

English Literature of the Romantic Period, 1798-1832
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The Gothic Novel

Welcome to the Fifth Lesson of the week. Our focus on various genres of the English Romantic Period brings us to a key genre that we will talk about today, the Gothic.

Influenced by trends in architecture which date back to the 12th century across Europe, Gothicism was a version of the Romantic sensibility, a version of Romanticism whose interest lay in what may be called the darker side of human sentiments and passions. Gothic architecture itself may be seen in castles with turrets, labyrinthine passages, spires and dungeons. Such architecture has been part of castles but also churches and other buildings. For the Romantics, this was an ideal setting for conspiracies, dark secrets in a family, ghosts and violence.

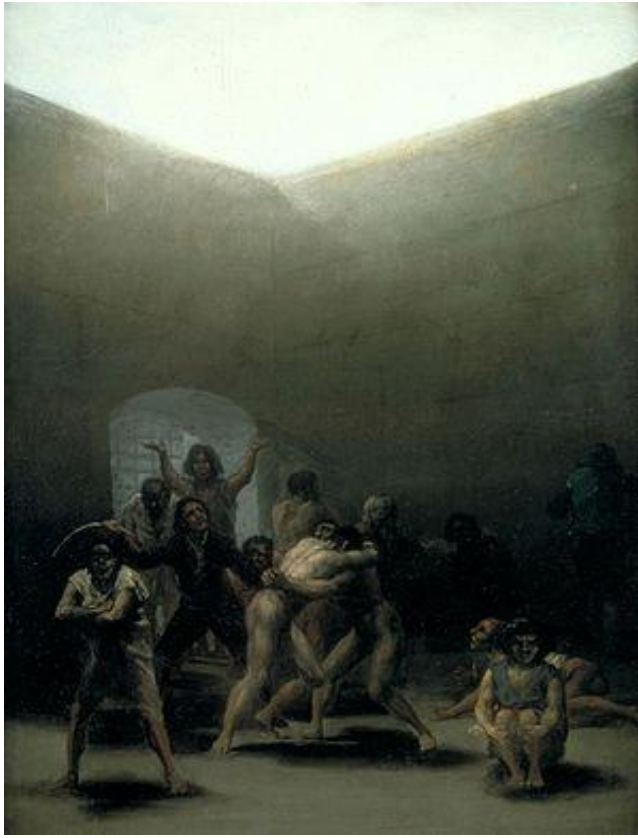
Paranoia, evil and desire became the hallmark of characters in the Gothic novel. Matthew Lewis's *The Monk*, Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto*, usually credited as the first Gothic novel, and an entire host of works from women authors, Clara Reeve, Maria Edgeworth and Ann Radcliffe are significant Gothic texts. Texts like *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, Radcliffe's famous novel, were bestsellers in their time.

The genre and mode also adopted ideas from the visual arts, most notably from works such as Henry Fuseli's *The Nightmare*.



The Nightmare, Henry Fuseli, 1781

In the painting we see the woman in some kind of semi-conscious state, the little gnome-like horrific ugly figure sitting on her, a horse's head in a corner and what looks like a bunch of unguents and medical supplies on the table next to her. The woman may or may not be sleeping, may or may not be dead or unconscious, but that is not the subject of our conversation here today. What we need to note right now is that texts like Henry Fuseli's *The Nightmare* were key elements in the making of the Gothic tradition.



Francisco Goya, *Yard with Lunatics*, 1794

Saturn Devouring His Son, Francisco Goya, 1819-1823



The Second of May, 1808, Francisco Goya, 1814

What is common to all of these paintings? What is common between Goya and Henry Fuseli? In all four, Fuseli's *The Nightmare* and the three Goya paintings, what is striking is not only the obsession with violence but also a clear interest in states of the mind like paranoia, madness, mental distress. It is also characterized by an interest in disease. The Gothic as an aesthetic mode is given to certain kinds of depiction of characters, landscapes and settings, and a certain view of relationships and social order.

It was keen on violence of various kinds, class tensions on the one hand, familial tensions on the other but also the violence going on in people's minds. The theme of madness is often found in Gothic texts. In Goya's *Yard with Lunatics*, we see an image of an asylum, of mentally disturbed people crowding together, behaving irrationally. Also, note the violence of *2nd of May, 1808*, and *Saturn Devouring his Son*.

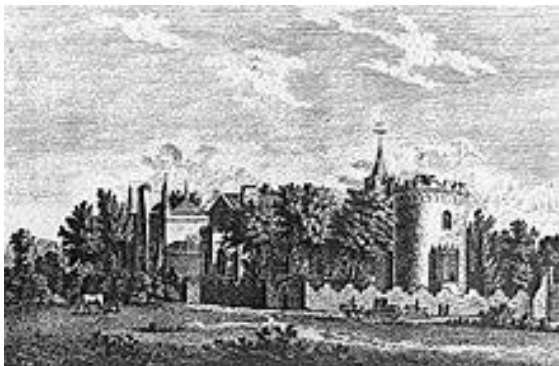
The tradition of the Gothic novel is not something restricted to the 18th and early 19th centuries. In the 20th century, Stephen King, Thomas Herbert, Michael Cunningham, and Joyce Carol Oates have all been influenced by the Gothic. The supernatural plays a very important role in the Gothic tale. Magic, vampires, devils and assorted creatures feature. Consequently, time itself is subject to scrutiny and confusion in these texts because ghosts come from the past. So, there are creatures from different eras found in labyrinthine passages, attics and cellars in these novels.

The past catches up with the present in these tales. There are prophecies about the future as well. So, in some sense, the present seems to experience events from the past in an endless cycle of repetition, what we commonly called *déjà vu*. There is both unrequited and excess desire but also madness and mental instability. Socially unacceptable desires bordering on incest, rape and violations are a common theme.

The settings include dungeons, passages, attics, graveyards, abandoned rooms and spaces. What strikes us first about the Gothic text is the brooding atmosphere and setting. Let us have a look at two images.



York Minster cathedral.



19th century painting of Walpole's Strawberry Hill villa

The first image is of the York Minster cathedral which is usually described as an excellent example of the English Gothic. The second image is of an 18th century painting of Horace Walpole's Strawberry Hill villa. Note the terrace and the spiky constructions.

Why are these settings important? They are important because characters find themselves trapped in specific places. These spaces are informed by the state of their minds. Characters in the Gothic novel are trapped within dungeons, cellars, labyrinthine passages but the movement through the passage modifies their mind just as the mind seems to modify the space they are in. Here is a brief description excerpted from Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto*. Isabella is in the castle looking at her setting.

As these thoughts pass rapidly through her mind, she recollected a subterraneous passage which led from the vaults of the castle to the Church of St. Nicholas. Could she reach the altar before she was overtaken? She knew even Manfred's violence would not dare to profane the sacredness of the place, and she determined, if no other means of deliverance offered, to shut herself up forever among the holy virgins whose convent was contiguous to the cathedral. In this resolution, she seized a lamp that burned at the foot of the staircase, and hurried towards the secret passage.

The lower part of the castle was hollowed into several intricate cloisters; it was not easy for one under so much anxiety to find the door that opened into the cavern. An awful silence reigned throughout those subterraneous regions, except now and then some blasts of wind that shook the doors she had passed, and which, grating on the rusty hinges, were re-echoed through that long labyrinth of darkness. Every murmur struck her with new terror; yet more she dreaded to hear the wrathful voice of Manfred urging his domestics to pursue her.

She trod as softly as impatience would give her leave, yet frequently stopped and listened to hear if she was followed. In one of those moments, she thought she heard a sigh. She shuddered, and recoiled a few paces. In a moment she thought she heard the step of some person. Her blood curdled; she concluded it was Manfred. Every suggestion that horror could inspire rushed into her mind. She condemned her rash flight, which had thus exposed her to his rage in a place where her cries were not likely to draw anybody to her assistance. Yet the sound seemed not to come from behind. If Manfred knew where she was, he must have followed her. She was still in one of the cloisters and the steps she had

heard were too distinct to proceed from where she had come. Cheered with this reflection and hoping to find a friend in whoever was not the Prince, she was going to advance, when a door that stood ajar, at some distance to the left was opened gently; but ere her lamp, which she held up, could discover who opened it, the person retreated precipitately on seeing the light.

The Castle of Otranto

What is this description doing? Note that there is darkness and silence. The heroine is uncertain how to proceed and is walking carefully along the corridor. Now as we can see, the mood of the heroine and the mood of the place merge into one. So, it is not a question of having a place that is just a backdrop or an external entity. In the Gothic novel, the place preys upon the mind and the mind influences the places passed through or inhabited.

Let us look at another example: Emily's experience of a landscape in *The Mysteries of Udolpho*. This is not oddly enough in a setting such as a building. In the excerpt we have just read from *The Castle of Otranto*, the heroine, Isabella is moving through the passages in the castle. Here, it is a description of a natural setting. As you will see, it is a landscape which is fear-inducing.

Towards the close of day, the road wound into a deep valley. Mountains, whose shaggy steeps appeared to be inaccessible, almost surrounded it. To the east, a vista opened, that exhibited the Apennines in their darkest horrors; and the long perspective of retiring summits, rising over each other, their ridges clothed with pines, exhibited a stronger image of grandeur, than any that Emily had yet seen. The sun had just sunk low below the top of the mountains she was descending, whose long shadow stretched athwart the valley, but sloping rays shooting through an opening of the cliffs, touched with a yellow gleam the summits of the forest, that hung upon the opposite steeps, and streamed in full splendor upon the towers and battlements of a castle, that spread its extensive ramparts along the brow of a precipice above. The splendor of these illumined objects was heightened by the contrasted shade, which involved the valley below... Silent, lonely and sublime, it seemed to stand the sovereign of the scene, and to frown defiance on all, who dared to invade its solitary reign. As the twilight deepened, its features became more

awful in obscurity, and Emily continued to gaze, till its clustering towers were alone seen, rising over the top of the woods, beneath whose thick shade the carriages soon after began to ascend. The extent and darkness of these tall woods awakened terrific images in her mind, and she almost expected to see banditti as part start up from under the trees...

...she anxiously surveyed the edifice: but the gloom, that overspread it, allowed her to distinguish little more than a part of its outline, with the massy walls of the ramparts, and to know, that it was vast, ancient and dreary. From the parts she saw, she judged of the heavy strength and extent of the whole. The gateway before her, leading into the courts, was of gigantic size, and was defended by two round towers, crowned by overhanging turrets, embattled, where, instead of banners, now waved long grass and wild plants, that had taken root among the mouldering stones, and which seemed to sigh, as the breeze rolled past, over the desolation around them. The towers were united by a curtain, pierced and embattled also, below which appeared the pointed arch of a portcullis, surmounting the gates: from these, the walls of the ramparts extended to other towers, overlooking the precipice, whose shattered outline, appearing on a gleam, that lingered in the west, told of the ravages of war – Beyond these all was lost in the obscurity of evening... Emily's heart sunk, and she seemed, as if she was going into her prison; the gloomy court, into which she passed, served to confirm the idea, and her imagination, ever awake to circumstance, suggested even more terrors, than her reason could justify.

The Mysteries of Udolpho

What is that passage doing? The heroine here, Emily, expects to see bandits because the setting is almost certainly meant to give her that kind of fear. So, in other words, what we are looking at is a landscape that is anxiety- and awe-inducing but primarily, it is about evoking terror. It is not a coincidence that the two-volume work on the history of the Gothic novel is called *The Novel of Terror*.

Something important that we must note here. The Gothic novel invariably featured a helpless woman being chased by human and non-human monsters. Not only the undead, the ghosts, the vampires but also evil spirits and evil humans being chase the female protagonist. This emphasis on the virgin woman being pursued by devils and also by avuncular creatures from the family such

as uncles, is central to the documentation of the darker side of human nature. The Gothic also showcased horror related to disease and decay: collapsing bodies, collapsing minds, and the fragile mental state in various people.

Along with rotting houses, rotting bodies and minds, decaying social order and family relationships are staple elements in the Gothic tale. In the Gothic novels, you will often have avuncular uncles or aunts or father figures who pursue the innocent, gullible heroine. The heroine's vulnerability is central to the imagining of the Gothic tale. In other cases, the familial relationships are themselves the cause of much problems.

Charles Maturin's *Melmoth, the Wanderer* is about the decaying Irish estate of the Melmoths. And in one particular episode, two lovers are locked up in a convent without any food and eventually, starve to death. The details of their dying are cannibalistic, and given to us by the monk who has locked them in...

The second day, hunger and darkness had their usual influence. They shrieked for liberation, and knocked loud and long at their dungeon door. They exclaimed they were ready to submit to any punishment; and the approach of the monks, which they would have dreaded so much the preceding night, they now solicited on their knees. What a jest, after all, are the most awful vicissitudes of human life! J – they supplicated now for what they would have sacrificed their souls to avert four-and-twenty hours before. Then, the agony of hunger increased. They shrunk from the door and groveled apart from each other. *Apart!* – how I watched that. They were rapidly becoming objects of hostility to each other, oh what a feast to me! They could not disguise from each other the revolting circumstances of their mutual sufferings. It is one thing for lovers to sit down to a feast magnificently spread, and another for lovers to crouch in darkness and famine – to exchange that appetite which cannot be supported without dainties and flattery, for that which would barter a descended Venus for a morsel of food. The second night they raved and groaned, (as occurred) and, amid their agonies, (I must do justice to women, whom I hate as well as men), the man often accused the female as the cause of all his sufferings, but the woman never, – never reproached him.

Melmoth, the Wanderer

This is the monk who imprisoned the young lovers who then die of hunger. He documents their deterioration from beings into something else. Please note what I have said. The Gothic is not an exploration only of the destruction of the human mind or of the family. It is also destruction of the social order. The passage continues...

Her groans might indeed have reproached him badly, but she never uttered a word that could have caused him pain. There was a charge which I well could mark, however, in their physical feelings. The first day, they clung together, and every movement I felt was like that of one person. The next the man alone struggled, and the woman moaned in helplessness. The third night – how shall I tell it? – but you have bid me to go on. All the horrible and loathsome excruciations of famine had been undergone; the disunion of every tie of the heart, of passion, of nature had commenced. In the agonies of their famished sickness, they loathed each other – they could have cursed each other; if they had breath to curse. [And then comes the final climactic moment...] It was on the fourth night that I heard the shriek of the wretched female – her lover, in the agony of hunger, had fastened his teeth in her shoulder – that bosom on which he had so often luxuriated, became a meal to him now.

Charles Maturin's *Melmoth, the Wanderer*.

Now this is obviously a particularly graphic description of how two lovers driven by hunger feast upon each other because there is nothing else to do. This is the collapse of civility, of civilization, of humanity itself.

Matthew Lewis's *The Monk* gives us another kind of graphic description. This is the scene of the death of Ambrosio who is tied to a rock that feeds upon him.

The Eagles of the rock tore his flesh piecemeal, and dug out his eye-balls with their crooked beaks. A burning thirst tormented him. He heard the river's murmur as it rolled beside him, but strove in vain to drag himself towards the sound. Blind, maimed, helpless and despairing, venting his rage in blasphemy and curses, execrating his existence, yet dreading the arrival of death destined to yield him up to greater torments, six miserable days did the Villain languish.

On the Seventh, a violent storm arose. The winds in fury rent up rocks and forests. The sky was black with clouds, now sheeted with fire. The rain fell in torrents. It swelled the stream. The waves overflowed their banks. They reached the spot where Ambrosio lay and when they abated, carried with them into the river the Corse of the despairing Monk.

Matthew Lewis's *The Monk*

Having looked at some graphic descriptions, we will turn to another key theme, secrecy. Secrecy is central to the Gothic. Secret knowledges, secret passages, secret relationships are a common feature. Memories and even fake memories play an important role as the form is primarily concerned with the intrusive past. These memories are of course central to how the present is lived.

We have already in many ways looked at the gender theme. The heroine usually is a virgin under threat and you have numerous other stereotypes. The women's sexuality and her socially valuable chastity merge with questions of inheritance and property in many Gothic texts. Ellen Moers, famously described the female Gothic as early as 1976, and subsequent work has unpacked the sexist-patriarchal subtexts to these.

The Gothic is also hybrid genre. It is an aesthetic that shows the hybrid nature of the modern age: the civilized and barbaric coexist; the progressive and retrograde or anachronistic, coexist. It has combined within itself science and superstition. A good example of the Gothic which partakes of science would be Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*. Commentators have explored the link between the Gothic and conceptualizations of English/ British nationhood in the 18th and 19th century.

Justin Edwards writes in reference to *The Castle of Otranto*: "The tyranny of the king is thus mirrored in the patriarchal tyranny of the Gothic villain. Manfred assumes absolute power and disregards the law of the land. But absolute power leads to corruption and decay and the castle collapses into a heap of stone and mortar. Out of the rubble, the nation is stabilized, for the aristocratic lineage of primogeniture is re-established, and the guilty are killed or incarcerated."

There are also colonial overtures to the Gothic (Luckhurst 2014). Soon after the period under discussion, the urban Gothic appears in Victorian England soon after. In the 20th century, we have a variation called cybergothic which are set in technologically advanced and dystopian ages.

There are these subgenres in the Gothic. Some of you might be aware of Rudyard Kipling's stories such as "The Phantom 'Rickshaw" set in India which are another variant of the Gothic genre. So what does the Gothic teach us? The Gothic is an exploration of psychology in terms of anxiety, fear, and unacceptable desires. The Gothic is an exploration of settings such as the wild landscape but also labyrinths, attics, and cellars. There is a mutual correlation between the state of the mind and the setting. The mood determines the place and the place determines the mood. There is unacceptable unlawful behavior, incest, violence, and the threat of rape. There is unacceptable social behavior such as cannibalism which we looked at earlier. There is inherent violence in all families that we see in the Gothic. The Gothic as a genre is a key moment in the Romantic age exploration of sensibility and sentiment. It is more violent exploration of the darker side of human nature.

Additional/ Recommended Reading

Edwards, Justin D. "British Gothic nationhood, 1760-1830". *The Gothic World*, edited by Glennis Byron and Dale Townshead, Routledge, 2014, pp. 51-61.

Helland, Donna. *Gothic and Gender: An Introduction*. Blackwell, 2004.

Hogle, Jerrold, editor. *The Cambridge Companion to Gothic Fiction*. Cambridge UP, 2002.

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Mighall, Robert. "Gothic Cities". *Routledge Companion to the Gothic*, edited by Catherine Spooner and Emma McEvoy, Routledge, 2007, pp. 56-62.

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Watkins, Daniel. "Social Hierarchy in Matthew Lewis's 'The Monk'". *Studies in the Novel*, vol. 18, no. 2, 1986, pp. 115-124.