

The Gothic as a Portrait of the Fallen World

In *The Gothic Novel*, Ann B. Tracy represents the genre as a picture of the fallen world. While the genre clearly evokes terror, it also creates a world that suffers the effects of deterioration, both in the physical and emotional sense. In her critical study, she uses the term “fallen” to suggest a world dominated by ruined places, buildings, and people—a motif that simultaneously creates a sense of tension within the plot as well as through reminding the reader of real social changes that were occurring at the time.

According to Tracy, the decaying scenery, perhaps best represented by the Gothic haunted house, suggests the decline in economic prosperity. Also included in this “fallen” paradigm are images of decaying structures like castles, monasteries, abbeys, as well as unraveling social structures. In her book, Tracy contends that the fallen world “is characterized by the concentration and magnification of fears and problems inherent in the ‘normal’ world” (315). As she suggests, the crumbling structures in the Gothic do have real-world implications. At the time of the Gothic novel’s surge in popularity, the British landscape was literally populated with ruined structures; some of these were remains of buildings abandoned after the Protestant’s dissolution of the monasteries, and others were castles that were simply too expensive to maintain. In this way, the “fallen” motif within the novels reflects outwardly on real political issues with which readers surely would have been familiar.

But the decaying scenery also represents the “fallen” emotional state of the characters who populate its landscape. On one hand, the villains of the novel have typically “fallen” from grace. They are grotesque, sometimes literally inhuman, men who are isolated from mainstream society. In *Frankenstein*, a text that will be discussed more thoroughly later in the course, the protagonist himself becomes a representation of the “fallen” hero once his experiment goes awry. Also, these novels frequently feature “fallen” women, who, in the Victorian sense, have become tainted by their sexual impurities—a plot that is one of the central elements in Lewis’s *The Monk* and, in an entirely different way, figures in Stoker’s *Dracula*. Once again, the “fallen” motif signifies a certain sense of the real world and perceived social problems of the time, including fears about women’s sexuality as well as about the potential effects of science. In this manner, the “fallen” creates a significant connection between the novel and the contemporary world, which, in turn, becomes a terrifying experience for the reader.

Works Cited:

Tracy, Ann Blaisdell. *Patterns of Fear in the Gothic Novel, 1790-1830*. New York: Arno, 1980.