

## The Gothic by Professor John Bowen

### Horace Walpole's Dream



Horace Walpole, in full Horace Walpole, 4th earl of Orford, was born September 24, 1717, London, England and died March 2, 1797. He is best known as the father of The Gothic. Walpole was perhaps the most assiduous writer of his era, having written *The Castle of Otranto* (1764), which would later be known as the first Gothic novel in the English language and one of the earliest literary horror stories.

Many of his works were inspired by his twisted interpretation of dreams or hallucinations. One night while asleep in his bedroom of Strawberry Hill Mansion he dreamt of a gigantic armoured fist appearing on the staircase and that inspires him to write *The Castle of Otranto*. This is published in 1764 and begins this enormously powerful tradition of darkness that continues to the present day in hundreds of books, television programmes and films.



### Place and Time

Gothic fiction is fascinated by strange places. On the one hand very wild and remote landscapes and on the other, to very imprisoning places. So, if you think of the end of *Frankenstein*, there on the wild, arctic wastes. Well the other one is somewhere like *Dracula*, where you get imprisonment of poor Jonathan Harker, whose a nice, modern young man – goes off to Central Europe and he's suddenly captured by Count Dracula and imprisoned in this violently, archaic world. So, it's a sudden transformation, both in the space that he's living in and the place that he goes to. It's also, of course, a change in the kind of time that Dracula's living in. He moves from a modern world – this is a world of typewriters, of recording equipment, of stenography, of modern trains – suddenly to a world that reaches back into most archaic and distant sense of time. And that's very typical of all Gothic fiction. It wants to see the relationship between the modern world and the past – not as one of evolution or development – but of sudden juxtaposition and often violent conflict, in which the past erupts within the present and deranges it and one of the most powerful motifs of that is, of course, the ghost. The thing that you think is dead but comes back vividly alive in the present.



### Power

So, at the heart of Gothic fiction is the question of power. On the one hand it tends to be drawn to very powerful, often supernaturally powerful, or obscenely powerful figures and on the other, to people who are completely vulnerable. He seems to want to do this to explore the limits of what it is to be human – to be driven by either internal desires or forces outside yourself that make you or compel you to do things you don't want to do. And that, of course, gives it an enormous scope to explore the positions, say of women, in 19th-century society or 18th-century society – the way that women often are forced into situations in which they are confronted by irrational kinds of desire or need to which they are vulnerable and which may make their very life at risk.

Gothic novels are full of the weird and dangerous. It's often fascinated by desire, by violence, by abduction. So, Gothic is a kind of writing that can make explicit, what is often held back within more normal kinds of writing. On the one hand, it's fascinated by total power, by these obscene

patriarchal figures, who seem to be able to have no restraints whatsoever. It's also constantly drawn to the figure of the vulnerable young damsels and her possible triumph over these apparently, unbeatable forces.

### **The Uncanny and The Sublime**

One really useful term for thinking about Gothic writing, is the uncanny. Now this is a term that comes from Sigmund Freud – so something that's new but that also takes us back to something, either in our own psychological past, or something in the world that's archaic. Often Gothic fictions drive onwards to these uncanny moments for the reader, in which you suddenly recognise somebody who seems unfamiliar and strange – in fact, has an identity that you already know. So, figures that are not quite human, that look human but are not entirely human, like dolls, wax works, automata – these are very characteristic marks – not just of Gothic but particularly of the uncanny.



In the mid 18th century, critics and writers became more and more fascinated by experiences that don't seem to fit within their normal category of what's beautiful and what's pleasurable. They get fascinated by – what's it mean to be in the middle of a storm at sea, or to see a shipwreck, or to be on the top of a high mountain in a great wind. And the work that they use more and more to describe this is – the sublime. The sublime isn't

harmonious, balanced and beautiful – which had traditionally been the concern of the aesthetic but is often terrifying and awesome and overwhelming and Gothic is absolutely at the centre of that move to the sublime and sublimity in understanding the world.

### **Political and Social Crisis**

Gothic particularly tends to appear at moments of political and social crisis, so there's an enormous increase in the number of Gothic novels written in the 1790s. There's another burst at the end of the 19th century, so at moments of great political change, particularly following the French Revolution in 1789, the Gothic seems a way of trying to master and understand these enormous changes. That's a religious crisis too. The Catholic Church is despoiled, its abbeys and its monasteries are closed and that feeds into the Gothic sense of doubt about the supernatural.

### **The Supernatural and The Real**

Gothic is fascinated by the supernatural. In Matthew Lewis's famous novel, *The Monk*, Satan himself appears at the end of the book and the main character, Ambrosio, sells his soul to the devil. But, there's also a very different kind of writing, like that of Ann Radcliffe, who's the other great Gothic novelist of the 1790s, where there is no supernatural. There do appear to be ghosts but, in fact, by the end of the novel all those ghosts have been explained in a naturalistic way. So, there are two different kinds of Gothic – one that uses the supernatural, as it were, and expects us to believe in it – and the other that gives a natural or realistic explanation of it.

