Gothic Novel

The Gothic \* novel is a literary \* genre that flourished in the late eighteenth- and early nineteenth centuries. The Gothic, however, is also a mode of writing stretching through centuries, cultures, and geographical locations. In both forms, it is a literature of fear and nightmare which shows special interest in the underside of humanity: the evil within the psyche and the disintegration of subjectivity.

The term 'Gothic' was originally used in a derogative sense to emphasise the genre's spiritual links with the barbarism, superstition, and irrationality associated with the Middle Ages. Horace Walpole's The Castle of Otranto: A Gothic Story (1764), the first specimen of the genre, draws on predecessors like the sentimental novel and graveyard poetry of the eighteenth-century. It challenges the neoclassical ideals of unity, coherence, and order - ideals cherished by the Enlightenment in general. Walpole's story of revenge establishes the most characteristic conventions of the genre; these conventions pertain to setting (haunted castle), \* character (monomaniac villain, heroine-in-distress), and \* plot (curse, transgression of taboos, significance of supernatural phenomena).

The Gothic achieves its peak of popularity in the 1790s with the publication of works as diverse as William Godwin's political Caleb Williams (1794), Matthew Gregory Lewis's \* pornographic The Monk (1796), Mary Wollstonecraft's feminist Maria and the Wrongs of Woman (1798), and, especially, Ann Radcliffe's \* romances. In The Mysteries of Udolpho (1794) and her other novels, Radcliffe launches the Female Gothic, an alternative tradition to Walpole's Male Gothic. Radcliffe innovates on the genre by proposing rational explanations of supernatural events, by providing elaborate descriptions of sublime landscapes, and by focusing on the struggles of the heroine-in-flight.

In the nineteenth-century, the Gothic responds to the contemporary anxieties surrounding the fast-developing natural sciences with the introduction of characters like the mad scientist (Mary Shelley's Frankenstein, or, the Modern Prometheus, 1818), vampires (Bram Stoker's Dracula, 1897), alter egos and doubles (Edgar Allan Poe's tales of terror; Oscar Wilde's The Picture of Dorian Gray, 1891; Henry James's The Turn of the Screw, 1898). While earlier works isolated good and bad qualities in separate characters, now the battlefield between opposing poles is relocated within a single character, thus reflecting on the confusingly heterogeneous and unfathomable nature of the self in the face of scientific rationality. This is how the genre can explore issues like the assimilation of socio-cultural anxieties, the transgression of socially sanctioned norms of race, class, and \* gender, and the effect of ever-present repressed human forces jeopardising the status quo. Adaptability and versatility continue to uphold the unwavering popularity of the Gothic novel. Fear and violence being its key interests, the genre has been used to depict diverse ages, places, and experiences - from the racist American South (William Faulkner's Absalom, Absalom!, 1936; Toni Morrison's Beloved, 1987), through feminist concerns with the female condition (Margaret Atwood's Lady Oracle, 1976), to the threatening megalomania and fragmentation of contemporary society (Angela Carter, Joyce Carol Oates, Stephen King).

from *Routledge Encyclopedia of Narrative Theory*
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References and further reading
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