Jeanette Winterson's *The Daylight Gate* is a novel that focuses on transgression and transformation. It is a dramatic reconstruction of the 1612 Lancashire witch trials, combining elements of the supernatural and the real. This essay will argue that *The Daylight Gate* uses Gothic motifs to examine the limits of human behaviour and identity. It focuses on the transgression of boundaries and the transformation of bodies, and the relationship between animals and humans. Its characters challenge accepted rules and behaviour and in the process question what it is to be human.

The physical locations in *The Daylight Gate* are Gothic sites. Botting notes that 'Gothic landscapes are desolate, alienating and full of menace' (1996, p. 2), and this description applies to the landscapes of the novel. Pendle Hill is 'brooding, disappeared in mists, treacherous with bogs' (Winterson 2012, p. 1), and Malkin Tower is representative of the Gothic castle, 'grim and windowless' and surrounded by a 'stagnant moat' (Winterson 2012, pp. 26-27). Lancaster Castle, and the Well Dungeon within it, are also Gothic sites of terror and torment. These sites help to establish the novel's locations as dangerous and wild, the environment mirroring the natures of the accused witches. The locations also provide a menacing backdrop the events of the novel. Botting notes that during the Enlightenment, 'Gothic' referred to the Middle Ages, marking them as a past filled with 'barbarous customs and practices…superstition, ignorance,
extravagant fancies and natural wildness' (1996, p. 15). This Gothic past is what the characters of *The Daylight Gate* inhabit. The first line of the novel says, 'The North is the dark place' (Winterson 2012, p. 1); this is a site of wildness and superstition. Referring to 18th century Gothic texts, Punter and Byron say that 'Gothic was the archaic, the pagan, that which was prior to, or was opposed to, or resisted the establishment of civilized values and a well-regulated society' (Punter & Byron 2004, p. 8). *The Daylight Gate* reflects this concern with that which is uncivilised and which challenges social codes. Limits are tested and binary opposites established, for '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' (Botting 1996, p. 6).

The novel makes use of a number of established Gothic themes. As Butter and Eitelmann note, 'Gothic thrives on transgression: incest, rape, perversion, crime, insanity, and death are prominent themes' (2010, p. 135), all of which feature in *The Daylight Gate*. The novel contains many scenes where the use of these themes feels extreme; the scenes of violence, rape and torture are graphic, as are the descriptions of the physical state of the accused witches in their prison. However, 'Gothic signifies a writing of excess' (Botting 1996, p. 1), and these scenes are used to evoke particular sensations. Gothic writing aims to 'produce fear and desire within the reader' (Halberstam 2003, p. 128, and this is what is taking place within *The Daylight Gate*. Fear, horror and desire are produced through the use of both supernatural and historical elements. These emotions are encouraged through examinations of boundaries and limits.

Boundaries are an important part of *The Daylight Gate*. These boundaries include those of gender, sexuality, law and humanity. The Daylight Gate itself is a boundary between the worlds of the living and the
dead. Each boundary can be seen as a limit, and these limits are transgressed by the characters of the novel. Although all of the accused witches are transgressive in their behaviour, Alice Nutter is particularly threatening to the men of the district. Being independently wealthy gives her a greater amount of freedom, and makes it unnecessary for her to have a husband. When Alice is first introduced she is 'riding astride' her horse, wearing riding gloves that are 'not the kind a woman wore' (Winterson 2012, p. 7). Alice treads the boundary of what it is to be a woman in 1612. Her refusal to be tied down is demonstrated by her statement, 'I am not tame' (Winterson 2012, p. 49). Alice is also transgressive in her relationship with Elizabeth. In Gothic stories, 'passion, excitement and sensation transgress social proprieties and moral law' (Botting 1996, p. 2), and this describes what Alice and Elizabeth have. In living together they transgress social and moral boundaries that would have existed at the time, and their passion for each other is shown in Elizabeth's jealousy and Alice's statement, 'I worshipped her' (Winterson 2012, p. 60). Elizabeth transgresses her own boundaries in her dealings with dark magic. The limits of good and evil, light and dark are probed by Elizabeth in her search for power.

Another boundary that is tested in The Daylight Gate is the one between human and animal. This boundary is examined through the connection that the witches supposedly have with animals, and by giving the novel's characters animal qualities. One way that this is achieved is via the use of familiars. Historically, associations between witches and familiars – 'personal demons' that assisted the witch in her work – are found most in England (Burns 2003, p. 85). Familiars were spirits taking the shape of animals, with dogs and cats being common (Burns 2003, p. 85). In The Daylight Gate, several of the accused witches have pets, including dogs and cats, which are supposedly their familiars. The connection between witches and familiars has a historical basis, but it also serves to underline how
unhuman the witches of the novel are. By supposedly engaging with these animals for the purposes of witchcraft, the women are shown to be unnatural and closer to beast than human. However, there is no evidence that these animals are anything other than pets. Alice's relationship with her falcon is the only animal-human connection in the novel that has a sense of the supernatural about it. The falcon obeys Alice's orders, including her final command to sever her jugular vein and thus kill her.

Many of the characters are compared to animals, or described as behaving like animals. The effect of this is that the boundary between human and beast is blurred, and the humanity of the characters is questioned. By using animals to describe the behaviour and appearance of her characters, Winterson is able to communicate their particular personalities to the reader. The character that is closest to that of a wild animal is Jennet. Jennet is often described in ways that are more animal than human. The clear implication is that her appalling treatment at the hands of her family has greatly damaged her: she is 'vicious, miserable, underfed and abused' (Winterson 2012, p. 26). Being so close to starvation, Jennet eats what food she gets as an animal would; she crawls and scampers, barefoot and with little clothing, 'fast as a ferret' (Winterson 2012, p. 103). She is 'a wilder thing than a child' (Winterson 2012, p. 27). Hunger and desperation make the characters revert to a primal state; this is also seen when Jem is offered food and he looks at it 'like an animal' (Winterson 2012, p. 75).

To Harry and Tom, witches are 'cats flesched as women' (Winterson 2012, p. 10). To them, witches are closer to animal than human, and calling them 'cats' links them to beliefs about cats as familiars, beliefs that considered cats 'demonic' (Burns 2003, p. 7). The link between animals and evil is seen in connection with the Dark Gentleman, a demonic agent or the Devil himself. Alice attends a party at which the Dark Gentleman is present, and at this party guests wear animal tails, indicating their association with
evil. The Dark Gentleman himself is described as 'like a black fox' (Winterson 2012, p. 179), indicating that he is cunning and sly, as well as dangerous. Roger Nowell is also likened to an animal, one that, although beautiful, is dangerous: 'he was dressed in black velvet and he walked softly like a panther' (Winterson 2012, p. 45). Not all characters are associated negatively with animals, however. Elizabeth Southern is described as 'an animal and a spirit combined into human form' (Winterson 2012, p. 59), a description that marks her as special, someone who is of a different realm. Shakespeare is described as 'like an owl, bright-eyed, his head perched on his ruff' (Winterson 2012, p. 89). The owl is of course a symbol of wisdom and intelligence, and Shakespeare displays both qualities, being quick to notice not only that Alice looks too young for her age, but that she is in danger.

*The Daylight Gate* examines human identity through associations with animals, but also via transformation. Many of the transformations in the novel take place within the bodies of the characters. The most significant of these transformations are those of Alice Nutter and Elizabeth Southern. Alice is an old woman, yet appears young due to her use of an elixir of youth concocted by John Dee. John Dee's 'Great Work' with Alice, Elizabeth, and the medium Edward Kelley is devoted to alchemy, and thus to transformation. As Alice says, 'The Great Work was to dissolve all boundaries. The Great Work was to transform one substance into another – one self into another. We would merge. We would be transformed' (Winterson 2012, p. 59). Indeed, the relationship of Alice and Elizabeth has no boundaries, and when they are together they merge: 'Elizabeth and I were lovers and we lived as lovers, sharing one bed and one body' (Winterson 2012, p. 60). This unification is not without its problems, for as Alice grows wealthy from her discovery of a magenta dye, Elizabeth becomes jealous.
Elizabeth ends up transforming in the darkest way possible, by selling her soul.

Magic is another method of transformation. Alice has difficulty believing in magic, despite what she has witnessed throughout her life. When John Dee asks Alice how it is possible she doesn't believe in the soul, or in such things as apparitions and spectres, Alice replies, 'I think these things are the magick of our own minds, not visitations from elsewhere' (Winterson 2012, p. 63). It is often difficult to tell in The Daylight Gate whether or not supernatural events have actually occurred or if they are indeed magic of the mind, as Alice says. The transformations that take place are often only witnessed or experienced by one person, or it is difficult to prove they are the result of magic. Examples of this include Alice witnessing a skull speak, and Jem claiming to have turned himself into a hare. Whilst supernatural means of transformation may be ambiguous, what is undoubtedly clear is the transformation of bodies as a result of torture and imprisonment. Imprisonment within the Well Dungeon transforms the accused women into 'grotesque' creatures (Winterson 2012, p. 82). By the time the trial is held, their bodies have been destroyed. Another character who has experienced an alteration of his body is Christopher Southworth. His body is disfigured as punishment for his role in the Gunpowder Plot: 'The tortures had changed his body. He had tried to change history' (Winterson 2012, p. 147).

The characters of The Daylight Gate are part of a wild Gothic landscape. This landscape serves as a backdrop to scenes of violence, terror and Gothic excess. Throughout the novel boundaries and limits are questioned and tested via transgression and transformation. The line between animal and human becomes difficult to distinguish, as do the lines between supernatural and real, good and evil. Ultimately, humanity is
shown to be both complex and flawed, and not far removed from the realms of nature and beast.

References


