

# vampires, castles and ghosts

everything you ever wanted to know about the gothic



**Professor David Punter** takes you beyond the stereotypes of modern Goth style, with a survey of the origins of the Gothic and its key features.

**W**hat is the Gothic? You might initially think of 'Goth culture' – black robes, black lips, vampire fixations, a certain type of music. Or perhaps Gothic films, which have a long history from Hammer horror through to far more recent remakes of Gothic texts like *Dracula* and *Frankenstein*. But the Gothic, in fact, has an even longer history and a broader cultural spread. Asking the questions when, where, what and why might help pin down this fascinating and long-lived cultural phenomenon.

## When is the Gothic?

In some ways, this is the most confusing question of all. We might want to trace the Gothic back to the original Goths, whose history is now mostly lost but who have been credited with a part in the last days of the Roman Empire and the sack of Rome. But the Goths left almost no written records, and were mostly unheard of until the 'first Gothic revival' in the late eighteenth century. In Britain this revival involved a series of attempts to 'return to roots', in contrast to the classical model revered in the earlier eighteenth century.

The notion of the Gothic as a reaction against the classical tradition had a considerable impact during the romantic period, and affected almost all the major romantic writers in different ways. William Blake was an upholder of the Gothic as against the classical. Coleridge's ballad 'The Rime of the Ancient Mariner' is distinctly Gothic in its use of supernatural machinery.

It is against this background that we see the emergence of the Gothic novel, as part of a second 'Gothic revival', in the nineteenth century. This time it was an

architectural revival which looked back to the great English medieval cathedrals for inspiration, rather than to the Greek and Roman architecture which had so greatly influenced the period of the Enlightenment in the eighteenth century. (Perhaps the best-known example of the 'neo-gothic style' is the Houses of Parliament.) The crucial features of this style were ornateness, soaring perspectives – part of the Gothic preoccupation with the sublime – and a kind of religious intensity.

From this time on, the Gothic has continued to exert an influence. We can find it in the ghost story, which became extraordinarily popular during the Edwardian period when writers such as Arthur Conan Doyle, M.R. James and H.G. Wells (despite his scientific turn of mind) wrote a number of distinctly Gothic tales. And we can find it in the more contemporary period with the evolution of the horror story in the hands of writers like Stephen King, Ramsey Campbell and Dean Koontz. We can find it too in parodies of the Gothic, from Jane Austen's early nineteenth-century satire *Northanger Abbey*, written at the height of the Gothic novel craze, to more modern pastiches and parodies.





## Where is the Gothic?

So the Gothic stands for a continuing set of revivals, or ways of revivifying the past but where do we find it? The Gothicism of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries was far more broadly spread than just Britain. German culture was particularly crucial, with any number of 'Gothic plays' produced during the period, some by rather poor writers but others by major figures such as Schiller. This German Gothic drama, interestingly, provides the roots of that staple of nineteenth-century English culture, the melodrama, with its swooning maidens, moustache-twirling villains and upright heroes. In France, the infamous Marquis de Sade wrote the first major criticism of the Gothic, attributing its growth to the dangers and terrors of the French Revolution.

The Gothic was also influential in America from the late nineteenth century onwards. Almost all of today's writers of horror fiction look back to Edgar Allan Poe as their master; but more traditionally-minded American writers, such as Nathaniel Hawthorne and Henry James wrote Gothic too. James's novella *The Turn of the Screw*, often filmed, remains one of the most startling, and indeed inexplicable, of Gothic works, with a panoply of ghosts and a narrator of the utmost unreliability – not for nothing was one well-known critical article on the book titled 'The Squirm of the True'!

## What is the Gothic?

### 1. TEXTS

Despite its variety, the central ground of the Gothic remains a series of novels written in Britain between, roughly, 1760 and 1830. The very first of these is often said to be Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto*, although to the modern reader Walpole's giant helmets, speaking pictures and other supernatural paraphernalia may seem comic rather than Gothic. The works which were perceived at the time as most distinctively Gothic were those of Ann Radcliffe – chiefly *The Mysteries of Udolpho* and *The Italian* – and *The Monk* by Matthew Lewis. Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, though now usually seen as Gothic, appeared a little late in the period and was arguably more concerned with the perils of scientific experimentation than with the problems of ghosts and haunting which preoccupied the Gothic.

The second wave in the late nineteenth century was, perhaps, an accompaniment to *fin de siècle* notions of decadence and degeneration: Bram Stoker's *Dracula*, Robert Louis Stevenson's *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*, Wells's *The Island of Doctor Moreau* and Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. Another less well-known but fascinating Gothic text from this period is Richard Marsh's *The Beetle*.

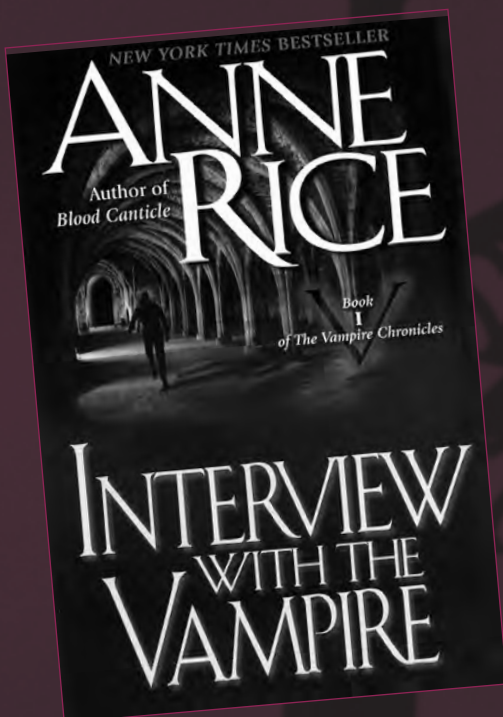
### 2. MOTIFS

We may prefer to define the Gothic by a series of motifs. The principal one is the Gothic castle, as in *Dracula*'s castle and in works by Walpole, Radcliffe and many later writers, Angela Carter among them. The castle is gloomy, forbidding, a place where maidens find themselves persecuted by feudal barons, a reference to a medieval past which somehow remains as the site of our worst fears and terrors.

The persecuted – or at least pursued – maiden is another major motif, the idea of somebody defenceless exposed to tyranny and loss. As, of course, is the ghost. Ghosts have never been absent from literature – think, for example, of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* – but in the Gothic we are constantly in the presence of ghosts, or at least of phenomena which might be considered ghostly, even if, as in the case of Radcliffe, they are usually explained away in the final few pages.

Then, of course, there is the vampire, who makes his first significant appearance in John Polidori's *The Vampyre* but becomes a source of obsession in much nineteenth-century literature. A particularly interesting example is the lesbian vampire in Sheridan LeFanu's *Carmilla*, although it is Stoker's *Dracula* who has most indelibly fixed himself in the minds of English readers.

And alongside these, there are all manner of monsters – Mary Shelley's is the most obvious – as well as zombies and the walking dead. A further, long-lived motif is the double. *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* is the most obvious example. The life-or-death experience of discovering, or being discovered by a double, runs right through Gothic literature.





### 3. MOOD

Alternatively, one might think of Gothic more in terms of mood. From the earliest days of Gothic fiction, it has been conventional to make a distinction between 'terror' and 'horror': 'terror' being something more shadowy, more insubstantial, harder to pin down, 'horror' standing for gross physical shock. But whichever way one looks at this, the central mood of the Gothic is fear.

In the Gothic, this mood always has something to do with the past, with 'what comes back', with the 'revenant'. Usually the ghost that returns in the Gothic has some connection with an evil deed the protagonist has committed in the past, although occasionally there seems little clear reason for the 'return' – Walter de la Mare's short stories contain some good examples of what we might call 'undeserved haunting'.

### 4. OUTSIDE THE MAINSTREAM

These days – although perhaps also at the time of the 'original Gothic' – the Gothic is conventionally identified as a specific subgenre of literature. This is at its most obvious in bookshops, where 'horror' is set apart from other fiction, and systematically marked out by publishers, with black, glossy covers, and so on, as a sub-genre on a level with science fiction, fantasy and romance. Gothic, then, is perhaps partly defined, and has been for two centuries, as a form of writing not wholly within the 'mainstream', even though its effects can be felt in many other mainstream works such as *Wuthering Heights*, *Jane Eyre* or the novels of Dickens.

## Why is the Gothic?

This is a very complicated question, with six possible answers, that might apply in a mingled way to any specific text.

### 1. SOCIAL

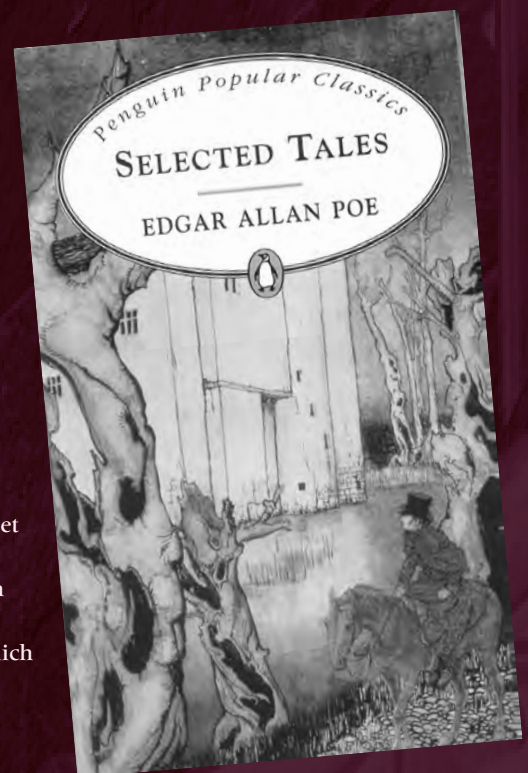
Some argue that the Gothic is a response to anxieties that the ancient feudal, aristocratic order might return to unsettle bourgeois conventions, a set of conventions which, on the surface, seemed certain of dominance during the eighteenth century but which were, perhaps, not quite as secure as they seemed. De Sade's theory was that the Gothic was related to the French Revolution; but perhaps it might be better to say that the Gothic is related to the uncertainties of revolution in general, of how sure we can be that forces that seem utterly defeated might not live on in a different form.

### 2. PSYCHOLOGICAL

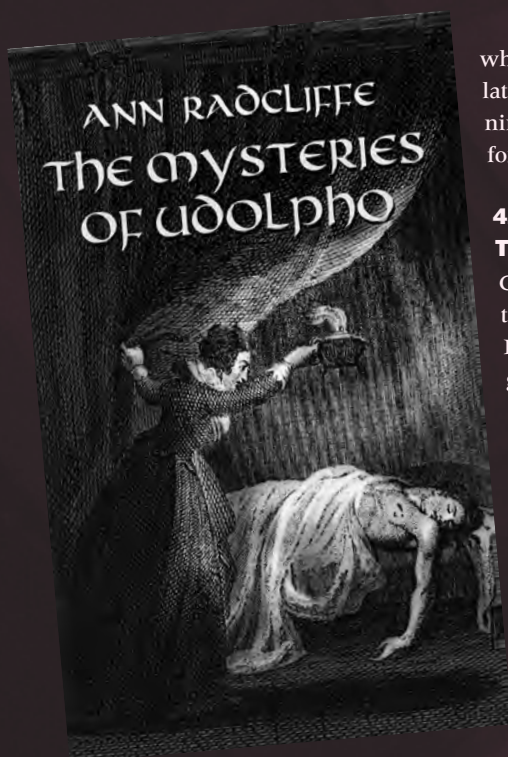
Freud famously identified the unconscious as that place in the mind from which nothing ever goes away: thus ghosts and hauntings are figures arising from our psychological past, figures of fear that we thought we had banished but which continue to live on inside us. There is a clear connection with the world of dreams; many commentators on dreams have said, for example, that in our dreams we are frequently objects of pursuit – thus the pursued maiden would be an instance of dreams writ large. We might also say that Gothic fiction enacts our fear of death but perhaps also the reverse, that it represents our fear of immortality, of living a life – like Coleridge's *Ancient Mariner* – from which no release is possible.

### 3. FEMINIST

Then again, we might point to the preponderance of suffering women in the Gothic, and say that what the Gothic really enacts is a struggle between the genders, a struggle in which men always have the upper hand. Texts such as *Jane Eyre*, of course, partially reverse this idea, since Jane, in a sense, 'wins'; but what she wins is an aged and blinded version of the man she loves. Certainly a great deal of Gothic fiction has been written by women, from Radcliffe through to Rice; and, much Gothic fiction, emblematically *Dracula*, seems to form itself around what psychologists might call 'eve-of-wedding fantasies' – those fantasies of lost freedom which women in particular have – or have had – before marriage (though ironically at the height of the Gothic, women had little freedom to lose!). There is a whole strand of criticism devoted to the 'female Gothic' – one of its main arguments hinges on the motif of the castle and its relation to the constrained domestic sphere







which most women, in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, were forced to inhabit.

#### 4. SCIENTIFIC/ TECHNOLOGICAL

Gothic, perhaps, tests the limits of the human. It does so in relation to ghosts, hauntings and the undead; but it also does so, most obviously in *Frankenstein*, in relation to the role of the divine and the question of how human ambition might overstep the boundaries of creation – this is, of course, also a gender argument, since *Frankenstein* also

usurps the role of women

in reproduction. The Gothic, though, might be seen as tracing the limits of what is possible for the human, and thus as questioning how far scientific and technological development might enable people to extend themselves without threat of divine retaliation – *The Island of Doctor Moreau* is one example of this, as are some of the graphic novels of Neil Gaiman. Behind it all lies a question of the value of science as opposed to human feeling.

#### 5. PASSIONS

The earliest writers of the Gothic (and critics of it) made it clear that they were ‘against reason’ – they did not accept the classic Enlightenment view that humans are mainly driven by reason. On the contrary: the Gothic reminds us that we are mainly driven by our *passions*. This may be a good or a bad thing. It may be a good thing insofar as we might feel emotional intensity towards certain people or causes; it may be a bad thing insofar as it drives us into obsession or madness. At all events, the Gothic deals in illicit desires, in what is prohibited by society; it deals in emotional extremes, whether terror or love; it deals in the terrifying forces which, in so many modern films, may besiege the ordinary house or ordinary lives, and sees them as evidence for forces inside ourselves with which we find it difficult, if not impossible, to come to terms.


#### 6. POPULAR CULTURE

And so I return to where I began, with popular culture. Gothic was, from its inception, a ‘popular’ form. Ghost stories were regularly published in Dickens’s Christmas annuals. More recently, there is the long-running series of M.R. James’s ghost stories shown on television at Christmas. Now, of course, with the huge stands of horror fiction in the bookshops, we may say that the Gothic has come into its own again.

## Conclusion

There is no one simple definition of the Gothic. Perhaps most useful of all is to think of it in terms of certain key cultural and literary oppositions: barbarity versus civilisation; the wild versus the domestic (or domesticated); the supernatural versus the apparently ‘natural’; that which lies beyond human understanding compared with that which we ordinarily encompass; the unconscious as opposed to the waking mind; passion versus reason; night versus day. And in so doing, perhaps we can make more sense of the connections between the Gothic in romantic poetry, or the nineteenth-century Gothic novel and its modern descendents, the Gothic film or Goth fashion style. Try applying these oppositions to the text you’re reading, whether it be an early novel, a short story or poem and see where they take you in understanding the essential qualities of this very rich and varied genre.



  
Professor David  
Punter teaches at  
the University of  
Bristol.