

The Gothic Novel: What is Gothic Literature?

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What is Gothic Literature?

Gothic literature is a deliciously terrifying blend of horror and romance. From Walpole's *Castle of Otranto* to Shelley's *Frankenstein* and Stoker's infamous *Dracula*, the Gothic novel has been around for centuries, and, despite a few major changes, has maintained some of the basic elements of classic Gothic romance since its very origins.

Gothic and Romantic Literature

The Gothic novel took shape in England around 1790-1830, although its roots can be found much earlier in writing dating back to the Middle Ages. It's still popular today with current authors such as Stephen King and is considered a category within Romantic literature.

What is a Gothic novel?

Robert D. Hume claims that a Gothic novel “can be seen as one symptom of a widespread shift away from neoclassical ideals of order and reason, toward romantic belief in emotion and imagination.”

Elements of a Gothic Novel

When anyone is asked to describe Gothic Literature, they think of dark and/or supernatural imagery, which are key devices used against the confines of realism. Where formal realism uses simple diction, Gothic novels go elaborate, where formal realism focuses on the inner workings of the individual, Gothic novels home in on the environment and how all the character's actions come into play. In the end, it's pretty safe to say that the works of Gothic Literature do everything formal realism would not even touch, which can either delight those readers who hate formal realism or seem too ridiculous to take seriously.

According to Watt's quote above, a Gothic novel is something of an inverted romance, as it tends to see things from the seamy side. However, what makes Gothic Literature unique, is not in the type of life it sees and represents but in how it blends the real with the imaginary. This blend produces terror because of the suspense and unpredictability associated with the paranormal and unknown and also makes the

characters within Gothic Literature even more realistic than those in novels from other genres.

No matter how fantastical and insane the situation is, a Gothic novel's characters always react in ways that are truer to everyday responses to these circumstances than the circumstances themselves, even providing natural explanations for what the reader knows is supernatural. This is a key element in Gothic Literature. Its blend of realism and fantasy means that the characters are developed as true to what they would be in the real world while they are placed in situations that are completely unreal. To put it simply, Gothic Literature is about how real people react in unreal situations. For example, if a monk is offered a deal with the Devil he can't refuse, will he take it or just walk away?

Characteristics of Gothic Literature

There are a few elements of the Gothic novel that are standard for almost every novel within the Gothic Literature genre. Here are a few of them:

1. Decaying or ruined scenery
2. The use of the supernatural within the text (perhaps the Devil tries to make a deal or a portrait moves on its own)
3. An isolated (whether voluntary or involuntary) protagonist
4. An antagonist that is the epitome of evil (usually a man and usually due to a fall from grace)
5. Protagonist falls from grace due to temptation from antagonist
6. The protagonist is only saved once they are reunited with their loved one
7. The underlying theme of the novel also applies to the real world
8. Real life fears (death, murder, destruction) are the same as in real life but at a much higher rate