The
Connell Short Guide
to

The Gothic

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What is the Gothic?

When we think of the Gothic, a wide variety of dark and frightening images spring to mind. From stormy nights and gloomy forests to haunted houses and decaying castles, ghosts and demons to murderers and villains, skeletons and hidden chambers to foreign lands and the distant past, the list goes on. But while the presence of these things seems to indicate that we are reading a Gothic text, there's certainly no such thing as a "check-list" of elements that a text must contain in order to be classed as Gothic.

Indeed, some texts are – somewhat confusingly – Gothic without containing any of the elements listed above. Some Gothic novels are, indeed, set in dark, mysterious locations in Europe, but others set the scene amongst the white picket fences, perfect housewives, and manicured lawns of the American suburbs. As well as medieval castles and ruined abbeys, the reader of Gothic fiction will also find scientific laboratories and even ordinary, modern houses; far from always being set in the past, plenty of Gothic texts tell stories of the present day. Gothic literature is undoubtedly filled with all sorts of ghosts, monsters, demons, and vampires, but many Gothic texts locate the monstrous not within spectres and supernatural creatures but within humans – people just like you or me.

The Gothic can be fantastic or familiar, sugges-tive or explicit, filled with horror or prompting

terror: there's no set formula. What the group of texts defined as "Gothic" do all have in common, however, is an ability to invoke fear. The genre emerged in the 18th century and has continued to adapt and develop ever since, often reacting to the anxieties and concerns of the period in which it is written. This book will consider a series of key moments in the history of the Gothic, exploring how our understanding of it shifts in response to changes in society, culture, and politics. As well as examining how the Gothic has altered across time, this guide will also investigate the threads running through the genre's history that unite a collection of seemingly quite different texts under the same rubric.

Where did the Gothic originate?

The word "Gothic" originally referred to the barbarian tribes of northern Europe who were believed to have brought down the Roman Empire when they invaded central and southern Europe in the fifth century. Because Roman society was closely associated with order and reason, the Visigoths were consequently seen as savage, brutal, and irrational. The refinement of Rome had been replicated in the trend for the Neoclassical in the early 18th century, a fashion that saw contemporary literature, art, and architecture draw inspiration from the classical culture of Ancient Greece and Rome.

In the middle of the 18th century, however, the idea of the "Gothic" entered English culture; in many ways a reaction against Neoclassicism, this understanding of the Gothic lost its specific geographical significance and came simply to encapsulate anything associated with the Dark Ages. As David Punter has noted:

> Where the classical was well-ordered, the Gothic was chaotic; where simple and pure, Gothic was ornate and convoluted; where the classics offered a set of cultural models to be followed, Gothic represented excess and exaggeration, the product of the wild and uncivilised.

These qualities of the Gothic proved very appealing, and people wanted to rediscover this exciting "lost" period of history. This interest prompted a Gothic revival in architecture, and in the 1740s wealthy landowners began designing homes that looked like medieval castles and building fake Gothic ruins in their grounds. Horace Walpole, who would go on to write the first Gothic novel, *The Castle of Otranto*, started to construct his own Gothic Revival castle, "Strawberry Hill House", in Twickenham in the mid-18th century. Likewise, William Beckford, who wrote the Gothic novel *Vathek*, built a neo-Gothic abbey that collapsed under the weight of its own huge tower in 1825.

In literature, so-called "Graveyard Poetry" became popular, featuring titles such as *Night-Thoughts* (Edward Young, 1742), *The Grave* (Robert Blair, 1743), and "Ode to Fear" (William Collins, 1746). The Graveyard Poets were primarily interested in writing reflective, melancholy meditations on death and mortality, and their work abounds with graves, skulls, and worms.

This period also saw the growing popularity of folk poetry, with Thomas Percy's *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry* (1765) collecting together works written in the traditional ballad form. As narrative songs passed down orally from generation to generation, these ballads appealed due to their lack of pretension and their links with the past; they were also seen as less artificial than the early 18th-century Neoclassicist poetry written by "Augustans" such as Alexander Pope.

With these foundations laid, it wasn't long until the first Gothic novel appeared. Published on Christmas Eve, 1764, Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* tells the story of Manfred, the Prince of Otranto, and his quest to ensure that his family line is not lost. In his Preface to the first edition of the novel, Walpole claimed that he had found the work, which had supposedly been printed in 1529, "in the library of an ancient Catholic family in the north of England"; it was only in the Preface to the second edition that he admitted he was the author rather than just the translator of the text.

The Castle of Otranto features many tropes that have come to be viewed as markers of the Gothic, including the figure of the pursued heroine, secret passageways, and mysterious noises, as well as the castle itself. Walpole's supernatural, however, can come across as excessive – even ludicrous – to the modern reader. Manfred's son, Conrad, for example, is killed by a giant helmet that crushes him to death, and the castle's portraits sigh and move.

18th-Century and Romantic Gothic

The Castle of Otranto is set in medieval Italy, and this distant historical and geographical positioning allowed Walpole to draw on the dark barbarism associated with the Catholic past in his exploration of the Gothic. Since the Reformation in the 16th century, England had been a Protestant country, and Catholicism was perceived as a foreign religion, associated with rebellion and danger. A similar distancing technique is also used by William Beckford, who in his novel *Vathek* combined Walpole's excess with the rich exoticism of the Oriental to produce a fantastical tale of terror. A wealthy and eccentric individual, as a youth Beckford loved to read a collection of Middle Eastern and Indian stories that had been translated into English in 1706 as *The Arabian Nights' Entertainment*. When he wrote *Vathek* in French in

1782, he drew on this 18th-century interest in the Orient, creating a tale filled with magnificent palaces, rich perfumes, and eastern magic.* The way in which Beckford, as a westerner, imagines – and thus "invents" – the life and customs of the East from an outsider's perspective is known as "Orientalism".

Beckford's novel is Gothic in its use of the supernatural: the text is filled with ghosts, ghouls, and spirits. Vathek – a rich and powerful ruler – enters a Satanic bargain with a demon named the "Giaour" in order to gain supernatural powers, but the text ends with him entering hell and facing torturous punishment for failing to remain "humble and ignorant". Beckford's depiction of hell is both lavish and terrifying; as Vathek enters this realm along a pavement strewn with gold dust he smells exotic incense, sees tables piled high with food and wine, and is greeted by a throng of spirits who "danced lasciviously". He becomes "frozen with terror", however, when he sees others who have been damned to this place, some of whom shriek with agony while others grind their teeth and foam at the mouth like the "wildest maniac".

Despite its ability to instil terror in the reader, *Vathek* is also comic in its excess and perversity. When Vathek's mother, Carathis, summons a collection of ghouls from their tombs in a cemetery

* *Vathek* was translated into English by Samuel Henry in 1786, although this edition was read, corrected, and annotated by Beckford himself.

Mary Shelley (1797 - 1851), author of Frankenstein

to feed on corpses and offer advice from beyond the grave, the reader expects to be frightened by the ensuing episode. Carathis, however, proceeds to converse with these supernatural beings in an entirely civilised fashion, with the narrator explaining how "The Princess received her visitants with distinguished politeness; and supper being ended, they talked of business". The summoning of spirits to feast on corpses here feels more like a middle-class dinner party than a diabolical act.

After a slight lull in the production of Gothic texts in the 1770s and 1780s, the 1790s marked a high point in 18th-century Gothic romance. The existence of circulating libraries and the production of books with cheap card covers made literature

more accessible than ever, and the reading public wanted the Gothic. It's no coincidence that the rapid rise in the popularity of the genre in this decade occurred alongside the violent and bloody events of the French Revolution and the European wars which followed. As Fred Botting observes:

> Terror... had an overwhelming political significance in the period. The decade of the French Revolution saw the most violent of challenges to monarchical order. In Britain the Revolution and the political radicalism it inspired were represented as a tide of destruction threatening the complete dissolution of the social order. In Gothic images of violence and excessive passion, in villainous threats to proper domestic structures, there is a significant overlap in literary and political metaphors of fear and anxiety.

This sense of terror fed into the work of Ann Radcliffe, who produced several bestselling Gothic novels during the 1790s. Like Walpole, Radcliffe was interested in ideas of lineage and identity, but her Gothic was less excessive than that produced by Walpole and Beckford. Radcliffe became known for her use of the "explained supernatural", whereby supposedly ghostly phenomena are ultimately attributed to earthly sources. In her novels, she avoids the depiction of violence and refuses to show the reader any objects of terror explicitly (her heroines have a habit of seeing something dreadful

and then fainting before they can explain what it was); instead, Radcliffe builds narrative suspense and uses the power of suggestion.

The Italian, or the Confession of the Black Penitents, which went on sale in 1797, was the last of Radcliffe's novels to be published during her lifetime. *The Italian* is often read as a response to a novel called *The Monk* which had been published the previous year by Matthew Lewis, who subsequently became known as "Monk" Lewis due to the popularity, and reputation, of his text. This novel was explicit in its use of sex and violence, gleefully transgressing boundaries in its depictions – which at times border on the pornographic – of sex, incest, murder, and pacts with the devil.

In her own tale of an evil monk, Radcliffe uses Catholic Italy to explore how ancient values – encapsulating superstition and corruption – threaten the modern. In writing the novel, she sought to reaffirm her own established aesthetics of terror, and in the process rejected Lewis's use of explicit horror. This distinction between terror and horror was explored by Radcliffe in an essay written in around 1802, but not published until 1826, entitled "On the Supernatural in Poetry". In this essay, she argued that 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". For Radcliffe, terror was associated with the "uncertainty and obscurity" of the sublime. The

sublime is an aesthetic concept suggesting everything that is boundless and cannot be understood, contained, or imitated. In his 1757 work *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful*, Edmund Burke had connected the sublime with that which is vast, great, dark, gloomy, solid, and massive.

In Radcliffe's Gothic novels, the sublime is linked with feeling and emotion, giving the reader an insight into the heroine's inner consciousness. In her extended, poetic descriptions of rugged and mountainous landscapes, Radcliffe sought to replicate the visual effects of contemporary paintings of such scenes, with the reader viewing these sublime scenes via the gaze of the protagonist.

Radcliffe's heroines often find themselves captured by evil villains, and when in *The Italian* Ellena finds herself imprisoned by the sinister Schedoni in the convent of San Stefano, she retreats to a turret to view a sublime landscape that prompts "dreadful pleasure" and "awaken[s] all her heart". By viewing this scene of cliffs, mountains, and forests, Ellena finds herself refreshed and strengthened, experiencing the very expansion of the soul and awakening of the faculties that Radcliffe argues is prompted by terror.

By the late 1790s, the Gothic had in many ways become rather formulaic, and it was this set of conventions (the persecuted heroine, the hidden passageway, the family secret) that Jane Austen parodied in *Northanger Abbey*, a send-up of the

Radcliffian Gothic that was published in 1818 but written c. 1798-99. When Mary Shelley started to write *Frankenstein, or The Modern Prometheus* in 1816, she reworked a set of established tropes into something that felt far more modern. By this point, the French Revolution was long over, and even the Napoleonic wars had come to an end. Rather than looking back to a medieval past or seeking to locate terror in anti-Catholic sentiment, Shelley chose to respond to recent discourses on radical politics, science, and sensibility. She was part of a group of writers known as the Romantics, who emphasised the importance of feeling and held the imagination, originality, and the spontaneous expression of the individual in high esteem.

Romanticism frequently looked to the individual's relationship with the natural world for inspiration, and many Romantic writers looked down on the popular Gothic mode of writing as inferior to the transcendental experience offered by nature. The poet William Wordsworth famously dismissed the popular "sickly and stupid German Tragedies" in his 1800 Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, yet his own work – and that of other Romantics such as Percy Shelley and Lord Byron – was undoubtedly indebted to the 18th-century Gothic.

Victor Frankenstein, the protagonist of Mary Shelley's novel, is in many ways a Romantic: he is preoccupied with his individual art and seeks fulfilment by gaining power over nature. Like Vathek, Frankenstein has a thirst for knowledge, but

he isn't seduced by magic and the supernatural; rather, he seeks to use science to play God and create the perfect man. Instead of a haunted castle or crumbling abbey, Frankenstein retreats to the laboratory, and in the place of a demon or spectre we are confronted with a flesh-and-blood monster. The creature may or may not be classed as "human" but it is very much alive and real, and in many ways its immediate violence and hideousness are more terrifying than a ghostly being that silently slides out of view.

In her Author's Introduction to a revised version of the novel published in 1831, Shelley explains that *Frankenstein* was written as part of a ghost-story writing competition suggested by her friend Lord Byron, and notes that she wanted to create a text that "would speak to the mysterious fears of our nature and awaken thrilling horror – one to make the reader dread to look round, to curdle the blood, and quicken the beatings of the heart". Shelley's text doesn't contain a ghost, but her idea – which came to her one night in a waking-dream – "haunted" her like a "hideous phantom".

In her depiction of the creature's monstrosity, Shelley explores the idea of difference and our treatment of those who are "other" – that is, not like us. The creature is not inherently evil, but rather comes to act in a violent and cruel way after having been rejected by society due to his hideous appearance. Both of Shelley's parents, who were writers themselves, had examined the idea of monstrosity within a political context. Her mother, Mary Wollstonecraft, had argued in *A Vindication of the Rights of Men* (1790) that "man has been changed into an artificial monster by the station in which he was born". Likewise, her father, William Godwin (to whom *Frankenstein* was dedicated), had suggested in his writings that monstrosity was a mark of cruel or corrupt socio-political structures, and argued that any monsters created by these systems reflect wider, more monstrous formations. In his *Enquiry Concerning Political Justice*, published in 1793, Godwin had described the feudal system as a "Voracious monster" whose legacy continued to give power and privilege to the aristocracy in the 18th century.

Inspired by her father's thinking, Shelley explored these ideas of monstrosity and justice in *Frankenstein*. When Justine – whose name, perhaps, suggests "justice" – is falsely accused of murder, Elizabeth, the orphan child who eventually marries Frankenstein, criticises the system that blamed and sentenced her, explaining that "men appear to me as monsters thirsting for each other's blood". In granting her Gothic monster a voice, Shelley seeks to deconstruct our understanding of monstrosity, and makes us question whether the creature's monstrous nature is in fact created by a monstrous society.