Gothic Fiction Research

**What is the Gothic Novel?**

The Gothic novel originally referred to any novel written between 1764 and 1820, which mark the dates of what was and still is believed to be the original and final classic Gothic novel, Horace Walpole’s *The Castle of Otranto,* and Charles Robert Maturin’s novel, *Melmoth the Wanderer* (Killeen 1). The Gothic novel continues to appear to this day, but “literary history has made a conventional ending for the cult of the Gothic at about 1820” (Sage 18). The very nature of the Gothic novel that classifies it as such is also the reason the novel is so hard to define. A defining feature of the Gothic is the fact it covers so many different genres in a timeline that allows the story to take giant leaps and cover just about anything it wants to. As Ian Watt points out, the very name of the Gothic novel is an oxymoron hard to define because it literally means “old new”, but many individuals classify the Gothic novel as a type of historical romance.

1820 marks the beginning of the modern Gothic as readers try to define the novels as not something that just consists of terror or fear, but with more defining features. This leads to the classifications of old and new gothic. Old being from 1765 to 1820 and new anything after that. Old Gothic novels are only categorized as “terror” or “horror” also known as “female” or “male.” Ann Radcliffe is the forerunner of the “terror” Gothic novel as she uses suspense to frighten her readers, but as always the concerns can be explained by natural occurences not meant to be afraid of (the supernatural explained). On the other hand, Matthew Gregory Lewis, author of *The Monk*, used horror to frighten his readers as actual monsters, death and violence pervaded his stories.

After 1820, in the Victorian era, more and more definitions of the Gothic novel developed as people tried to create convenient guidelines for the novel, some say leading to the death of the classic Gothic, and “converting wherever possible by a kind of retrospective evolution in to the harbinger of the modern historical romance” (Sage 19). In 1919, Freud’s *The Uncanny* has a significant influence on the approach and interpretation of the Gothic novel because it “introduces the notion that the whole structure and mood of horror fiction is a projection of deeply instinctual drive in the unconscious mind” (Sage 23). While Freud defined the Gothic novel as unconscious repressions and drives, others “sought to define the gothic as the basic political, legal and ecclesiastical mental condition of the English” (Bloom 4), which became known as emotionalism at the end of the 18th century when Edmund Burke codified the gothic as an emotional experience (8). In the more modern Gothic novel, authors such as Radcliffe or Lewis use Shakespeare or Milton references in their novels (Sage 24) as the villain/Hero of Gothic begins to be seen as an Elizabethan or Jacobean stage hero (Sage 25).

The Gothic novel always has and always will have a strong link to the historical novel as regionalism, often England, is a huge aspect in the plot of the novels. Some say it is not even a Gothic novel if it does not attempt to situate the events of its plot in a historical setting or if it does not have a concern with the historical past (Killeen 2). The past is a huge aspect of the Gothic novel because the past is never over in the gothic novel, it bursts through and the outdated becomes the contemporary, and this is what serves to help make the genre even more terrifying to its readers as “part of the new modern Gothic’s ability to attract and terrify readers is its new found ability to appear anywhere in any type of novel –Julian Wolfreys” (Killeen 3).

Modernity and superstitions are at odds with one another in the modern Gothic novel and this is what creates the terror for the new readers. Society wants to move on and become more modern but are worried about what will happen when they give up the past, especially when it comes to Catholicism and religion or strict racial and regional definitions and boundaries. These concerns appear as ghosts from the family’s past come to curse the current family members for forgetting their roots. The past, present and future collide in the modern Gothic novel and the uneasiness of the time is shown through unexplained phenomenon and ghostly encounters.

\*\*\*What about gothic developments outside of Britain? German/France

**Differences between Early and Late Gothic novels**

Early- 1764-1820

-Terror vs Horror novels

- Focuses on the suspense/situation

Late- 1820-present?

* Focuses more on the psychological aspect of the characters.
* Monsters are no longer just monsters, there are reasons behind the way they are, misunderstandings and mistreatments.
* Things can no longer be taken at face value, there are underlying meanings. A ghost becomes something much more, a warning from the past or a character’s unconscious troubles.
* Says something about society/classes/religion/culture

TIMELINE

**First Wave: 1765-1820**

Leads to Terror (Radcliffe) v Horror Gothic (Lewis)

**Early Gothic (Gothic Romances)**

***Horace Walpole: The Castle of Otranto (1764)***

Goal was to combine fanciful medieval romances (too unbelievable) with more modern novels (too strictly confined) to get something in the middle of a realistic romance?

-Mysteries

-Ancestral curses

-Fainting heroines

***Clara Reeve: The Old English Baron (1778)***

Tried to adapt Walpole’s mysteries to the time. If the supernatural events were less absurd would they become more believable?

***Ann Radcliffe: The Mysteries of Udolpho (1794)***

Develops the ‘supernatural explained’ and made the Gothic novel socially acceptable

***Mathew Gregory Lewis: The Monk (1796)***

Develops ‘continental horrors’ pastiche and self-parody (present in the original gothic novels) inspired the ‘terror gothic novels’

***Lord Byron, Pery Bysshe Shelley, Mary Shelley, and John Polidori: Gothic romance (1816)***

Development of the Byronic Hero, Frankenstein

***Charles Maturin: Melmoth the Wanderer (1820)***

Some critics say this marks the last of the classic Gothic novels

**Victorian Gothic in the 19th century: A reinterpretation**

Characterized by psychological depth of the villains and a more active ghost with crimes/acts of terror evoked by his own feelings or jealousies, sometimes the ghost is an animal

***Edgar Allen Poe: Fall of the House of Usher (1839)***

Develops a focus on the psychological aspects of the characters and the horror within

**The Bronte Sisters: Start of the Female Gothic?**

A woman’s entrapment in domestic space under the authority of the patriarchal “hero” and her dangerous attempts to escape

***Emily: Wuthering Heights (1847)***

Develops the byronic hero, Heathcliff, who is demonic yet the hero

***Elizabeth Gaskell: Doom of the Griffiths (1858)***

Develops idea/fear that ancestral sin can come back to curse future generations

***Bram Stoker: Dracula (1897)***

Directly influenced by Ann Radcliffe and Horace Walpole’s Styles, Stoker started a sub-genre of the gothic by posing arisocrats dominating peasants in the political plight of colonization

***Charles Dickens:***

From reading gothic novels as a teenager, his writing was influenced by them. Urban setting with a gloomy atmosphere, the poor juxtaposed right underneath the rich. Introduced Urban Fog which would become key in Urban Gothic fiction

**Urban Gothic: Robert Louis Stevenson Jekyll and Hyde, Picture of Dorian Grey (1880s)**

Introduces social anxiety, ethics, social degeneration, questions the social structure

**Northanger Horrid Novels: Jane Austen (1818)**

Parodies the Gothic

**Female gothic:**

defined as a version of the gothic depicting the vulnerable and sexually naïve woman vigorously pursued by the forces for lust and emotional avarice. In the 19th century this innocence and vulnerability is translated wholesale to child figures, and society itself configured as the male villain out to get her. (Killeen 61)

Dickens uses a lot of this childhood horror

Even though these novels try to protect the child, something far more sinister is happening: the novels perpetuate the abuse of children Dickens is theoretically trying to stamp out, and this is partly because they see the child as a threat to adult integrity as well as the source of adult subjectivity: these novels both love and hate the child, desire and loathe it (Killeen)

**The Regional Gothic**

Fear surrounds ethnic borders, especially those areas deemed part of the Celtic world (Killeen 91)

The gothic describes a barbarian or one not civilized, this barbarian and the depiction of civilized v uncivilized is placed on a timeline on which some people/cultures are historically behind others or less developed.

**Encompasses the Irish Gothic**

(Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu, maria Regina Roche, maria edgeworth, sydney owenson, charles robert maturin, oscar wilde, bram stoker, w.b. yeats, and elizabeth bowen)

-Felt loyalty, similarity and dissimilarity to both england and ireland

-The search for a new power other than the government, interest in occults

\*\*There are always opposing forces in the gothic whether it be male female, nations, old and new, good and bad

**The Victorian Occult Gothic**

-A loss of faith in religion/catholicism as it fails to explain some things that happen in this world

-An obsession with the occult

-Ghost stories also show an issue with time. It is the past manifesting itself in the present

-Link between femininity and the occult leads to a crisis in masculinity as males fear women will control society once again with the emergence of the “new woman” and her sexuality

-Worry the world is run by secret societies

-Refusal to completely turn one way or the other to the future or the past. Allows the reader to be the modern human they want without leaving the past or religion

-OR is the gothic novel a renewal of religion, hope and comfort for those afraid god is dead.

WORKS CITED

*The Gothick Novel*. Ed. Victor Sage. 1990.

*Gothic Histories.* Clive Bloom. 2010

*Gothic Literature 1825-1914*. Jarlath Killeen. 2009

\*\*\*Find *Foregin Quarterly Review* of 1827 Walter Scott’s essay on the supernatural (start of supernatural explained)