

The Gothic and the Ethnic in Barbara Kingsolver's *The Bean Trees*

Matthew J. Bolton

Matthew J. Bolton offers an engaging reading of *The Bean Trees*, Kingsolver's first and probably still best-known novel, as a clever adaptation of the literary conventions of the gothic novel. Together *Wuthering Heights* and *Jane Eyre*, among the most widely read English novels, feature gothic tropes: the foundling child of uncertain ethnic origin, the supposedly mad woman of non-English ancestry who is hidden on an upstairs floor, and the woman protagonist who falls in love with a married man but decides not to pursue her affection. Bolton explains in detail how Kingsolver employs these tropes but subverts and adapts them to her late-twentieth-century setting. In the process, Kingsolver is able to redefine the notion of ethnicity: what nineteenth-century English readers perceived as a threat in the novels of the Brontë sisters, Taylor Greer sees as an opportunity. Her encounter with the strange and the unfamiliar is characterized by care and concern and, ultimately, a principled decision. — T.A.

Barbara Kingsolver's 1988 novel *The Bean Trees* follows its narrator Taylor Greer as she travels from her native Kentucky to Tucson, Arizona, in search of a better life. Along the way, she picks up not only her new name—Taylor is a trade-up from her given name of Marietta—but also a toddler, foisted upon her by a desperate woman on the edge of a Cherokee Indian reservation. Once in Tucson, Taylor must create a new life for herself and for the child, whom she calls Turtle. Gradually, she gathers about her a circle of friends who will serve as a surrogate family for Turtle: her roommate, Lou Ann; her employer, Mattie; and Estevan and Esperanza, two of the illegal immigrants whom Mattie shelters. When the state challenges her custody of Turtle, however, Taylor must risk all this by returning to the Cherokee Nation to secure her rights to be Turtle's mother.

On one level, Kingsolver's novel is representative of its own time and place: the American Southwest of the 1980s. Its depiction of Tucson is as vivid as its exploration of class, race, and gender in American life is insightful. Yet on a deeper, structural level, *The Bean Trees* draws on the long tradition of the gothic novel. While Taylor's narrative voice is distinctly American and distinctly modern, her story itself is rooted in the great English gothic novels, and in particular the masterpieces of the Brontë sisters, Emily's *Wuthering Heights* and Charlotte's *Jane Eyre*, both published in 1847. Kingsolver structures her novel around three tropes that are familiar to readers of the Brontës: the adoption of a foundling child of uncertain ethnicity and parentage, the discovery that someone lives hidden in the upper stories of an old house, and a heroine's struggle to overcome the obstacles that stand between her and the man she hopes to marry. These gothic elements are the machinery of the novel, the engine that propels Taylor's narrative forward. Yet Taylor, who made it across the country in a car she had to push to get started and who works at Mattie's garage patching and rotating tires, knows something about engines. She may be driven by the events around her, but she is also a driving force. By refusing to accept the gothic formulation by which people of other races and ethnicities are equated with the strange, the dangerous, and the cursed, she creates for herself and for her loved ones a future that is beyond what Catherine, Heathcliff, Jane, or Rochester could have envisioned.

The stories of both *Wuthering Heights* and *The Bean Trees* are set in motion with the discovery and de facto adoption of a foundling child. In Emily Brontë's novel, Mr. Earnshaw finds a child

starving, and houseless, and as good as dumb in the streets of Liverpool, where he picked it up and inquired for its owner. Not a soul knew to whom it belonged . . . and his money and time being both limited, he thought it better to take it home with him at once. (30)