

GOTHIC LITERATURE

1. SOCIO-HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Gothic literature is a literary movement that focused on ruin, decay, death, terror, and chaos, and privileged irrationality and passion over rationality and reason, grew in response to the historical, sociological, psychological, and political contexts of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Although Horace Walpole is credited with producing the first Gothic novel, *The Castle of Otranto*, in 1764, his work was built on a foundation of several elements. First, Walpole tapped a growing fascination with all things medieval, and medieval romance provided a generic framework for his novel. In addition, Edmund Burke's 1757 treatise, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Sublime and Beautiful*, offered a philosophical foundation. Finally, the Graveyard School of poetry, so called because of the attention its poets gave to ruins, graveyards, death, and human mortality, flourished in the mid-eighteenth century and provided a thematic and literary context for the Gothic.

Walpole's novel was wildly popular, and his novel introduced most of the stock conventions of the genre: an intricate plot; stock characters; subterranean labyrinths; ruined castles; and supernatural occurrences.

While it may be comparatively easy to date the beginning of the Gothic movement, it is much harder to identify its close, if indeed the movement did come to a close at all.

In its attention to the dark side of human nature and the chaos of irrationality, the Gothic provides for contemporary readers some insight into the social and intellectual climate of the time in which the literature was produced. A time of revolution and reason, madness and sanity, the 1750^s through the 1850^s provided the stuff that both dreams and nightmares were made of.

2. REPRESENTATIVE WORKS AND AUTHORS

2.1. *The Castle of Otranto*, by Horace Walpole

The Castle of Otranto, by Walpole, published in December 1764, is universally regarded as the first Gothic novel. Set in some undefined medieval past, the novel draws on heroic romance as well as legends and folklore. In this one novel, Walpole established virtually every convention of Gothic literature. These include the Gothic castle, a presence so real as to nearly be a character. He also uses gloomy weather, clanking chains, midnight bells, and subterranean passageways.

2.2. *Dracula*, by Bram Stoker

Dracula was first published in 1897 by Bram Stoker, an Irish writer and theatre manager. The novel is part of the Victorian Gothic period, a resurgence of Gothic literature that appeared approximately a century after the first Gothic literary movement started by Walpole. Stoker spent a year researching vampires and folklore before writing his novel.

2.3. "The Fall of the House of Usher," by Edgar Allan Poe

Edgar Allan Poe's most famous story, "The Fall of the House of Usher" was published in 1839, some years after the height of the Gothic movement. Nevertheless, the story is, as are many of Poe's stories, classically Gothic in setting, theme, and mood. Fred Botting, in *Gothic* writes, "The house is both a Gothic manifestation, an architectural ruin set in a desolate and gloomy landscape and a family equally in decay, dying from an unknown and incurable disease." The story also contains the element of claustrophobia in the premature burial of Roderick Usher's sister.

2.4. *Frankenstein*, by Mary Shelley

Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* was published in 1818. The novel does not fit neatly into any generic designation, but many critics suggest that it is the first modern work of science fiction. However, Shelley's emphasis on isolation, wild landscapes, supernatural occurrences, and the haunting presence of the double places the novel within the context of the Gothic.

3. THEMES

3.1. Terror and Horror

Terror and horror are the tools of the Gothic writer. Terror grows out of suspense while horror produces disgust. In other words, a character experiences terror in the anticipation of some dreaded event; the character experiences horror when the event really happens. Thus, there is an emphasis on terror and the terrible, which writers create through their long descriptions of sublime landscapes as well as their intimations of the supernatural. Moreover, the agonizing suspense to which writers subject their characters produces terror in both the character and the reader. However, the eventual explanation of all things supernatural relieves the reader from the experience of horror. Some writers focus on the details of the horrible, including torture and putrefaction.

3.2. Appearance and Reality

Gothic literature often explores the difference between appearance and reality. Events often appear to have supernatural causes. By the end of the book, writers offer logical explanations. Some writers, however, do not always differentiate between appearance and reality. This ambiguity leads to a dreamlike (or nightmarish) atmosphere in the novel. Readers recognize the state: for all intents and purposes, a dream appears to be real until awakening. It is in the foggy fugue state, however, that the dreamer is unsure of what is the dream and what is the reality. In addition, other writers play with appearance and reality through the use of different narrative structures and voices. Poe famously develops the unreliable narrator who appears initially to be sane but who, through the course of the story, is revealed to be insane. The struggle to differentiate the reality from the appearance rests at the heart of much Gothic literature.

3.3. Confinement

Nearly every Gothic novel of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries contains some element of confinement. Indeed, many critics have commented on the sense of claustrophobia found in Gothic fiction. Often this occurs with the entrapment of the heroine in some ancient castle. When she finally escapes her room or cell, she finds herself within a subterranean passageway with no apparent way out. It is the lack of escape that causes the terrifying claustrophobia. The struggle against the confinement elicits both horror and terror in the reader. Perhaps the master of confinement, however, is Poe. In "The Fall of the House of Usher," Madeline Usher is buried alive. Such scenes hold considerable horror. Poe's *The Cask of Amontillado* is another tale of claustrophobic containment, as the narrator, Montresor, walls Fortunato in a crypt, where he has lured him to taste fine sherry. Poe's *The Tell-Tale Heart* also uses this theme, but in this case it is the heart of the murdered victim that is confined but refuses to remain hidden. Whether it be prison cells, monastic cells, shackles, locked rooms, or dark tunnels, the space of the Gothic novel is claustrophobic and confining, tapping into a primal human fear.

3.4. Justice and Injustice

While the world of justice and injustice might seem to be absent from the world of the Gothic, on closer examination, it seems clear that guilt and reparation of sins are at the center of many stories. In Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto*, the death of Conrad, the heir to his father's estate, apparently takes place as a way of righting a wrong. That is, Conrad's ancestor comes back from his grave to assure that Otranto goes to the rightful heir. This is the case of the sins of the father being visited on the children; at no time does it seem that Conrad knows that his title is faulty. Likewise, Madeline and Roderick Usher pay for the sins of their family with their own decay and death. Their house collapses on them, ending the family line. Thus, the "fall of the house of Usher" has two meanings: the house itself literally caves in and the lineage of Usher also falls as a result of the sins of earlier generations. In the Gothic world, justice must ultimately triumph, even if the justice that is meted out is severe. Because the Gothic is a literature of excess, it is little wonder that the justices and injustices are also excessive. Thus, the gloom that hangs over the heads of many characters is the knowledge that in their own day they will have to pay for the wrongs their ancestors committed.

4. STYLE

4.1. Setting

In Gothic literature, the setting may be the single most important device. Gothic writers generally set their novels in wild landscapes; in large, often ruined, castles; and/or in subterranean labyrinths. In Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto*, the castle itself plays a major role in the novel. Robert Kiely writes in *The Romantic Novel in England*: "If anything gives this novel unity and animation, it is the castle. The place itself seems sufficiently charged with emotion to require little assistance from the characters. In fact, external conditions play a larger part in determining the behavior of the characters than do their own internal motivations." Thus, the setting itself provides as much suspense as does the plot or the characters.

In addition, Gothic writers as a rule set their novels in the distant, medieval past, in what they thought of as the Gothic period. However, their descriptions have little to do with the medieval period as it was; rather, the settings in Gothic novels reveal much more about what eighteenth and nineteenth-century writers believed about the Middle Ages. For Gothic writers, the medieval past was a time of superstition and Catholicism, made exotic and eerie by monks, nuns, ghosts, and crumbling castles. Although most of the novels are set in some European landscape, others, most notably Beckford's *Vathek*, have foreign locations, such as the Middle East. Again, removing the setting of the novel from contemporary locations and time periods allowed Gothic writers to infuse their works with the fear of the unknown, mysterious occurrences, and strange, unusual customs.

4.2. Diction

Diction is the choice of words and the order of words writers make for their literary creations. Diction may be on the continuum from informal, or low diction, to formal, or high diction. In Gothic novels, writers opted to use somewhat archaic and formal language, particularly in dialogue. Although the word choices are not accurate representations of the speech patterns of medieval people, the diction of a Gothic novel is reminiscent of a medieval romance. Further, the diction removes the novel from the present-day reality. Walpole, for example, writes the following for his heroine Isabella in *The Castle of Otranto*: "Sir, whoever you are, take pity on a wretched princess standing on the brink of destruction: assist me to escape from this fatal castle, or in a few moments I may be made miserable for ever." In Gothic literature, diction plays a crucial role in creating an atmosphere of fear, suspense, terror and horror.

4.3. Narrative

Narrative is an accounting of an event or sequence of events, real or invented. In literary criticism, the expression "narrative technique" usually refers to the way the author structures and presents his or her story. Gothic literature can be characterized by the complex and complicated narrative structures writers give their work. There are usually plots within plots, and there are episodes that seem to have little connection to the episodes immediately before and after. Gothic writers often provide little transition or explanation for the arrangement of their episodes. The overall effect is to render the narrative strange and fragmented.

4.4. Mood

The mood of a literary work is the emotional attitude with which the subject is handled by the author. Mood is conveyed in a work through the author's handling of diction, setting, and narrative. In the case of Gothic novels, the mood is one of fear, anxiety, terror, and horror. Both the characters and the readers of Gothic novels experience these emotions to the fullest extent possible for human beings. The dark, dreary, and morbid settings as well as the sublime mountainous landscapes serve to invoke terror, while the suspense created by mistaken identities and long chase sequences through cellar passageways produce both fear and anxiety. Many critics speak of the claustrophobia of Gothic novels, created by coffins, prisons, dark halls, passages, and interior spaces. At its best, Gothic literature evokes the same kind of emotional response from its readers as do nightmares and night terrors. Just as the dreamers often find themselves fleeing from shadowy monsters or evil-doers, characters in Gothic novels likewise flee from those who would do them harm. Readers of Gothic novels are able to experience these strong emotions vicariously, through the trials of the main characters. They are able to be deliciously, if safely, frightened out of their wits by the narrative twists and turns. That this is able to happen can largely be attributed to the prevailing mood Gothic authors develop.