

GOTHIC LITERATURE

The English Gothic novel began with Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* (1765), which was enormously popular and quickly imitated by other novelists and soon became a recognizable genre. To most modern readers, however, *The Castle of Otranto* is dull reading; except for the villain Manfred, the characters are insipid; the action moves at a fast clip with no emphasis or suspense, despite the supernatural manifestations and a young maiden's flight through dark vaults. But contemporary readers found the novel electrifyingly original and thrillingly suspenseful, with its remote setting, its use of the supernatural, and its medieval trappings, all of which have been so frequently imitated and so poorly imitated that they have become stereotypes. The genre takes its name from Otranto's medieval—or Gothic—setting; early Gothic novelists tended to set their novels in remote times like the Middle Ages and in remote places like Italy (Matthew Lewis's *The Monk*, 1796) or the Middle East (William Beckford's *Vathek*, 1786).

The first great practitioner of the Gothic novel, as well the most popular and best paid novelist of eighteenth century England, was Ann Radcliffe. She added suspense, painted evocative landscapes and moods or atmosphere, portrayed increasingly complex, fascinating-horrifying evil villains, and focused on the heroine and her struggle with him. Her best works—*A Sicilian Romance* (1790), *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794), and *The Italian* (1797), with the irredeemably malevolent monk, Schedoni—still have the ability to thrill and enthrall readers.

In "On the Supernatural in Poetry," a dialogue that was unfinished at her death, Radcliffe distinguished between the effect her novels achieved, terror, and the effect Lewis's achieved, horror:

Terror and horror are so far opposite, that the first expands the soul, and awakens the faculties to a high degree of life; the other contracts, freezes, and nearly annihilates them. I apprehend, that neither Shakspeare nor Milton by their fictions, nor Mr. Burke by his reasoning, anywhere looked to positive horror as a source of the sublime, though they all agree that terror is a very high one; and where lies the great difference between horror and terror, but in the uncertainty and obscurity, that accompany the first, respecting the dreaded evil?

Their different approaches to the novel of terror, as it was called in the eighteenth century, have given been called by some critics terror Gothic, represented by Radcliffe, and horror Gothic, represented by Lewis. Sometimes this same distinction is tied to gender, with female equated with terror Gothic and male being equated with horror Gothic.

TERROR VERSUS HORROR

Gothic fiction arouses—and is intended to arouse—terror and/or horror in the reader. On this point there is agreement, but here agreement ends and a host of questions arise.

* How, exactly, do terror and horror differ? Is one a physical response, like revulsion, and the other a mental response? Is one a response to the other, for example, does horror cause terror? Is one a response to an immediate or present danger and the other to a danger further away? Is one a response to what we see or hear and the other to what we imagine or think? Does one sensationalize? Is either an emotional response?

* Do terror and horror arouse the same kind of pleasure as we read Gothic tales? Alternatively, if we don't feel pleasure as we read them, what do we feel? and is what we feel the same for both horror and terror?

* Is there ambivalence in our horror or terror? For example, are we both attracted and repelled to one or

both? Is our attraction and repulsion to experiencing horror and/or terror safely why we read Gothic fiction? (Remember: our motives and responses are often complex and involve conflicting emotions and desires; Aristotle identifies pity and terror as part of the audience's response to tragedy).

* Is one response of a higher order than the other?

The distinctions some writers on this subject have made may help you clarify your thinking:

Terry Heller: Terror is the fear that harm will come to oneself. Horror is the emotion one feels in anticipating and witnessing harm coming to others for whom one cares.

G. Richard Thompson: Terror suggests the frenzy of physical and mental fear of pain, dismemberment, and death. Horror suggests the perception of something evil or morally repellent. Mystery suggests something beyond this, the perception of a world that stretches away beyond the range of human intelligence—often morally incomprehensible—and thereby productive of a nameless apprehension that may be called religious dread in the face of the wholly other.

Dennis Wheatly: Terror is a response to physical danger only, horror is fear of the supernatural.

Peter Penzold: I consider as pure tales of horror all those stories whose main motifs inspire physical repulsion, as opposed to what Blackwood calls "spiritual terror". The feeling these tales produce is one of loathing and disgust, rather than true terror and awe.

GOTHIC ELEMENTS

What makes a work Gothic is a combination of at least some of these elements:

- * a castle, ruined or intact, haunted or not (nowadays a Victorian or New England house), ruined buildings which are sinister or which arouse a pleasing melancholy,
- * dungeons, underground passages, crypts, and catacombs which, in modern houses, become spooky basements or attics,
- * labyrinths, dark corridors, and winding stairs,
- * shadows, a beam of moonlight in the blackness, a flickering candle, or the only source of light failing (a candle blown out or an electric failure),
- * extreme weather and extreme landscapes, like rugged mountains, thick forests, or icy wastes,
- * omens and ancestral curses,
- * magic, supernatural manifestations, or the suggestion of the supernatural,
- * a passion-driven, wilful villain-hero or villain,
- * a curious heroine with a tendency to faint and a need to be rescued—frequently,
- * a hero whose true identity is revealed by the end of the novel, movie, etc.,
- * horrifying (or terrifying) events or the threat of such happenings.

The Gothic creates feelings of gloom, mystery, and suspense and tends to the dramatic and the sensational, like incest, diabolism, and nameless terrors. Most of us immediately recognize the Gothic (even if we don't know the name) when we encounter it in novels, poetry, plays, movies, and TV series. For some of us—and I include myself—the prospect of safely experiencing dread or horror is thrilling and enjoyable.

Elements of the Gothic have made their way into mainstream writing. They are found in Sir Walter Scott's novels, Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, and Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* and in Romantic poetry like Samuel Coleridge's "Christabel," Lord Byron's "The Giaour," and John Keats's "The Eve of St. Agnes." A tendency to the macabre and bizarre which appears in writers like William Faulkner, Truman Capote, and Flannery O'Connor has been called Southern Gothic.