

## What Is the Gothic? Issues of Genre, Trope, and Form

The Gothic is used to refer to a number of cultural phenomena from architecture to late-20<sup>th</sup> century youth culture and music to various literary and cinematic works. In general, the term connotes a fascination with or an investment in the darker side of human psychology with an emphasis on the unknown or the mysterious and the potentially terrifying and disturbing. The term originated with the name of some of the Germanic tribes (e.g., the Goths, the Visigoths, and the Ostrogoths) who sacked Rome and rampaged across Europe from the 3<sup>rd</sup> to 5<sup>th</sup> centuries. More directly, it came to refer to medieval architecture that rejected classical styles for more ornate structures involving pointed arches, flying buttresses, and great vaults. This architecture is exemplified in some of the most famous medieval European cathedrals and castles. In the 18<sup>th</sup> century, Gothic architecture experienced a revival in England, and at the same time, an interest in medieval subjects led to the development of what came to be known as Gothic literature.

Gothic novels were constructed around certain trope-centered formulas involving ruined, haunted castles, labyrinths, shadows, omens, and darkness. These novels were often centered upon heroines in need of frequent rescue and heroes with hidden, unknown identities. Perhaps more important was the sense of emotion that the Gothic novel awoke in its readers—a literary experience that would have seemed foreign but titillating to readers accustomed to the more rational Enlightenment texts. In the Gothic novel, the reader entered a mysterious world defined by drama, suspense, and terror. In this way, the Gothic novel was similar to another important literary form of the time: the sentimental novel. The sentimental novel, like the Gothic, focused on emotions that would overwhelm the human senses. In these texts, emotion and instinct were of far greater importance than rational thought. To this extent, these novels signified the clash between reason and emotion that dominated 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century discourse.

Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto*, published in 1764, has been generally credited as the first Gothic novel. In this case, the term Gothic referred to the novel's medieval setting in a castle in Italy, and many of the Gothic novels that followed would similarly be set in castles from the distant past, often in European countries still dominated (from an English point of view) by the Catholic Church. As the genre developed, Gothic grew to include all sorts of texts that involved mysterious, sometimes supernatural events; extreme emotions, especially elements of terror; convoluted plots with heroines trapped in ancient castles or abbeys with secret passageways; licentious villains; and multiple hidden identities. These features continued to define Gothic through Victorian and American literature and still define Gothic today.

The medieval, or Gothic, setting invoked certain ideas through its implicit contrast with the contemporary 18<sup>th</sup> century in England. Where England of the Enlightenment era often imagined itself as refined and rational, as controlled by a legitimately elected

government that protected the rights of its citizens and fostered economic and social progress, the medieval era—especially in other countries—could be demonized as irrational, as dominated by tyrannical authority linked to the aristocracy and the Catholic Church (many Gothic villains are either Catholic clergy or from the nobility), and as saturated by superstitious beliefs, including Catholicism. At the same time that Gothic texts castigated the medieval era as primitive or unrefined, they simultaneously suggested or indulged a nostalgic desire for a less rational, less controlled past, if only from a safe perspective in the present.

Walpole's novel was incredibly popular and immediately spurred numerous imitations. Over the next half-century, Gothic novels were probably the most popular subgenre in England. Their popularity, in some respects, seems to suggest a reaction against the Enlightenment emphasis on reason, scientific knowledge, and logical explanations. Fantastic elements within Gothic fiction, such as the haunted castle in *Castle of Otranto* or the appearance of demons in Mathew Lewis's *The Monk*, conjured up a world vastly different from the well-ordered, potentially fully knowable universe of much Enlightenment thought. Further, these works' emphasis on uncontrollable passions and on flawed judgment countered the stereotypical view of Enlightenment cool reason. Yet from its beginning as a form, the novel had focused as much on psychological turmoil, epistemological uncertainty, and conflicting desires as it had on close observation, logical calculation, and rational discourse. Enlightenment thinkers most often saw emotions—at least the right emotions—as intrinsic to the proper functioning of the individual and society; you will see more on this in the subunit on sentimental fiction. What differed in the Gothic was that the emotions it described and attempted to call up in its readers were not those necessary for the proper functioning of a rational society—particularly sympathy, sensibility to the suffering of others—but rather those that potentially disrupted social bonds, including unrestrained sexuality and the sadomasochistic pleasures of dominating others or being terrified. On a deeper level, Gothic works sometimes suggested the interconnection between these good and bad emotions or desires, as the ability to sympathize with others led both readers and heroes and heroines to vicariously experience being terrified and/or terrorizing others.

While Walpole's novel and many other Gothic texts involved events that were described as supernatural, many Gothic texts, including those of the most popular Gothic novelist of the era, Ann Radcliffe, turned on what has been called the *explained supernatural*. In those works, events that first appeared inexplicable on the basis of scientific or rational explanation would later be revealed to be the work of the nefarious plotting of a villain or to derive from the misunderstanding of the main character, usually a naïve heroine. The explained supernatural in the Gothic raised the specter of phenomena outside human knowledge, but in the end these works conformed, to a large extent, with the Enlightenment's ideal of being able to discover the logical workings of even the most mysterious events. At the same time, these works emphasized the difficulty of making logical sense of the world, the possibility that our understanding is manipulated or ill-guided, and that, more often than not, our view of the world is flawed by our subjective viewpoint.

Another development within late-18<sup>th</sup>-century British Gothicism was its political use. Especially in reaction to the French Revolution, British novelists and political writers frequently invoked Gothic imagery either to describe the terror of the Revolution or to indicate the irrational conditions that the Enlightenment-inspired Revolution was supposed to overcome. Most famously, Edmund Burke's enflamed rhetoric in *Reflections on the Revolution in France* partook of the Gothic theme of sexualized passions raging out of control. On the other hand, the radical political philosopher William Godwin's novels, especially *Things as They Are; or the Adventures of Caleb Williams* in 1794, use Gothic tropes to describe the unjust nature of the current undemocratic society. In Godwin's hands, the mysterious and irrational nature of events and behavior derived not from the disordered or complex nature of humankind but rather from the failures of society.

The Gothic has continued to be a popular mode or subgenre since its inauguration but has often been viewed as less aesthetically significant, yet Gothic elements appear frequently in canonical literature. In particular, the Romanticism that would chronologically follow the appearance of the Gothic pursued the path opened by Gothic fiction with its frequent subordination of reason to emotion and instinct; its willingness to explore intense, sometimes disruptive passions; and its emphasis on individual, subjective perspective. Furthermore, the Gothic, as we will see, emerged from the literary and philosophical considerations of the importance of the individual, investigations of the relationship between reason and the emotions, and empiricist attempts to make the body and bodily sensations the foundation of knowledge. In those ways, despite its sometimes seemingly sensationalist elements and its indulging in the graphic or in prurient voyeurism, the Gothic provides key insights into literary and philosophical questions at the center of the late 18<sup>th</sup> century and of modern thought more broadly.

### Summary

- Broadly speaking, Gothic refers to any work that indulges in or explores dark emotions, supernatural occurrences, and/or mysterious events.
- The term Gothic derives directly from medieval architecture and more distantly from the Germanic tribes who invaded Rome.
- Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* has been typically credited as the first Gothic novel and inaugurated many of its key tropes—a medieval setting, irrational passions, supernatural events.
- The Gothic would develop in many ways over the course of the late-18<sup>th</sup> century, becoming a tool of politics as well as serving as entertainment.
- One of the key developments during this period was the explained supernatural, epitomized by the works of Ann Radcliffe, in which seemingly supernatural events are explained through rational causes in the end.
- The Gothic was more than the merely sensationalistic or popular; it had firm bases in the most important philosophical questions of the time and it influenced later movements such as Romanticism.