

The Gothic: Etymology and Development

In the course of its development, gothic assumed different connotations. During the eighteenth century, the word gothic differentiated from what it meant earlier, and continued to be different from what it connoted in the nineteenth and twentieth century. L. K. Wheeler, traces the origins of the term and the changes it endured in the following: The word Gothic originally only referred to the Goths, one of the Germanic tribes that helped destroy Rome. Their now-extinct language, also called Gothic, died out completely. The term later came to signify “Germanic,” then “medieval,” especially in reference to the medieval architecture and art used in Western Europe between 1100 and 1500 CE. (The earlier art and architecture of medieval Europe between 700-1100 CE is known as “Romanesque.”) Characteristics of Gothic architecture include the pointed arch and vault, the flying buttress, stained glass, and the use of gargoyles and grotesques fitted into the nooks and crannies unoccupied by images of saints and biblical figures. The term has come to be used much more loosely to refer to gloomy or frightening literature.

According to Wheeler, originally, the word Gothic referred to the “Goths”, one of the Germanic tribes, who helped destroy Rome and ravaged the rest of Europe in 3rd, 4th, and 5th centuries. Thus, the term became a synonym to barbaric; the gothic was a pejorative term “used to denigrate objects, people, and attitudes deemed barbarous, grotesque, coarse, crude, formless, tasteless, primitive, savage, and ignorant”. Then, it came to mean “Germanic” or “Medieval”. Later, the gothic referred to a type of architecture and a type of spooky fiction. In terms of architecture, the word gothic referred to a style of architecture prevalent in Western Europe from the twelfth to the sixteenth century, of which the chief characteristics are the pointed arches, rounded vaults, gargoyles and buttresses. It was applied also to buildings, architectural details, and ornamentations.

Aesthetics of Gothic Fiction

In terms of literature, gothic referred to a type of fiction characterised by gloomy setting, supernatural events, villains, mystery, suspense and other tropes. A definition of the gothic genre is strongly linked to its first appearance with the publishing of Walpole’s novel. In 1764, Horace Walpole published *The Castle of Otranto* that came to be recognised as the first gothic novel, wherein the gothic took a new turn to denote all that is supernatural and terrifying. In *The Castle of*

Otranto, Walpole created a gloomy atmosphere that draws upon Medieval scenery, subterranean labyrinths, and shocking supernaturalism.

In *A Glossary of Literary Terms*, M. H. Abrams defines the gothic genre in relation to Horace's Walpole *The Castle of Otranto: A Gothic Story*: "The Gothic novel, or in alternative term, Gothic romance, is a type of prose fiction which was inaugurated by Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto: A Gothic Story* (1764) ... and flourished through the early nineteenth century. Some writers followed Walpole's example by setting their stories in the medieval period; others set them in a Catholic country, especially Italy or Spain. The locale was often a gloomy castle furnished with dungeons, subterranean passages, and sliding panels; the typical story focused on the sufferings imposed on an innocent heroine by a cruel and lustful villain, and made bountiful use of ghosts, mysterious disappearances, and other sensational and supernatural occurrences" (which in a number of novels turned out to have natural explanations).

In the light of this, the gothic narrative is mainly identified through the use of tropes, such as the ancient setting, dreary landscapes, villains and helpless heroines, paranormal appearances, etc. Jerrold E. Hogle in "Introduction: The Gothic in Western Culture" writes:

"Though not always as obviously as in *The Castle of Otranto* or *Dracula*, a Gothic tale usually takes place (at least some of the time) in an antiquated or seemingly antiquated space — be it a castle, a foreign place, an abbey, a vast prison, a subterranean crypt, a graveyard, a primeval frontier or island, a large old house or theatre, an aging city or urban underworld, a decaying storehouse, factory, laboratory, public building, or some new recreation of an older venue, such as an office with old filing cabinets, an overworked spaceship, or a computer memory. Within this space, or combination of such spaces, are hidden secrets from the past (sometimes the recent past) that haunt the characters, psychologically, physically, or otherwise at the main time of the story".

The setting is an influential feature of the Gothic narrative. The latter revolves around locations like abandoned castles, massive dungeons and abbeys, underground premises, old cities and venues. Jerrold Hogle presents an overview

of the settings that could be demonstrated in Gothic horror tales. Another key factor of the gothic is haunting and secrets. He adds:

“These hauntings can take many forms, but frequently assume the features of ghosts, specters, or monsters (mixing features from different realms of being, often life and death) that rise from within the antiquated space, or sometimes invade it from alien realms, to manifest unresolved crimes or conflicts that can no longer be successfully buried from view”.

He, also, mentions the haunting which could emanate from monsters or supernatural elements; he, further, pinpoints the vitality of secrets as a source of dread and terror. The Gothic, as a genre, maybe described as “staggering, limping, lurching form, akin to the monsters it so frequently describes”, but it is also true that “no other modern literary form as influential as the Gothic novel has also been as pervasively conventional”. In *The Coherence of Gothic Conventions*, Eve Sedgwick offers a clear statement about the gothic:

“Once you know that a novel is of the Gothic kind ... you can predict its contents with unnerving certainty. You know the important features of its *mise en scene*: an oppressive ruin, a wild landscape, a Catholic or feudal society. You know about the trembling of the heroine and the impetuosity of her lover. You know about the tyrannical older man with the piercing glance who is going to imprison and try to rape or murder them”.

Not surprisingly, all gothic narratives share mostly common themes; the important ones are location, the helpless heroine and the tyrant villain. It may appear essential for gothic tales to follow the scheme of Walpole’s novel and be set in some distant and foreign place and time. In addition, George E. Haggerty, in *Gothic Fiction/Gothic Form* (1989), speaks about the importance of space in the gothic mode and states that space is always: “threatening and never comfortable in the Gothic novel; castles loom with supernatural capacity for entrapment; cloisters induce claustrophobia; rooms become too small; vistas too grand”. Gothic literature uses “adjectives that are selected to establish mood rather than to describe in any specific way – they depict the scene less than they create a response to it”. This disjointed atmosphere of “the decaying, ruined scenery which implies

that at one time there was a thriving world”(The Gothic Novel) is a vehicle used to transmit the vision of dissatisfaction with the deteriorated present. It communicates that the once treasured landscape had faded and became ruins; it is used to create fear and dread. It is worth noting that the gothic, as a genre, reacts against the rationalism of the Enlightenment. It makes use of a shocking supernaturalism to subvert against the dry realism of the movement. It, also, exhibits the negative consequences of acting upon repressed previously forbidden desires. Unnatural events in the gothic story may, sometimes, be given natural explanations while, in other times, they are beyond understanding. The inability to grasp the supernatural situation leads the characters to a state of paranoia characterised by crying and sentimental speeches. A threatening atmosphere built around mystery and suspense is one of the Gothic conventions. The Gothic plot is pervaded by fear that results from the obscurity of the unknown and is often compromising of mysterious and inexplicable elements. Gothic is, also, a literature of the alienated self whether this alienation is from “[the character’s] creations, from nature and his humanity or simply living in isolation and thus alienated from society and even from reality”. Most Gothic protagonists are portrayed as struggling to reach self-knowledge. This reflects their journey of struggling against their alienation prompted by the threat of the modern life. The gothic hero becomes a sort of archetype as we find out that there is a pattern to their characterisation. There is always the protagonist, usually isolated either voluntarily or involuntarily. Then, there is the villain, who is the epitome of evil, either by his own fall from grace or by some implicit malevolence.

Source:

GOTHIC HORRORS AND THE DOUBLE IN *FRANKENSTEIN*

- Kohil Mouna