sinks into chaos, 250,000 people are quarantined, and there are 20,000 sick and 5,000 dead at one point. Ultimately, all human connections fail, violence is omnipresent, ethnic conflicts rage even under these circumstances, there is a feeling of constant panic among the sick as well as among the healthy and every man and woman feels alone and fights alone for him/herself. As doctor Hamilton notices:

rabies is the equalizer, no traditional divisions based on skin color, race, class, gender – the only division is between healthy and sick – although there is no real division the sick look healthy and the healthy are potentially sick. (Pekic 1985: 399)

While Professor Lieberman is working on what is believed to be an anti-rabies serum, those deemed indispensable are evacuated into the control tower leaving everyone else to die of rabies or rabid patients. In an apocalyptic scene, we see the control tower surrounded by human bodies, described as Gothic bodies, some of them dead foaming at the mouth, some of them convulsing from the disease, some of them desperately trying to find safety either from the bullet or the light. Human behaviour seems unthinkable, ineffable and inexplicable by normal standards: a terrible cross between a man and an animal slowly takes over the airport denying and destroying all rational human effort. It becomes terrifyingly obvious what humankind will turn into unless the contagion is stopped: the entire civilisation will be wiped out. In the end, a primal image of a naked man and a naked woman (doctors who tested the serum), almost transformed into animals by rabies, fighting each other to the death represents an inverted primal image from the Bible and the apocalyptic ending of the novel, which is inevitable when anger, hatred and a killer instinct replace love, mercy and companionship/fellowship.

As the Cold War opponents realise that it is necessary to join forces in order to avoid a global catastrophe, Heathrow is wiped from the face of the Earth by missiles named the Lightning of God. The irony is complete: a failed Faustian experiment is extinguished by the man-made weapons carrying the name of God; an effort to create a superior race turns into a de-evolution process in which people born as humans die as dogs. The dystopian ending is also a warning of what the world may turn into if people are deprived of their more humane characteristics and artificially pushed into a struggle for the survival of the fittest abusing both nature and science.

## Conclusion

The fictional story of the Heathrow disaster and a potential apocalypse scenario is made more remarkable and more dramatic by the use of Gothic tropes and motifs. Perhaps ironically, the elements belonging to Gothic science fiction make the story ring true and sound more convincing. Pekic's use of the tropes of the Mad Scientist, the Monster, the Gothic Body, etc., can be understood if the novel is read as a piece of Gothic science fiction. This mode is characterised by interest in the urban environment, science and the representation of human-induced horror. Apart from being highly relatable to the present situation, faced by the entire world, a deadly, man-made virus threatening to destroy human civilisation is also an excellent setting for the primordial battle of good and evil. This battle in the novel exposes the weaknesses of contemporary man, his selfishness, his vanity, his hubris, his futile efforts to dominate and 'improve'

nature. A man turned into a rabid dog is a powerful metaphor and a warning against the abuse of science and the abuse of inherently human qualities.

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