**Elements of the Gothic Novel**

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Version Date: November 22, 2011

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.

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| 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*:

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| --- | --- |
| **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, choler, 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 |

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.