A Level Gothic Guide

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What makes Gothic?

Although it's never easy to define precisely the characteristics of any given field of literature, **Gothic** defies pinning down more than most. Ghosts and monsters are an easy and flippant answer to '**what makes Gothic**'; but not all Gothic has either or both.

The presence of psychological and physical terror is one key characteristic, as is a concern with morality, often represented by the religious.

The term '**horror**' is one which can be applied to most **Gothic literature** and although in the 21st century rather gory films have come to define this type; it is certainly possible to be gory and horrific without being Gothic. Madness, death and decay are all ever-present possibilities.

This guide seeks to explore some of the '**elements**' which make Gothic, Gothic. In doing so, it links some of the most commonly studied texts from the **genre** with other texts which demonstrate the typicality of the element involved, and thus suggest some wider reading possibilities.

History of Gothic

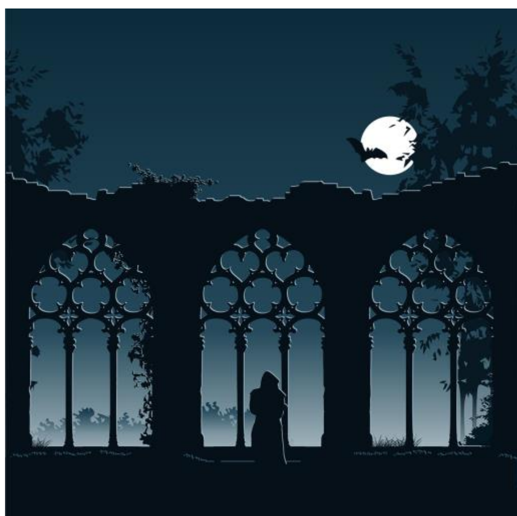
The '**invention**' of the **genre**:

The '**first Gothic novel**' is a title usually given to **The Castle of Otranto** by **Horace Walpole**, published in 1764. The first edition purported to be a translation of a two-hundred-year-old Italian manuscript (the '**medieval translation**' is a motif that continues to be well used in Gothic and wider literature).

It was only in 1765, with the publication of the second edition that Walpole decided to attach his own name to it, and perhaps flippantly decided to insert the word '**Gothic**' into the subtitle.

How could it be '**Gothic**'? First… who were the Goths? They were an Eastern European tribe in the early centuries A.D. and were well known for their pillaging and raiding against the countries of the Roman Empire. Even if Otranto was as old as Walpole claimed in the first edition, it was still a thousand years too late to be Gothic.

But there is also a movement in architecture which is labelled '**Gothic**'; and this stretched from the 12th to the 16th centuries and enjoyed something of a revival in mid-18th century England. Gothic buildings were arched, pointed, and full of flourishes.



Interestingly, the epithet '**Gothic**' had been applied to them originally as an insult, because the Goths were synonymous with barbarism – and these buildings were considered to be crude and vulgar: '**Northern**' and crude, lacking in the finesse of '**Southern**' European Art. The word became a term for the old-fashioned and the outlandish.

There are two possible reasons, then, why Walpole might have chosen to slap the word '**Gothic**' on his story.

The story concerned a disastrous political marriage that took place in an old familial castle; overtones of incest insert themselves when the bridegroom is crushed by a giant helmet on his wedding day only for his father to take over the engagement for himself.

One reason could be the setting: the castle itself, and the settings of many subsequent Gothic tales could be quite entitled to the name.

The other reason? Why would an author choose a derogatory epithet for his work? Walpole was admitting to authorship for the first time: the style of his work, happily accepted as a two centuries' old story, might well become the target of critics for being '**crude**' or '**barbaric**'. Perhaps **Walpole**, with a strong sense of irony, was merely getting there first? Or perhaps he was referring to the other meaning of the word **Gothic**: old-fashioned and outlandish – terms which certainly resonate with **Otranto**.

Either way, a new **genre** was born – or at least a new title for a genre which stretches both backwards and forwards from the 1790s birth of its name.

Before Otranto

Even before the birth of the Gothic label, works of literature drawing on the requisite elements held a central place in English Literature. **AQA** gives a choice of five texts from before 1800 in its '**Elements of the Gothic**' option:

William Shakespeare Macbeth (c. 1611)
Christopher Marlowe Dr Faustus (first performed 1592, published 1604)
John Webster The White Devil (1612)
John Milton Paradise Lost, Books 1 and 2 (1667)
Geoffrey Chaucer The Pardoner's Tale (14th c.)

Elements of the supernatural, violence and madness permeate these texts and thus situate them firmly in the **Gothic genre**. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries the use of divine or anti-divine characters as a supernatural element was common: the moral aspects of the **Gothic** tie in well with such elements.

The use of archetypal characters such as God, Satan or Death are not so common in later Gothic, where **metaphorical representations** of them were preferred, or where other supernatural beings provided a similar element.

The (Long) Nineteenth Century

The 19th century was the heyday of the Gothic. After the publication of ***The Castle of Otranto***, at a time when the novel was still a relatively new form, the two came together in a very productive way.

In the late 18th century, novels were proving immensely popular among young women; but were considered by their elders to be hardly educational and often of as a dubious pastime. **Gothic** '**romances**' were everything parents and guardians feared: sensational, darkly sexual, melodramatic and unrealistic.

Ann Radcliffe's many novels are a fine example of this period. The ***Mysteries of Udolpho*** (**1794**) is perhaps her best-known work, parodied in **Austen's** ***Northanger Abbey*** (**1818**).

The Gothic also features in **Henry James's** ***The Turn of the Screw*** (**1898**). Featuring a brooding Italian bandit, masquerading as a nobleman to inveigle the heroine's aunt into matrimony and signing over her vast fortune, **Radcliffe's Udolpho** foreshadows ***Northanger Abbey*** in that its many seemingly supernatural events are in fact attributable to real and knowable forces; but is not quite as prosaic in its explanations as **Austen's**, since at least some of the events turn out to be related to a band of pirates!

The most famous literary challenge of this period is a specifically Gothic one. In the summer of **1816 Lord Byron**, the **Shelleys** and **John Polidori**, **Byron's** personal physician were gathered in **Villa Diodati**, on Lake Geneva. The inhabitants of the villa dare each other to produce the most frightening work they can, with the real challenge supposed to be between **Percy Shelley** and **Byron**, two of the foremost Romantic poets.

However, ironically, it was **Mary Shelley**, who chose to produce **Frankenstein** as a result, and **Polidori**, with his **Vampyre** who triumphed. **The Vampyre** (**published 1819**) was a short story which brought the European legends of the vampires into English for the first time. Its central villain, a **Lord Ruthven**, bore a striking resemblance to **Byron**: **Polidori** had created the tradition of the **Byronic hero** or villain that was to remain a part of Gothic.

Victorian anxieties about the tensions created by scientific advance and a rapidly expanding consciousness of the world outside Britain, a combination of massively improved transport and communication technology with the vast Empire sprawling the globe, found their perfect outlet in the Gothic.

Novels like **Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*** (**1818**) and **Robert Louis Stevenson's *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*** (**1886**) explored the impact of the rapid expansion of scientific knowledge, while ***Dracula*** (**1897**) drew on British fears of the result of reverse imperialism, as immigrants came to the '**Mother**' land.

Victorian Britain was also a country of deep repression, where morality and the appearance of morality were considered imperative, yet one commentator in 1859 claimed there were 55,000 prostitutes working on the streets of London, and that according police reports one in every twenty five houses was of '**ill-fame**' (**W. O'Daniel, Ins and outs of London, 1859**).

This tension, between the denial of sexuality on the surface, and a heaving mass of immorality below, found its natural outlet in Gothic fiction.

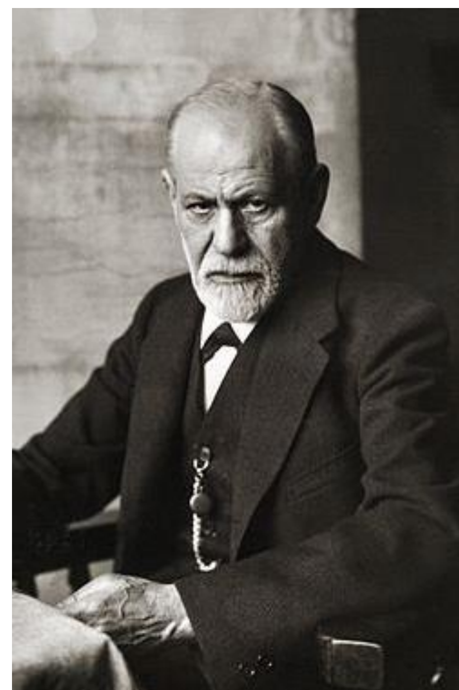
Vampirism is an easy metaphor for sexual intercourse – both the penetrative and the reproductive aspects of it – and vampire novels abounded, some of higher quality than others. ***Varney the Vampyre*** (**1847**) was a '**penny dreadful**' novel released in 109 episodes, and the excuse it gave for titillation can be easily seen in an early description of a victim:

How sweetly the long silken eyelashes lay upon the cheek. Now she moves, and one shoulder is entirely visible—whiter, fairer than the spotless clothing of the bed on which she lies, is the smooth skin of that fair creature, just budding into womanhood…

Varney the Vampyre is not really worth reading for much else other than the titillation it provides, but it does demonstrate the pervasiveness of the **genre** during the Victorian period, and one of the appeals of vampire fiction. Such an appeal is also courted to some extent by ***Dracula***, in scenes such as where the three vampire sisters attempt to seduce **Jonathan Harker**.

Many other Victorian Gothic novels exploited the link between sex and horror, some for more moral purposes than others. **Dracula's** treatment of **Lucy Westenra**, the flirt who receives three marriage proposals in one day, demonstrates that other face of Victorian rectitude, one in which women who display signs of sexuality must be punished for their moral failings: naturally **Lucy** falls victim to the Count and becomes one of the evil '**undead**'.

Turn of the Century, Turn of the Screw



The end of the 19th century and beginning of the 20th was the era which saw the birth of psychology, with **Freud** gaining a hold on our understanding of the psyche in the early 1900s.

Psychological terror and turmoil had always been a major part of Gothic (**both *The White Devil* and *Macbeth* have characters who go mad**), and the greater prominence of this area of study enriched both the creation and understanding of such motifs.

Henry James's *The Turn of the Screw* (**1898**) plays on these motifs: its ambiguous narration, of a governess who is sure the ghosts of her predecessor and the woman's lover are haunting the two children in her charge, abstains from telling us what is really going on, leaving the story open to many different interpretations, including the **Freudian**, and the supernatural.

Gothic in the Twentieth Century and later

Modern Gothic takes many forms. One is reproduction Victoriana, which is set in an historical period, and follows the conventions of that period.

Susan Hill's *The Woman in Black* (**1983**) is perhaps the best known of these, and is very successful in what it attempts to do, when a ghost seeks vengeance for the death of her son,

destroying the life of an innocent individual who becomes involved by accident (**in this case, as in Bram Stoker's *Dracula*, it is a junior solicitor who is sent by his company to undertake what should be a simple legal task**). It is written in entirely authentic-seeming Victorian prose.

Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (**1987**), a novel also set in the 19th century but very definitely a modern work of fiction, contains explicit violence and sexuality. It follows the conventions of the so-called '**slave narratives**', and is powerful in its depiction of the experience of slave families.

Although the initial assumption of the reader is that the character of '**Beloved**' is supernatural, being the adult ghost of the deceased eldest daughter (**who at the age of two had died violently at her mother's hands, the reader later learns**), there is an alternative, prosaic explanation offered later in the book. Both reading s are supported by the text, and readers are left to draw their own conclusions.

Other authors draw on the nineteenth century legacy but make the **genre** their own. The ghost story has been particularly favoured in these kinds of reworkings: **Daphne Du Maurier's Rebecca** (**1938**) places an innocent young woman into a house replete with sinister housekeeper and the ghost – real or metaphorical – of her husband's first wife, with a mystery to unravel about her predecessor's death.

Modern Gothic has also taken a much broader look at the supernatural monsters of earlier literature, and used them in many and varying ways. The vampire has been rehabilitated in modern fiction: **Anne Rice's *Interview with a Vampire*** (**1976**) did much for them as a species, showing the story from the vampire's point of view, with a more sympathetic approach than before.

The first decade of the 21st century has seen an avalanche of young adult literature with romantic heroes drawn from the supernatural canon: ***Twilight*** (**Stephanie Meyer, 2005**) and ***Wicked Lovely*** (**Melissa Marr, 2007**) to name but two. **Supernatural Romance** has become a category of its own, and has drawn Gothic away from its horror elements, although

the attraction of the romantic heroes is still inextricably linked with their danger – the vampire being the ultimate '**bad boy**'!

Elements of Gothic

Setting

There is a well-worn maxim about ghost stories being incompatible with the electric light bulb , and it seems that it applies to many other Gothic plots; and many Gothic stories come from before electricity supplied to homes in any case.

But darkness is a favourite when it comes to the more dramatic scenes.

Poe's *The Raven* (**1845**) takes place upon '**a midnight dreary**' after all! ***The Red Room*** (**1894**) by **H.G. Wells** demonstrates how nothing more than darkness and fear have the power to terrify, as the protagonist dashes desperately across his room trying to relight candle after candle as they are extinguished by what he believes to be some '**mysterious hand**'.

In darkness, familiar objects can easily become unfamiliar and dangerous: a distancing and a making strange of the everyday – a common device of Gothic literature.

The importance of Gothic architecture has already been touched upon. Gothic castles provide a natural home for stories of the supernatural, and much Victorian Gothic relies on this.

The little physical description we get of **Dracula's castle**, for example, mentions the '**great round arches**' and the '**octagonal**' rooms; **Jonathan Harker's** main focus is emotional, but the '**frowning walls**' are also evocative of the massive and intimidating set.

Such use of Gothic architecture is not only confined to the Victorian era, though: **Angela Carter** also evokes it in some of the stories in ***The Bloody Chamber*** (**1979**), most notably in the eponymous story and the final one of the collection, **Wolf-Alice**.

Castles have come to seem a natural home for supernatural and terrifying adventures, particularly since these stories are often associated with a single, mesmerising or powerful figure, whose home must be similarly imposing. The conflict in the stories sometimes stems from a clash between two times, the '**modern**' and the ancient: a setting which is at least partly ancient is therefore needed. Castles can also supply the much needed secret passages, priest's holes and hidden doors.

Aside from the castle, and the aristocracy which seems to be conferred by them, an association with monastic life seems to be a favoured choice. ***The Monk*** (**1796**) by **Matthew Lewis**, lurid and filled with satanic titillation, takes place in a monastery: the use of religious settings and characters serves to heighten the tension between good and evil, and often the identification of the evil character with the devil.

The dramatic skyline of **Whitby Abbey** is evoked in ***Dracula***, and **Jane Austen** plays on this same motif in *Northanger Abbey* (**where Catherine Morland is deeply disappointed to discover that the titular abbey is no more than a modern house built on the site of the former abbey**).

Northanger Abbey itself bucks the trend for Gothic setting by being not only a '**normal**' house but also clean and in good repair. Decay is the order of the day in much Gothic: the building being symbolic of the moral, bodily or social decay embodied in the story.

Edgar Allan Poe's *The Fall of the House of Ussher* (**1839**) takes this to extreme, setting his story in a paradoxical house where '**there seemed to be a wild inconsistency between its still perfect adaptation of parts, and the crumbling condition of the individual stones**.'

Foreign settings are also a common element. The hey-day of Gothic in the early 19th century is also the time when those who could afford it were exploring the Continent and discovering the myths and legends of others.

Vampires and werewolves are both European legends with no equivalent in the British Isles. The exoticism and fear of a new place both served to make Gothic more attractive still. It is also much easier to believe that the fantastical is taking place in another country than merely '**down the road**'.

Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* mirrors the trip around Europe that she took with her husband **Percy Bysshe Shelley**, although the Arctic framing device has a setting of which she had no first-hand knowledge! Even **Shakespeare's *Macbeth*** locates the Gothic elements of witches and ghosts in a country considered strange and barbarous by a 17th century English audience: Scotland!

The White Devil by **John Webster**, like many revenge tragedies, takes place in Europe – specifically in Italy – exploiting the tension in the English view of Roman Catholics, and the limited knowledge that the audience would have had of the place.

Authors also like originate the danger in foreign parts and then bring them home to terrify the populace.

Dracula may begin in the remote parts of Eastern Europe, but it rapidly translocates to the familiar settings of **Whitby** (**whose Gothic associations have only grown since then**) and London which is where the vampire presents a real threat to Victorian Britain: our heroes drive him out and chase him across Europe to finish off the threat in the place in which it originated.

A natural partner for the tendency to use setting in Gothic as a mirror to the plot is provided by the oft-used device of pathetic fallacy. Gothic aims to heighten emotions and tensions: the use of the weather as an extra dimension to setting is too valuable to pass over. **Austen** mocks this too in **Northanger Abbey**, as **Catherine Morland**, having terrified herself investigating her room at the Abbey, is sent flying to bed by a gust of wind that blows out her candle. **Austen** reflects that '[**Catherine**] **had not been used to feel alarm from wind, but now every blast seemed fraught with awful intelligence**.'

Every blast does indeed seem so in Gothic literature: if the weather is mentioned, it is likely to be for a reason. In a novel such as **Emily Bronte's *Wuthering Heights*** (**1847**), the weather becomes almost a character in itself, so tied in is the bleakness of the setting to the emotions of the protagonists.

Deformation: Ugliness is more than skin deep

It is partly due to the fact that its heyday lay in the Victorian era that Gothic fiction has so strongly identified the physically monstrous with the morally deformed. There is also a tendency towards metaphor at the heart of many Gothic tales. Whatever the reason, however, it cannot be denied that appearance matters.

In **Stevenson's *Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde***, the appearance of **Hyde** is strikingly different from his alter-ego.

Mr. Hyde was pale and dwarfish, he gave an impression of deformity without any nameable malformation, he had a displeasing smile, he had borne himself to the lawyer with a sort of murderous mixture of timidity and boldness, and he spoke with a husky, whispering and somewhat broken voice; all these were points against him, but not all of these together could explain the hitherto unknown disgust, loathing and fear with which **Mr. Utterson** regarded him.

Utterson goes on to identify '**Satan's signature**' upon **Hyde's** face. His appearance is constructed by **Stevenson** to be symbolic of his character, and the transformation that **Jekyll** undergoes is also symbolic: **Hyde** is smaller than the doctor, and this has been seen to

represent the idea that **Jekyll's** character, good overall, has a small core of evil subsumed within it. Just as the evil is smaller than the whole of **Jekyll's** personality, Hyde is smaller than his physical person. The word '**broken**' gives us the clue: **Hyde** is not a '**whole**' man. Several times in the novel, characters mention that **Hyde** gives the appearance of being deformed in some indescribable way: there is the comforting notion that evil can be recognised in outward show. It's a theme which occurs in many of the '**monster**' type of Gothic novels.

The eponymous doctor of **Frankenstein** seeks to create a creature which is beautiful, but when it awakes, he recoils in horror and disgust from something whose lustrous hair and teeth '**only formed a more horrid contrast with his watery eyes… his shrivelled complexion and straight black lips**.'

It is almost as if the unnaturalness of what he is doing has been kept at bay by his scientific enthusiasm for doing what has not been done before – a strong metaphor for the fears about scientists blinded by the search for knowledge, but who do not think about the consequences of gaining that knowledge – until the moment when his creation becomes reality.

Mary Shelley is much more subtle in ***Frankenstein*** than to merely equate deformity with evil; it is at least partly the creature's ugliness, leading to his rejection by his creator and by humanity, that leads to his becoming evil. Nevertheless, what is on the outside mirrors what is on the inside.

The link, mirror or reversal, between appearance and the underlying character is central to **Oscar Wilde's** ***The Picture of Dorian Gray*** (**1890**).

As **Gray** becomes more debauched, his picture ages and withers accordingly, reaping the rewards of his sins, whereas the man himself remains young and beautiful, unnaturally so. This gives a more subtle warning: external beauty cannot be trusted because it can hide a terrifying interior.

Yet the visual reminder of evil remains a core part of this novel, and is just as '**Gothic**' as the element of the supernatural that enables the painting to do **Gray's** aging for him.

This theme is also picked up in those traditionally beautiful monsters, the vampires.

Dracula, when **Jonathan Harker** first encounters him, is an old man, yet his lips show '**remarkable ruddiness**.' **Stoker** also draws our attention to the '**peculiarly sharp white teeth**' and to **Dracula's** hands, which '**strange to say**' have '**hairs in the centre of the palm**.'

These features bring animalistic qualities to someone who, though intimidating, remains human featured, and indeed, must be attractive in order to acquire his prey. The original vampire in English, in **John Polidori's** ***The Vampyre***, appears based on his previous employer, **Lord Byron**, despite his '**dead grey eye**' and '**deadly hue**', is surrounded by women throwing themselves at him: vampires cannot be too monstrous.

However, we can see the difference between what a vampire is and the person they were, in the person of **Lucy Westenra**, in ***Dracula***.

When our heroes encounter her as a vampire for the first time, they discover that '**The sweetness was turned to adamantine, heartless cruelty, and the purity to voluptuous wantonness**.' She is still the beauty she once was, apart from the fact that her eyes have changed to be '**unclean and full of hell fire, instead of the pure, gentle orbs we knew**.'

She is beautiful in a different way, though, which is sexual and inappropriate for a woman in Victorian England – and therefore evil. When she loses her soul and becomes a vampire, it becomes obvious in her appearance. Beautiful women are always dangerous!

In ***Macbeth*** we see **Shakespeare** construct the witches' '**otherness**' in a way that is suggested at once to ***Macbeth*** and ***Banquo*** by their strange appearance, '**so wither'd and so wild**'. The instant recognition that they are supernatural is prompted by their appearance. The witches are certainly not normal: '**Your beards forbid me to interpret That you are so**' says **Banquo**. Women are either disturbingly attractive (**the three sisters in *Dracula* for example**) or so ugly as to be unfeminine.

Sexuality and The Gothic

The link between **Lucy Westenra's** sexuality and her fate in ***Dracula*** has already been explored, but there are many other instances in Gothic literature where sexuality has a role to play.

Dealing as it does with the darker undercurrents of human nature, and gaining much of its popularity through its references to the seamier side of life, Gothic has long been associated with sexuality, and perhaps particularly taboo sex.

Sheridan Le Fanu's *Carmilla* (**1872**) is a novella in which the titular female vampire attracts and preys on a young woman: the lesbian overtones are deliberately used for sensationalist purposes, and play on Victorian notions of propriety.

Carmilla herself is stunningly beautiful, but her ability to attract a woman, rather than a man, makes her particularly dangerous. There is a suggestion of a similar attraction between **Jonathan Harker** and **Count Dracula**.

Homosexuality as a taboo has grown less shocking, but the partnership between **Lestat** and **Louis** in **Anne Rice's *Interview with a Vampire***, with their mock-daughter, shows that this aspect remains a part of Gothic fiction.

It may be a moralising cliché of modern teen-slasher movies that you must never have sex outside of marriage or you'll be the next one to die, but that cliché itself stems from the **genre's** roots in Gothic horror. **Victor Frankenstein's** fiancée is safe until her wedding night, **Lucy Westenra** loses her life because of her flirtation, and we can trace this back to the Fall, when **Eve** takes a fateful bite from the apple at the instigation of the serpent, an incident capable of more **Freudian** interpretation than most.

Other taboos explored in Gothic texts include bestiality and incest. ***The Castle of Otranto*** has suggestions of incest, albeit at one step removed, when **Isabella's** dead fiancé's father decides to marry her instead. She flees from him, regarding it as incestuous, and his inappropriate lustfulness is undoubtedly a factor in his downfall.

Victor Frankenstein marries **Elizabeth**, a girl who has not only been raised as his sister, but who also took on the care of his siblings upon his mother's death. This carries forward into modern Gothic also: Beloved sees the anti-heroine seduce – in fact, virtually rape – her supposed mother's boyfriend, an action which is designed to force him out of the house.

Bestiality is partially present in the attraction between the '**monsters**' of Gothic fiction and their victims; it also becomes a major part of the stories in **Angela Carter's** ***The Bloody Chamber***.

Here, however, the taboo is often reversed, and it becomes an image of liberation of female sexuality, and power. Her stories draw not only on the Gothic but on fairy tales, and the combination of the two, both powerful allegorical tools, leads to some intriguing treatments of traditional lines.

Werewolves, an element who rarely takes centre stage in written Gothic literature in English, are brought to the fore, with their potential realised in stories that draw also on ***Little Red Riding Hood***.

In a Mirror Darkly : Society's need for Gothic

One of the functions of Gothic literature is to mirror and explore concerns which are contemporary to their writing. ***Macbeth*** is not only **Shakespeare's** attempt to please a new king, but also features witchcraft, something that the new king was fascinated with, having penned his own treatise, **Daemonologie** in 1594.

Witches had been feared and sought out for prosecution, particularly in Scotland at the end of the 16th century: it was considered a real and believed phenomenon that women could consort with the devil.

How to prove witchcraft was real and how to deal with such creatures of Satan had been laid down long before in the German treatise of 1486, **the Malleus Maleficarum** or '**Hammer against Witches**'. This book was much used throughout Europe as a guide to finding and proving witchcraft.

Direct contact with the divine – and with the '**anti-Christ**' – is an aspect of literature of this period, before Gothic took a step back from a concrete external entity to explore instead the '**inner**' evil of humans and the monsters they create, yet still within a strong moral framework.

Marlowe's Faustus features a man who, from society's moral viewpoint, '**overreaches**' himself in his desire for power, over and above the knowledge he has already acquired: the hubris, the '**overreaching**' is the **Hamartia** or '**tragic flaw**' that is a signifying characteristic of many fictional Gothic characters.

At the end of the 18th century, Gothic was still mainly seen as a frivolous entertainment for bored young ladies, and though it was popular, it did not resonate with everyone.

When it began to echo concerns – still present today – of the tensions between what scientific progress could and should achieve, then it began to resonate more strongly.

Frankenstein's subtitle is '**The Modern Prometheus**', and this reference to the man who stole fire from the gods, and was severely punished for it, in Greek mythology, has to be a clue to how the author viewed her work. Usurping the role of the Creator by creating life leaves **Frankenstein** in an unenviable position: he does not have the skill nor the compassion to make his creation work as a person.

The tension between science and religion is also present in **Dracula**: **Van Helsing**, the exponent of such modern medical techniques as the blood transfusion (**no matter how primitive and unlikely to work in that form!**) has to turn to the '**Host**' which he has a special dispensation to use to close **Lucy Westenra's** tomb against the '**Undead**'.

Science cannot hold off the inevitable, at which point the characters must turn to religion. These two novels bookend a century in which the publication of **Darwin's** ***The Origin of Species*** and ***The Descent of Man*** were just part of a wider ranging debate, often fiercely fought, between proponents of religion and science. Gothic echoes and draws on this debate.

The title of the collection of short stories in which **Carmilla** is published is '**In a Glass Darkly**', a reference to **St Paul's** image of the imperfect understanding we have of the divine while alive, an apt title for a Gothic collection.

The critic **Steven Bruhm** has linked society's desire for '**modern Gothic**' (**in the shape of both novels and films**) to **Freudian psychology** ('**The contemporary Gothic: why we need it' in The Cambridge Companion to Gothic Fiction, 2002**), seeing it as a forum for exploring '**Oedipal complexes**' and deep longings and fears, such as loss.

Oedipal complexes are a traditional part of Gothic – at least partly linked to the tensions with religion, as discussed in the paragraph above – with ***Frankenstein*** and his monster being a

classic example. ***Bruhm*** brings in modern authors such as **Stephen King**, and particularly his ***The Shining*** (**1977**) to support this.

For him, Gothic enables the exploration of deep psychological fears to do with separation and loss: even modern Gothic often harks back to a (**imagined**) ideal past age, in which social stability can be safely threatened by the monster or other danger, because it will survive.

This is no new thing: ***The Castle of Otranto*** is also set in an imagined past era, which has no correlation with reality. (**This is also reflected in the use of foreign territory as a setting, discussed above**.)

The Sublime

The philosophical concept of '**the sublime**' has been violently argued, but the definition, which is most useful to, and therefore considered in conjunction with, Gothic, is that of **Edmund Burke**, in his ***Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*** (**1757**).

For **Burke**, the sublime was '**whatever is fitted in any sort to excite the ideas of pain, and danger**', including terror, so that it provoked '**the strongest emotion of which the mind is capable**'. This taking of the emotions to the highest pitch, a sort of literary roller-coaster, is the distinguishing feature of Gothic from mere gore.

It can be argued that this element of the sublime is akin to the hyperbole which is a key part of so much Gothic fiction: the use of the exaggerated, even surreal, context enables authors to reflect back their societies in a distorted and unthreatening way.

It is important to note that for **Burke** the '**sublime**' was the product of negative feelings or experiences, so that it cannot be the same as beauty. The role of the monster in Gothic becomes clearer in this light: they are examples of ugliness taken to such an extreme that they become pleasurable in the horror they provoke.

Others have suggested the sensation of being overwhelmed, as by immense geography, is approaching the sublime: **Victor Frankenstein's** experience in the boat on the lake as he gazes at the sky seems an apt example.

Odds and Sods: Curses, Doubles and Secrets

There are many more recurring motifs in Gothic fiction. When a **genre** has been going for so long, the opportunities to play with it have been many, and writers retain what works.

Madness is a common theme, but so is the existence of a mysterious curse – the witches' promises to **Macbeth**, that he can be killed by no man '**of woman born**', and that he will not be defeated until '**Great Birnam Wood to high Dunsinane Hill shall come**' can be seen in this light, and **The Castle of Otranto** also depends on the fulfilment of a dreadful curse for its dénouement.

Both these curses are phrased so as to seem impossible in their requirements, but it is the feature of Gothic to enable the impossible to become commonplace, and the reader can be sure that if a curse is uttered, it will be fulfilled! **Frankenstein's** creation promises that he will be with him '**on his wedding night**', and the dramatic tension caused when **Victor** ignores this warning, going against the audience's understanding of the **genre**, is very powerful.

Secrets are the staple of Gothic: they haunt the **genre** like ghosts. Think of ***Rebecca***, ***Beloved***, **Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre*** (**1847**) and the eponymous tale in ***The Bloody Chamber***, for just a hint.

The revelation of a secret can do two things: it can release the tension that its existence caused, or it can bring devastation.

Hunting for a secret, is a sure-fire way for a character to find themselves in danger, particularly for females. So ingrained in the **genre** is this motif, that **Catherine Morland** in **Northanger Abbey** searches feverishly for any clues she can find, knowing that there must be a secret, and ends up with just a laundry list to show for it.

The villainous older man who abuses, murders or imprisons his innocent wife is yet another recurring element. There may well be a younger female – our heroine? – in the picture, and indeed, the wrongdoing of the husband is often the secret that needs to be found.

In Gothic novels from the end of the 18th century, doubles or doppelgangers are common, and are a natural tool of the writer working in sensationalist fiction. The use of the double is also related to the role of allegory in Gothic, where it can be seen as symbolic of the alienation of a character. Then too, there is the doubling aspect of alter-egos, from **Jekyll and Hyde** to virtually any vampire in fiction.

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