

Notes on the Gothic Genre

- I. The Gothic genre was popular in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries
- II. The term “Gothic” was first applied to architecture—to cathedrals, abbeys, and castles of Northern Europe
- III. The Gothic design appeals to the sublime (vastness, power, obscurity), as opposed to classical architectural designs that emphasize proportion, light, and reason
- IV. Most Gothic fiction was produced during the period from 1764 (beginning with Horace Walpole’s *The Castle of Otranto*, with the sub-title, *A Gothic Story*) through the 1820s
 - A. Its peak in popularity occurred during the 1790s
 - B. Even later, though its influence continued to be felt
 1. Popular novels such as Charles Dickens’s *Oliver Twist* (1837) contains some elements that are associated with the Gothic
 2. The sensation novels of the 1860s (such as Wilkie Collins’s *The Woman in White* and Mary Elizabeth Braddon’s *Lady Audley’s Secret*), were also heavily influenced by the Gothic.
 - C. Ann Radcliffe (*The Mysteries of Udolpho* being the most famous) was the most famous, and had many imitators
 - D. *The Mysteries of Udolpho* was one of the Gothic novels satirized by Jane Austen in *Northanger Abbey*
- V. Despite the use of the term “Gothic” in some of the sub-titles, the novels were usually termed “romances”
- VI. The genre offended many critics
 - A. Wordsworth complained about “frantic novels, sickly and stupid German Tragedies, and deluges of idle and extravagant stories in verse” in his Preface to the *Lyrical Ballads*
 - B. This is somewhat ironic, since Coleridge’s *Christabel* fits that description very well
- VII. Some common Gothic elements (not in every novel, but many) include:
 - A. Terror in the Burkean sense (or, in some cases, horror)
 - B. Supernatural elements. These may be explicitly supernatural, or they may only be perceived as supernatural, and later revealed to have a rational explanation (the so-called “supernatural explained,” a term applied to Ann Radcliffe’s novels).
 - C. Gothic fiction often has a setting sometime in the past, though the past setting was more often vague and atmospheric, rather than being historically precise, so there were often anachronisms.
 - D. There is most often a setting in an old, crumbling castle (or in some cases an abbey), with lots of secret passages
 - E. There is a villain; in many cases, these turned out to be “second sons” (i.e., not able to inherit under primogeniture)
 - F. There is a heroine (usually), young and marriageable, imprisoned in the castle or otherwise in the power of the villain
 - G. Her imprisonment often involves a dispute over some matter of property, marriage, or inheritance. (For example, she may be unwilling to marry the villain or to surrender property that she has some control over.)
 - H. There is usually a mystery or secret from the past that comes to light in the present. This is very often a past crime such as murder and/or usurpation of property or a title.
 - I. This mystery (or related mysteries) often involves some question of identity, particularly the heroine’s (such as Ellena in Radcliffe’s *The Italian*)

- J. Gothic stories often have “framed” or “embedded” stories (tales within tales), often in the form of a discovered manuscript.
- K. Anti-Catholic discourses are very common
- VIII. Some of the novels were lurid and quite titillating
 - A. For example, Matthew Lewis’s *The Monk* depicts a monk who, under the influence of a demon in the disguise of a human female, rapes and murders a young woman, who, turns out to be his sister
- IX. Anonymous letter published in 1797 makes four complaints about Gothic novels:
 - A. Gothic novels aren’t realistic or morally edifying
 - B. Excess terror is bad for young minds
 - C. There are too many of these novels
 - D. They’re all formulaic. Note the “recipe” that the writer will provide at the end.

Here is a passage from this letter:

I allude, Sir, principally, to the great quantities of novels with which our circulating libraries are filled, and our parlour tables covered, in which it has been the fashion to make *terror* the *order of the day*, by confining the heroes and heroines in old gloomy castles, full of spectres, apparitions, ghosts, and dead men’s bones. This is now so common, that a Novelist blushes to bring about a marriage by ordinary means, but conducts the happy pair through long and dangerous galleries, where the light burns blue, the thunder rattles, and the great window at the end present the hideous visage of a *murdered* man, *uttering* piercing groans, and developing shocking mysteries. If a curtain is withdrawn, there is a bleeding body behind it; if a chest is opened, it contains a skeleton; if a noise is heard, somebody is receiving a deadly blow; and if a candle goes out, its place is sure to be supplied by a flash of lightning. Cold hands grasp us in the dark, statues are seen to move, and suits of armour walk off their pegs, while the wind whistles louder than one of Handel’s choruses, and the still air is more melancholy than the dead march in Saul.

The writer goes on to complain about the way that women are depicted in Gothic novels, too:

Is the corporeal frame of the female sex so masculine and hardy, that it must be softened down by the touch of dead bodies, clay-cold hands, and damp sweats? Can a young lady be taught nothing more necessary in life, than to sleep in a dungeon with venomous reptiles, walk through a [wood] with assassins, and carry bloody daggers in their pockets, instead of pin-cushions and needle-books?

The writer closes with a recipe that highlights the formulaic nature of much Gothic fiction.

In the mean time, should any of your female readers be desirous of catching the season of terrors, she may compose two or three very pretty volumes from the following recipe:

Take — An old castle, half of it ruinous.
 A long gallery, with a great many doors, some secret ones.
 Three murdered bodies, quite fresh.
 As many skeletons, in chests and presses.
 An old woman hanging by the neck; with her throat cut.

Assassins and desperados, '*quant. suff.*'
Noise, whispers, and groans, threescore at least.
Mix them together, in the form of volumes, to be taken at any of the watering
places before going to bed.*

*Quotations from: Anon. "Terrorist Novel Writing." *Spirit of the Public Journals for 1797*, vol 1. (London, 1798), 223-25. Rpt. in *Gothic Documents: A Sourcebook*, ed. by E. J. Clery and Robert Miles (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000), 182-85.