

Gothic Fiction of the Romantic Age/The Terror Novels

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If the reaction against the sedate neo-classicism of the 18th century produced the poetry of the pre-romantics and the Romantics, in fiction it produced the Gothic novels or the 'Novels of Terror.' Connection with the word 'Gothic' may introduce one to the world of the wild, barbarous and crude in these novels in vogue in the late 18th and early 19th century. In fact, Edmund Burke's famous book titled *The Sublime and the Beautiful* (1757) identifies 'delightful horror' among other sources of the sublime, a quality of mimetic art. Works of fiction giving pleasure by evoking this 'delightful horror' may be traced back to Smollett's *The Adventures of Ferdinand Count Fathom* (1753). But the 'Gothic' fiction or the 'Novel of Terror' proper began with Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* of 1764. The new interest in nature infused in this strain an interest in the remote past, in a revelling in the emotions of awe and wonder, in the reference to historic ruins, necromancy, dungeons, hauntings and prophecies. The interest was such an abiding one as to disrupt the sedate peacefulness and rule of reason of the neo-classical era.

As has already been stated, Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* was the trend-setter. Purported to be the translation of an Old Italian romance, the novel is a picture of the 'dark ages' with the dreadful castle, the enormous black helmet, its spectre marching dejectedly yet sedate, and other blood-curdling incidents. The story is set in the 13th century. Manfred,

Prince of Otranto, is the grandson of usurper and has no lawful claim to the realm: his grandfather has poisoned the rightful owner, Alfonso. A prophecy foretold that the usurpers would remain in power as long as they had male issue to continue their line and while the castle remained large enough to hold the lawful ruler. Now when Manfred tries to marry his son to the beautiful Isabella to ensure male succession, mysterious incidents are let loose. The ghost of Alfonso, now grown too big to be contained in the castle, overthrows it and rises from the ruins. The ghost establishes the lawful successor. This introductory novel of the popular tradition shook the domesticated world created by Richardson's novels.

The Castle of Otranto directly inspired Clara Reeve's *The Old English Baron* of 1777, an attempt at blending the ancient romance and the modern novel. This, too, is an engaging fairy-tale of chivalric virtue and unlawful disinheritance, with a ghost standing in for a fairy godmother as the justifier of the righteous. Though Clara Reeve is known only for this book, it is not a great novel. Reeve is not an observer of characters from many angles; she fails to enliven the past and she lacks the imaginative sweep of Walpole. But her novel is important partly because of its popularity and partly because it serves as a link between Walpole and Ann Radcliffe.

Ann Radcliffe is often called the 'Shakespeare of Romance writer'. Her 'Gothic' never degenerates into horror; rather she writes with a 'tranquillity tinged with terror'. Her two novels *The Mysteries of Udolpho* and *The Italian* abound in mysterious incidents; but they show an increasing tendency towards finding rational explanation for the supernatural. The reader is engaged in finding out which of the explanations is the true one, and this keeps the story going. In both the novels, the elaborate and picturesque landscape of an imagined Italy serves to awe the spirits of Radcliffe's romantically susceptible heroines. Emily and Ellena, the two respective heroines, are victims of long-drawn-out male threats, provided by

feudal, Machiavels and an encroachingly sinister Catholicism. Radcliffe's novels are still the most popular of the genre.

Two later novelists, M.G. Lewis or the 'Monk' Lewis and Charles Robert Maturin, relished more at some supernatural sensationalism, their novels projecting more or less a cinematic horror. Lewis's *The Monk* is set in a Capuchin Friary in Madrid, a small world of repression, obsession, ambition and intrigue contrasting vividly with the tranquillity of Radcliffe. Ambrosio, the monk, is the symbol of sexual repression at the heart of asceticism and ultimately falls from grace for his pact with the Devil. The novel lacks psychological insight, but its semi-pornographically exploits, incidents and images make it the creepiest of its kind. A similar Faustian pact with the Devil and the degeneration is seen in Maturin's *Melmoth the Wanderer*. But it is distinguished in its examination of the isolation of the central figure.

William Beckford's *Vathek* of 1786 and Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* also fall under the 'Gothic' though not in the strictest sense of the term. *Vathek* is the story of a dissolute and disillusioned Arabian hero whose thirst for power leads him into the caverns of the underworld. In *Frankenstein*, a parallel is drawn between the classical myth of Prometheus and modern experiment. The artificial man created by Dr. Frankenstein challenges his creator with an acute and trained intelligence. The creator is punished by the creation, and the novel ends with a prophetic speculation on future.

The 'Gothic' fiction, the supernatural parallel to realistic literature, did not come to end even with the rise of scientific temperament. It continues its legacy still in literature and cinema, suspending dull reason for the sake of pleasure.