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| **British Romanticism: The Gothic Novel** |

**Introduction**

Gothic literature presents an important stage in the development of Romantic literature. It takes the fantastic, macabre and supernatural as the background for events, which are usually set in haunted castles, graveyards, ruins and wild picturesque landscapes. “Gothic” originally referred to the “medieval”, but its meaning changed when the emphasis shifted to the elements of the macabre and fantasy, and thus it meant “wild,’ “barbarous”” or “crude.”

**I. Themes**

1. **Terror and Horror**

Terror and horror are the tools of the Gothic novelist. Ann Radcliffe distinguished between the two terms, suggesting that terror grows out of suspense while horror produces disgust. In other words, a character experiences terror in the anticipation of some dreaded event; the character experiences horror when the event really happens. Thus, in Radcliffe’s novels, there is an emphasis on terror and the terrible, which she creates through her long descriptions of sublime landscapes and her intimations of the supernatural. Moreover, the agonizing suspense to which she subjects her characters produces terror in both the character and the reader. However, the eventual explanation of all supernatural things relieves her reader from the experience of horror. Matthew Gregory Lewis, by contrast, chooses horror for his novels. His prose focuses on the details of the horrible, including torture and putrefaction. In his work, Lewis describes in disturbing detail the physically revolting and morally decadent.

**B. Appearance and Reality**

Gothic literature often explores the difference between appearance and reality. For example, in Radcliffe’s works, events often appear to have supernatural causes. However, by the end of the book, Radcliffe offers logical explanations. Thus, in the case of Radcliffe, it is possible for the reader to distinguish by the close of the novel what is real and what is apparent. By contrast, writers such as Lewis do not always differentiate between appearance and reality. This ambiguity leads to a dreamlike (or nightmarish) atmosphere in the novel. Readers recognize the state: for all intents and purposes, a dream appears to be real until awakening. It is in the foggy fugue state, however, that the dreamer is unsure of what is the dream and what is the reality. The struggle to differentiate the reality from the appearance rests at the heart of much Gothic literature.

**C. Confinement**

Nearly every Gothic novel of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries contains some element of confinement. Indeed, many critics have commented on the sense of claustrophobia found in Gothic fiction. Often this occurs with the entrapment of the heroine in some ancient castle. When she finally escapes her room or cell, she finds herself within a subterranean passageway with no apparent way out. It is the lack of escape that causes the terrifying claustrophobia. In Lewis’s *The Monk*, Agnes is chained to a wall to be tortured. The struggle against the confinement elicits both horror and terror in the reader. Whether it be prison cells, monastic cells, shackles, locked rooms, or dark tunnels, the space of the Gothic novel is claustrophobic and confining, tapping into a primal human fear.

**D. Justice and Injustice**

While the world of justice and injustice might seem to be absent from the world of the Gothic, on closer examination, it seems clear that guilt and reparation of sins are at the center of many stories. In Horace Walpole’s The *Castle of Otranto*, the death of Conrad, the heir to his father’s estate, apparently takes place as a way of righting a wrong. That is, Conrad’s ancestor comes back from his grave to assure that Otranto goes to the rightful heir. This is the case of the sins of the father being visited on the children; at no time does it seem that Conrad knows that his title is faulty. Charles Robert Maturin’s *Melmoth the Wanderer* also explores this theme. In the Gothic world, justice must ultimately triumph, even if the justice that is meted out is severe. Ambrosio, for example, in Lewis’s *The Monk*, deserves to be punished; however, his punishment is horrible. Because the Gothic is a literature of excess, it is little wonder that the justices and injustices are also excessive. Thus, the gloom that hangs over the heads of many characters is the knowledge that in their own day they will have to pay for the wrongs their ancestors committed.

**II. Style**

1. **Setting**

In Gothic literature, the setting may be the single most important device. Gothic writers generally set their novels in wild landscapes; in large, often ruined, castles; and/or in subterranean labyrinths. In Walpole’s *The Castle of Otranto*, the castle itself plays a major role in the novel. Robert Kiely writes in The Romantic Novel in England: ‘‘if anything gives this novel unity and animation, it is the castle. Thus, the setting itself provides as much suspense as does the plot or the characters.

In addition, Gothic writers as a rule set their novels in the distant, medieval past, in what they thought of as the Gothic period. However, their descriptions have little to do with the medieval period as it was; rather, the settings in Gothic novels reveal much more about what eighteenth and nineteenth-century writers believed about the Middle Ages. For Gothic writers, the medieval past was a time of superstition and Catholicism, made exotic and eerie by monks, nuns, ghosts, and crumbling castles. Although most of the novels are set in some European landscape, others, most notably William Beckford’s *Vathek*, have foreign locations, such as the Middle East. Again, removing the setting of the novel from contemporary locations and time periods allowed Gothic writers to infuse their works with the fear of the unknown, mysterious occurrences, and strange, unusual customs.

**B. Diction**

Diction is the choice of words and the order of words writers make for their literary creations. Diction may be on the continuum from informal, or low diction, to formal, or high diction. In Gothic novels, writers opted to use somewhat archaic and formal language, particularly in dialogue. Although the word choices are not accurate representations of the speech patterns of medieval people, the diction of a Gothic novel is reminiscent of a medieval romance. Further, the diction removes the novel from the present day reality.

**C. Narrative**

Narrative is an accounting of an event or sequence of events, real or invented. In literary criticism, the expression ‘‘narrative technique’’ usually refers to the way the author structures and presents his or her story. Gothic writers also often present an exceedingly complicated narrative, woven around some theme or idea. For example, in Maturin’s *Melmoth the Wanderer*, there are stories within stories. Kiely describes the narrative of this book in his *The Romantic Novel in England*: ‘‘The structure of *Melmoth the Wanderer*, a series of narrations within narrations—often compared with a nest of Chinese boxes—defies conventional chronological sequence and replaces it with obsessive variations on the single theme of human misery.’’ The overall effect of such construction is to distort the chronological and spatial development of the story and to give the overall work a dreamlike quality.

**D. Mood**

The mood of a literary work is the emotional attitude with which the subject is handled by the author. Mood is conveyed in a work through the author’s handling of diction, setting, and narrative. In the case of Gothic novels, the mood is one of fear, anxiety, terror, and horror. Both the characters and the readers of Gothic novels experience these emotions to the fullest extent possible for human beings. The dark, dreary, and morbid settings as well as the sublime mountainous landscapes serve to invoke terror, while the suspense created by mistaken identities and long chase sequences through cellar passageways produce both fear and anxiety. Many critics speak of the claustrophobia of Gothic novels, created by coffins, prisons, dark halls, passages, and interior spaces. At its best, Gothic literature evokes the same kind of emotional response from its readers as do nightmares and night terrors.

**Conclusion**

In its attention to the dark side of human nature and the chaos of irrationality, the Gothic provides for contemporary readers some insight into the social and intellectual climate of the time in which the literature was produced. While it may be comparatively easy to date the beginning of the Gothic movement, it is much harder to identify its close, if indeed the movement did come to a close at all. Certainly, any close examination of the works of many writers of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries demonstrates both the transformation and the influence of the Gothic.