

The Gothic Novel: Popular Literature's Response to England's Late 18th-Century Crisis

At the end of the eighteenth century, England found itself plunged into crisis. Following the best part of a century of general stability brought about by the Glorious Revolution in 1688, a series of political and social conflicts changed the feelings of the population. An underlying anxiety emerged. The changes and loss of landmarks were causing a certain darkness to be brought out in people's thinking. This mood was allied to a deep nostalgia for a lost past.

One of the two primary aims of popular literature is to respond to the feelings of the day. In light of the changing circumstances, what evolved was a new literary genre: the Gothic novel. In this work, an example of the best-seller of the day (Ann Radcliffe's *The Mysteries of Udolpho*) will be explored with a view to showing how this new type of fiction applied itself and reflected the prevailing sombre mood.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

England in 1760 was an exciting and successful place to be. A new king, George III, was beginning his reign. The benefits of the Industrial Revolution were starting to feed themselves through to the greater population. The Seven Years War was being won. This victory over the French would by 1763 promote England to the position of being the most powerful colonial nation in the world, with its control spreading from Canada to the Philippines and Australia, India and Africa to the Caribbean Islands. No wonder then there was an overall feeling of optimism and trust in the future. There was little to indicate that those feelings could alter so much within a generation.

By the 1790s, everything had changed. The great colonial masters had been humiliated across the Atlantic in America. The American War of Independence had been lost to the rebels in 1783 after eight years of hostilities. At home there was political turbulence leading to events such as the Gordon Riots in London in 1780 when significant numbers from a march of 60,000 people broke ranks, looting and imposing mob rule. These riots resulted in nearly three hundred people being shot dead, two hundred wounded, around four hundred and fifty arrested, with about thirty of them later tried and executed. What's more, there was little support to people's loss of confidence from the monarch who by then had become somewhat erratic. However, the main change of mood lay in the effects of the advancement of the Industrial Revolution.

On the face of it, this phenomenon was all beneficial. It created economic growth and prosperity which filtered down to most layers of society. In agriculture, the old open field system with communally worked farms was being replaced by privately owned agricultural holdings. The new landowners could specialize and individualize production. Food was more diversified, plentiful and efficiently produced. Industrially, change was happening at an even faster pace. Human and animal labour was being pushed aside and replaced by machines. The advent of the steam engine alone produced seismic change in transport, factories and mines. There was rapid growth in industries such as textiles, particularly in the North West of the country. Gas was being harnessed as a source of lighting. For the overall population, progress in medicine and personal hygiene alongside improved diet were leading to better living standards and longer life expectancy.

But very soon, the downside of the Industrial Revolution started to show its face. The effects of changes in agriculture were many-fold, and not always positive. Efficiency on one hand was matched by a lack of need for great number of workers. Most yeomen, (small landowners) were unable to pay for fees linked to the setting up of enclosures and many had to sell up, often under market value, to big new landowners who could take financial advantage of the situation. Cottagers and squatters, who had up to then been able to live off the vast acreage of commonland, found there was little of this commodity still available to them. They were unable to fish, hunt, graze cattle and pick up wood on land as easily as they used to. Jobs were scarce and too often temporary in nature when they did appear. The poor had become poorer. Solutions for them were few. Some stayed and tried to accommodate the changes, but many more were forced into an exodus to the cities and unfamiliar surroundings. The more adventurous along with some desperates boarded boats set for the New World of

America. Oliver Goldsmith's poem *The Deserted Village* bears witness to the upheavals in England's countryside at this time.

Changes in urban lifestyle were similarly profound. As the countryside emptied, so the cities filled. Whilst there was a greater availability of work and wages in the latter, living conditions for the new industrial workers, in many cases, were poorer than pre-industrial revolution times. The rush to industrialization produced terrible urban sprawl. Housing was poorly constructed and cramped. Lack of basic services such as sewage and quality drinking water created an ideal environment for the onset of epidemics such as cholera. Lack of space triggered criminality and violence. Links, sustainable within rural communities, did not survive in an urban environment. Social control suffered. A new individualism replaced the concept of common interest.

“Capitalism brought a great increase of economic specialization, and this, combined with a less rigid and homogeneous social structure..., enormously increased the individual's free choice. For those fully exposed to the new economic order, the effective entity on which social arrangements were now based was no longer the family, nor the church, nor the guild, nor the township, nor any other collective unit, but the individual: he alone was primarily responsible for determining his own economic, social, political and religious roles.”¹

At the same time that the Industrial Revolution was serving to build a new and prosperous middle class, it was also guilty of widening the gap between the well off and the very poorest in society. It was this gap, together with the sheer speed of change which was at the heart of the disquiet of ordinary people. Although the middle and upper classes did not share the commoners' concerns, nevertheless they had anxieties of their own. These were based around the danger of a potential popular revolution and an overthrow of the very fabric of society as they knew it. Demography was increasing rapidly (as Malthus would confirm in his *Essay on the Principle of Population* in 1798), and this was adding to the new and potentially political weight of the masses. Events across the Channel, which would ultimately lead to the French Revolution, were being almost equally felt in England. Radical agitators were plying their trade widely throughout the country. The lower classes were starting to listen. Imported revolutionary ideologies appeared to represent a constant threat to the social structure. In *The Popular Novel in England*, Tompkins notes: “The disturbed atmosphere of the revolutionary

¹ R W Mises (p 63)

period caused the idea of a general political conspiracy to take root, though in shallow soil, and to bear some astounding fruits".²

This new radicalism was a source of fear. That fear was to be well founded since by 1795, with the French Revolution at its bloodiest, troops had to be sent to various English cities to maintain order, intellectual radicals had been tried for treason,³ the rights of assembly had been withdrawn and Habeas Corpus suspended at least twice. Such was the intensity of public feeling. It was from this sea of all-round consternation that the Gothic novel emerged.⁴

THE ORIGINS AND EVOLUTION OF THE GOTHIC NOVEL

The origins of the Gothic novel (also called Gothic romance), can be traced back to Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* written in 1764. The literary era prior to this had seen the birth of the novel itself, but in a more realistic form of the picaresque and a more genteel one of the sentimental. Popular readership now no longer saw these as satisfactory in the midst of the new upheavals. The readers were showing a new interest for the Middle Ages in a regressive mood towards a previous era in national history. They were also looking for a way of exploring their darker aspects of life now more fully exposed.⁵ The literary requirements for tears was being replaced by that of fears. This was in keeping with Edmund Burke's aesthetical theory on the sublime (developed in 1757 in his *Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Idea of the Sublime and Beautiful*) which promoted excess, intensity, darkness and a pleasure closely allied to fear as opposed to the comfort of classical beauty.

² *The Popular Novel in England* (1770-1800), Tompkins, Lincoln, Nebraska, 1961, p 281-82.

³ Amongst them was Thomas Paine. Involved in the early stages of the French Revolution, he wrote the *Rights of Man* (1791) as a response to Edmund Burke's attack in his *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790). After this publication, Paine was tried and convicted in absentia for the crime of seditious libel. The Government employed men to follow Paine around, and drum up hatred for him and his views. They organized hate mobs and the burning of his effigy. The aim (which turned out to be successful) of the authorities was to chase Paine out of Great Britain. In 1792, he answered the seditious libel charges in the following words: "If, to expose the fraud and imposition of monarchy ... to promote universal peace, civilization, and commerce, and to break the chains of political superstition, and raise degraded man to his proper rank; if these things be libellous ... let the name of libeller be engraved on my tomb" Thomas Paine, *Letter Addressed To The Addressers On The Late Proclamation*, in Michael Foot, Isaac Kramnick (ed.), *The Thomas Paine Reader*, p 374.

⁴ This would be in keeping with the French surrealists' interpretation according to which the Gothic novel is an expression of the disruptions in Europe brought about by the French Revolution.

⁵ It has become common to interpret the Gothic novel using Freudian (and more recently Lacanian) psychoanalysis, therefore seeing it as a strategy for dealing with tabooed issues.

The Gothic novel used a stock of devices to evoke fear: ruined castles and abbeys, damp dungeons, dark villains, mad monks, endangered heroines, secret chambers, haunted galleries, creaking doors, mysterious portraits and ghosts. But within the broad definition, there were three almost separate levels of intensity : fear, terror and horror. Whilst fear and terror novels were published in the same time period, horror, the most intense, did not come into being until after the relative decline of the first two. Within the sentimental-historical Gothic (Sophia Lee's *The Recess*, 1783-85), fear was diluted by the presence of an emotional softness.⁶ At the next level of intensity with authors such as Horace Walpole, Clara Reeve (*The Old English Baron*, 1778) and Ann Radcliffe (*The Mysteries of Udolpho*, 1794), the fear factor was increased to one of terror. As the era of the Gothic novel neared its end, terror gave way to full-blooded horror in the guise of works such as M. G. Lewis's *The Monk* (1796), Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818) and Charles Robert Maturin's *Melmoth the Wanderer* (1820).

THE MYSTERIES OF UDOLPHO

Ann Radcliffe (1764-1823)

The Mysteries of Udolpho (1794) was the fourth of six works by Ann Radcliffe who was considered to be the queen of the Gothic novel.⁷ It was a mark of this writer's almost universal popularity that she received five hundred pounds remuneration for it (an unprecedented amount for a single novel at that time). Together with Rousseau's *La Nouvelle Héloïse* (1761) and Goethe's *Die Leiden des jungen Werthers* (1774), *The Mysteries of Udolpho* was the most influential and praised across Europe. Its popularity continued through to the nineteenth century, running into countless editions and translations. Walter Scott considered Radcliffe to be a "mighty magician", "the first poetess of romantic fiction". For Thomas de Quincey, she was "the enchantress of that generation" and for John Keats she was

⁶ Sophia Lee was strongly influenced by the French writers of the previous generation whose exploration of melancholy was a novelty at the time: "From English literature there are the influences of Chaucer, Clara Reeve, Thomas Leland and that of Walpole; from the French something of the plot and topics of Prevôt's *Cleveland* (1731-39). Elsewhere are parallels to Baculard d'Arnaud and Diderot." Marion Marceau, *The Lee Sisters: Eighteenth-Century Commercial Heroines in The Invisible Woman*, ed. Isabelle Baudino, Jacques Carré, Cécile Révauger (London : Ashgate, 2005), 167.

⁷ Her five other novels were : *The Castles of Athlin and Dunbaye* (1789), *A Sicilian Romance* (1791), *Romance of the Forest* (1792), *The Italian* (1796), *Gaston de Blondville* (1826).

“Mother Radcliffe”.⁸ The novelist’s writing was condensed into a short seven year span, aside from *Gaston de Blondville*, written in 1802 and published posthumously in 1826. She retired at the tender age of thirty-two and became a recluse, prompting rumours of mental imbalance which continued right up to her death in 1823.

The Basic Plot

Set in 1584, the story of *The Mysteries of Udolpho* traces the adventures of Emily St Aubert. She is the only child of a French landed family whose fortune is now in decline. After her mother’s premature death, Emily, with her father, sets out on a journey from her native Gascony through the Pyrenees to the Mediterranean coast of Roussillon. During this journey, she meets a dashing young man of noble character, called Valancourt. They fall in love but are separated.

Before long, Emily’s father succumbs to a long illness and Emily, now orphaned, is forced to live with her aunt, Madame Cheron, and becomes her ward. Madame Cheron’s new husband is the villainous Montoni whose sole motives revolve around the accumulation of money, even from his own wife. He tries to force Emily to marry Count Morano, but later withdraws support for this when he finds Morano has less riches than he thought. After taking Madame Cheron and her niece to Venice, Montoni then imprisons them in the Apennines in the castle of Udolpho. He isolates his wife and violently tries to force her to sign over her properties to him. Madame Cheron dies, but without signing her estate over. Emily flees the castle with the help of two servants (Annette and Ludovico) and Monsieur du Pont, her secret admiror. She then finds refuge in Château-le-Blanc (the estate of the benevolent Count de Villefort), takes control of the property of her aunt and is finally reunited with Valancourt.

Radcliffe’s Gothic Machinery

Radcliffe maintains simple storylines upon which she layers at least five devices to create a Gothic work. In this novel, the Gothic imposes itself right from the start. The use of the word “mysteries” in the title is reinforced by the fact that it refers to a remote castle, Udolpho. Such a fortified stronghold indicates the dark and the superstitious, the strange and the magical, the

⁸ Walter Scott, *Lives of Eminent Novelists and Dramatists*, rev.edn. (London and New York : Frederick Warne and Co, 1887), 553, 565 and *The Letters of John Keats*, ed. Hyder Edward Rollins (Cambridge, Mass : Harvard University Press, 1958), ii. 62.

forbidden and the hostile. Throughout the book, the use of symbolic buildings, allied to that of elaborate description of dramatic and potentially hazardous landscapes, (natural threats to complement man-made ones), results in an overall feeling of omnipresent danger.⁹

“‘There,’ said Montoni, speaking for the first time in several hours, ‘is Udolpho.’ Emily gazed with melancholy awe upon the castle, which she understood to be Montoni’s; for, though it was now lighted up by the setting sun, the Gothic greatness of its features, and its mouldering dark grey stone, rendered it a gloomy and sublime object... Silent, lonely and sublime, it seemed to stand the sovereign of the scene, and to frown defiance on all, who dared to invade its solitary reign. As the twilight deepened, its features became more awful in obscurity....” (p 226-27)

Not only are symbolic images and landscapes used to create a disturbance in the reader’s thinking, but Radcliffe cleverly has these observations made and seen through the eyes of a young girl. The image of the young girl itself is one of physical frailty, and innocence under the threat of being lost. Radcliffe’s Emily is an outgrowth of the sentimental heroine created earlier by Samuel Richardson and with whom the readers (mainly middle-class women) could easily identify. She is unusually beautiful and gentle, with a graceful figure. She is also fond of drawing, poetry and music. She is described as extremely virtuous, obedient and sensitive. Any danger or hostility towards her thereby is compounded to the reader.

“At length, the travellers began to ascend among the Apennines... The tremendous precipices of the mountains, that came partially to the eye, each assisted to raise the solemnity of Emily’s feelings into awe; she saw only images of gloomy grandeur, or of dreadful sublimity, around her; other images, equally gloomy and equally terrible, gleamed on her imagination. She was going she scarcely knew whither, under the dominion of a person, from whose arbitrary disposition she had already suffered so much, to marry, perhaps, a man who possessed neither her affection, or esteem....” (p 224)

Radcliffe’s third device is obscurity. In *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, the reader is never allowed to see things completely clearly. There are unseen events, noises and visions mixed with silent emptiness. Along with these are hints, associations, sights in shadow and dim light. Many

⁹ Radcliffe’s wild and sublime landscapes are reminiscent of Salvator Rosa who was one of her favorite painters. These landscapes alternated with picturesque ones, as the novelist was also influenced by Gilpin’s theories on the picturesque together with works such as Hester Lynch Piozzi’s *Observations and Reflections made in the Course of a Journey through France, Italy and Germany* (1789).

things are left indistinct. Devendra P. Varma remarks: “She knows, as Burke has asserted, that obscurity is a strong ingredient in the sublime”.¹⁰

“A return of the noise again disturbed her; it seemed to come from that part of the room which communicated with the private staircase, and she instantly remembered the odd circumstance of the door having been fastened, during the preceding night, by some unknown hand. Her late alarming suspicion concerning its communication also occurred to her. Her heart became faint with terror. Half raising herself from the bed, and gently drawing aside the curtain, she looked towards the door of the staircase, but the lamp that burned on the hearth spread so feeble a light through the apartment, that the remote parts of it were lost in shadow. The noise, however, which she was convinced came from the door, continued. It seemed like that made by the undrawing of rusty bolts, and often ceased, and was then renewed more gently, as if the hand that occasioned it was restrained by a fear of discovery. While Emily kept her eyes fixed on the spot, she saw the door move, and then slowly open, and perceived something enter the room, but the extreme duskiness prevented her distinguishing what it was...”

The Mysteries of Udolpho advances another relatively new device of that time, that of suspense. Emily is led about the castle, seemingly for hours on end. Whilst there always appears to be a threat to her well-being, no real harmful event ever actually occurs. And yet, throughout the fifty-seven chapters of the novel, the concept of threat is never lost. Radcliffe’s use of suspense extends beyond the main character. There is implication that Emily’s father St Aubert has an illicit affair with the Marchioness de Villeroi, but the reader is left hanging until the final chapter. Likewise, there is much left unsaid about a mysterious black-veiled picture which seems to haunt Emily’s imagination.¹¹ Radcliffe’s refusal to offer immediate answers to the mysteries of her creation only heightened her standing among her readership. Robert Hume notes: “(Mrs. Radcliffe) raises vague but unsettling possibilities and leaves them dangling for hundreds of pages”.¹²

¹⁰ *The Gothic Flame* (New York: Russell & Russell, 1966), 89.

¹¹ “Emily passed on with faltering steps, and having paused a moment at the door, before she attempted to open it, she then hastily entered the chamber, and went towards the picture, which appeared to be enclosed in a frame of uncommon size, that hung in a dark part of the room. She paused again, and then, with a timid hand, lifted the veil ; but instantly let it fall – perceiving that what it had concealed was no picture, and, before she could leave the chamber, she dropped senseless on the floor.” (p 248-49). The reader will have to wait another four hundred pages before realizing that what Emily thought was a corpse is in fact a waxwork figure.

¹² “Gothic Versus Romantic: A Reevaluation of the Gothic Novel” *PMLA* 84 (1969), 282-290

The Mysteries of Udolpho also touches on the concept of the supernatural. While lesser authors might have used this device to provide obvious answers to difficult questions raised in the plot, Ann Radcliffe never took that easy option. The rationale for so-called supernatural events in *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, whilst suspended for long periods in the book, nevertheless are given a plausible explanation by its completion. Emily's nightmarish vision of a pall in the Marchioness de Villeroi's bedroom, followed by Ludovico's mysterious disappearance, is explained by the presence of clandestine smugglers operating in the castle and using a secret tunnel to the outside (p 663). Likewise, the strange music, the discovery of a mysterious poem and the disappearance of Emily's bracelet in a fishing house are explained by the presence of a secret admirer of Emily, Monsieur du Pont (a prisoner himself in the castle). As for the sighting of other ghosts, they are merely a projection of Emily's hysteria.¹³

Radcliffe and Horror

Radcliffe's personal background in Rational Dissent never let her stray into areas of conjecture. She held fast to principles of not only rationality, but also underlying morality. Vice punished, virtue rewarded was the way the novelist combined these two entities. At the end of her novel *Montoni*, the villainous usurper, dies and Emily, the virtuous heroine, triumphs by finding matrimonial felicity and financial security. Radcliffe's readers therefore were safe in the knowledge that fears, anxieties and disruption would only be ephemeral. Social values, traditional morality and status-quo would inevitably return. Contrary to modern common opinion about Gothic being a mixture of the macabre and the grotesque together with an expression of deep subversive impulse, Radcliffe's work is its purest form. She broke new ground in extending the concept of fear in popular literature, not by resorting to ungraciated violence, but by mental subtleties associated with suspense, imagination and apprehension, the ingredients of terror. The popularity of her work, with critics and public alike, demonstrated its accuracy in reflecting the national mood of the day. Yet, unwittingly, it laid the foundations for a new level of Gothic intensity, that of horror such as in *Mary*

¹³ During her confinement in the castle of Udolpho, Emily goes through a mental ordeal and seems to lose anchor to objective reality. Separated from the rest of the world, she no longer has a clear and lucid perception of things. Her irrational state (reinforced by the legends recounted by the superstitious servants around her) is reflected in the style which becomes more imprecise as well as in her body language (weeping, fainting, inability to act). For the best part of the novel, it is as if Emily was imprisoned in her own consciousness.

Shelley's *Frankenstein*. Though this radical new form would be popular for some two decades, Radcliffe herself appeared to be shocked by it. She responded to Lewis's horror Gothic *The Monk* with her own subtler version *The Italian* within a year of the publication of the former in 1798. Radcliffe clearly saw horror, not as an extension of terror, but as something quite different. In her essay *On the Supernatural in Poetry*, she remarked:

“Terror and Horror are so far opposite that the first expands the soul, and awakens the faculties to a high degree of life; the other contracts, freezes and nearly annihilates them...; and where lies the great difference between terror and horror, but in the uncertainty and obscurity, that accompany the first, respecting the dreaded evil?”¹⁴

The Gothic novel was a literary fad created as a reflection of the mood of the people of England experiencing a period of crisis in their country and their lives. Like all fads the Gothic novel faded with the changing of moods. *Melmoth the Wanderer* (1820) could be considered as the last of the genre. With the publication of *Northanger Abbey* three years before, Jane Austen had indeed struck a mighty blow to Gothic fiction by satirizing its excesses and showing its emotional extravagance and sensationalism. A dawn of a new era had been heralded.

The 1820s and 1830s saw a political and social stabilization led by a series of bills passed through Parliament including the First Reform Bill (1832) which extended democratic representation in society. In parallel, the upper and middle classes developed charity and social aid for the poor and homeless. This social awareness inspired and was inspired by the new generation of authors such as Charles Dickens (*Oliver Twist* in 1838 or *David Copperfield* in 1850), Benjamin Disraeli (*Sybil, or the Two Nations* in 1845), Elizabeth Gaskell (*Mary Barton* in 1848 or *North and South* in 1855) or Charles Kingsley (*Westward Ho* in 1855). By the time Queen Victoria came to the throne in 1837, popular fiction style was

¹⁴ This essay was written in the form of a discussion on the use of the supernatural in literature, and was to be part of the prologue to *Gaston de Blondville*, but was instead published separately in *The New Monthly Magazine and Literary Journal* (1826).

swinging towards a greater realism. The genre of the Victorian novel was to be defined by its focus and comment on social issues.

Crisis is often thought of as a time of threat and destruction of current forms, but in the case of the Gothic novel, it was time of creation of a new genre that still strongly exists today¹⁵.

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¹⁵ The Gothic tradition continued throughout the 19th century with Edgar Allan Poe's short stories, the works of Sheridan Le Fanu, Robert Louis Stevenson's *Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (1886), Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890), and Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897). The genre is still continuing today as the themes and effects of the first Gothic novels are being used in films, TV series, computer games and also novels. Many variants of Gothic fiction can be found in twentieth-century literature: the Southern Gothic (and its tendency to the macabre and bizarre) with William Faulkner, Flannery O'Connor, Truman Capote, the Modern Gothic Thriller with Daphne Du Maurier's *Rebecca* (1938), the Modern Gothic in the 1960s with Victoria Holt or Phyllis A. Whitney, and more recently the New American Gothic with James Purdy, Joyce Carol Oates, and John Hawkes.

