

THE DARK COVERT OF THE MIND: WACOUSTA

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A comparison between Major John Richardson's *Wacousta* (1832) and the English Gothic novel *Frankenstein* (1818) by Mary Shelley proves fruitful, for there are several interesting similarities between *Wacousta* and the unnamed creature created by Dr. Frankenstein. Like this monster, *Wacousta* is "repulsive" in appearance and of "gigantic stature" (p. 376), and he possesses superhuman strength and speed (as he demonstrates, for example, when he escapes from the midst of the garrison with Clara in his arms). The appearance of *Wacousta's* face at the window of a cabin terrifying those within echoes a similar scene in *Frankenstein*. Both Frankenstein's Creature and *Wacousta* are initially presented to the reader from an external point of view, from which they appear as malicious, depraved enemies of mankind. But both are, later in their respective novels, permitted to tell their own stories and are hence humanized. In these stories, both are seen as initially benevolent. The monster becomes evil because of his rejection by society and, especially, by his creator, Frankenstein. Similarly *Wacousta* becomes evil as a result of the treachery of Colonel de Haldimar, who thus becomes, in a sense, the "creator" of the "monster" *Wacousta* seen in the novel. *Wacousta*, like Dr. Frankenstein's monster, learns "that man is the only enemy of man upon earth" (p. 393). Both live to be avenged on their creators; and both take this revenge indirectly — that is, by killing not their creators but those they love: in the monster's case Frankenstein's brother William, his wife Elizabeth, and his friends Justin and Clerval; and in *Wacousta's* case Colonel de Haldimar's children Charles and Clara.

As Clara Thomas observes, *Wacousta*, like other Gothic novels, "suggests far deeper implications than Richardson consciously gave it, puzzling connections with every man's hidden springs of curiosity, wonder and fear."² The external features can be interpreted as symbolically presenting psychological, even subconscious, truths. John Moss explicates some of these features with some conviction, including *Wacousta's* identity crisis and the perhaps "bizarre contention" (his own phrase) that the relationship of Charles de Haldimar, Clara de Haldimar, and Sir Everard Valletort shows "incipient incest, homosexuality, and impotence";³ and Margot Northey points to the implied lesbianism of Clara and Madeline's

¹Major Richardson, *Wacousta: A Tale of the Pontiac Conspiracy* (Toronto: The Musson Book Company Limited, n.d.), p. 376. All further references are to this edition and are given in parentheses in the text.

²Clara Thomas, *Our Nature — Our Voices* (Toronto: new press, 1972), p. 23.

³John Moss, *Patterns of Isolation* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1974), pp. 44-50.

relationship.⁴ Extending the *Frankenstein* parallel reveals further psychological symbolism in *Wacousta*. Frankenstein, as the creator and then rejecter of the monster, must assume much of the responsibility for his evil. A strange love-hate relationship persists between the two, so that when Frankenstein dies, the monster has no more reason to live; he can in fact be seen as the alter-ego, the shadow, the evil side of Frankenstein. Wacousta stands in a similar relationship to Colonel de Haldimar, and when Wacousta dies, de Haldimar's death soon follows. Wacousta is, in one sense, an aspect of de Haldimar, his "creator," as the monster is of Frankenstein. In fact, at the beginning of the novel the Colonel is the only one who sees Wacousta in the fort, and he fears that the other officers may "consider it [the appearance of Wacousta] as emanating from an imagination disturbed by sleep, rather than caused by the actual presence of one endowed like themselves with the faculties of speech and motion" (p. 18). In the context of these psychological-symbolic parallels with the Frankenstein story, a few other observations on the novel are in order.

In his *Anatomy of Criticism* Northrop Frye remarks that "it is in the romance that we find Jung's libido, anima, and shadow reflected in the hero, heroine, and villain respectively."⁵ This comment, with a slight variation, is applicable to *Wacousta*. For the cool, controlled front that Colonel de Haldimar presents to his men can be seen in Jungian terms as the "persona" aspect of his personality. The continuing violent conflict of persona and shadow (Wacousta) prevents the achieving of any Jungian self-individuation in this book. The "anima" figure for both the "persona" Colonel de Haldimar and the "shadow" Wacousta is Clara de Beverley; Wacousta's identifying her with her daughter Clara de Haldimar fits the Jungian notion that the anima is a composite figure. *Wacousta*, then, supports Robert Kroetsch's claim, at least regarding Canadian literature, that "Canadian writing tends to be Jungian, whereas American writing tends to be Freudian."⁶

Douglas Jones' argument in *Butterfly on Rock* that in Canadian literature the garrison serves as a fitting symbol of the rationally ordered aspect of the mind that tries to resist the encroachments of the violent and irrational, which is represented and embodied in the wilderness and its Indian inhabitants, also applies well to *Wacousta*. The violence in the novel breaks out for the most part when the occupants of the garrison leave its security to make forays into the wilderness, though occasionally it can break out within the garrison itself, as Wacousta's presence there at the beginning of the novel shows. Jones further argues that the wilderness "is associated with the most vital elements in the lives of the characters"⁷ and that "the only effective defence for a garrison culture is to abandon defence, to let down the walls and let the

⁴Margot Northey, *The Haunted Wilderness* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1976), p. 21.

⁵Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957), p. 304.

⁶Robert Kroetsch, "The Canadian Writer and the American Literary Tradition," *The English Quarterly*, 4, No. 2 (Summer 1971), 47.

⁷Douglas Jones, *Butterfly on Rock* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1970), p. 6.

wilderness in, even to the wolves."⁸ But a potential symbol for such a meeting of wilderness and garrison in this novel, the bridge connecting the two, becomes, rather, a symbol of their continuing opposition. On the social level, the bridge represents, as Northey notes, the "precarious footing" of Canadian frontier society, for which "European ways seemed patently unsuitable and inadequate, and yet native primitivism presented a terrifying alternative."⁹ Similarly, on the psychological level, it represents the continuing gap between rationality and irrationality, self and shadow. In this regard, then, Jones' argument does not fit this book, and it is perhaps not strange that he doesn't mention *Wacousta* in *Butterfly on Rock*. For here no essential integration, social or psychological, is achieved, and the final impression is of Gothic gloom, rather than of such muted optimism as Jones describes.

The historical material Richardson drew on with its savage Indian warfare enabled him to follow the first American Gothic novelist Charles Brockden Brown's lead in substituting an Indian for a nobleman or monk as Gothic Villain. But Richardson gives this substitution, in addition, a particularly Canadian twist. For *Wacousta* is not really an Indian, but an Englishman, masquerading as an Indian to enable himself to get revenge. Moreover, before becoming an Indian he first served as a soldier in Montcalm's army at the battle of the Plains of Abraham and is frequently referred to as "the warrior of the Fleur de Lis." In this mixture of nationalities, Richardson embodies the Canadian position: torn between American and English features, with French added to further complicate the mosaic. This ethnic confusion, the novel prophesies, makes very unlikely any integration of the national psyche.

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⁸Jones, p. 8.

⁹Northey, p. 25.