The Peculiarities of the Gothic Novel in Twentieth-Century English Literature

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ABSTRACT: This article aims to address the genre of Gothic literature, its evolution and place in modern culture. Gothic fiction is a controversial genre, and while for certain critics, Gothic ended in the nineteenth century, for others the eighteenth-nineteenth century period represents only the first wave of Gothic fiction. In their opinion, Gothic genre actually never ended per se, but evolved, changing to reflect different realities. Today Gothic has morphed into multiple genres and has contaminated others. This article attempts to overview the development of Gothic fiction until present day, and to identify Gothic fiction tropes, while considering their evolution.

KEYWORD: Gothic literature, modern Gothic tropes, horror, fantasy, science fiction, popular literature.

Introduction

Gothic fiction may seem to be an obsolete literary genre today; however, it is as relevant as ever. It is considered to be a very persistent and productive genre; its works are scattered along 250 years, despite being seen as a highly unstable literary genre. Gothic is seen as unstable, because its elements came to contaminate almost every other genre, furthermore, it generated new genres. It is still widely popular today, although its many forms are not constantly recognized as Gothic. In order to comprehend its place in modem culture, one should first look into its origin and its evolution, as means to identify the classic features of Gothic fiction, and trace in modern fiction.

Gothic history

It would stand to reason, however, that Walpole was mistaken in his understanding of the term Gothic. As pointed out by Robin Sowerby," It is well known that the use of the term 'Gothic' to describe the literary phenomenon that began in the later eighteenth century has little, if anything , to do with the people from whom it is derived". The Goths in history were a Germanic tribe that came out southern Russia around the third century and spread their influence into parts of France, Spain, Italy and England. They had no written literature of their own, so much of the history of the Goths was passed down orally or recorded by other peoples, and many of these records were kept by enemies of the Goths, so reports weigh toward being unfavorable. When Walpole was applying the term Gothic to his novel the historical Goths were recounted as a savage band of war-loving people. They were the enemy of the Romans and as the Romans were regarded as the purveyors of civilization, the Goths were the converse; they were the destroyers, the corrupters. They were set up in a strict binary opposition to the Romans. They were savage whereas the Romans were civilized,

they were ignorant whereas the Romans were educated, they were bloodthirsty whereas the Romans were peaceful.

Sowerby also explains:

Through History the word 'Gothic' has always been chiefly defined in contrasting juxtaposition to the Roman and a constant factor in its various uses, perhaps the only constant factor, has continued to be its antithesis to the Roman or the classical.

Characterization The Gothic Specter

Any child in the western world can recognize the likeness of the creature in *Frankenstein,* though people familiar with Shelley's novel realize Frankenstein is the man, and the monster is the "creature" or the "daemon". When the non-literary mind describes Frankenstein the results are similar: stitches, scars, green skin, a torn, dirty sport coal, lumbering walk, monosyllabic grunts, and, of course, a pair of large, steel bolts fastened to each side of the neck. This portrait for the Creature, courtesy of Boris Karloff in the 1931 film adaptation, never appears in the original novel, not even close. Only once does Shelly directly describe the Creature in specific detail:

His limbs were in proportion, and I had selected his features as beautiful. Beautiful! Great God! His yellow skin scarcely covered the work of muscles and arteries beneath; his hair was of a lustrous black, and flowing; his teeth of a pearly whiteness; but these luxuriances only formed a more horrid contrast with his watery eyes, that seemed almost of the same colour as the dun white sockets in which they were set, his shriveled complexion and straight black lips.

This was Victor's original encounter with the Creature after he animated it with the spark of life. This the classic specter of Gothic fiction, a powerful, frightening creature, horrifying to look upon, and filled with extreme malevolence. Later, when Victor comes upon his creation after abandoning it he narrates, "[H] is countenance bespoke bitter anguish… while its unearthly ugliness rendered it almost too horrible for human eyes. Words like "ugly, horrid, horrible," and "hideous" in reference to the Creature appear throughout the story.

Gothic Novel Examples

Horace Walpole's **The Castle of Otranto** (1764) is often regarded as the first true Gothic romance. Walpole was obsessed with medieval Gothic architecture, and built his own house, Strawberry Hill, in that form, sparking a fashion for Gothic revival. A few good examples of Gothic fiction are Ann Radcliffe's **The Mysteries of Udolpho** (1794) and The Italian (1797). Matthew Gregory Lewis's **The Monk** (1796) was the book that introduced more horrific elements into the English gothic. Mary Shelley's **Frankenstein** (1818) and Bram Stoker's **Dracula** (1897) are fine examples of gothic novels.

Gothic Literature in the Romantic Period

In both Gothic and romantic creeds there is a tendency to slip imperceptivity from the real into the other world, to demolish barriers between the physical and the physic or supernatural. Wordsworth's **Guilt and Sorrow, Peter and Bell,** Coleridge's **The Ancient Mariner, Kubla Khan, Christabel,** Keats' **The Eve of St. Agnes** and **La Belle Dame Sans Mercy,** Shelley's **The witch of Atlas** are some **Gothic poems** influenced by the technique and devices of **the Gothic fiction**.

Gothic Literature in the Victorian Period

The Gothic romances have great influence on the Victorian and modern fiction. The sensational novels of Bulwar Lytton, Wilkie Collins in their emphasis on mystery and terror are a direct descent

from the Gothic novels. **The Bronte sisters** luxuriously used the suggestive method of Radcliffe for creating **the Gothic atmosphere** in **Wuthering Heights** and **Jane Eyre.** Walter de la Mare's Poem **The Listeners** is full of gothic setting.

Gothic Literature in the Modern Period

In modern times, the fantasy of H.G. Wells, and C.S. Lewis, J . K Rowling, Edgar Allan Poe shows us worlds unknown, monstrous and horrible. The modern detective novels of Edgar Wallace and Peter Cheney are influenced by the Gothic romances. They provided a pattern and also inspired the sensational writers of to-day with the incentive that set them on the sinister paths of crime fiction. The term 'Gothic' is possibly one of the hardest to describe objectively. Taxonomizing endeavors are often carried out by critics through an inductive process that relies on a set number of canonical texts from key writers such as Horace, Ann Radcliffe, Matthew Lewis, and Charles Robert Maturin. The motifs, settings and themes of landmark novels and short stories have themselves become markers of Gothic indexity, even when some of them, as in the case of the trope of the found manuscript, do not originate in the pages of the Gothic novel. For this reason, the establishment of a modern Gothic tradition needs to be understood as part of a broader revisionist venture still preoccupied with the tenuousness of its guiding principles and imbued with a desire to dissect the meanings and cultural values of the Gothic Retrospectively seen as a genre by some, influential critic David Punter has warned that the Gothic is a "contested site" , as even the seemingly untouchable "early figures were often also writing in different genres". It is possible to think of the Gothic as a "historical phenomenon" that blossomed in the late 18th century at the cultural and national levels, prompting a re-thinking of the "Gothic"(related to the Goth tribes) or barbaric past. However, the texts associated with the Gothic were hybrids, bringing together elements from the chivalric romance and the sentimental novel, so they are therefore difficult to homogenize. To reduce the Gothic to a literature of fear, useful as this notion is in establishing the ludic grounds of the textual effects of certain novels, also fails to account for why we have held on to this label over others. Given the undecidability regarding the literature foundations of the Gothic, to attempt to provide an all-encompassing definition of the contemporary Gothic is a doomed endeavor. Current thinking in the area has tried to overcome this problem by suggesting that the Gothic is "a mode rather than a genre," "mobility and [a] continued capacity for reinvention" being two of its "defining characteristics " As the fragments of an already atomized type of literature, the contemporary Gothic is marked by its ubiquity: if a certain novels is not Gothic, it is bound to utilize motifs or to include literary aspects that have, at some point, been associated with the Gothic, from graveyards and ruins as memorable settings to rapacious monks, monsters, and ghosts as villains. Since these are very specific and no longer confined to narrative effect, it is possible to find the "Gothic" as an aesthetic or thematic qualifier in further subgenre hybrids (Gothic romance, Gothic science fiction, Gothic noir) or even in methodological subdivisions reliant on the type of cultural work carried out by a text (postcolonial Gothic, queer Gothic , feminist Gothic).

Although there is a still a noticeable divide between the popular and the academic uses of "Gothic" to designate certain types of contemporary literature, it is also true that the remarkable and consistent work of scholars in this field has contributed to the popularization of the term. For instance, the British Library ran a successful expert-led multimedia exhibition between 2014 and 2015, *Terror and Wonder: The Gothic Imagination,* celebrating the relevance and legacy of the Gothic. The numerous book displays included works by Daphne du Maurier and Stephen King, both of whom initially found their novels discussed as romances or as horror in the press. The same applies to cinema, where the broader "horror" label, which refers to a filmic genre that seeks to generate a particular emotional reaction rather than to the specifics of a film's setting, design, or theme, is preferred to Gothic. When

the British Film Institute ran its "Gothic: The Dark Heart of Film" season (2013-2014), however, "Gothic" was applied to *A Nightmare on Elm Street* (Wes Craven, 1984) or *The Twilight Saga: Breaking Dawn Part1* (Bill Condon, 2011), films that have been widely received as a horror "slasher" (*Nightmare)* and a paranormal romance (*Breaking Dawn*). This conflation of genres of genres and subgenres can be confusing in determining where the Gothic begins and horror ends but it is not necessarily detrimental to an overall understanding of the term. It simply indicates that the various components of the Gothic (its monsters, its formulas) are beginning to overtake old genre demarcations. As an increasingly recognizable label, it has become possible to study texts as "Gothic" (or "gothic") if they behave in a particular anti-realist manner. A more concerted interest in the Gothic outside of architecture and the celebration of its potential for social commentary (sometimes at the expense of horror's perceived intellectual limits) has made it more widely available (Valancourt and Udolpho presses have brought back a number of out-of-print Gothic novels since 2005 and 2009, respectively) and encouraged contemporary writers such as Patrick McGrath, Sarah Waters, or Kate Mosse to use the term to refer to their work.

Moreover, concerns over genre determinacy have given way to the forms of cultural work the Gothic carries out, if sometimes at the expense of nuance of intuitive alignments between texts and their respective literary traditions. As early as 2000, Chris Baldick and Robert Mighall were already proposing that criticism "has tended to reinvent [the Gothic] in the image of its own projected intellectual goals of psychological 'depth' and political 'subversion'…, mistakenly presenting Gothic literature as a kind of 'revolt' against bourgeois rationality, modernity or Enlightenment." While their broader point is that an emphasis on intention and transgression has ignored artistic merit and even implausibly turned plot incoherence into virtue, it is equally true that the Gothic is now largely celebrated as oppositional, socially aware, and even politically minded. This is not a situation exclusive to the Gothic, as other disciplines, such as television perceived to be "lowbrow" by some, have carried out similar re-appraisals. Where these disciplines are nascent or in need of legitimization, as the Gothic was during the beginnings of its modern institutionalization in the 1990s and 2000s, the process of casting its outlook as transformative and impactful is crucial. As Catherine Spooner notes, it is indeed possible to trace the prioritization of the social value of the Gothic to a "broader crisis in the humanities" where the letter "are increasingly pressed to prove their utility, whether expressed in economic terms- stimulating the culture industries-or moral ones-creating well-rounded human beings and cultivating active citizenship." The Gothic is more describable by its cultural function on the grounds that, this is now largely expected of it. More recently, the question of whether post-millenial Gothic constitutes a new beast of its own defined by technological, ideological, and economic pressures specific to the new millennium and whether it should be understood as distinct from, or a continuation of, 20th-century Gothic is becoming a pressing one. The Gothic from the 1990s onward is necessarily influenced by previous trends and intellectual preoccupations that began to mature in the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s- for example, the feminist revisions of Angela Carter's work or Toni Morrison's examination of the effects of slavery in *Beloved* (1987) – as a result of, among other things, the rise of social activism and an awareness of the importance of identity politics to the study of literature. The iterations of the Gothic since the 1990s are sufficiently varied and indicative of wider modern shifts to capaciously allow for a broad, if not exhaustive, survey of this type of literature. The approach here is broadly thematic and centers on key markers of a text's Gothicity.

Conclusion

In simple terms, Gothic fiction makes people afraid. But what is it that creates the fear? The monsters? The boogeymen? Or is it a deeper, unconscious fear? Through all the monsters and the

ominous settings of Gothic fiction, the real fear comes out of the portrayal of destabilizing factors, things that will cause the collapse of social norms and customs. Gothic fiction uses specters to reveal the true evils at work that could potentially cause the destabilization of society.

The progress of Gothic fiction is ongoing. As society changes, so will the genre. Every society and culture through history has feared its demise. Gothic fiction preys off this fear, and as life goes on so does the threat of destabilization and its exposure in Gothic fiction.

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