

The Gothic Experience

The First Wave of Gothic Novels: 1765-1820

The English Gothic novel began with Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto: A Gothic Story* (1765). 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 that they have become stereotypes. But for most modern readers, however, *The Castle of Otranto* is dull reading; except for the villain Manfred, the characters are insipid; the action moves at such a fast clip that the novel lacks emphasis and suspense, despite the supernatural manifestations and a young maiden's terrified flight through dark vaults. The novel was so enormously popular that it was quickly imitated by other novelists, thereby initiating a genre. The genre takes its name from *The Castle of Otranto's* medieval—or [Gothic](#)—setting, as well as the subtitle; 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 the eighteenth century England, was Ann Radcliffe. She added suspense, painted evocative landscapes and moods or atmosphere, portrayed increasingly complex, fascinatingly-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.

Source URL: <http://academic.brooklyn.cuny.edu/english/melani/gothic/history.html>
Saylor URL: <http://www.saylor.org/courses/engl403>

Inspired by Radcliffe and influenced by German sensationalist horror tales, Matthew Lewis wrote *The Monk* (1796). The novel follows the lust-driven monk Ambrosio from one abominable act to another—rape, incest, matricide, burial alive—to his gory death and well-deserved damnation. Naturally it was enormously successful and controversial. The story goes that Radcliffe, a sedate, conventional matron, was appalled at his novel and his acknowledging her influence on him, so she responded with *The Italian*, whose villain is also a monk, to show how a novel of terror and suspense should be written.

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 distinguished by some critics as 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 with male being equated with horror Gothic.

In 1818, Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein, or the Modern Prometheus* introduced the theme of the dangers of science and created the obsessed scientist, who was to develop into the mad scientist, and the archetypal Monster. *Frankenstein* has been called the first science fiction novel; she of course thought she was writing a novel of terror.

<>The publication of Charles' Maturin's *Melmoth the Wanderer* in 1820 is the last of what some critics have called the Classic Gothic novel and

for others marks the end of the true Gothic novel. His forte is showing character under extreme conditions, both psychologically, spiritually, and physically; Melmoth has sold his soul to the devil to live another one hundred fifty years, with an out, if he can only find someone else to take his place. The novel is powerful and certainly one of the great tales of mystery and terror, despite its loose structure.

Gothic Fiction in the Nineteenth Century

Most critics, literary historians, and readers see Gothic fiction as continuing to the present time; though it has undergone great changes, the themes, effects, and conventions of the earliest Gothic novels are alive and well, appearing in novels, movies, TV dramas and cartoons, and computer games. Because the Gothic stream became so broad and took so many branches and turnings, I will cover only a few highlights and discuss, during the course of the semester, the historical significance of the authors we will be reading.

An early writer who transformed Gothic fiction was Edgar Allan Poe. He contributed a sophisticated analysis of the psychological processes, insight into the unconscious, a sense of structure, an insistence on unity of tone and mood. His work shows the close connection between Gothic fiction and detective fiction, which grows out of the Gothic, and the continuing overlap between Gothic fiction and science fiction.

<>The modern ghost story developed late in the nineteenth century, which was a skeptical age. In an age of general belief in ghosts and similar spectral manifestations, ghost stories are generally matter of fact, like Defoe's "True Relation of the Apparition of one Mrs. Veal" (1706), which disappoints most modern readers because it lacks mystery and suspense. The ghost in modern fiction takes more forms, such as the animal ghost, and may be more active and malevolent than in early Gothic fiction; Walpole's ghost is singularly inactive; the only effect the ghost's appearances have is to frighten servants and, finally, to destroy the castle as a result of expanding to his full size; it is not clear that he

intended to destroy the castle. The modern ghost may have its own purposes, act on its personal emotions, like jealousy or the pleasure of inflicting pain, and not be the mere instrument of an outside force, like righting injustice or revenging a wrong. Ghost stories continued to be popular through the first decades of the twentieth century.

Gothic Fiction in the Twentieth Century

The horror tale experienced an upsurge in popularity at the beginning of the twentieth century. Perhaps it can be explained, at least in part, as a way of expressing the horrors of World War I and the revulsion at its devastation.

Several new variants of Gothic fiction arose. A commercially successful, mass Gothic novel, often called Modern Gothic or Gothic Romance, is particularly written for women by women and started when some novels by Victoria Holt and Phyllis A. Whitney were issued by Ace Books in the 1960s. These novels follow a pattern: an innocent, inexperienced, young heroine suspects her superior suitor or husband, who is usually older, often wealthy, and worldly-wise, of a crime; she may have to compete with an older woman for his affections, a competition she of course wins. The book covers are typically stereotyped, with a young woman fleeing a mansion or castle looming in the background. Terry Carr, a former editor at Ace books, bluntly describes the Modern Gothic's content and appeal:

The basic appeal... is to women who marry guys and then begin to discover that their husbands are strangers... so there's a simultaneous attraction/repulsion, love/fear going on. Most of the "pure" Gothics tend to have a handsome, magnetic suitor or husband who may or may not be a lunatic and/or murderer...it remained for U.S. women to discover they were frightened of their husbands.

What these novels do for the women who devour them is to reassure them of the primacy and the power of heterosexual romance and love, to allay their doubts about what it takes to be a desirable, beloved woman,

and to reassure them that their husbands are not dangerous. Though written in 1938, Daphne Du Maurier's *Rebecca* is the quintessential Modern Gothic thriller and later novels often claim to be written in the style of *Rebecca*. Publishers also attach the label "gothic" to a specific kind of paperback historical-romance potboiler. Comparable formulaic books written specifically for male readers include the Western and hard-boiled detective stories. I have devoted so much space to this form, because I do not intend to refer to it again, either in writing or in class. <>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. The contemporary writers James Purdy, Joyce Carol Oates, and John Hawkes have been linked under the name of New American Gothic.

SOME CONNECTIONS

It is generally agreed that Gothicism is related to romanticism; what is not generally agreed upon is what the connections are. The two movements are connected chronologically, use many of the same themes, like the hero-villain with a secret, and deal with psychological processes. The eighteenth century Gothic writers are often described as precursors to Romanticism because they valued sensibility, exalted the sublime, and appealed to the reader's imagination. And Gothic elements appear in Romantic poetry like Samuel Coleridge's "Christabel," Lord Byron's "The Giaour," and John Keats's "The Eve of St. Agnes." Elements of the Gothic have also made their way into mainstream writing. They are found in Sir Walter Scott's novels, Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre*, Emily Bronte's *Wuthering Heights*, Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick*, Charles Dickens's *Great Expectations* and his unfinished *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*, and Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*.

Revised: August 26, 2008