“Heathens! Bloody Heathens!”

Postcolonial Gothic in *The Wicker Man*

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Audiences accustomed to typically garish UK horror movies such as Piers Haggard’s *Blood on Satan’s Claw* (1971) may have overlooked the more quietly disturbing film *The Wicker Man* (dir. Robin Hardy) on its release in 1973. Yet, the film eventually achieved cult status and in 1999 featured in the BFI 100—a selection of the most influential twentieth century British films (BFI 100). *The Wicker Man*, like the Gothic, is not reducible to horror alone, and as BFI contributor James Donohue puts it, is “a genre misfit, equally resembling a detective thriller, a religious allegory, even a musical” (par. 1). *Sunday Times Scotland* journalist Allan Brown, in his examination of the film’s production, states that in contrast to formulaic horror films that pit good against evil, *The Wicker Man* merely portrays an encounter between different belief systems (69). Hardy’s film does not explicitly state which system is morally superior.

Investigating the disappearance of a child, police officer Sergeant Howie travels to the remote Scottish island of Summerisle, a pagan community whose religious and moral practices are very much at odds with his puritanical Christianity. Summerisle is not simply an undiscovered oasis of heathendom—the inhabitants have renounced Christianity and turned back to their ancestral religion. In the course of his investigation, Howie finds himself confounded at every step by the islanders’ irrational, immoral, and downright blasphemous assertions. The film concludes with Howie’s sacrificial burning in a gigantic human figure woven from willow branches: the eponymous wicker man (Fig. 1).

*Fig. 1. Howie’s first view of the wicker man in which he will be burnt as a sacrifice. Screen capture from The Wicker Man, Extended Version DVD (Hardy). [image redacted].*
“Heathens! Bloody heathens!” Howie’s exclamation of shock and revulsion when he learns that human sacrifice persists in the British Isles is entirely reasonable, and yet revealing of his ethnocentric viewpoint. As Donald Mcleod, a contributor to a recent conference on the film\(^1\) notes, “surely there was good reason to sacrifice him in the minds of the islanders” (78). Sergeant Howie, a representative of British law (and unofficially, of its dominant religion) arrives as a colonial power, yet the community’s situation is arguably postcolonial. Whilst nominally within the United Kingdom, the island has its own aristocratic leader, and belief systems that confront what John McLeod calls in his introduction to postcolonialism “colonial ways of knowing.” McLeod suggests that representations of truth and reality as defined by a dominant power often persist even after independence—postcolonialism is in part the challenging of such discourses by those formerly colonized (32–3). In the context of the film, we can think of the progressive disclosure of Summerisle’s culture and beliefs by its inhabitants as a similar response to Howie’s mainland ethos.

The bizarre, barbaric, and terrifying Other that Howie encounters epitomizes the Gothic horror described by Chris Baldick as “the bugbears of a discarded mythology” (xiv). Lord Summerisle’s feudal rule, the islanders’ polytheistic pre-Christian fertility rites, and the repurposing of the ruined church’s graveyard for pagan use astound and disgust the visitor from the mainland precisely because he considers such practices backward and uncivilized. Howie voices his suspicions concerning the missing child to Lord Summerisle stating “I think Rowan Morrison was murdered under circumstances of pagan barbarity which I can scarcely bring myself to believe as taking place in the twentieth century.” Hughes and Smith mention that colonizing and colonized cultures have often provided subject matter for the Gothic genre, yet writers of Gothic fiction have also gone beyond the horror of the exotic to examine the effects of such meetings

There is a sense, though, in which the Gothic is, and has always been, post-colonial, and this is where, in the Gothic text, disruption accelerates into change, where the colonial encounter—or the encounter which may be read or interpreted through the colonial filter—proves a catalyst to corrupt, to confuse or to redefine the boundaries of power, knowledge and ownership. (1)

What then, does *The Wicker Man* as a Gothic narrative tell us about colonialism? If the film blurs distinctions between good and evil, clearly demarcated in the majority of horror films, is it similarly obscuring boundaries between the colonizer and the colonized? I suggest that the film questions these and other dualities in a manner that is characteristically postmodern and Gothic.

Throughout the film, we explore the community of Summerisle exclusively from Howie’s perspective as he investigates the alleged crime. Donald Mcleod describes this process as a sort of ethnocentric anthropology (70)—Howie is unable or unwilling to understand the pagan society that he has intruded upon

[Howie] blatantly represents the mainstream mainland establishment and society that will not tolerate deviance from its norms, interests and status quo. Cultural relativity, the ability to perceive the intrinsic worldview of another culture and to accept different ‘ways of

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1 *The Wicker Man: Rituals, Readings and Reactions* was held at the University of Glasgow, UK on July 14–15, 2003. Both cited books edited by Franks et al. and Murray et al. collect papers presented at this event.
seeing’ and behaving, so important to much of anthropology, does not form part of Howie’s repertoire. (76)

The sergeant’s intolerance is particularly apparent when he interrupts a lesson at the island’s school:

MISS ROSE (to schoolchildren): It is the image of the penis which is venerated in religions such as ours as symbolizing the generative force in nature.

HOWIE: Miss, you can be quite sure that I shall report this to the proper authorities. Everywhere I go on this island it seems to me I find degeneracy—there is brawling in bars, there is indecency in public places, and there is corruption of the young—and now I see it all stems from here: it stems from the filth taught here in this very schoolroom.

Howie then carelessly erases the notes on the blackboard (concerning the magical properties of various stones) in order to write up the missing girl’s name, much as the colonizer intentionally or unintentionally wipes away indigenous cultural knowledge. Soon afterwards, furious at the desecration of the church grounds he perceives, Howie furnishes a cross from a Summerisle apple crate and places it reverently on a grave, apparently reclaiming the church for Christianity (Fig. 2).

Fig. 2. Summerisle’s ruined churchyard. Behind Howie, a woman holds an egg whilst nursing a baby, recalling the islanders’ belief in reincarnation as opposed to Christian resurrection. Screen capture from The Wicker Man, Extended Version DVD (Hardy). [Image redacted].

Christian and pagan sensibilities confront one another explicitly in the key exchanges between Howie and Lord Summerisle. Conveyed to the imposing island castle by horse and carriage in marked contrast to his ultra-modern arrival by seaplane, the police officer learns something of Summerisle’s modern history. The islanders subsisted in poverty due to the harsh and barren environment until Lord Summerisle’s grandfather, a “free-thinking Victorian agronomist,” purchased the land in order to experiment with new strains of fruit that he believed would flourish in a climate warmed by the Gulf Stream. In order to enlist the native population in this labour, he sought to “give them back their old gods”, reviving the island’s pre-Christian religion. A successful harvest confirmed the efficacy of the indigenous faith, and as Lord Summerisle relates, his father continued the religious revival “through love”:

LORD SUMMERISLE: He brought me up the same way. To reverence the music and the drama and the rituals of the old gods. To love nature, and to fear it, and to rely on it, and to appease it when necessary. He brought me up …

HOWIE: He brought you up to be a pagan!

LORD SUMMERISLE: A heathen conceivably, but not, I hope, an unenlightened one.

HOWIE: Lord Summerisle, I am interested in one thing—the law. And I must remind you sir, that despite everything you’ve said, you are the subject of a Christian country.
It is possible to read Lord Summerisle’s words as a postcolonial reassertion of the islanders’ indigenous beliefs despite his grandfather’s somewhat questionable motives for reintroducing the religion. Lord Summerisle, and possibly his father, are native islanders despite their mainland heritage, which in turn raises questions concerning immigrants’ national and cultural identity and further complicates consideration of the community’s postcolonialism. Can colonists’ descendants respond legitimately to what is, at least in part, their ancestral culture? Lord Summerisle’s insistence that he is an “enlightened heathen” rather than a pagan is also interesting. The Summerislanders had converted to Christianity, but subsequently rejected it—they are not ignorant of the dominant culture. Howie, though, remains immovable in his assertion that Summerisle is subject to both the law and Christianity.

In the film’s final unforgettable scenes, Howie realizes that Lord Summerisle and the community engineered the missing child story and the very course of his investigation to entrap him as a human sacrifice. According to the Summerisle mythos, the community must appease the gods to prevent another poor harvest with the offering of a “willing king-like virgin fool” (Howie comes to the island of his own free will, is an authority figure, and is “saving himself” for his fiancée). The ritual burning of the outsider in the huge wicker figure provides a final juxtaposition of belief systems—the islanders joyfully chant the Middle English folksong “Sumer is i-cumen in” as Howie preaches desperately to the assembly before choking out the twenty-third Psalm (“The Lord is my Shepherd”). This recalls the mainland church scene at the beginning of the film in which the congregation sings the same psalm and Howie reads the lesson on Christ’s sacrifice (Figs. 3 and 4).

**Fig. 3. Reading the lesson in the mainland church. Screen capture from The Wicker Man, Extended Version DVD (Hardy). [Image redacted].**

**Fig. 4. Howie imprisoned within the wicker man preaches to a quite different congregation. Screen capture from The Wicker Man, Extended Version DVD (Hardy). [Image redacted].**

Is *The Wicker Man* then simply a Gothic horror tale depicting the civilized British Christian’s fear of the colonized and their potential regression to savage heathendom? Two aspects of this theory appear problematic: the complexities and contradictions within the film itself, plus the differences between the authors’ stated intent and reception by successive audiences. Sergeant Howie manifests colonial power in numerous ways: moral superiority, intolerance of deviant behavior, and cavalier disregard for local laws and customs. However, Steven Sutcliffe makes the excellent point that Howie is not representative of the mainland society, rather he is “a testy evangelical man in a rapidly-secularising culture” (39). Sutcliffe refers to the opening scenes of the film in which Howie’s colleagues secretly ridicule his sanctimonious nature and celibacy—it is not with just Summerisle’s wild culture that his beliefs conflict (39–40). Howie does seem aware of this decline of religious authority, though clinging steadfastly to his faith, stating in the following scene: “This is still, in theory, a law-abiding Christian country, however unfashionable that may seem.” In addition, Howie is from the Scottish Highlands, a region that, as historian Kenneth Morgan mentions, traditionally maintained a fierce sense of independence from English rule (196). Although he announces himself as “of the West Highland
Constabulary” and thus representing British law, as a Scot he is conceivably a subject of internal colonialism. This raises additional complexities in situating the film in a postcolonial context—as John McLeod points out, the Scots were both colonized by the English and as British subjects, colonized other countries (243). For this reason, McLeod continues, postcolonial cannot therefore function as a catchall term to describe diverse experiences of occupation (244).

Characteristics of Lord Summerisle and the islanders introduce further complications. Whether viewed as regressive savages or a society liberated from an alien ideology, identifying colonial and postcolonial aspects of Summerisle is again problematic. Alternate readings of the old religion’s reintroduction to the island are possible—did Lord Summerisle’s grandfather benevolently restore the native culture, or does he represent a second-wave of colonialism exploiting the island’s people and resources? Film scholar Jonathan Murray indicates that the Summerislanders could be “colonized dupes” or more optimistically, be turning the colonizer Howie’s assumptions of their primitivism back on him (21). Alternatively, they could be genuine practitioners of the old religion. Paula James in her analysis of the film also indicates that the island is far from regressive in its similarity to the liberal 1970s society of the mainland, whilst Howie, as mentioned above, is conservative in his moral and religious convictions (50). Lord Summerisle too presents an ambiguous figure—the religious and legal head of the community, both his accent and his grandfather’s purchase of the island suggest that he is English rather than Scottish. Often he appears dressed in the traditional kilt and frilled shirt of the Scottish laird in contrast to the contemporary apparel of the islanders, as if attempting to integrate himself with the society he leads. Again, it is unclear whether Lord Summerisle is a colonial tyrant or a leader in accordance with the society’s natural order. Certainly, the islanders appear content, even joyful in their neo-feudal pagan utopia, but of course we are only shown what they wish to show Howie, and that as we discover is intended to deceive. Lord Summerisle is certainly charming and persuasive compared to the ridiculously indignant Howie, but perhaps he contrives the police officer’s sacrifice to ensure the continuance of his own rule rather than to appease the gods. It is unclear whether the islanders critically assess their postcolonial liberator’s motives.

Brown states that the cultures in The Wicker Man are in opposition, but that it is only from Howie’s Christian viewpoint that they are in binary opposition. Howie brands the pagan community evil because of its uncivilized practices, yet for Brown, this is the evil of impassive Nature (69–70): in The Wicker Man “Control, restraint and discipline are challenged by anarchy, fecundity, and relativism” (70). To return to McLeod’s comment above, the islanders do not kill Howie maliciously, rather he meets the criteria of the sacrificial offering required to restore the fields’ fertility. In the Summerisle cosmology, he will not remain dead but undergo reincarnation (78). Howie’s faith similarly anticipates life after death, though his resurrection will free him from earthly existence. Good and evil is thus a problematic duality in the film—can we, like, Howie legitimately view the Summerisle community as evil? Stefan Gullatz’s philosophical analysis of this aspect of the film concludes that the ahistorical, self-contained, and cyclical universe of pagan Summerisle renders it “ethically neutral”—no self-conscious will directs evil outwards (198–203). The moral ambivalence of The Wicker Man is in keeping with the narrative’s Gothicism, which as John Paul Riquelme mentions in his article on the Gothic and modernism, affords “critical engagement with binary opposites that support hierarchical thinking” (592). Indeed, Fred Botting’s introductory essay on the Gothic is strikingly applicable to the film’s discourse:
This play of terms, of oppositions, indeed characterises the ambivalence of Gothic fiction: good depends on evil, light on dark, reason on irrationality, in order to define limits. The play means that Gothic is an inscription neither of darkness nor of light, a delineation neither of reason and morality nor of superstition and corruption, neither good nor evil, but both at the same time. Relations between real and fantastic, sacred and profane, supernatural and natural, past and present, civilised and barbaric, rational and fanciful, remain crucial to the Gothic dynamic of limit and transgression. (9)

Such blurring of boundaries helps somewhat in making sense of the film’s disquieting inconsistencies. As discussed above, notions of colonizer and colonized are indistinct in *The Wicker Man*, as are moral evaluations of their respective actions. This perhaps, is an authentic depiction of “post-” societies in general, characterized by ethical uncertainty and devolved authority.

What then do we know of writer Anthony Shaffer and director Robin Hardy’s conception of the film, and how does this compare with interpretations by successive audiences? Shaffer and Hardy have both contributed to recent analyses of the film (Brown, Franks, Murray) and have distanced themselves from “pro-pagan” readings. Sutcliffe (49–50) and Franks (*Demotic* 57) report that to some degree, the film cautions against the cultish mentality of 1960s and 70s New Age countercultural movements. The writer and director seem to detect continuity between the subjugation of individuals by primitive superstition and by modern authoritarian movements such as Nazism, as Sutcliffe and Franks also mention. Brown’s interview with Shaffer reveals that the reversion to pre-Christian religion on Summerisle was a necessary device within which to explore the nature of sacrifice—or murder for belief’s sake (21–22). In what he calls “a demotic possession of the text” Franks observes that contemporary pagans and political radicals amongst others, have claimed the film as a celebration of pre-Christian or libertarian ideals (*Demotic* 58):

The conflict between Howie and the islanders is thus apparently between two different forms of authority, one associated with liberalism, modernity and democracy and the other with tradition, pre-modernity and authoritarianism. … Shaffer refers to those interested in paganism and witchcraft as ‘lunatics’, yet audiences have continually sided with the populace of Summerisle rather than with the virtues represented by Howie. (*Demotic* 65)

Whether Howie’s immolation in the wicker man horrifies or delights depends largely on the attitudes to Christianity and hegemony that the audience brings to the film. Once again, the division is not clear-cut: in his foreword to Murray’s *Constructing the Wicker Man*, Robin Hardy recalls the film’s reception in the USA “In Kentucky we received the most unusual of critical praise—pastors and priests advising their flocks to go and see the film … ‘It is rare in a movie’, one minister said, ‘to see so clear an invocation of what resurrection really means’” (vi).

In considering whether Summerisle is indeed illustrative of the postcolonial, it is important to recall McLeod’s warning that this is not a term applicable to all instances of cultural domination (243). As we have seen, Summerisle exhibits many of the complexities and contradictions of postcolonialism. Finally, then, we must examine Shaffer and Hardy’s construction of Summerisle’s modern Celtic paganism. Describing the scripting of *The Wicker Man*, Brown notes that the film’s primary source was Sir James George Frazer’s famous 1922 study of folk magic and religion *The Golden Bough* (24). Even a brief perusal of the text reveals the inspiration for the islanders’ belief system: chapter sixty-four is
entitled “The Burning of Human Beings in the Fires” and mentions “gigantic images constructed of osiers [willow] or covered with grass in which the Druids enclosed their victims” (Frazer ch. LXIV, 2, par. 4). Mikel J. Koven discusses the problematic use of this now largely discredited source—read as history by Shaffer and Hardy—accusing them of “folkloristic fallacy” (83). In effect, Koven argues, they have recreated Frazer’s Victorian model of pre-Christian Celtic religion “complete with the ideology of the Empire.” (87). Interestingly, Koven realizes that they may have wished to depict a society restored artificially by Lord Summerisle’s Victorian grandfather, but notes that Hardy has maintained his confidence in his sources’ accuracy (87). Evidently, Koven has revealed one of the film’s strengths in spite of Hardy’s assertion. However, further assumptions are apparent in Summerisle’s genesis. Locating the community on an isolated Scottish island, Koven feels, gives credence to Frazer’s notion of unreconstructed heathenism persisting in Britain’s wilder regions (90). Furthermore, Frazer’s outdated anthropology reduces all instances of religious practice to fit an identical pattern (94) which affords The Wicker Man its haphazard mixture of folkloric elements, by no means all Celtic nor even ancient, as Richard Sermon notes (28–30). Sermon wryly comments “the very first wicker man may have been the one built and burnt on Burrowhead in the autumn of 1972” (42). In his concluding remarks, Koven states that

In other words, what Hardy and Shaffer attempted to do in The Wicker Man was to unproblematically literalise a colonialist agenda which sees the Celtic nations as an undifferentiated whole, and does not distinguish between the other cultural influences which may have affected Frazer’s descriptions of the Beltane and sacrificial rites. (95)

These other influences include Julius Caesar’s account of Druidic sacrificial practices in The Gallic Wars, and Aylett Samme’s 1676 illustration that inspired the design of the film’s wicker man (95).

Even if Summerisle is no more than a Celtic fantasy realm dreamt up by two Englishmen and based on an Empire-era folklorist’s dubious research, it is still a recognizable simulation of Britain’s pre-Christian past. Luc Racaut argues that the film uses “tropes … from the public imagination, which still have resonance today in what I have no choice but to call ‘collective memory’” (57). The characters that appear in the May Day parade scenes—the hobby-horse, fool, and antlered dancers—still feature in Britain’s village folk festivals. This folk memory may be as flawed as Frazer’s anthropology, but may account for the powerful attraction and/or repulsion that viewers experience. Situating the pagan community in the (perceived) wilds of Scotland and caricaturing Celtic religion may be revealing of the filmmakers’ own colonial attitudes, but Summerisle is sufficiently real to provoke strong audience reactions.

The Wicker Man then, presents a complicated and often conflicting picture of a society that has purposively removed itself from another’s dominion. This process, viewed from Howie’s perspective, is a regression from civilized rationality to primitive superstition—the very Gothic fear of the “return of the repressed” that Hughes and Smith mention (2). Yet it is perhaps Howie who embodies this Gothic terror in the film—his religious and moral attitudes are outdated and repressive in the eyes of both the permissive mainlanders and the pagan Summerislanders. To class Howie as the monstrous element in this Gothic narrative seems incongruous—he goes to his death with nobility—yet his officious and prim manner throughout the film alienates those viewers who no longer share his convictions. Perhaps audiences celebrate the burning of Howie as the triumph of their post-Christian,
postmodern mentality over a belief system that has lost relevance for them. As Howie warns Lord Summerisle though, the same fate awaits any future authority that fails to meet the community’s needs.

HOWIE: Well, don't you understand that if your crops fail this year, next year you're going to have to have another blood sacrifice? And next year, no one less than the king of Summerisle himself will do. If the crops fail, Summerisle, next year your people will kill you on May Day.

LORD SUMMERISLE: They will not fail. The sacrifice of the willing king-like virgin fool will be accepted.

The Gothic postcolonial in *The Wicker Man* thus appears to question notions of legitimate sovereignty. Lord Summerisle and the old gods rule the island because they ensured the success of the harvest. The islanders were born to the land and have an ancestral link to their culture. Howie, his god, and the Christian church no longer have authority, but in this Gothic narrative, old rulers haunt the current, just as Howie’s warning must haunt Lord Summerisle. It is no longer just the colonizer who experiences Gothic horror: the postcolonial society now dreads a return to subjugation as well as loss of its own relevance. However, the postcolonial is never a simple return to the precolonial—as in the May Day parade of animal-masked islanders led by Lord Summersisle in the guise of a woman, identity for the postcolonial individual is manifold and complex. To raise another Gothic preoccupation, how do we negotiate our colonial and/or postcolonial inheritances? Howie refuses to acknowledge the Summerislanders’ responses to colonialism, yet perhaps we also fail to listen to him. A wholesale rejection of colonial history deprives us of well-intentioned yet flawed heroes such as Howie—the postcolonial response is at its most fruitful a series of dialogues between our complex, fragmented pasts and presents—an intricate Gothic interplay of light and shadow.

If we indeed fear our now inappropriate pasts in our insecure present, John Patterson’s recent article in *The Guardian* provides a serendipitous illustration. Bemoaning the selection of classics for the 2007 Summer of British Film, he states

> What a sorry, retrograde, inward-looking, cliché-driven sense of nationhood is laid before us by their choices, many of them long since staled and drained of their power by four decades of reruns. All our national distempers and cultural fevers, circa 1954, are represented here: the self-deluding postwar victory complex and nostalgia for the great good fight (*The Dambusters, Henry V*); the post-imperial compensation fantasy (*Goldfinger*); the chinless emotional constipation of the English (*Brief Encounter*); our lovable and harmless eccentrics, gawd bless ’em (*Withnail And I, Billy Liar*). And one perfect, long-lost, almost unnervingly British masterpiece in *The Wicker Man*. (par. 2)

Perhaps this last film’s portrayal of past cultures returning to challenge our present accounts for its enduring power and relevance.
Works Cited


---. “Straw or Wicker? Traditions of Scottish Film Criticism and *The Wicker Man*.” Murray 11–36.


Works Consulted

