

# Elements of the Gothic Novel

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Robert Harris

The gothic novel was invented almost single-handedly by Horace Walpole, whose *The Castle of Otranto* (1764) contains essentially all the elements that constitute the genre. Walpole's novel was imitated not only in the eighteenth century and not only in the novel form, but it has influenced the novel, the short story, poetry, and even film making up to the present day.

## **Gothic elements include the following:**

- 1. Setting in a castle.** The action takes place in and around an old castle, sometimes seemingly abandoned, sometimes occupied. The castle often contains secret passages, trap doors, secret rooms, dark or hidden staircases, and possibly ruined sections. The castle may be near or connected to caves, which lend their own haunting flavor with their branchings, claustrophobia, and mystery. (Translated into modern filmmaking, the setting might be in an old house or mansion--or even a new house--where unusual camera angles, sustained close ups during movement, and darkness or shadows create the same sense of claustrophobia and entrapment.)
- 2. An atmosphere of mystery and suspense.** The work is pervaded by a threatening feeling, a fear enhanced by the unknown. Often the plot itself is built around a mystery, such as unknown parentage, a disappearance, or some other inexplicable event. Elements 3, 4, and 5 below contribute to this atmosphere. (Again, in modern filmmaking, the inexplicable events are often murders.)
- 3. An ancient prophecy** is connected with the castle or its inhabitants (either former or present). The prophecy is usually obscure, partial, or confusing. "What could it mean?" In more watered down modern examples, this may amount to merely a legend: "It's said that the ghost of old man Krebs still wanders these halls."
- 4. Omens, portents, visions.** A character may have a disturbing dream vision, or some phenomenon may be seen as a portent of coming events. For example, if the statue of the lord of the manor falls over, it may portend his death. In modern fiction, a character might see something (a shadowy figure stabbing another shadowy figure) and think that it was a dream. This might be thought of as an "imitation vision."
- 5. Supernatural or otherwise inexplicable events.** Dramatic, amazing events occur, such as ghosts or giants walking, or inanimate objects (such as a suit of armor or painting) coming to life. In some works, the events are ultimately given a natural explanation, while in others the events are truly supernatural.
- 6. High, even overwrought emotion.** The narration may be highly sentimental, and the characters are often overcome by anger, sorrow, surprise, and especially, terror. Characters suffer from raw nerves and a feeling of impending doom. Crying and emotional speeches are frequent. Breathlessness and panic are common. In the filmed gothic, screaming is common.
- 7. Women in distress.** As an appeal to the pathos and sympathy of the reader, the female characters often face events that leave them fainting, terrified, screaming, and/or sobbing. A lonely, pensive, and oppressed heroine is often the central figure of the novel, so her sufferings are even more pronounced and the focus of attention. The women suffer all the more because they are often abandoned, left alone (either on purpose or by accident), and have no protector at times.
- 8. Women threatened by a powerful, impulsive, tyrannical male.** One or more male characters has the power, as king, lord of the manor, father, or guardian, to demand that one or more of the female characters do something intolerable. The woman may be commanded to marry someone she does not love (it may even be the powerful male himself), or commit a crime.

**9. The metonymy of gloom and horror.** Metonymy is a subtype of metaphor, in which something (like rain) is used to stand for something else (like sorrow). For example, the film industry likes to use metonymy as a quick shorthand, so we often notice that it is raining in funeral scenes. Note that the following metonymies for "doom and gloom" all suggest some element of mystery, danger, or the supernatural.

wind, especially howling	rain, especially blowing
doors grating on rusty hinges	sighs, moans, howls, eerie sounds
footsteps approaching	clanking chains
lights in abandoned rooms	gusts of wind blowing out lights
characters trapped in a room	doors suddenly slamming shut
ruins of buildings	baying of distant dogs (or wolves?)
thunder and lightning	crazed laughter

**10. The vocabulary of the gothic.** The constant use of the appropriate vocabulary set creates the atmosphere of the gothic. Using the right words maintains the dark-and-stimulated feel that defines the gothic. Here as an example are some of the words (in several categories) that help make up the vocabulary of the gothic in *The Castle of Otranto*:

<b>Mystery</b>	diabolical, enchantment, ghost, goblins, haunted, infernal, magic, magician, miracle, necromancer, omens, ominous, portent, preternatural, prodigy, prophecy, secret, sorcerer, spectre, spirits, strangeness, talisman, vision
<b>Fear, Terror, or Sorrow</b>	afflicted, affliction, agony, anguish, apprehensions, apprehensive, commiseration, concern, despair, dismal, dismay, dread, dreaded, dreading, fearing, frantic, fright, frightened, grief, hopeless, horrid, horror, lamentable, melancholy, miserable, mournfully, panic, sadly, scared, shrieks, sorrow, sympathy, tears, terrible, terrified, terror, unhappy, wretched
<b>Surprise</b>	alarm, amazement, astonished, astonishment, shocking, staring, surprise, surprised, thunderstruck, wonder
<b>Haste</b>	anxious, breathless, flight, frantic, hastened, hastily, impatience, impatient, impatiently, impetuosity, precipitately, running, sudden, suddenly
<b>Anger</b>	anger, angrily, cholera, enraged, furious, fury, incense, incensed, provoked, rage, raving, resentment, temper, wrath, wrathful, wrathfully
<b>Largeness</b>	enormous, gigantic, giant, large, tremendous, vast
<b>Darkness</b>	dark, darkness, dismal, shaded, black, night

Walpole himself lays on most of these elements pretty thick (although he's a lot lighter on darkness than many modern gothic works), so it might be said that another element of the classic gothic is its intensity created by profuse employment of the vocabulary of the gothic. Consider this from Chapter 1 of *The Castle of Otranto*: The servant "came running back breathless, in a frantic manner, his eyes staring, and foaming at the mouth. He said nothing but pointed to the court. The company were struck with terror and amazement." Gets your interest up on page two, doesn't he? Then, "In the meantime, some of the company had run into the court, from whence was heard a confused noise of shrieks, horror, and surprise." *The Castle of Otranto* is available at Amazon.com

### An Example

The 1943 Sherlock Holmes film, *Sherlock Holmes Faces Death* (one of the classic Basil Rathbone and Nigel Bruce films), contains all the elements of the gothic. Here is a brief rundown of the items above:

1. Setting. It's not quite a castle, but it is a huge mansion with several levels, including a basement and a hidden sub-basement. Dark and drafty. Ominous.

2. Atmosphere of Mystery. It's a multiple murder mystery, with cryptic notes, hidden passageways, wind, lightning, and everyone a suspect.
3. Ancient Prophecy. There is the Musgrave Ritual. Obscure, compelling, ancient.
4. Omens and portents. The crow at the tavern, the intrusive lightning strike, the taunting notes from the butler.
5. Supernatural or inexplicable events. How the victims died. The lightning seems to strike at just the right time.
6. Overwrought emotion. The female lead screams and panics a bit.
7. Women in distress and 8. Women threatened by a male. Toned down here, but the murderer had designs on the heroine.
9. The wind blows, signs bang into the wall, lightning, a few characters are trapped in various ways.

## ROMANTICISM

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The Romantics broke away from the restrained ideas and styles of the eighteenth century. This movement marked a liberation of the artist's imagination and style.

**Faust** by Johann Wolfgang von Goethe = earliest most essential Romantic work. Faust sells soul to the devil for knowledge – pursuing idea that *all knowledge is significant*.

Essential Romantic Musician / Composer = **Beethoven** – “turned the highly structured classical sonata into an expansive form for the expression of powerful internal struggles.” (5<sup>th</sup> Symphony)

Romanticism refers to a movement in art, literature, and music during the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

❖ Romanticism is characterized by the 5 “I”s

Imagination

- Imagination emphasized over “reason”
- Backlash against the rationalism characterized by the Neoclassical period or “Age of Reason”
- Imagination considered necessary for creating all art
- British writer Samuel Taylor Coleridge called imagination “intellectual intuition.”

Intuition

- Romantics placed value on “intuition,” or feeling and instincts, over reason.
- Emotions were important in Romantic art.
- British Romantic William Wordsworth described poetry as “the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings.”

Idealism

- Idealism refers to any theory that emphasizes the spirit, the mind, or language over matter – thought has a crucial role in making the world the way it is.
- Immanuel Kant, a German philosopher, held that the mind forces the world we perceive to take the shape of space-and-time.

Inspiration

- The Romantic artist, musician, or writer, is an “inspired creator” rather than a “technical master.”

- Romanticism emphasized going with the moment, or being spontaneous, rather than being precise, controlled, or realistic.

#### Individuality

- Romantics celebrated the individual.
- During this time period, Women's Rights and Abolitionism were taking root as major movements.
- Walt Whitman, a later Romantic writer, would write a poem entitled "Song of Myself." It begins, "I celebrate myself."

Adapted from: [www.huffenglish.com/powerpoints/Romanticism.ppt](http://www.huffenglish.com/powerpoints/Romanticism.ppt)

#### ***CHARACTERISTICS OF ROMANTICISM***

- Interest in emotions and imagination
- Awareness of mystery and ecstasy
- Fondness for picturesque, exotic settings
- Belief in the goodness of simple, unspoiled humanity
- Humanitarian sympathy for the common man; poets wrote in the language of the common man and idealized those close to nature – farmers/shepherds
- Enthusiasm for external nature – the wilder, more primitive the better
- Fascination with remote times and places, legends and superstitions
- Not much regard for truth to life
- Emotion over reason – "Poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feeling." – William Wordsworth
- Individual or free expression valued over the social and artistic conformist
- Personal experience valued over set rules and traditions
- Romantic spirit sees real world as a reflection of an ideal world and life as constant striving toward that ideal