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## Gothic Fiction

Literature / Second Year

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## **1. History of the Goths**

The Goths are Germanic tribes who led to the collapse of the Roman Empire. Archaeologists have reported that these tribes first settled in the Baltic and eventually moved down to the Black Sea. In the third century, the Goths conquered Rome under Alaric, who took it in 410 AD and set up kingdoms in Italy and France. It is well recognised that, other than their destruction of the Roman civilization and literature, the Goths left no literature of their own. Until about the seventeenth century, the word "Gothic" meant all things medieval. However, the Renaissance, however, first used the term in an aesthetic context to describe a style of architecture attributed to the Germanic tribes. In contrast to the classical style, the Goths were regarded as "barbaric, disordered, and irrational" (Punter 4). Critics view the mediaeval age (5<sup>th</sup>–15<sup>th</sup> cent.) as "a cultural wasteland, primitive and superstitious" (ibid.). What is noticeable here is that the Gothic Age, or Mediaeval, was in opposition to the Classical Age in many terms:

Where the classical was well ordered, the Gothic was chaotic; where the classical was simple and pure, Gothic was ornate and convoluted; where the classics offered a world of clear rules and limits, Gothic represented excess and exaggeration, the product of the wild and the uncivilized, a world that constantly tended to overflow cultural boundaries [... ] Gothic was the archaic, the pagan, that which was prior to, or was opposed to, or resisted the establishment of civilized values and a well-regulated society. (Punter 7)

## **2. Gothic Fiction:**

Gothic fiction, or Gothic Romance, is a genre of prose fiction that was first founded by Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto: A Gothic Story* (1765). Gothic fiction is another term for dark romanticism, which emphasises "human fallibility, self-destruction, judgement, and punishment, as well as the psychological effects of guilt and sin". Romantics are optimistic but dark Romantics are pessimistic. Gothic fiction is "romantic tales of terror and the supernatural". Writers tried to imitate Walpole's novels. The Gothic is characterised by: the mediaeval period, dark ruined castles, secret passages, gloomy corridors, dark basements, chaos, imprisonment, decay, death, terror, irrationality, cruelty, persecution, ghosts, vampires, isolated settings, evil, gothic doubles, etc. Other examples are Ann Radcliffe's *The*

Mysteries of Udolpho (1894); Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818); Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897); Robert Louis Stevenson's *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*; and Edgar Allan Poe's works. They all attempted to reflect the spirit and vogue of the nineteenth century, when science and reason had become a great threat to mankind. The Gothic seeks to explore the existential mystery and terror of the nature of humankind.

### **3. The Purpose of Gothic Fiction:**

The Gothic is intended to evoke terror and horror in the reader; terror is psychological fear, while horror is physical revulsion.

Gothic fiction is a special kind of literature. It can convince people to believe that there is nothing to be afraid of. It wakes up the terror in our soul and then turns it into a pleasure experience. The mixture of horror and pleasure enter our soul and purify us [...] Although we don't know whether to laugh or cry, this expression on horror is effective to some degree. Because the daily life looks very natural and it has no depression of horror sometimes [...] Gothic fiction creates lots of horrible scenes which bring a strong thrill to people and make people feel safe while experiencing the extreme danger and death. People are provided with a particular relaxation and pleasure. That is where the endless charm of Gothic fiction lies in [...] This aesthetic pleasure is some kind of pleasure in our internal sense. Simply, maybe we can feel great pleasure from destruction. Everyone will have this experience which can be call "so cruel pleasure" [...] So, the purpose of literature is to arouse people's emotion and let out people's horror, pain and mercy. We not only get the aesthetic pleasure from the horror and evil, but also a kind of "purification". (Pang et al. 16)

### **4. The difference between Romanticism and the Gothic:**

The broad difference is that Romanticism was always associated with men, while the gothic was often identified with women. To begin, we should list the central features of Romanticism to understand how they differ: Romanticism positively encourages "imagination, individualism, idealism, inspiration, intuition, freedom, beauty of nature". The Gothic draws the reader's attention to the damaging consequences of Romanticism. In Romanticism, nature is beautiful and calm, while the Gothic represents nature as hostile and threatening. Imagination and freedom can bring about amazing achievements; it can also cause massive damage, including environmental destruction and emotional distress. To illustrate, the Gothic novel Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley's *Frankenstein* examines the dark

possibilities of Romanticism, when a scientist tempers with the human nature that resulted in the creation of a monster. The misuse of imagination by the mad scientists Frankenstein endangers the whole existence of human beings. Thus, we can infer that the illusion of the Romanticists of an ideal future or utopia becomes a nightmare of a world ruined or dystopian.

## **5. Elements of Gothic Literature:**

Excerpted from G. Jackson, Lisa . "Summer Reading Assignment (2017:2018)", 2012. web access 24/01/2021

### **Setting & Atmosphere**

There are old, rundown structures, especially castles or great country manors that are declining from former greatness. Other features:

- Hidden passages
- Trap doors
- Winding stairs
- Dungeons or secret rooms

There are bleak, foreboding environments.

- Dark, dense forests
- Imposing mountains
- Foggy moors
- Gloomy, stormy weather
- Areas far away from civilization

The atmosphere is one of suspense, mystery, horror, or dread.

### **Protagonist**

The protagonists of Gothic literature are isolated or alone. This isolation can be self-imposed or a result of circumstances beyond her control.

- Physical isolation (trapped in a house far from civilization)
- Emotional isolation (cut off from the people around her)

The plot tends to involve hidden secrets which threaten the protagonist.

-Female Protagonists and Male Protagonists

- Persecuted maidens
- Fainting spells
- Ailing health
- Troubled past
- Dark attributes

### **Emotions**

-Emotions run high for both male and female characters.

• Characters are often passionate and strong-willed, defying others or even their own common sense in pursuit of their goals.

• Women are often curious and have a tendency to swoon, while men storm and rage in reflection of unseen inner torments.

- The events emphasize high emotion and often reflect a heightened sense of drama.
- Examples include murders, kidnappings, people going mad and tragic illnesses.

### **Damsels in Distress**

- The "damsel in distress" motif appears quite often in Gothic literature, with women threatened by tyrannical men or just the circumstances in which they find themselves.
- They often appear frightened and may suffer from some kind of ailment.

### **Foreboding**

- Ominous implications precede dark events in Gothic literature.
- Unlucky omens appear, ancient curses linger in the air, and dark forces beyond the protagonist's control thwart his ambitions.

### **Decay**

- The overall impression of a Gothic world is one of decay: a formerly great family, community, country or individual who has peaked and now begins a slow process of decline.
- This appears both in the landscape (crumbling buildings) and in the characters themselves.

### **The Supernatural**

- The supernatural often appears in Gothic literature, particularly ghosts and unexplained manifestations.
- In some Gothic novels, elements ultimately have a rational explanation, but the implication always suggest something not of this world. Other such beings may include apparitions, monsters, demons, and vampires.
- Characters' dreams bleed into reality or death-like states.

## **References**

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Pang, Wenfang , Diqiu Wang and Shanshan Hu. "Gothicism in The Fall of the House of Usher." *Advances in Literary Study*, 3 (2015):15-20.

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