The Gothic

Function and Definition

Ritgerð til B.A.-prófs

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Abstract

This essay treats the Gothic mode, an ever popular genre of literature. It begins its investigation with Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto*. It considers the question of the genre's origin, the reasoning which led to the birth of the Gothic mode. It asks whether the Gothic offered any innovations when it came to be, and whether it is still innovative.

It proposes answers to the question of what the Gothic genre is – whether it is a real literary genre – and offers support for the opinion that it is a true and independent genre that offers unique possibilities available in few other genres. It answers the question of what is needed for a narrative to be considered Gothic.

It further analyzes and shows how the term "Gothic" is applicable to the genre. The discourse also considers and shows the relevance of the following concepts to the genre: the sublime, abjection, setting, and decay. It shows the central import of the sublime to the Gothic by examples; abjection is shown to be the foundation of the horror of Gothic; the importance of the setting and its execution is treated. It is suggested that decay is inherent in the genre's content and the progression of its narrative.

Finally, it attempts to prove that if any of the factors treated are missing in a narrative it does not fulfil the qualifications set here to belong in the Gothic mode.

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Introduction

Martin Luther King had a dream of a better world, a world where injustice was done away with and everyone lived in peace and harmony. Horace Walpole also had a dream – but not one of a happier world or peace. His dream led him to write a novel that became the first Gothic novel. The importance of dreams should not be underestimated; they may not change the world, but they can make it a little bit nicer for a moment. The following discourse is an attempt to understand the workings of the Gothic genre, to show what it is, and question if it even is an independent genre and not only a handy tag with which to lump together a great many literary works.

We will also attempt to show the reason for the name of the genre. By analysis of various works that have been identified as belonging to the genre, its content and workings will be shown to be intimately connected, also demonstrating that without the one or the other there would be no Gothic. It will be shown that while the Gothic is one that shares much with other genres this is explained by its origin and in the manner it performs its function. The reason for the genre's longevity, its reappearance in various, changed, forms and its popularity, then and now, will become clear in the course of the discourse as it will be shown that the Gothic, with all its monsters and monstrosities fulfils a necessary function for its readers.

What is "Gothic"?

One would presume that posing a question as simple as "What is Gothic?" would supply an equally simple answer. Unfortunately, such is not the case with the Gothic, whether it is in literature, motion pictures, or in music. Something often presumed to be indicative of the Gothic, perhaps even defining, is the inclusion of some supernatural content. As a rough and general starting point it is sufficient to begin an explanation. An incorrect beginning, it may be but it gives something to build a better explanation and definition. Assuming a story with supernatural content, would it then be possible to state that it is Gothic, based on that element alone? The short answer would be no, if the supernatural content were but a fixture of the story. The example of Superman suffices here; he is an alien being and is capable of feats greater than humans are, yet narratives about Superman are not Gothic. If one considers what

Harriet Guest writes about the Gothic, there are "two critical ingredients in Gothic literature – a benighted and powerless populace, and superstitious fictions which are fabulous, but not necessarily supernatural" (119-120). If one replaces the supernatural content with fabulous content, then a better definition of the Gothic can be achieved. There are several generally agreeing definitions of the Gothic in circulation, with differences so slight they may be but matters of phrasing, but before these are treated further let us consider what is generally considered to be the first Gothic novel.

The first novel to name itself Gothic was *The Castle of Otranto* by Horace Walpole first published in 1764. The novel was initially published under the pretence of being a translation of a Medieval text (Walpole 5) and the title page of the first edition of the novel does not claim it as Gothic; that claim appears on the title page of the second edition (Walpole 1-2). Nor does Walpole mention the word Gothic in either the preface to the first edition or the preface to the second edition. Walpole's only claim of the novel's 'gothicity' is, as mentioned, on the title page of the second edition. This indicates that sometime between publishing the first and the second edition something spawned the use of the term. The word gothic in Walpole's time had several connotations, none referring to literature. *The Oxford English Dictionary* lists several interpretations of the word, of which the third is of most interest. The entry lists the denotations of the gothic as:

a) belonging to, or characteristic of, the Middle Ages; medæval, 'romantic', as opposed to classical. In early use chiefly with reprobation: belonging to the 'dark ages' [first use 1695]

b) A term for the style of architecture prevalent in Western Europe from the twelfth to the sixteenth century, of which the chief characteristics is the pointed arch. Applied also to buildings, architectural details, and ornamentations. [first use 1641] (Simpson 702-703)

It is of great interest that nowhere in these entries is there a mention of the Gothic as a literary genre; keeping the meaning of Gothic in mind, as per the *Oxford English Dictionary*, Walpole's own words are of great interest, how he explains and justifies *The Castle of Otranto* in his second preface.

Turning the attention to Walpole's own words, what then was his intent with the novel? What was he trying to accomplish? Why pretend to be the translator of an older text rather than accept the credit for being the author of an original narrative? How did he end up creating a genre that, in the words of David Blair,

began as a part of an attempt to liberate and validate kinds of narrative – folkloristic, mythic, supernatural – that 'progress' and 'modernity' in their eighteenth-century versions had tended to exclude and marginalise. (vii)

As far as acknowledging the novel as his, there had been earlier counterfeit translations published, the so-called Ossian epics: *Fingal* (1762) and *Temora* (1763). The authenticity of the works was debated at the time and later shown to be false translations, that is, original contemporary work (Clery x). It can be presumed that Walpole was aware of this debate and that this may have piqued his interest; that it may have presented a challenge to him. On the matter of Walpole's decision to publish *The Castle of Otranto* as a translation, E. J. Clery writes in 2008 in his introduction to the novel that there was "on the one hand a growing enthusiasm for the superstitious fancies of the past: and on the other, a sense that this kind of imaginative freedom was forbidden, or simply impossible, for writers of the enlightened past" and that "[t]he same pressures doubtless played a part in Walpole's decision" (Clery xi). This is of course speculation, but pleasant and plausible speculation as to his motivation.

Regarding what Walpole intended to accomplish with the novel, he explains himself in the preface to the second edition, where he writes: "It was an attempt to blend the two kinds of romance, the ancient and the modern. In the former all was imagination and improbability: in the latter nature is always intended to be … copied with success (Walpole 9). Thus attempting to create something new by combining "fancy" and "nature", two elements that can be understood to have been mutually exclusive, Walpole writes: "Nature has cramped imagination" (9). On the same matter David Blair offers another formulation, that Walpole's attempt was "a means of repossessing imaginative and emotional territories which had been largely surrendered in the rational, enlightened culture of the eighteenth century" (Clery vii).

Walpole opined that realism was too prevalent in contemporaneous literature, books were too lifelike and offered little of interest; thus his suggestion that one should look back to more fantastic (c.f. less realistic) literature, such as epics (*Beowulf*, Sir *Gawain and the Green Knight*, narratives on King Arthur). In so doing 'life' would be brought back into literature, thus solving the problem of overly realistic literature. Walpole explains his intent in the second preface:

Desirous of leaving the powers of fancy at liberty to expatiate through the boundless realms of invention, and thence of creating more interesting situations, he wished to conduct the mortal agents in his drama according to the rules of probability [realistically]; in short, to make them think, speak and act, as it might be supposed mere men and women would do in extraordinary positions. He had observed, that in all inspired writings, the personages under the dispensation of miracles, and witnesses to the most stupendous phenomena, never lose sight of their character, whereas in the productions of romantic story, an improbable event never fails to be attended by an absurd dialogue. (Walpole 9-10)

From this evidence it can be seen that Walpole considered neither the old nor the new to be truly superior, but that each was lacking on its own. It also describes what he wanted to do with *The Castle of Otranto*: to offer a fantastic tale that was told in a realistic manner, a narrative that combined the best of the preceding "fancy" and the new tale of "probability".

Another aspect of his contemporary literature that Walpole challenges is its didactic purpose, that fictions should have a purpose other than entertainment. Walpole challenges the idea that literature should "exhibit life in its true state, diversified only by accidents that daily happen in the world", as well as that "what we cannot credit we shall never imitate" (Samuel Johnson qtd in Clery 23). Walpole does not adhere to this creed in *The Castle of Otranto* and, according to Clery, Walpole: "flouts this principle by bringing divine punishment to bear on the heir of an usurper … by no stretch of the imagination could the tale offer a useful lesson for real life" (23). Nor is the moral that "edifying" (Clery 23), as the moral that Walpole offers is: "that *the sins of fathers are visited on their children to the third and fourth generation* (emphasis original)" (Walpole 7). In this manner *The Castle of Otranto* breaks away from the didactic and realist norms prescribed by Johnson. Not only does Walpole not adhere to the moral precepts of realistic literature, but he also deviates in manner. His use of the "powers of fancy" (Walpole 9) contradict the precepts of his contemporary novelists, who quote a motto of Horace's, namely "*utile dulci*" (Clery xxiii), indicating that their work should please as well as instruct. As Clery notes, another saying of Horace's comes to mind when one considers *The Castle of Otranto*; that is, "*incredulus odi* ('what I cannot believe disgusts me')" (Clery 22). Its relevance to the

realist movement goes without argument, but that Walpole may have taken this motto and reversed it is unclear and debatable. Yet it must be admitted that if the motto were taken at face value then Walpole would certainly be in violation of its tenets when he wrote *The Castle of Otranto*.

In connection to this mention of Walpole's contemporary novelists it may be of use to briefly consider the concept of the novel, especially in relation to the realist movement. The realists often referred greatly to the aesthetics prescribed by, among others Aristotle and Horace (see above). In an interesting parallel to what Walpole does in his second preface, the birth of the novel also spawned a rejection of its preceding literary forms. Regarding the concept of the novel, Clery writes, "The 'novel' means literally 'the new', and it marked itself off as a new, more credible and progressive genre of fiction for an enlightened age by denigrating 'the old', the romance" (22). This stance taken by novelists differs little from the one taken by Walpole. In simpler terms, while novelists may have wholly rejected and scoffed at "the romance" and heartily welcomed the onset of realist literature, Walpole does the same when he rejects both "kinds of romance", neither being sufficient in his mind, as one "[c]ramps imagination" and in the other "all was imagination" (Walpole 9). The difference being that Walpole does not wholly reject the preceding literary forms, but asserts that both have been taken to too great extremes and that it is time to exercise some moderation. Applying this moderation and mixing it together, Walpole then presents his audience with *The Castle of Otranto*, a novel that follow the realist tenets as well as offers elements of imagination. Clery sums up Walpole's attempt with *The Castle of Otranto* by writing that Walpole was trying "to combine the unnatural occurrences associated with romance and the natural characterization and dialogue of the novel. Just as the novel contained traces of romance, so Walpole's experiment drew on the innovations of realist and sentimental fiction" (24). Considering that the idea of the Gothic novel still remains with us today, in many varying forms, Walpole's ideas about the genre cannot be said to be anything less than effective.

We have now reviewed Walpole's intent with his novel as well as considered some of the implications of his theory about literature which became the Gothic. Following this we take a closer look at the Gothic's building blocks; what the genre is made of and how it functions.

The Sublime Effect

The Gothic being complex, while supposedly easily identified by its setting and characters, such an identification is similar to identifying an iceberg by what is visible above the sea's surface: easily recognised but not the whole of the matter. If all that was offered by the Gothic were instances of gothic architecture and simple bogeymen, ghosts and goblins, then the genre would hold little appeal to its audience. When Walpole proffered his thesis on the Gothic, in his second preface, that by mixing old and new, one would create something of greater interest to readers than applying either alone, his idea of creating what is essentially realistic unreality brought with it something inherent to the genre. It is common knowledge that reading stories stimulates the reader when the narrative's action is made real in the mind of the reader. In this simulation of reality a reader can experience the adventures and misadventures of their protagonist of choice, accompanying them as they experience what the author has in store for the characters of the narrative. This, of course, applies to all forms of literature, and the *faux* emotional stimulation simply distances the events of the narrative from the reader, allowing the readers to fully submerge themselves into the events of the story. This distance created from the knowledge that the events of the narrative are make-believe is but one of the defence mechanisms at work in literature at large, and in the Gothic especially. The importance of this distance will be clarified shortly.

While the descriptive content of Gothic literature, stylistic execution, etc. is borrowed from many other genres, as is fitting and prescribed by Walpole, what separates the Gothic is its effect on its audience. Accepting that stylistic expressions and emotional stimuli are something that is universal for literature leads one to the point of why the Gothic is different and how.

One of the things which singles out the Gothic and qualifies it as an unique genre is its focus on specific emotional stimuli and its means of effecting this stimulation. It specializes in creating fear, terror, and desire in its audience. It does this by presenting the audience with characters and settings that are uncomfortable in their resemblance to the audience's denied and forbidden desires. This confrontation will result in a sublime effect being achieved and the media through which it is produced is created through a process called abjection. We begin by dealing with the concept of the sublime as it pertains to the Gothic, as that is the intended effect.

The idea of the sublime is nothing new and has a long history. Clery briefly describes its history and its application as it was introduced in 1764:

> The concept of the sublime originated in a classical text, the treatise *On the Sublime (Peri Hupsous)* attributed to Longinus. In 1674 this text was translated into French by Boileau, and the resulting account of the "grand style" of writing which provokes powerful emotion became immediately influential. Writers from John Dryden to John Dennis began using this classical concept to counter other classical concepts, most notably *mimesis* (emphasis original). (27)

That the sublime became a tool to counter realism (*mimesis*) is unsurprising, as it seemingly refers to an opposite intent than that of realism. For the Gothic, the sublime and *mimesis* are both concepts to be used to create the emotional stimuli and sensation of "transport" (distancing, Walpole's intent, see above) and to achieve it those disparate effects need to be combined. This combination creates a more effective (c.f. real) emotional stimuli within its audience. On the matter of the sublime, its function and its necessity Clery refers to Edmund Burke and his *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, Clery writes:

> It presented imaginative transport not only as desirable … but as a necessity, mentally and even physically. Burke begins by outlining the problem of indifference, a state of mental lethargy brought on by a steady diet of the familiar. Positive pleasure, the type of novelty associated with beauty, is one way of relieving the problem, but is only a mild and temporary cure. Far more effective is a peculiar kind of pain mixed with delight, "the strongest emotion which the mind is capable [of feeling]". The sublime is an apprehension of danger in nature or art without the immediate risk of destruction; it is a "state of the soul, in which all its motions are suspended, with some degree of horror" and "the mind is so entirely filled with its object, that it cannot entertain any other. (28)

This explanation of the sublime that Burke offers is of great importance to understanding the attraction that the Gothic holds on its audience. This creation of a false "immediate risk of destruction" is created, leading to a cathartic relief of the undesirable "mental lethargy". This cathartic moment is the desired result of any Gothic experience, to experience a false sense of danger, all the while remaining

completely safe and distanced from events. An effective analogy is that of a rollercoaster ride compared to an actual automobile accident: in the rollercoaster the passenger is offered the illusion of danger by great and fast changes in trajectory and velocity, creating a situation in which the passenger is fully aware of the immediacy of danger (c.f. crashing) but feels safely distanced and secure due to knowledge of security measures, as well as having placed the responsibility for his wellbeing in the hands of, to the passenger, competent people. This contrasted with the actual terror of being a passenger in a car that is careening down a winding and twisting mountain road, where once the intended velocity is reached, and the breaks are stepped on, only to be found to be out of order. While the two scenarios are similar in that they stimulate a feeling of terror in its audience (passenger) the difference between the two is the assured safety of the simulation, which holds greater attractions. This is the sublime, the simulation of hazard within the mind of the reader who is engrossed in a tale. As such, the sublime is the goal of the Gothic, to stimulate the emotional response of its audience by creating a circumstance and setting which the reader is sufficiently distanced from to experience a feeling of safety and yet remain close enough to feel endangered by it, these created simultaneously.

Accepting that the Gothic aims to stimulate emotion within the reader to such a degree as to create a terror/fear reaction, the question then becomes how? That the Gothic is associated with monstrosities, deviant creatures and behaviours is hardly surprising, as confronting readers with these are the manner in which the sublime effect is achieved. That is the Gothic's goal.

Abjection in the Gothic

The main process which the Gothic utilizes to create the content with which to arrive at this sublime state is abjection. This concept has its origin in Freudian psychoanalysis and the application of this school of thought to the Gothic has been highly successful. Abjection is similar to the process of projection, and the concept of abjection and its relevance to the Gothic will be further discussed here. How then is abjection found within the Gothic? From oversized statues and ghosts in *The Castle of Otranto*, to the manufactured monster of Mary Shelly's *Frankenstein*, to the recent and familiar book and film character Hannibal Lecter; what these have in common is that they deviate from what is socially accepted. The animated and gigantic statue being abnormal, as in the 'real' world statues are inanimate and remain unchanged in size and place unless moved by mankind; ghosts, manufactured monsters, and 'regular' monsters like Lecter are 'inhuman' in how much they deviate from the societal norms, specifically Western ones. These monsters and monstrosities that the audience of the Gothic are confronted with are created via the process of abjection. The term abjection was coined by Julia Kristeva to describe the process in which horror is created by presenting one with what one refuses to accept about oneself (Hogle 6). Hogle summarizes Kristeva's explanation of the abject as being "the fundamental inconsistencies that prevent us from declaring a coherent and independent identity to ourselves and others" and that the "most primordial version of this 'in-between' is the multiplicity we viscerally remember from the moment of birth, at which we were both inside and outside of the mother and thus alive and not yet in existence" (7). This sense of being both and neither, that is, remembering a sensation of being balanced between life and death, leads to a conflict that is repressed, leading to the abjection of that which stimulates this sensation. This results in "defamiliarized manifestations" that are expressed in the Gothic as the monsters whom we then "fear and desire because they both threaten to reengulf us and promise to return us to our primal origin" (Hogle 7). Thus the sublime effect is achieved within the reader by presenting an event that triggers such a repressed memory.

Considering this effect, the use of supernatural beings in the Gothic becomes clear. These beings share the characteristics that they differ from the accepted norm of human life (c.f. being living human beings) and in some manner remind the audience

of the primal memory of being between life and death at the moment of birth. This device is an integral part of the Gothic, constantly recurring in works within the genre. In *The Castle of Otranto* readers are immediately presented with an impossibility, the giant helmet which kills Conrad (18-19). An oversized, inanimate (dead) object that inexplicably has become animate (living) and has then consciously travelled and killed. A dead thing comes to life to take a life, a most poignant reminder for the audience of the intimacy and precarious nature of life and death. Shortly after this incident, Walpole presents another event in which readers are confronted with yet another reminder of this primal birth memory; where a painting comes to 'life' in front of Manfred. Manfred is "full of anxiety and horror" (Walpole 26) at this unnatural occurrence, mirroring the intended emotion which should be occurring within the reader.

From these examples it would be easy to assume that only inanimate objects are the instruments and objects of abjection; however while the introduction of vitality to non-vital objects is an effective manner of creating a resonance with the primal birth memory, it is a basic example. Personification of abjection can be found in any character, event, space, etc., occurring in a Gothic novel, but it is mostly found in deviant creatures or characters. Consider Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, where again the 'monster' has its source (one of them, at least) of horror in the apparent contradiction and intimacy of life and death. The 'monster' is created out of dead things, which once were part of multiple other living beings, and it is brought to life from this dead state. This example again shows the potency of stimulating that memory of birth, of being both and neither. Another slightly varied example is the vampire character, a being that once was a living human but is transformed into an unloving, undead being, a re-enactment of that primal birth memory. The vampire is, most often, in a state of always dying but never being dead, never alive. The vampire character is a recurring and popular Gothic stock character, used by authors such as Ann Rice in her Vampire Chronicles, Stephen King (*Salem's Lot*, etc) and many more. Another probable factor in the vampire character's popularity is the apparent 'immortality' (constant state of dying, see above), and this leads to Oscar Wilde.

A remarkable example of abjection is the portrait in Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, in which is made visible all that which the protagonist is unwilling to accept as being the consequences of his faults and the existence thereof. That is, that which is aberrant and deviant in accordance with social norms becomes

physically manifest in the portrait instead of on Dorian himself. Wilde, using the assumption that deed is manifested in one's physical appearance, gives an interesting visual explanation of the process of abjection in how the portrait assumes the disfigurement which Dorian incurs with his actions. To be clear, what occurs in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* can be described as a character that is based on abjection in turn abjects these traits onward. Dorian chooses to cover and hide the picture in an attempt to repress its existence, as it continuously changes to mirror Dorian's deeds. In *The Picture of Dorian Gray* the portrait is the object onto which Dorian's actions are abjected and physically manifested in a manner which can be easily understood by the audience; in *The Castle of Otranto* the abjected is not always as easily detected. The previous examples of abjection may be misleading due to their focus on physical representation and manifestation in the narrative. According to Hogle abjection is a process "as thoroughly social and cultural as it is personal" and "all that is abjected is thrown under in another fashion: cast off into a figure or figures criminalized or condemned by people in authority and subjected to (again, thrown under) their gaze and the patterns of social normalcy they enforce" (7). In this we are then given to understand that what we abject, according to Kristeva, are "fundamental inconsistencies" (Hogle 7) which, when one takes into account Hogle's mention of social norms and their authority, are tendencies, behaviours, characteristics, etc., which are unacceptable according to social norms, but are still in evidence. Common examples are murder, lust, cannibalism, sadism, and so forth – behaviour which is condemned by most social norms, c.f. things that are taboo. It cannot be stressed enough that the abjected is physical, psychological, visible, and invisible, or any combination thereof. The frequency of murder and lust in other literary genres leads to the argument that such behaviour cannot be defined as a solely Gothic device, and this is of course true. The counter-argument is that this is a result of what Walpole intended with *The Castle of Otranto* and the Gothic: to mix and match the old and the new. Thus it is not surprising to find that the Gothic contains elements from other genres as borrowing, mixing, and changing is innate and integral to the genre.

What abjection is there to be found in *The Castle of Otranto*? As mentioned, the abjected is not as physically apparent in *The Castle of Otranto* as it is in other Gothic narratives, e.g. *The Picture of Dorian Gray* in which the picture is a more than sufficient symbol. What deviancy can be found in the novel? What taboos are being violated? What behaviour or thought is unacceptable according to society? Almost

immediately readers are presented with semi-incest and bigamy, when Manfred shortly after the death of his son, Conrad, decides to take Isabella, Conrad's intended wife, as his own; intending to cast aside his wife, Hippolita. Beginning with Manfred's intention of replacing his current wife with Isabella, there is the problem of divorce, something that at the time Walpole wrote the novel was a very difficult thing to obtain and at the contextual time was unthinkable, nigh impossible without a papal edict annulling the marriage, not ending it. The emotional content and stress of divorce is great, a potential well of rage, rejection, depression, and so on, as well as in Walpole's time taboo. Even today divorce carries a stigma of failure or defeat, as common as it has become.

Regarding the semi-incest, Manfred's actions can be read as a reverse Oedipal complex. A standard understanding of the Oedipus complex is one in which the son wishes to replace his father as his mother's sexual partner (Barry 97). This understanding is vastly simplified and the complex contains many layers of complexity but can be paraphrased as to concern a son's contestation of the father's place in the mother's affection. Colloquially, it describes the desire that mother love him more than daddy. By it being reverse, it is meant that here the son is no longer a part of the equation, thus leaving a father figure spurning the mother in favour of what amounts to his daughter. The argument here is that this chain of events is set in motion as a result of Manfred's attempt to erase the existence of his son, that by repressing that Conrad has lived, he can then deny his death. In support of this it would be beneficial to introduce Steven Bruhm's idea of the Gothic narrative as a narrative of trauma:

> [The Gothic's] protagonists usually experience some horrifying event that profoundly affects them, destroying (at least temporarily) the norms that structure their lives and identities. Images of haunting, destruction and death, obsessive return to the shattering moment, forgetfulness or unwanted epiphany … all define a Gothic aesthetic. (268)

Bruhm supports his claim that the Gothic is a narrative of trauma by citing Cathy Caruth's definition of trauma and post-traumatic stress. Cathy writes:

> there is a response, sometimes delayed, to an overwhelming event or events, which take takes the form of repeated, intrusive hallucinations, dreams, thoughts or behaviours stemming from the event, along with

> numbing that may have begun during or after the experience, and possibly also increased arousal to (and avoidance of) stimuli recalling the event … [T]he event is not assimilated or experienced fully at the time, but only belatedly, in its repeated *possession* (emphasis original) of the one who experiences it. (268)

Adding this to the batter that makes up the Gothic the complexity of the recipe grows.

The characters are created with abjected traits, or they develop such traits during the course of the narrative; a traumatic event occurs which is either the effect of the abjected traits, or will be the spawning point of said traits. In the above example of Manfred the traumatic event is the death of Conrad, his son, which leads him to react to that trauma by attempting to replace him with himself. Here Walpole appears to have Manfred attempting to partially repress the existence (life), and thus the end of existence (death), of his son. The death of Conrad is unarguably a traumatic event for Manfred, as is evidenced by his reactions as he comes upon the scene of Conrad's death:

> The horror of the spectacle, the ignorance of all around how this misfortune happened, and above all, the tremendous phænomenon before him, took away the prince's speech. Yet his silence lasted longer than even grief could occasion. He fixed his eyes on what he wished in vain to believe a vision; and seemed less attentive to his loss, than buried in meditation on the stupendous object that had occasioned it. He touched, he examined the fatal casque; nor could even the bleeding mangled remains of the young prince divert the eye of Manfred from the portent before him. All who had known his partial fondness for young Conrad were as much surprised at their prince's insensibility. (19)

This description of Manfred's reactions, that he "wished in vain to believe a vision", is not only suggestive of him desiring to repress the event, but a direct statement to that effect. Manfred's later actions, where he attempts to erase Conrad's existence by shunning Hippolita and taking Isabella as his wife, further supports the idea that Manfred, in an attempt to deny the trauma having occurred, is repressing the event by trying to fill the void left by his son by becoming him.

The presented examples show that the Gothic deals with trauma, whether it occurs in the events of the narrative, or is caused or experienced by the characters in

said narrative. In addition, the Gothic also deals with the audience's trauma. This by creating a safe environment which is sufficiently distanced and fantastic in its setting and content that it does not offer the threat of real destruction, thus allowing the audience to experience a pseudo-destruction through the traumas and actions of the narrative's characters.

The Gothic Setting

Let us now return to the word gothic and why it was used to describe *The Castle of Otranto*. As shown above, the word Gothic has two primary understandings, one referring to architecture and the other referring to the past in a negative sense. Regarding the meaning of the Gothic and *The Castle of Otranto*, Clery writes: "'Gothic' also signified anything obsolete, old-fashioned, or outlandish. *Otranto* may have been set in Gothic times, but the term does nothing to describe what was ground-breaking and influential about the novel" (21). Here one reason for the term "Gothic" appears, the Medieval setting of the novel. Also to be noted in this understanding of the Gothic is how it distances events from the reader. By not setting the narrative in an immediate space or time there are two thing that are gained: first, the aforementioned distancing of the events of the narrative, where readers can more easily appreciate the fiction for fiction's sake, and the fictional distance allows the story to more easily discuss matters that might otherwise be taboo in some manner (e.g. incest, patricide/matricide, etc); second, by setting the events of the narrative in a world which is so similar to, yet so different from, the real world, that is, a world in which fantastic events can occur, the author gains a greater freedom in the narrative. The distancing of the narrative's setting offers exactly those options of authorial freedom of expression that Walpole desired.

Another reason for the Gothic connection is the architectural understanding of the word, using the example of *The Castle of Otranto*, it would be the castle. In his introduction to *The Castle of Otranto*, Clery writes:

> For the reader of today, coming to *Otranto* after more than two centuries of Gothic writing, many of its elements will appear instantly, if not uncannily, familiar. To begin with there is the castle which dominates the narrative as both a physical and psychological presence […] all of the action takes place either in or near the castle […] but more important than physical immediacy is the atmosphere of oppression created by the place, and the way it emphasizes the powerlessness of the characters, manipulated by the forces they only dimly comprehend. Architecture becomes the embodiment of fate. (xv)

Walpole's interest in Gothic architecture is visible in his villa, Strawberry Hill, which he spent twenty-five years transforming into a "gothic castle" (Clery i). It does not

require a great stretch of one's imagination to suppose that a man who spends twenty-five years redecorating his house would incorporate this interest into his writing. Note that Clery's suggestion of how the castle's presence in the novel emphasizes the powerlessness of its characters is in agreement with Guest's stipulation of a powerless populace. Another thing to consider is the evolution of setting which Walpole established by using so prominently an architectural feature in his novel, that is, how the use of the Gothic setting has evolved. How the setting has changed from being only a setting and become an integrate part of the process of the Gothic in the effect which the setting has upon the reader, in other words, how it is employed as a mood and emotional stimuli magnifier. On the Gothic setting, Jerold E. Hogle writes:

> Though not always as obviously as in *The Castle of Otranto* or
> *Dracula*, a Gothic tale usually takes place (at least some of the time) in
> an antiquated or seemingly antiquated space – be it a castle, a foreign
> palace, a vast prison, a subterranean crypt, a graveyard, a primeval
> frontier or island, a large old house or theatre, an aging city or urban
> underworld, a decaying storehouse, factory, laboratory, public
> building, or some new recreation of an older venue, such as an office
> with old filing cabinets, an overworked spaceship, or a computer
> memory. (2)

Hogle's recitation serves the purpose of showing how numerous are the varieties of settings available to the Gothic. Examples range from Edgar Allan Poe's many works, in which many of the examples Hogle lists are to be found, for instance "The Fall of the House of Usher" in which the house/castle is a most dominant feature as well a setting for the narrative, as in *The Castle of Otranto.* In "The Pit and the Pendulum" in which Poe uses a prison setting to great effect. Further examples, and perchance more vivid, are Alex Proya's 1998 motion picture *Dark City*, where the setting is simultaneously old and new, fixed and yet ever-changing, a prison, a laboratory, and so on; and Francis Ford Coppola's 1992 rendition of Bram Stoker's *Dracula*, which features several of the possible settings mentioned by Hogle, a graveyard, a prison, a castle, etc. This emphasis placed on the various settings found in the Gothic is merely to show the fluid and adaptable nature of the Gothic. This will be further developed later when the effect and function is discussed, as the setting intimately interacts with those processes. Yet now we see that the lexical definitions of the word "gothic" are both true and false when used to describe what Walpole was attempting with *The*

Castle of Otranto. He intentionally integrated several of the understandings of the word, the architectural, the denigrating, etc., and in so doing changed its meaning, creating something new – something that is faceted and complex in its workings yet appears so to be so simple.

Decay in Gothic Settings, Characters and Narrative

The various settings in the Gothic do take many forms. The setting and its expression is nearly as varied as the characters which are found in the Gothic, while there is a commonality found in the various settings, that which Hogle described as an "antiquated or seemingly antiquated space" (2). Another description which is suggested here is that of decay being a significant element in the setting, characters or narrative. Decay is here understood as meaning both decline and decomposition but with greater emphasis on the decline-understanding. The choice of this word can be explained by considering the narrative in *The Castle of Otranto* where Manfred's rule is undermined and in a constant state of decay due to his knowledge of the prophecy that " *the castle and lordship of Otranto should pass from the present family, whenever the real owner should be grown too large to inhabit it*" (Walpole 17). Manfred's knowledge of this prophecy and the early introduction of the giant helmet, this coupled with the death of his son and his subsequent actions suggest that the trauma of the events has initiated a state of mental decline for Manfred, leading ultimately to his destruction. Further support for this argument of decay's importance to the Gothic can be found by considering the settings in *The Castle of Otranto*, "*The Yellow Wallpaper*" by Charlotte Perkins Gilman and "The Fall of the House of Usher" by Edgar Allan Poe. The setting of *The Castle of Otranto* is of course a castle, thus in accordance with Hogle's criteria above, as well as containing subterranean passages (the tunnel which Isabella escapes through) and these attributes in the physical setting of the narrative remain classic in the genre, and from these and more, later authors have evolved the wider and more diverse selection of narrative settings.

The setting in the Gothic is of great importance; the architectural connection discussed above supports this line of argument, and can be seen in the care which is taken to describe it in Gothic narratives. One example is how Edgar Allan Poe immediately establishes a properly Gothic setting:

> the melancholy House of Usher. I know not how it was – but, with the first glimpse of the building, a sense of insufferable gloom pervaded my spirit. I say insufferable; for the feeling was unrelieved by any of that half-pleasurable, because poetic, sentiment, with which the mind usually receives even the sternest natural images of the desolate or

> terrible I looked upon the scene before me – upon the mere house, and
> the simple landscape features of the domain – upon the bleak walls –
> upon the vacant eye-like windows – upon a few rank sedges – and
> upon a few with trunks of decayed trees (171)

In connection to this passage the concept of abjection again becomes of interest. The setting described is far from hospitable or welcoming, as is remarked upon by the narrator, who describes a feeling of: "utter depression of soul which I can compare to no earthly sensation more properly than to the after-dream of the reveller upon opium – the bitter lapse into everyday life – the hideous dropping off of the veil" (Poe 171). The items described are comparable to those traits which are abjected into characters, that is, they are things which do not conform to a socially accepted norm.

In addition to differing from 'normal' settings the Gothic setting also contributes, to a varying degree, to the emotional stimuli required to achieve the sublime effect. Descriptions of gloom, desolation, terror, etc., create an emotional response similar to that which is created when confronting an audience with the abnormal, here used to describe that which is abjected. It would be possible to critique either of these elements if either were singled out to be solely defining of the Gothic, but combined they create a psychological environment which makes the audience more susceptible and more open to achieving the desired effect. What is important is the manner in which abjection and setting, when combined, reinforce the psychological stimuli of the narrative, creating a greater tension; how it works in unison to increase said tension, how it as a part of a whole with other factors that make up the Gothic.

An example that supports this reasoning is the setting of Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper" in which the interaction of the protagonist with the setting leads to the protagonist becoming mentally unstable, if not clinically insane. Where the antiquity of the previous examples was established by the descriptions in the course of the narratives, Gilman establishes the setting's antiquity by describing it as an "ancestral hall" and "a colonial mansion, a hereditary estate" (141), thus establishing the location of the narrative as a place of history, carefully not disclosing any detailed information, thereby making it anonymous as well as distinct. In addition to this, the narrator suggests that the building is a "haunted house" (141) whereby a foundation is laid for the possible inclusion of supernatural or fantastic

content and the audience is thus duly prepared for such occurrences. The main setting of the narrative is described by Perkins Gilman as:

> a big, airy room, the whole floor nearly, with windows that look all ways, and air and sunshine galore. It was a nursery first and then playroom and gymnasium, I should judge; for the windows are barred for little children, and there are rings and things in the walls. The paint and paper look as if a boy's school had used it. It is stripped off – the paper – in great patches all around the head of my bed, about as far as I can reach, and in a great place on the other side of the room low down. I never saw a worse paper in my life. One of those sprawling flamboyant patterns committing every artistic sin… [the pattern is] pronounced enough constantly to irritate and provoke study, and when you follow the lame uncertain curves for a little distance they suddenly commit suicide – plunge off at outrageous angles, destroy themselves in unheard of contradictions. The colour is repellent, almost revolting; a smouldering unclean yellow, strangely faded by the slow-turning sunlight. It is a dull yet lurid orange in some places, a sickly sulphur tint in others. (142-143)

In this description Perkins Gilman even further interweaves the psychological influences of the setting, characters and narrative in her description. The dislike that the protagonist expresses can be read as a sign that the disorder and madness she perceives within the pattern is in fact effected by her abjection of her own emotional and mental state. In a similar manner as mental instability is a trait which is often abjected, mental illness is a trait which is frowned upon according to general Western norms. As such, the protagonist represses her own perceived internal conflict and projects it onto an external inanimate object (compare to statuary in *The Castle of Otranto*, the monster in *Frankenstein*) and the manner in which Gilman achieves the sublime effect is by describing the protagonist's observation of and interaction with the wallpaper. A suggested interpretation is that the wallpaper, as the vessel of abjection, is seen as the unconscious, while the protagonist's journal entries may be read as the conscious, and thus that the narrative be seen as a clash of the conscious and the unconscious. Steven Bruhm describes what he considers to be central to the Gothic, as "the very process of psychic life that for Freud defines the human conditions. While the id finds its narrative expression in the insatiable drives of the desiring organism… the superego takes monstrous form in the ultrarational, cultured figures….The battle for supremacy between the ravenous id and the controlling

superego translates in myriad ways in to the conflicts oft the Gothic." (261-262) This, in the case of "The Yellow Wallpaper" is a clear example of how the setting of the narrative is an integral part of the process which the Gothic utilizes to achieve its intended effect, to stimulate the primal birth memory by creating a fictional situation in which the end result is an emotional stimuli which creates a sublime effect within the audience. As the wallpaper's pattern represents the unconscious id battling the conscious ego and superego, which is represented by the journal entries; the pattern is also representing the decline of the protagonist's mental health in its chaotic and random design – the same design further emphasizing the battle that goes on in the narrative. The fear of mental instability being that which is abjected in the narrative and the fear of becoming mad, joined with the thrill of witnessing the protagonist's path to madness cooperates to create the sublime effect. This, as madness in "The Yellow Wallpaper" is shown as the destruction of the self and the free will, leaving only the compulsion to follow the pattern: to lack free will is to lack life. To be dead.

Conclusion

During the course of this discourse we have found that the Gothic from its humble origins as an idea of one man has become a genre of great complexity, just as Walpole himself wished, a form of narrative that would evolve in the hands of future authors. We have answered the question as to what Gothic means.

We have presented a possible interpretation of why what Walpole established with *The Castle of* Otranto has become something that pervades our society, fluctuating in popularity and expression. That is through the combination of the abject, the sublime effect, and setting. With this the Gothic presents us with what we fear. displayed so that we desire it. What remains constant in the genre is not how it performs, but that it does perform. It takes the various horrors: our personal horrors, those that grow out of our needs, imagined or real, clashing with the social norms imposed upon us; it deals with the darkness in our humanity by transforming it into something inhuman and thus presenting us with an adapted portrait of our darkness which can be accepted and coped with.

We have introduced the idea that the element of decay is an important factor in the potency and appreciation of the Gothic, that a state of decay is described in the Gothic narrative.

Remember that the Gothic narrative is only fiction and fiction isn't real. Everyone knows that the bogeyman in the closet, the vampire in the dark alley, or the monster hiding in the windmill is not real. But just maybe, maybe it is. And that makes us afraid. Afraid that maybe that monster who thrills us with its escapades in the story really is us. But it is only pretend, all make-believe. Will the next Gothic narrative you read lead to a dream or a nightmare? This is the sublime question.

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