The Gothic as a Set of Literary Themes

In “The Structure of Gothic Convention,” Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick opens her argument by saying “Once you know that a novel is of the Gothic kind (and you can tell from the title), you can predict its contents with an unnerving certainty” (9). In her essay, from The Coherence of Gothic Conventions, Sedgwick is able to distill the genre into a relatively straightforward collection of predictable characteristics: an oppressive landscape, a sensible but impetuous heroine, a sexually deviant tyrant, and a convoluted plotline. According to Sedgwick, the Gothic novel operates through a reducible formula that guides its themes, plot, and structure. Indeed, the Gothic does include a set of rather expected characteristics, including supernatural heroes, labyrinths, ruined castles, and pursued heroines—all of which will be studied in more depth as the course continues. Almost every one of these novels also has a gloomy tone intended to evoke horror, fear, and terror.

The prevalence of these characteristics in Gothic literature echoes Mishra’s concept of the genre as a mode, rather than a historical event. Also like Mishra, Sedgwick contends that a defining characteristic of the genre is that the self is “massively blocked off from something to which it ought to normally have access” (12), which echoes Mishra’s idea of the genre as a tension between surfaces and realities. According to both critics, the Gothic resolves its horror once that which is blocked or hidden can finally be accessed by the protagonist. In the Gothic, therefore, the conventions become a reliable way to project a similar psychological terror onto characters.

Works Cited: