

## GOTHICISM

Nature is terrifying, a cultural tradition since the plagues of the Middle Ages, an environment to escape in armor and castles, as Edgar Allan Poe depicts in "The Masque of the Red Death." The Gothic view of Nature became traditional in western civilization. Mountains were frightening obstacles and warts on the face of the earth. The Calvinists who settled in New England in the 17th century saw Nature as the domain of Satan. During the 18th century, Gothicism countered optimistic rationalism, as in *Wieland* (1798) by Charles Brockden Brown. Poe defined the popular Gothic modes of horror and mystery and Gothicism became a tradition of later writers including Ambrose "Bitter" Bierce. Victorians defined men as "beastly" Gothic creatures mandating moral control by women.

Gothicism in fiction derives from tales of terror and the supernatural. In early medieval history the Goths were a single Germanic tribe, but later "Gothic" referred to the medieval in general. In the rationalistic 18th century with its Neoclassical aesthetic values, the term came to mean barbaric. The magnificent cathedrals of the Middle Ages were scorned as "Gothic." A "Gothic revival" in Romantic reaction against Neoclassicism and the limits of reason began in England when in 1747 Horace Walpole settled at Strawberry Hill, Twickenham and made his home a little Gothic castle, then wrote the first Gothic romance, *The Castle of Otranto* (1764). Other novelists followed his example, notably Matthew ("Monk") Lewis and Ann Radcliffe in England and E. T. A. Hoffman in Germany. The popular Gothic--including crime fiction, pulp or dime novels--with a tone and emphasis the opposite of conventional, is sometimes called "sensationalist" or "subversive."

Several of the first American novels were likewise popular Gothic entertainments, but Brown and Poe initiated a serious literary Gothic tradition. In the United States, as exemplified by Brown in *Wieland* (1798), the literary Gothic mode was influenced by Calvinism. It is comparable to Greek tragedy without gods: An irrational universe is dominated by chance, chaos, force, violence, perversion and madness. Evil triumphs over good and moral order is lost. More a victim than a hero or heroine, the protagonist is doomed to catastrophe by circumstances beyond his or her control, not of his or her creation. A person is relatively helpless, and is lucky to survive and to maintain sanity. In the "sublime gothic," wonder and a paradoxical or perverse exaltation are consolations.

Later in the 19th century Naturalism was a blend of the empirical and the Gothic, as in Crane's *Maggie* (1893). Gothicism is helpless, whereas Naturalism tries to be scientific and allows for escape from the horror. Most fiction depicting social oppression, such as the feminist "literature of misery" and much African-American literature, is Gothic or Naturalistic in the sense of emphasizing determinism and victimization. Literary Gothicism revived during the 1950s and is best exemplified today by Cormac McCarthy in *Blood Meridian* (1985) and *The Road* (2006), but his humanism transcends his Gothicism, whereas Postmodern novels by urban atheists such as Pynchon, Abish, Sontag and others transcend nothing and are likely to induce boredom or suicide. In the mid-20th century "black humor" is a blend of the Gothic and the comic, and today the Gothic also informs postmodernist fiction, as in McCarthy and Don DeLillo. The Gothic appears as Realism in works that transcend it. In Christian writers, for example, the fallen world *without* belief in God is Gothic. The paranormal world on earth, the spiritual dimension as documented on television by ghost hunters, is Gothic--dominated by evil spirits.

Michael Hollister (2021)

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"Though the Goths were a single Germanic tribe of ancient and early medieval times, the meaning of Gothic was broadened to signify Teutonic or Germanic and, later, 'medieval' in general. In architecture, Gothic, though it may mean any style not classic, is more specifically applied to the style which succeeded the Romanesque in Western Europe, flourishing from the twelfth to the sixteenth centuries. It is marked by the pointed arch and vault, a tendency to vertical effects (suggesting aspiration), stained windows (mystery), slender spires, flying buttresses, intricate traceries, and especially by wealth and variety of detail and flexibility of spirit.

Applied to literature the term was used by the eighteenth-century Neoclassicists as synonymous with 'barbaric' to indicate anything which offended their classic tastes. Addison said that both in architecture and literature those who were unable to achieve the classic graces of simplicity, dignity, and unity resorted to the use of foreign ornaments, 'all the extravagances of an irregular fancy.' The romanticists of the next generation, however, looked with favor upon the Gothic; to them it suggested whatever was medieval, natural, primitive, wild, free, authentic, romantic. Indeed, they praised such writers as Shakespeare and Spenser because of their Gothic elements--variety, richness, mystery, aspiration. Later vigorous celebrators of the Gothic were John Ruskin and Walter Pater.

## GOTHIC NOVEL

A form of novel in which magic, mystery, and chivalry are the chief characteristics. Horrors abound: one may expect a suit of armor suddenly to come to life, while ghosts, clanking chains, and charnel houses impart an uncanny atmosphere of terror. Although anticipations of the Gothic novel appear in Smollett (especially in *Ferdinand Count Fathom*, 1753). Horace Walpole was the real originator, his famous *Castle of Otranto* (1764) being the first. Its setting is a medieval castle (hence the term 'Gothic') which has long underground passages, trap doors, dark stairways, and mysterious rooms whose doors slam unexpectedly. William Beckford's *Vathek, an Arabian Tale* (1786) added the element of Oriental luxury and magnificence to the species. Mrs. Anne Radcliffe's five romances (1789-1797), especially *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, added to the popularity of the form. Her emphasis upon setting and story rather than upon character delineation became conventional, as did the types of character she employed. Succeeding writers who produced Gothic romances include: Matthew ('Monk') Lewis, William Godwin, and Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley, whose *Frankenstein* is a striking performance in the tradition. The form spread to practically every European literature, being especially popular in Germany.

In America the type was cultivated early by Charles Brockden Brown. The Gothic novels not only are of interest in themselves but have exerted a significant influence upon other forms. This influence made itself felt in the poetry of the Romantic period, as in Coleridge's *Christabel* and *Kubla Khan*, Wordsworth's *Guilt and Sorrow*, Byron's *Giaour*, and Keats' *Eve of St. Agnes*. Some of the romances were dramatized and some dramas not based on romance, like Byron's *Manfred* and Morton's *Speed of the Plough*, have Gothic elements. The novels of Scott, Charlotte Bronte, and others, as well as the mystery and horror type of short story exploited by Poe and his successors, contain materials and devices traceable to the Gothic novel. The term *Gothic novel* is today often applied to works, such as Daphne de Maurier's *Rebecca*, which lack the Gothic setting or the medieval atmosphere but which attempt to create the same atmosphere of brooding and unknown terror which the true Gothic novel does. It is also applied to a host of currently popular tales of 'damsels in distress' in strange and terrifying locales--a type ridiculed as early as Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey*."

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