

Gothic-Writing Points

Posted on the Irish Eyes blog on Tue, 04/12/11

Last week I stumbled upon an article titled *Elements of the Gothic Novel* by Robert Harris. Since I consider the [Collective Obsessions Saga](#) in the realm of gothic fiction, I was interested in the article's points.

According to Harris, gothic novel elements include:

- ❖ Setting in a castle.
- ❖ An atmosphere of mystery and suspense.
- ❖ An ancient prophecy connected with the castle or its inhabitants.
- ❖ Omens, portents, visions.
- ❖ Supernatural or otherwise inexplicable events.
- ❖ High, even overwrought emotion.
- ❖ Women in distress.
- ❖ Women threatened by a powerful, impulsive, tyrannical male.
- ❖ The metonymy of gloom and horror.
- ❖ The vocabulary of the gothic.

None of the eight books in the [Collective Obsessions Saga](#) are set in a castle, but rather a large mansion by the sea. The atmosphere is most definitely mysterious and suspenseful at times. As for "ancient prophecy" being connected to the structure or its inhabitants, there is an element of divine fate playing itself out through several generations totaling more than 140 years.

The other points are covered as well: The [Collective Obsessions Saga](#) has omens with touches of the supernatural, along with emotional drama (*mental illness, murder, suicide, obsession*), and women in distress. While most females in the storyline come across as rather assertive, a few of them are indeed threatened by unbalanced males at one time or another.

The "gloom and horror" ambiance is present, although neither dominates any one book in the saga.

Although I've only included terms that apply to the [Collective Obsessions Saga](#), Harris defines "vocabulary of the gothic" as the following:

- ❖ **Mystery** (*diabolical, enchantment, ghost, haunted, omens, ominous, portent, secret, spectre, spirits*).
- ❖ **Fear, terror & sorrow** (*anguish, apprehensions, commiseration, concern, despair, dismay, dread, frantic, grief, hopeless, lamentable, melancholy, miserable, mournfully, panic, sadly, shrieks, sorrow, sympathy, tears, terror, unhappy, wretched*).
- ❖ **Surprise** (*alarm, amazement, astonished, shocking, staring, thunderstruck, wonder*).
- ❖ **Haste** (*anxious, frantic, impetuous, sudden*).
- ❖ **Anger** (*enraged, furious, incensed, provoked, raving, resentment, temper, wrath*).
- ❖ **Largeness** (*enormous, massive, tremendous, vast*).

In addition, elements of romance are considered part of the gothic genre. These are: powerful love, uncertainty of reciprocation, unreturned love, tension, lovers parted, illicit love and rival love. The only point that might not apply to my saga is "uncertainty of reciprocation."

Even the most obsessive character in the saga (Mike Sullivan, who appears in [The Twain Shall Meet](#)) never has doubt that the object of his desire will return his affections. He is actually quite certain she will be his in the end, even when all odds are stacked against him (*re: incarceration in a sanitarium*).

Gothic tales and the writing thereof may not be to the taste of everyone, but the genre continues to fascinate me.

It's one of the reasons I chose to use the pseudonym Deidre Dalton for the [Collective Obsessions Saga](#). I want to keep the eight-part series detached from my work as Deborah O'Toole because my other books do not contain gothic elements. [Mind Sweeper](#) has a touch of Gothicism, but stories like [Celtic Remnants](#) have nothing in common with the genre.

Whatever the case, *Elements of the Gothic Novel* is a good read for those with an interest in the style.

ORIGINAL SOURCE:

Elements of the Gothic Novel by Robert Harris

<https://www.virtualsalt.com/gothic.htm>

Version Date: October 19, 2020

Previous versions: November 16, 2018; August 18, 2018; November 22, 2017; June 15, 2015



Elements of the Gothic Novel by 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 in the eighteenth century, but enjoyed widespread influence in the nineteenth century in part because of that era's indulgence in dark-romantic themes. Today, the Gothic continues to influence the novel, the short story, and poetry, and provides a major source of themes and elements in film making. (In fact, Gothic elements have been used so often in film that some have become predictable clichés. For example, when people enter an abandoned room in a supposedly abandoned house, the door often closes and locks behind them.)

Gothic elements include the following:

1. Setting in a castle or old mansion. The action takes place in and around an old castle or an old mansion, or the ruins of an old castle or mansion. Sometimes the edifice is seemingly abandoned, sometimes occupied, and sometimes it's not clear whether the building has occupants (human or otherwise). The castle often contains secret passages, trap doors, secret rooms, trick panels with hidden levers, dark or hidden staircases, and possibly ruined sections.

The castle may be near, on top of, or connected to caves, which lend their own haunting flavor with their darkness, uneven floors, branchings, claustrophobia,

echoes of unusual sounds, and mystery. And in horror-Gothic, caves are often home to terrifying creatures such as monsters, or deviant forms of humans: vampires, zombies, wolfmen.

Quick Quiz. Discuss how many of the items from Element 1 above are present in the novel or movie *Phantom of the Opera*.

Translated into the modern novel or filmmaking, the setting is usually 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. The house might be already dark, perhaps because it was abandoned, or it might at first seem light and airy, but either night comes and people turn off the lights to go to bed, or at some dramatic point the lights will fail (often because of a raging storm). (And, as movie goers know well, while the scenes and dialog form the rational (or irrational) movement in the film, the music controls the emotional response to what is seen and spoken.)

The goal of the dark and mysterious setting is to create a sense of unease and foreboding, contributing toward the atmospheric element of fear and dread. Darkness also allows those sudden and frightening appearances of people, animals, ghosts, apparent ghosts, or monsters.

One Upmanship. Filmmakers, especially, love the Gothic for its audience-frightening characteristics, but they do not want to be restricted to the items on Walpole's list. What other ways to scare an audience can you think of? For example, the stairs and floors of ruined mansions are notorious for their lack of maintenance so that the old wood frequently collapses, sending terrified and scaming folks down a floor or two. And even on the ground floor, the tiles or wood is likely to collapse, sending some dispensable character down a deep pit and often to the end of his role in that film. Zombies emerging from quicksand to drink someone's blood could be another example.

2. An atmosphere of mystery and suspense. The work is pervaded by a threatening feeling, a fear enhanced by the unknown. This atmosphere is

sometimes advanced when characters see only a glimpse of something--was that a person rushing out the window or only the wind blowing a curtain? Is that creaking sound coming from someone's step on the squeaky floor, or only the normal sounds of the night? Often the plot itself is built around a mystery, such as unknown parentage, a disappearance, or some other inexplicable event. People disappear or show up dead inexplicably. Elements 3, 4, and 5 below contribute to this atmosphere.

In modern novels and filmmaking, the inexplicable events are often murders. The bodies are sometimes mutilated in ways that defy explanation--"What kind of monster could do this?" or "Here's the body, but there's no blood." When the corpses start to mount, suspense is raised as to who will get killed next.

Another setting that lends itself well to the sense of suspense and especially entrapment is a supposedly deserted island, where the characters have arrived by shipwreck or mysterious invitation. Their way back to civilization has been cut off (the airplane ran out of fuel or crash landed, the boat sank, etc.). Who knows? They might even run into living dinosaurs. When the entrapment is in a small space (such as a closet) then claustrophobia adds to the terror.

What are some examples from movies you have seen that include experiences of entrapment? Hint: Think room, cave, airplane, space ship, coffin, etc.

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." Ancient, undecipherable maps showing the location of amazing treasure represent another variant of the ancient prophecy aspect.

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." Sometimes an omen will be used for foreshadowing, while

other writers will tweak the reader by denying expectation--what we thought was foreshadowing wasn't.

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. As you might imagine, Hollywood uses special effects to a large degree to provide fire, earthquakes, moving statues, and so forth, often blurring the line between human-produced, natural, and supernatural events.

6. High, even overwrought emotion. The narration may be highly sentimental, and the characters are often overcome by anger, sorrow, surprise, fear, 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. (In horror-Gothic films, when the guy tells the girl, "Stay here; I'll be right back," you pretty much know that one of them will soon be dead.)

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. In modern Gothic novels and films, there is frequently the threat of physical violation.

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. (This explains why they never oil the hinges on the doors in Gothic novels.) 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

Quick Quiz. What other gloomy metonymies can you think of?

10. The vocabulary of the Gothic. The constant use of the appropriate vocabulary set creates and sustains 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*:

Mystery	diabolical, enchantment, ghost, goblins, haunted, infernal, magic, magician, miracle, necromancer, omens, ominous, portent, preternatural, prodigy, prophecy, secret, sorcerer, spectre, spirits, strangeness, talisman, vision
Fear, Terror, or Sorrow	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

Surprise	alarm, amazement, astonished, astonishment, shocking, staring, surprise, surprised, thunderstruck, wonder
Haste	anxious, breathless, flight, frantic, hastened, hastily, impatience, impatient, impatiently, impetuosity, precipitately, running, sudden, suddenly
Anger	anger, angrily, cholera, enraged, furious, fury, incense, incensed, provoked, rage, raving, resentment, temper, wrath, wrathful, wrathfully
Largeness	enormous, gigantic, giant, large, tremendous, vast
Darkness	dark, darkness, dismal, shaded, black, night

11. Hyperbolic Phrases. In the advertising business, it is sometimes said, "The lie is in the adjective." Adjectives control how we think of the nouns they modify: "mild curiosity" presents an attitude of relaxed interest, whereas "insatiable curiosity" presents the attitude of a hungry mind. In the Gothic, adjectives are used to amplify nouns in order to (1) create phrases that increase the feeling of dread, horror, anxiety, or suspense, or (2) produce a substantially increased emphasis or sense of importance. Here are some examples from Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*:

Increased Dread	Increased Emphasis
deep grief	intense distaste
gigantic creature	inestimable benefit
bitterly feel	ardent curiosity
strange sight	unparalleled eloquence
dark gloom	astonishing degree
unparalleled misfortunes	burning ardor
intoxicating draught	strongly excited

Quick Quiz Make a list of adjectives that describe the excesses of disturbed people (crazed, wild, uncontrollable). Next, make a list of nouns that name

personality traits (greed, cruelty, screaming, viciousness). Combine the adjectives with the nouns in various arrangements and list you top five results.

12. The Onomatopoeia of the Gothic. Onomatopoeic words resemble the sound they name. For example, "buzz" when spoken supposedly resembles the sound of a buzzer. Many onomatopoeias are not very close in actual sound, but they convey the meaning to the reader. Here are some onomatopoeias frequent in Gothic works, allowing appropriate fearful sound effects to arise from the printed word.

creak	moan
squeak	sigh
groan	clank
slam	grind
whisper	whoosh
bam	bang
shriek	knock
howl	scream
blam	crash
growl	snarl
bark	hiss

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.

ELEMENTS OF ROMANCE

In addition to the standard Gothic machinery above, many Gothic novels contain elements of romance as well. Elements of romance include these:

1. Powerful love. Heart stirring, often sudden, emotions create a life or death commitment. Many times this love is the first the character has felt with this overwhelming power.

2. Uncertainty of reciprocation. What is the beloved thinking? Is the lover's love returned or not?

3. Unreturned love. Someone loves in vain (at least temporarily). Later, the love may be returned.

4. Tension between true love and father's control, disapproval, or choice. Most often, the father of the woman disapproves of the man she loves.

5. Lovers parted. Some obstacle arises and separates the lovers, geographically or in some other way. One of the lovers is banished, arrested, forced to flee, locked in a dungeon, or sometimes, disappears without explanation. Or, an explanation may be given (by the person opposing the lovers' being together) that later turns out to be false.

6. Illicit love or lust threatens the virtuous one. The young woman becomes a target of some evil man's desires and schemes.

7. Rival lovers or multiple suitors. One of the lovers (or even both) can have more than one person vying for affection.

FURTHER READING

Ann Radcliffe, *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794)

Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein* (1818)