Keeping It in the Family: Incest and the Female Gothic Plot in du Maurier and Murdoch

Avril Horner and Sue Zlosnik

From Walpole’s *The Castle of Otranto* (1764) to the present day, incest has repeatedly featured as a motif in Gothic fiction. This is hardly surprising because in Gothic novels the family is frequently represented as harbouring dangers, its structures at one and the same time regulating and focusing desire. Female sexuality is habitually the contested space in the family (both its control and exploitation) and in the Gothic plot young women frequently find themselves particularly at risk from the predatory attentions of tyrannical fathers, father surrogates or, indeed, rapacious siblings. James Twitchell suggests in his 1987 book *Forbidden Partners: The Incest Taboo in Modern Culture* that the prohibition of incest is the most defining trait of the human family and that ‘if we want to understand the dynamics of the modern family we will have to study the unfolding of this trait in the nineteenth century as the modern nuclear family takes shape’. It does not escape Twitchell’s attention that Gothic fiction in this period has a recurrent tale to tell: ‘If the Gothic tells us anything it is what “too close for comfort” really means.’ Feminist scholarship has played a significant role both in establishing Gothic studies and in providing detailed historical and discursive contextualisation for changing representations of incest in literature. Caroline Gonda’s book *Reading Daughters’ Fictions*, for example, examines the nature of representations of the father–daughter bond in the period between 1709 and 1834, beginning with the observation that expressions of excessive affection for a daughter were in the eighteenth century ‘not merely expressible without disquiet but in some quarters de rigueur’. Building on Gonda’s work, Julie Shaffer argues that in the fiction of...
familialization is made problematic in quite a different way at points, for it overlaps with the threat of incest, everywhere a possibility in Gothic novels, themselves closely related to the sentimental novel, the two linked through their reliance on suffering victims with whom the audience can sympathize as proof or practice of its own moral sensibility.4

This essay will consider representations of incest in the fiction of two very different but roughly contemporary twentieth-century women writers who, while not always identified as Gothic novelists, made inventive use of Gothic conventions and themes. Daphne du Maurier (1907–89) and Iris Murdoch (1919–99) seem an unlikely pairing: the best-selling middlebrow author set alongside the younger cerebral literary novelist noted for exploring philosophical problems in her novels. Both represent incest in their fiction but, as we shall argue, how they do this and what it signifies differ; in particular, it is the spectre of incest’s female victims that haunts du Maurier’s work whereas Murdoch appears to use the incest motif in a much more self-conscious manner, its relationship to female victimhood appearing more complex. For both, however, incest as a trope is a powerful presence. We shall be considering representations from each of the writers of both father–daughter incest and incestuous desire between siblings. Twitchell suggests that ‘parental incest is an act so different in motivation and consequence that it may deserve a separate name and category’.5 It is thus perhaps not surprising to find that, despite their differences, both du Maurier and Murdoch represent parental incest as particularly horrifying and that both use Gothic effects to suggest the threatening nature of such a relationship.

In the case of du Maurier, it was the clear delineation of family relationships and what they might mean for her own sense of self that presented a problem, as autobiographical writings not made public until later in her life indicate. In 1977 at the age of 70, she published a volume entitled Myself When Young, a memoir based on diaries kept from childhood until her late 20s. In this work, the figures of her actor father (Gerald du Maurier, referred to as D.) and her writer and artist grandfather (George du Maurier) are prominent, their artistic legacy contrasted with the dullness she associated with her mother’s family. Du Maurier’s relationship with her father appears to have been particularly complex. In Gerald: A Portrait (published in 1934 shortly after his