

Terror and Horror : Gothic Crosscurrents in Literature

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Abstract

The word “Gothic” was originally implied to anything that is wild, barbarous, destructive and outlandish. When applied to literature, the term, was used both with eulogistic and disparaging connotations and became the synonyms for the grotesque, ghastly and violently supernatural. The literature was based on gloom, fear, terror and horror. In its long run, the Gothic literature got its horizon expanded with the touch of novelty and multi dimensional perspectives. This study relates the affinity between the spirits of Gothic architecture and literature that came as a vogue in late eighteenth century England. The main argument of this study is to reveal how the spirits of horror and terror intersected in literature. Similarly, it is also interesting to see how the aspects of horror and terror have crosscurrents between themselves. The more the genre found its way, there remained crosscurrents between the Gothic literatures propagated in Germany, England and France. This study is qualitative and its nature, purpose and approaches are historical. As such, this study makes a systematic and objective evaluation of facts, themes and ideas related to the previous study to understand causes, development, and trends of Gothic. This analysis helps to explain the present relevance, and also anticipates future aspects of the Gothic literature, exploring how this literature got its efflorescence in our own day being modern Gothic, which incorporates many shades of interpretations.

Keywords: *Gothic, fantasy, horror, modern Gothic, sublime, the double, terror, uncanny*

Introduction

Originally, the word “Gothic” was applied to anything wild, barbarous and destructive to classical established norms and patterns. In its long run, the word came to be applied to the pointed and in ecclesiastical architecture between twelfth and fourteenth centuries. The term got its wide currency throughout eighteenth century when it conjoined to literature and

fine arts. The term then got its disparaging and eulogistic connotations, but the term later on became a concept, and has been perceived from its own arena. Thus, it remains interesting to acknowledge that the real history of Gothic began in political discussion, not in aesthetic discussion. So, it remains to explore how did the gothic spirits of terror and horror find their voices in literature. What is the modern gothic?

Since there are various definitions with multiple interpretations of the terms “Gothic,” some define it in eulogistic sense while others in dyslogistic sense. A common ground has not been found, yet its concept becomes clear when we ponder on these lines from *TheGothicFlame*:

The term ‘Gothic’ is usually associated with the frost-cramped strength, the shaggy covering and the dusky plumage of the northern tribes; and the ‘Gothic’ ideal wrought in gloomy castles and somber cathedrals appeared dark and barbarous to Renaissance Mind. At the close of the so-called Dark Ages, the word ‘Gothic’ had degenerated into a term of unmitigated concept; it masked a sneer, and was intended to imply reproach.

(Varma10)

Varma’s definition, in context, shows the term somehow in dyslogistic way, but he confirms that it was because of its complicated history.

The concept later on got its larger scope when it started to incorporate many shades of religions as well as political meanings. So, Victor Sage rightly says, “In religio-political terms, Luther’s record rejection of the Empire of Roman-Catholicism is assimilated to the first sack of Rome by the Goths. ‘Gothick’ in this tradition, suggests not darkness but a rude ‘democratic’ enlightenments” (18). Sage’s interpretations give a wide arena to the spirit of Gothic. Used in both eulogistic as well as dyslogistic sense, incorporating many shades and combinations of associations, it remains as an intersection of religious belief, aesthetic flavor and political inclinations.

Gothic Spirits and the Rise of Literature of Terror and Horror

As discussed, the term “Gothic” remains somehow equivocal. It is generally a common point, without any doubt, that the literature of terror and horror—which in totality is known as Gothic literature—was inspired from Gothic architecture that now signifies a medieval type of ecclesiastical architecture characterized by the use of pointed arch and vaults. The sensation of thrill of mystery and wonder came much more from Gothic architecture and buildings. However, Gothic is a conglomeration when Ruskin views, “pointed arches do not constitute Gothic not vaulted roofs, nor flying buttresses, nor grotesque sculptures, but all or some of

these things with them when they come together so as to have life” (qtd. in Varma 14). So, the Gothic literature is justified when the features of Gothic revealed themselves in the novels of late 18th century.

The moment the term got its affinity with the literature, it lost all its medieval connotations, and became synonyms for the grotesque, ghastly, and violently supernatural or superhuman. The Gothicity of romances was thus based on gloom, wilderness, fear, terror and horror. The mid eighteenth century minds were rebelled with the sight of Gothic art, its grandeur of wildness and the touch of novelty as well. These aspects inspired the inquisitive writers. The Gothic spirits like the spiritual assurance, the unknown and something obscure, and the sources of splendor and completion became the assets of Gothic Novels and the literature of terror and horror in totality.

The Gothic architecture and its spiritual power creates a sensation of awe and wonder to the beholder, suggesting that life maintain its greatness from there. So, Gothic attitudes relate the individual with the infinite universe, creating an awareness of “*tattvamasi*” (Denys 18) which means “thou art that” (Deussen 170) as expressed in *Chandogya Upanishad*. Thus mystery also finds its great value in the Gothic literature because the proving of “the mysterious provided the *raison d’être* of the Gothic novelists, who took an important part in liberating the emotional energies that had been so long restrained by common sense and good form” (Neil 106). A Gothic Cathedral, in the same pattern, possesses some great spiritual awareness by “its massiveness strikes terror into the beholders” (Hugo 90). So, when the writer conjoined with Gothic spirits attempts the same, he keeps in his mind the grand design of fear and sorrow, wonder and joy, the nothingness as well as infinitude of man. The reader then is terror-stricken and lost, and thus is carried away into the world of fantasy and morbidity, but he is found and made whole in the same manner.

The Gothic literature explores the primitive impulses of terror and horror. It also digs out the freedom of spirit, variety, mystery and the instinctual aspects of awe and sensation. So the stock Gothic qualities and features chill the spine and curdle the blood which carry us from this plane to another plane, giving us an effect of sublime. The sublime is created from the vast entity of nature. When our limited mind encounters with the vast entity of nature, a kind of pleasure is created in human mind with awe, terror, and sensation that is known as sublime. It means the effect is heavy and terrific but with a different kind of pleasure that is not perceived in the day to day reality. In its extremity, the Gothic literature creates an accidental encounter between infinite power of nature and the finite power of human mind. It is the other pole of

pleasure but with sensation and awe. In this way, Gothic trappings, features, and setting are there to make beholder aware of his nullity. Therefore, Robert D. Hume writes about the stock devices of literature of horror and terror:

It is assumed that all Gothic novels are much the same and that the form is identified by the presence of some stock devices. These “Gothic Trappings” include haunted castles, supernatural occurrences . . . secret panels and stairways, time-yellowed manuscripts, and poorly lighted midnight scenes. . . . (282)

The elements of terror and horror are associated with Gothic castles. In the similar ways, the dungeons of the castles, secret passages, winding stairs, tortured chambers also recall the scenes of ancient chivalry and tell us of moral of departed greatness. The ruined castle frequently displayed in Gothic literature is not simply the symbol of mourning, but it remains as the symbol of domestic mystery.

The feature of the landscape is also affected by atmospheric conditions. The Gothic scenes are set in sober twilight or under the soft radiance of the moon in some ruined abbey, or half demolished tomb, or a vaulted arch wreathed with ivy. All these discussed aspects created the entire world of Gothic literature, and are thus named as conventional Gothic traits which, in such a way, are distinctly manifested in the literature catching the spirits of Gothic in reality.

The Crosscurrents and Efflorescence

The Gothic novels, generally, were nourished by the whole European literature and traditions. The interest in Elizabethan, Jacobean dramas, and the fiction of sensibility furnished by French AbbePrevest and elaborated by Baculard d’ Arnold became the playground for the English Gothic novels, as E. A Darker confirms, “The exciting adventures, the violent emotions, the gloomy scenes, forests and antres, castles, dungeons, graveyards, in the Abbe’s novels and plays and stories of Baculard, were to be the distinctive features of Gothic romance throughout its course” (5:175). Not only such factors, but the influence from Germany is also noteworthy because they had a great appetite for the Middle Ages. This provided a vast quantity of materials for the English writers of Gothic literature. German Goethe and Schiller developed three genres— the Ritter, Rauber and Schauer romance. Goethe’s *Gotz Von Berlichingen* (*Gotz with Iron Hand*) (1773) became the precursor of chivalric romance, medievalism, and tyrannical barons. It is also called the genre of the Ritter. The second genre known as Rauber was introduced by Schiller in his *Die Rauber* (1781). This genre which is often called robber novel contains banditti, monks, inquisitors, haunted towers, dungeons and confessions. The

third genre known as Schauer Romance was a latter development. It assimilated the features of the earlier two genres—Ritter and Rauber—in its violent machinery, characters and atmosphere.

The English Gothic literature imported the spirits of the Schauer Romance developed by Goethe and Schiller at its height. However, the English influences to Germany and French were also noteworthy as stated by Varma, “when English Gothic fiction reached its efflorescence by 1789, the German Gothic was still lagging a decade behind England in its maturity. It is a factor worthy of note that the supernatural came to be explained in Germany only after 1800, where as Mrs. Radcliffe’s supernatural explication was introduced in England in 1783” (33). The influences of oriental tales, on the other hand, were also considerable for the development of English Gothic novels. The oriental allegory practiced by Addison in *The Vision of Mirza* (1771) and Samuel Johnson in *Rasselas* (1759) gave some color to Gothic romance. Likewise, Galland’s translation of *The Arabian Nights* (1704-17), *Turkish Tales* (1714), and *Persian Tales* (1714) provided color and splendor for many literary works of England especially to the Gothic novels.

Similarly, the Gothic novel found its sources on the ghost story as well as the graveyard poetry of England as viewed by Kenneth Clark that the Gothic novelists were the natural successors to the Graveyard poets and all the elements of graveyard poetry reappeared in the novel (cited in Varma 27). However, one should not conclude that such outside influences were only there in Gothic literature. On the other hand, all the invention was also new combination of impulses that sprang from the creative personal dreams and repressed unconscious of its authors.

It leads to a point that Gothic literature did not spring fully all of a sudden in England, rather it is a sequential development that was introduced at first by Tobias Smollett in his *Ferdinand Count Fathom* (1753). The trend was in fact introduced by Horace Walpole in his *The Castle of Otranto* (1764). His greatness remains praiseworthy that he gave rise to a new trend of literature that resembles Gothic literature.

Walpole’s *The Castle of Otranto* is a gruesome tale of passion, bloodshed and villainy. It also applies all the conventional Gothic traits. This work sets a tradition of historical Gothic novel in which the atmospheres of supernatural terror, distinct panorama of history or chivalry are portrayed in a unique way. This school of historical Gothic novel was developed by Clara Reeve in *The Old English Baron* (1777), the Lee sisters, Sophia Lee and Charlotte Smith. *The Recess* (1784) by Sophia Lee, and *Error of Innocence* (1786) by Harriet Lee and later

on Charlotte' Smith's *The Old Manor House* (1793) are notable hallmarks in the tradition of Historical Gothic school.

The Historical Gothic was followed by the school of terror. It is often called pure Gothic. In this pure Gothic, the superstitious dread is aroused by a series of supernatural manifestations. This school specially focuses on the craft of terror, and shows the intangible spiritual psychic dread as well as a shudder at the other world. This school was initiated by Ann Radcliffe with her influential work *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794).

The school of terror influenced the school of horror that followed the earlier one. The school of horror, combining the spirits of school of terror and Schauer Romanticism was blazed in its glory. Thus, there remained the cross currents among their schools as they intermingled the streams of terror and horror.

To trace the distinction between "terror" and "horror" novels, it is necessary to judge the subtle gradations that come in between the effects of terror and horror. It was Edmund Burke who made a distinction between terror and horror. He joined an esthetic value to terror by explaining it as a source of sublime. He views that to make anything very terrible, obscurity in general is necessary (34). Sublime effects take a person into a higher plane of experience. Likewise, according to Burke, sublime emotions would be generated by objects that were vast, magnificent and obscure (33). Therefore, for him terror, obscurity, and power were the sources of sublime. However, he provides concern with the terror, leaving the beauty of horror, the grotesque power of something ghastly.

The modern concept of horror and terror, in this context, helps to bring home the concepts. Terror creates an intangible atmosphere of spiritual psychidread while horror resorts to a cruder presentation of the macabre by an exact portrayal of the physical horror:

. . . violence, pain and terror are ideas "Heterogeneously Yoked" together thus making a combined attack upon the mind. 'Horror' approaches violence in its intensity; 'terror' when sufficiently embodies horror. . . . And the effect of horror is what Arjuna felt in the Bhagavadgita:

My limb quail, my mouth goes dry, my body shakes and my hair stands on end. (Verma 130-31)

Thus the difference between terror and horror "is the difference between awful apprehension and sickening realization: between the smell of death and stumbling against a corpse" (Varma 130). In this way, the sublime created by terror and horror bears a great value in the Gothic literature the literature of Terror and Horror.

In its course of development, the school of Horror opened an arena of a grotesque and gruesome theme of horror. The morbid and fantastic creations of this school are: *Vathek* (1786) by William Beckford; *Caleb Williams* (1794) by William Godwins; *The Monk* (1796) by Mathew Gregory Lewis; *Frankenstein* (1818) by Mary Shelley; *Vampyre: ATale* (1819) by Dr. John Polidori; and *Melmoth the Wanderer* (1820) by Charles Maturin. These works with new insights shocked the nerves, furnishing the chamber of horror that at last established their writers in the rank of important writers of the literature of horror.

In its long run, the horror Gothic opened a lot of possibilities to the forth coming age. So it has an agglutinative relation sub with the Gothic of 1980s which is known as “decadent Gothic”. This new trend of Gothic included the original Gothic traits while at the same time tilted toward the modernity of theme because they concern with the theme of degeneration and essence of man. These “decadent Gothic” includes R.L. Stevenson’s *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1886), Oscar Wilde’s *Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891), H.G. Wells’ *Island of Dr. Moreau* (1896), and Bram stoker’s renowned work *Dracula* (1897).

The Modern Gothic

The moment we pay concern to the recent trends of Gothic, it is more versatile and inter disciplinary than it has been since the 1970s. Since the concepts of cannon has been broken and the marginal hither to neglected subject are brought to the foreground, Gothic is now to a great concern since it bears a far broader range of contexts. It reveals the fragmentation of personality, mental disintegration and cultural decay as well. Still going further, the Gothic now explores the dark side of human psyche, as Punter says, “What is, perhaps, most distinctive about contemporary Gothic is the way in which it has followed the tradition of not merely describing but inhabiting the distorted forms of life, social and psychic, which follow from the attempted recollection of primal damage” (178). In this way, the literature of terror and horror expands its boundary.

Modern Gothic, in its expansion, deals with the concept of uncanny, doppelganger and fantasy. The uncanny bears its significance when it “means frightening and unfamiliar” (Freud 76). It belongs to all that is terrible that undoubtedly bears the quality to stimulate drear and creeping horror. The uncanny, in this sense, is not only frightening, it is also everything that ought to have remained hidden and secret, yet comes into the surface. The uncanny derives terror not only from alien, but from something that is strangely familiar to us. Its “effect is often and easily produced by effacing the distinction between imagination and reality, such

as when something that we have hitherto regarded as imaginary appears before us in reality” (Freud 85). Only in such a situation, uncanny comes to light.

The word “doppelganger” literally explained means the “doublegoer”. It is a ghostly counterpart of a living person. It can also mean the double, and alter ego just like *Frankenstein’s* monster. It is a psychic projection. So, the double is the necessity to confront and recognize the darker aspects of one’s personality, as clarified by Freud:

. . . the ‘double’ has with reflection in mirrors, with shadows guardians spirits, with the beliefs in the soul and fear of death . . . For the ‘double’ was originally an insurance against destruction to the ego . . . and probably the ‘immortal’ soul was the first ‘double’ of the body. This invention of doubling as a prosecution against extinction has its counterpart in the language of dreams. . . . (82)

The double, in its aspects, possesses the traits of both complementary and at the same time antithetical to the character involved.

The idea of fantasy is relevant to the Gothic as it helps to reveal the darker side of one’s psyche. A happy person never fantasizes only an unhappy one does so. Every single fantasy is the wish fulfillment. If so is the case, there is more specific value to the Gothic literature because it demonstrates the mechanisms that enforce non-fulfillment. Punter further clarifies:

Rather than jumping straight from an existence situation to a projection of its opposite, Gothic takes us on a tour through the labyrinthine corridors of repression, gives us glimpses of the skeletons of dead desires and makes them move again. . . and the phantoms, vampires and monsters of Gothic are for the most part recognizable embodiment of psychological features. (188)

It is thus true that the writers of Gothic literature give their full attention to the nightmare. As such, the images in Gothic literature like mountains, ghosts, deserts, Cavern Lake, corpse, invisible voices are not simply the illusions. They constitute objects and facts in the another real word.

Modern Gothic literature interests in the breakdown of the boundaries. It also concerns with what is forbidden. It deals with the theme of an outsider who seeks some kind of salvations, this is to explore the theme of gloomy, melancholic and doomed earth when owe can find horror, chronic isolation and alienation. Edgar Allan Poe (1809-1904) and his works “depict a guilty conscience or trace the growth of some terrible obsession . . . because he elected to deal with problems of mental pathology” (Crompton-Rickett 30-31). Faulkner’s *Absalom Absalom!* is also no exception in this case. Going even beyond, modern Gothic literature

reflects the chaotic minds with the failure of human aspirations. It shows the horizon of the Gothic literature is expanding in course of time as clarified by Punter:

Gothic interlocks with the heritage of Kafka to produce a mode of fiction about bureaucratization, institutionalization, the alienation of the individual from power and control over his or her own life. . . . The principal subject at issue is the conflict between the individual and dehumanized environment; the fears of scientism. . . . (120)

The genre, in this way, occupies the pre-occupations of the time just like eclipsed life, chasm of capitalism, inhumanity, child abuse, serial murder pollution and even schizophrenic condition of modern man.

These themes are explored in the works of works like *Mistress of Mellyn* (1960) by Victoria Holt; *ThunderHeights* (1960), *The Shining* (1977) by Phyllis a Whitney; *Interview with the Vampire* (1976) by Anne Rice. Even going ahead, in its long run, the elements of Gothic literature are found in film. The “Gothic” category even expands its horizon if we include any work that evokes atmosphere of brooding terror and horror.

Conclusion

Gothic in its long expansion intersects the multidimensional aspects. Making the inescapable connection between the world of text and the world of reader, this literature often emphasizes that real terror and horror are not in jungle and in other physical entities like masters, ghosts on vampires; rather real terror an horror lurk in us, at the very moment, here and now. The term that has been used in disparaging computation has now found a footing of its own for boarder range of contexts. The literature that concerns with the Gothic traits has become more prevalent nowadays. Since the concepts of cannon of great work disappeared, and the boundaries of literature expanded, Gothic as a literature of horror and terror found its real efflorescence, glowing in the canvas of the world of literature. The Gothic literature is expanding in such way that no area remains untouched by it in this wider context.

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