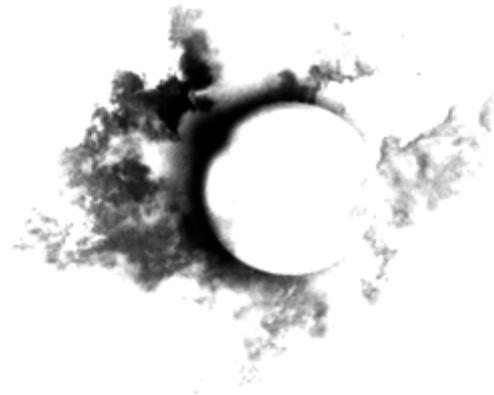


The
Gothic Novel



Tales of Mystery and Imagination

*“All that we see or seem
is but a dream within a dream”*

Elements of the Gothic Novel

The gothic novel was invented mainly by the English author Horace Walpole (1717-1797), whose story *The Castle of Otranto* (1764) contains nearly all the elements that make up the genre. Walpole's work was imitated and the genre was later made famous by authors such as Poe and Mary Shelley. It even influenced 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 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 have their own haunting flavour with their branchings, claustrophobia, and mystery.

2. An atmosphere of mystery and suspense.

The work is pervaded by 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.

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?"

4. Omens, portents and 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.

5. Supernatural or otherwise inexplicable events.

Dramatic, amazing events occur, such as ghosts or giants walking or objects (such as a suit of armor or painting) coming to life. In some works, the events are finally given a natural explanation, while in others the events are truly supernatural.

6. High emotion.

The story 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.

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 crying. A lonely heroine is often the central figure of the novel, so her sufferings are the focus of attention.

8. Women threatened by a powerful, impulsive, tyrannical male.

One or more male characters has the power, as king, lord of the manor, father, etc, 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 kind of metaphor, in which something (for example 'rain') is used to stand for something else (for example 'sorrow'). The film industry likes to use metonymy to create a certain atmosphere, 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 when howling; rain, especially blowing; doors grating on rusty hinges; sighs, moans, howls, eerie sounds; footsteps approaching; 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; crazy laughter.