

Elements of the Gothic Novel

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The Gothic novel was invented almost single-handedly by Horace Walpole, whose *The Castle of Otranto* (1764) contains essentially all the elements that constitute the genre. Walpole's novel was imitated in the eighteenth century, but enjoyed widespread influence in the nineteenth century in part because of that era's indulgence in dark-romantic themes. Today, the Gothic continues to influence the novel, the short story, and poetry, and provides a major source of themes and elements in film making. (In fact, Gothic elements have been used so often in film that some have become predictable clichés. For example, when people enter an abandoned room in a supposedly abandoned house, the door often closes and locks behind them.)

Gothic elements include the following:

1. Setting in a castle or old mansion. The action takes place in and around an old castle or an old mansion, or the ruins of an old castle or mansion. Sometimes the edifice is seemingly abandoned, sometimes occupied, and sometimes it's not clear whether the building has occupants (human or otherwise). The castle often contains secret passages, trap doors, secret rooms, trick panels with hidden levers, dark or hidden staircases, and possibly ruined sections.

The castle may be near or connected to caves, which lend their own haunting flavor with their darkness, uneven floors, branching, claustrophobia, echoes of unusual sounds, and mystery. And in horror-Gothic, caves are often seem home to terrifying creatures such as monsters, or deviant forms of humans: vampires, zombies, wolfmen.

Translated into the modern novel or filmmaking, the setting is usually an old house or mansion--or even a new house--where unusual camera angles, sustained close ups during movement, and darkness or shadows create the same sense of claustrophobia and entrapment. The house might be already dark, perhaps because it was abandoned, or it might at first seem light and airy, but either night comes and people turn off the lights to go to bed, or at some dramatic point the lights will fail (often because of a raging storm). (And, as movie goers know well, while the scenes and dialog form the rational (or irrational) movement in the film, the music controls the emotional response to what is seen and spoken.)

The goal of the dark and mysterious setting is to create a sense of unease and foreboding, contributing toward the atmospheric element of fear and dread. Darkness also allows those sudden and frightening appearances of people, animals, ghosts, apparent ghosts, or monsters.

2. An atmosphere of mystery and suspense. The work is pervaded by a threatening feeling, a fear enhanced by the unknown. This atmosphere is sometimes advanced when characters see

only a glimpse of something--was that a person rushing out the window or only the wind blowing a curtain? Is that creaking sound coming from someone's step on the squeaky floor, or only the normal sounds of the night? Often the plot itself is built around a mystery, such as unknown parentage, a disappearance, or some other inexplicable event. People disappear or show up dead inexplicably. Elements 3, 4, and 5 below contribute to this atmosphere.

In modern novels and filmmaking, the inexplicable events are often murders. The bodies are sometimes mutilated in ways that defy explanation--"What kind of monster could do this?" or "Here's the body, but there's no blood." When the corpses start to mount, suspense is raised as to who will get killed next. Another modern setting that lends itself well to the sense of suspense and even entrapment is a supposedly deserted island, where the characters have arrived by shipwreck or mysterious invitation. Their way back to civilization has been cut off (the airplane ran out of fuel or crash landed, the boat sank, etc.). Who knows? They might even run into living dinosaurs.

3. An ancient prophecy is connected with the castle or its inhabitants (either former or present). The prophecy is usually obscure, partial, or confusing. "What could it mean?" In more watered-down modern examples, this may amount to merely a legend: "It's said that the ghost of old man Krebs still wanders these halls." Ancient, undecipherable maps showing the location of amazing treasure represent another variant of the ancient prophecy aspect.

4. Omens, portents, visions. A character may have a disturbing dream vision, or some phenomenon may be seen as a portent of coming events. For example, if the statue of the lord of the manor falls over, it may portend his death. In modern fiction, a character might see something (a shadowy figure stabbing another shadowy figure) and think that it was a dream. This might be thought of as an "imitation vision." Sometimes an omen will be used for foreshadowing, while other writers will tweak the reader by denying expectation--what we thought was foreshadowing wasn't.

5. Supernatural or otherwise inexplicable events. Dramatic, amazing events occur, such as ghosts or giants walking, or inanimate objects (such as a suit of armor or painting) coming to life. In some works, the events are ultimately given a natural explanation, while in others the events are truly supernatural. As you might imagine, Hollywood uses special effects to a large degree to provide fire, earthquakes, moving statues, and so forth, often blurring the line between human-produced, natural, and supernatural events.

6. High, even overwrought emotion. The narration may be highly sentimental, and the characters are often overcome by anger, sorrow, surprise, fear, and especially, terror. Characters suffer from raw nerves and a feeling of impending doom. Crying and emotional speeches are frequent. Breathlessness and panic are common. In the filmed Gothic, screaming is common.

7. Women in distress. As an appeal to the pathos and sympathy of the reader, the female characters often face events that leave them fainting, terrified, screaming, and/or sobbing. A lonely, pensive, and oppressed heroine is often the central figure of the novel, so her sufferings are even more pronounced and the focus of attention. The women suffer all the more because they are often abandoned, left alone (either on purpose or by accident), and have no protector at

times. (In horror-Gothic films, when the guy tells the girl, "Stay here; I'll be right back," you pretty much know that one of them will soon be dead.)

8. Women threatened by a powerful, impulsive, tyrannical male. One or more male characters has the power, as king, lord of the manor, father, or guardian, to demand that one or more of the female characters do something intolerable. The woman may be commanded to marry someone she does not love (it may even be the powerful male himself), or commit a crime. In modern Gothic novels and films, there is frequently the threat of physical violation.

9. The metonymy of gloom and horror. Metonymy is a subtype of metaphor, in which something (like rain) is used to stand for something else (like sorrow). For example, the film industry likes to use metonymy as a quick shorthand, so we often notice that it is raining in funeral scenes. (This explains why they never oil the hinges on the doors in Gothic novels.) Note that the following metonymies for "doom and gloom" all suggest some element of mystery, danger, or the supernatural.

| | |
|-------------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| wind, especially howling | rain, especially blowing |
| doors grating on rusty hinges | sighs, moans, howls, eerie sounds |
| footsteps approaching | clanking chains |
| lights in abandoned rooms | gusts of wind blowing out lights |
| characters trapped in a room | doors suddenly slamming shut |
| ruins of buildings | baying of distant dogs (or wolves?) |
| thunder and lightning | crazed laughter |

10. The vocabulary of the Gothic. The constant use of the appropriate vocabulary set creates and sustains the atmosphere of the Gothic. Using the right words maintains the dark-and-stimulated feel that defines the Gothic. Here as an example are some of the words (in several categories) that help make up the vocabulary of the Gothic in *The Castle of Otranto*:

| | |
|----------------|---|
| Mystery | diabolical, enchantment, ghost, goblins, haunted, infernal, magic, magician, miracle, necromancer, omens, ominous, portent, preternatural, prodigy, prophecy, secret, sorcerer, spectre, spirits, strangeness, talisman, vision |
|----------------|---|

| | |
|--------------------------------|---|
| Fear, Terror, or Sorrow | afflicted, affliction, agony, anguish, apprehensions, apprehensive, commiseration, concern, despair, dismal, dismay, dread, dreaded, dreading, fearing, frantic, fright, frightened, grief, hopeless, horrid, horror, lamentable, melancholy, miserable, mournfully, panic, sadly, scared, shrieks, sorrow, sympathy, tears, terrible, terrified, terror, unhappy, wretched |
| Surprise | alarm, amazement, astonished, astonishment, shocking, staring, surprise, surprised, thunderstruck, wonder |
| Haste | anxious, breathless, flight, frantic, hastened, hastily, impatience, impatient, impatiently, impetuosity, precipitately, running, sudden, suddenly |
| Anger | anger, angrily, cholera, enraged, furious, fury, incense, incensed, provoked, rage, raving, resentment, temper, wrath, wrathful, wrathfully |
| Largeness | enormous, gigantic, giant, large, tremendous, vast |
| Darkness | dark, darkness, dismal, shaded, black, night |

11. Hyperbolic Phrases. In the advertising business, it is sometimes said, "The lie is in the adjective." Adjectives control how we think of the nouns they modify: "mild curiosity" presents an attitude of relaxed interest, whereas "insatiable curiosity" presents the attitude of a hungry mind. In the Gothic, adjectives are used to amplify nouns in order to (1) create phrases that increase the feeling of dread, horror, anxiety, or suspense, or (2) produce a substantially increased emphasis or sense of importance. Here are some examples from Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*:

| Increased Dread | Increased Emphasis |
|--------------------------|---------------------------|
| deep grief | intense distaste |
| gigantic creature | inestimable benefit |
| bitterly feel | ardent curiosity |
| strange sight | unparalleled eloquence |
| dark gloom | astonishing degree |
| unparalleled misfortunes | burning ardor |
| intoxicating draught | strongly excited |

Walpole himself lays on most of these elements pretty thick (although he's a lot lighter on darkness than many modern Gothic works), so it might be said that another element of the classic Gothic is its intensity created by profuse employment of the vocabulary of the Gothic. Consider this from Chapter 1 of *The Castle of Otranto*: The servant "came running back breathless, in a frantic manner, his eyes staring, and foaming at the mouth. He said nothing but pointed to the court. The company were struck with terror and amazement." Gets your interest up on page two, doesn't he? Then, "In the meantime, some of the company had run into the court, from whence was heard a confused noise of shrieks, horror, and surprise."

(Many classic Gothic novels are available as free downloads at www.gutenberg.org), including:

Castle of Otranto (1764), Horace Walpole
<https://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/696>

Vathek: An Arabian Tale (1787), William Beckford
<http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/42401>

Mysteries of Udolpho (1794), Ann Radcliffe
<http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/3268>

The Monk: A Romance (1796), Matthew Lewis
<https://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/601>