

Gothic Fiction: Overview

Gothic fiction is an important genre of literature that combines elements of both horror and romance. As a genre, it is generally believed to have been invented by the English author Horace Walpole, with his 1764 novel *The Castle of Otranto*. The effect of Gothic fiction depends on a pleasing sort of terror, an extension of essentially Romantic literary pleasures that were relatively new at the time of Walpole's novel.

Prominent features of Gothic fiction include terror (both psychological and physical), mystery, the supernatural, ghosts, haunted houses and Gothic architecture, castles, darkness, death, decay, doubles, madness, secrets and hereditary curses.

The stock characters of Gothic fiction include tyrants, villains, bandits, maniacs, Byronic heroes, persecuted maidens, femmes fatale, madwomen, magicians, vampires, werewolves, monsters, demons, revenants, ghosts, perambulating skeletons, the Wandering Jew and the Devil himself.

Important ideas concerning and regarding the Gothic include: Anti-Catholicism, especially criticism of Roman Catholic excesses such as the Inquisition (in southern European countries such as Italy and Spain); romanticism of an ancient Medieval past; melodrama; and parody (including self-parody).

Origins

In a way similar to the gothic revivalists' rejection of the clarity and rationalism of the neoclassical style of the Enlightened Establishment, the term "gothic" became linked with an appreciation of the joys of extreme emotion, the thrill of fearfulness and awe inherent in the sublime, and a quest for atmosphere. The ruins of gothic buildings gave rise to multiple linked emotions by representing the inevitable decay and collapse of human creations— thus the urge to add fake ruins as eye-catchers in English landscape parks. English Protestants often associated medieval buildings with what they saw as a dark and terrifying period, characterized by harsh laws enforced by torture, and with mysterious, fantastic and superstitious rituals.

The first gothic romances

The term "Gothic" came to be applied to the literary genre precisely because the genre dealt with such emotional extremes and very dark themes, and because it found its most natural settings in the buildings of this style — castles, mansions, and monasteries, often remote, crumbling, and ruined. It was a fascination with this architecture and its related art, poetry (see Graveyard Poets), and even landscape gardening that inspired the first wave of gothic novelists. For example, Horace Walpole, whose *The Castle of Otranto* (1764) is often regarded as the first true gothic romance, was obsessed with medieval gothic architecture, and built his own house, Strawberry Hill, in that form, sparking a fashion for gothic revival. Indeed Margaret Drabble suggests in the *The Oxford Companion to English Literature* (ed.; 5th & 6th edns)

(1985, 2000), that the term 'Gothic' originally meant medieval, as in *Castle of Otranto, a Gothic Tale*.

Walpole's novel arose out of this obsession with the medieval. He originally claimed that the book was a real medieval romance he had discovered and republished. Thus was born the gothic novel's association with fake documentation to increase its effect. Indeed, *The Castle of Otranto* was originally subtitled "A Romance" — a literary form held by educated taste to be tawdry and unfit even for children, due to its superstitious elements — but Walpole revived some of the elements of the medieval romance in a new form. The basic plot created many other gothic staples, including a threatening mystery and an ancestral curse, as well as countless trappings such as hidden passages and oft-fainting heroines.

It was however Ann Radcliffe who created the gothic novel in its now-standard form. Among other elements, Radcliffe introduced the brooding figure of the gothic villain, which developed into the Byronic hero. Unlike Walpole's, her novels, beginning with *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794), were best-sellers, although along with all novels they were looked down upon by well-educated people as sensationalist women's entertainment (despite some men's enjoyment of them).

"The person, be it gentleman or lady, who has not pleasure in a good novel, must be intolerably stupid. I have read all Mrs. Radcliffe's works, and most of them with great pleasure. The *Mysteries of Udolpho*, when I had once begun it, I could not lay down again; I remember finishing it in two days — my hair standing on end the whole time." [said Henry]

"I am very glad to hear it indeed, and now I shall never be ashamed of liking Udolpho myself." [replied Catherine] — Jane Austen, Northanger Abbey (written 1798)

Radcliffe also provided an aesthetic for the burgeoning genre courtesy of her influential article "On the Supernatural in Poetry" in *The New Monthly Magazine* 7, 1826, pp 145-52, examining the distinction and correlation between horror and terror in Gothic fiction.

Victorian Gothic

Though it is sometimes asserted that the Gothic had played itself out by the Victorian era and had declined into the cheap horror fiction of the "Penny Blood" or "penny dreadful" type, exemplified by the serial novel *Varney the Vampire*, in many ways Gothic was now entering its most creative phase - even if it was no longer a dominant literary genre (in fact the form's popularity as an established genre had already begun to erode with the success of the historical romance). The Victorians sometimes called their novels 'Gothick' to distinguish them from 'Gothic'. Influential critics, above all John Ruskin, far from denouncing mediaeval obscurantism, praised the imagination and fantasy exemplified by its gothic architecture, influencing

the Pre-Raphaelites. Recently readers and critics have also begun to reconsider a number of previously overlooked Penny Blood and Penny Dreadful fictions. Authors such as G.W.M. Reynolds are slowly being accorded an important place in the development of the urban as a particularly Victorian Gothic setting, an area within which interesting links can be made with established readings of the work of Dickens and others. The formal relationship between these fictions, serialized for predominantly working class audiences, and the roughly contemporaneous sensation fictions serialized in middle class periodicals is also an area worthy of inquiry.

An important and innovative re-interpreter of the Gothic in this period was Edgar Allan Poe who opined 'that terror is not of Germany, but of the soul'. His story "The Fall of the House of Usher" (1839) explores these 'terrors of the soul' whilst revisiting classic Gothic tropes of aristocratic decay, death and madness. The legendary villainy of the Spanish Inquisition, previously explored by Gothicists Radcliffe, Lewis and Maturin, is revisited in "The Pit and the Pendulum" (1842). The influence of Ann Radcliffe is also detectable in Poe's "The Oval Portrait" (1842), including an honorary mention of her name in the text of the story.

The influence of Byronic Romanticism evident in Poe is also apparent in the work of the Brontë sisters. Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* (1847) transports the Gothic to the forbidding Yorkshire Moors and features ghostly apparitions and a Byronic anti-hero in the person of the demonic Heathcliff whilst Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847) adds the madwoman in the attic (Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar 1979) to the cast of gothic fiction. The Brontës' fiction is seen by some feminist critics as prime examples of Female Gothic, exploring woman's entrapment within domestic space and subjection to patriarchal authority and the transgressive and dangerous attempts to subvert and escape such restriction. Charlotte's *Jane Eyre* and Emily's *Cathy* are both examples of female protagonists in such a role (Jackson 1981: 123-29). Louisa May Alcott's gothic potboiler, *A Long Fatal Love Chase* (written in 1866, but published in 1995) is also an interesting specimen of this subgenre.

Elizabeth Gaskell's tales "The Doom of the Griffiths" (1858) "Lois the Witch" and "The Grey Woman" all employ one of the most common themes of Gothic fiction, the power of ancestral sins to curse future generations, or the fear that they will.

The gloomy villain, forbidding mansion and persecuted heroine of Sheridan Le Fanu's *Uncle Silas* (1864) shows the direct influence of both Walpole's *Otranto* and Radcliffe's *Udolpho*. Le Fanu's short story collection *In a Glass Darkly* (1872) includes the superlative vampire tale *Carmilla*, which provided fresh blood for that particular strand of the Gothic and influenced Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897). According to literary critic Terry Eagleton, Le Fanu, together with his predecessor Maturin and his successor Stoker, form a sub-genre of Irish Gothic, whose stories, featuring castles set in a barren landscape, with a cast of remote aristocrats dominating an atavistic peasantry, represent in allegorical form the political plight of colonial Ireland subjected to the Protestant Ascendancy (Eagleton 1995).

The genre was also a heavy influence on more mainstream writers, such as Charles Dickens, who read gothic novels as a teenager and incorporated their gloomy atmosphere and melodrama into his own works, shifting them to a more modern period and an urban setting. His most explicitly Gothic work is his last novel *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* (1870). The mood and themes of the gothic novel held a particular fascination for the Victorians, with their morbid obsession with mourning rituals, Mementos, and mortality in general.

The 1880s, saw the revival of the Gothic as a powerful literary form allied to "fin de siècle" decadence. Classic works of this period include Robert Louis Stevenson's *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (1886), Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891), George du Maurier's *Trilby* (1894), Henry James' *The Turn of the Screw* (1898) and the stories of Arthur Machen. The most famous gothic villain ever, Count Dracula was created by Bram Stoker in 1897. Stoker's book also established Transylvania and Eastern Europe as the *locus classicus* of the Gothic.

In America, two notable writers of the end of the 19th century, in the Gothic tradition, were Ambrose Bierce and Robert W. Chambers. Bierce's short stories were in the horrific and pessimistic tradition of Poe. Chambers, though, indulged in the decadent style of Wilde and Machen (even to the extent of having a character named 'Wilde' in his *The King in Yellow*).

The Victorian Gothic fictionalized contemporary fears like ethical degeneration and questioned the social structures of the time.

Vampire Hunting in Transylvania

By Elizabeth Miller

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“And then away for home! away to the quickest and nearest train! away from this cursed spot, from this cursed land, where the devil and his children still walk with earthly feet!” (Bram Stoker, Dracula, 54)

The “cursed land” is Transylvania, one of three former principalities (the others being Moldavia and Wallachia) which form the modern state of Romania. The name “Transylvania,” from the Latin for “the land beyond the forest,” dates back to documents in the ninth and tenth centuries. Encompassing today an area of some 39,000 square miles with a population of 7,000,000, this region, which ethnic Romanians consider the cradle of their modern nation, has had a turbulent history. At the time Bram Stoker wrote *Dracula* Transylvania was part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire; it would be joined after World War I with the principalities of Moldavia and Wallachia to form the modern state of Romania.

But this is not the Transylvania that most of us know. Because of Irish author Bram Stoker’s decision to select it as the homeland of his fictional Count Dracula, it is invariably represented in fiction and film as a mysterious realm where the supernatural rules supreme. Its inhabitants are still depicted as backward peasants who hold fast to their primitive and superstitious past, who still hang garlic on their windows to keep vampires away, and who would never venture out at night without a crucifix in hand.

Contrary to popular assumption, this stereotyping did not begin with Stoker. The first reference to a Transylvanian in Western literature, in Shakespeare’s *Pericles*, is none too flattering: “The poor Transylvanian is dead that lay with the little baggage” (IV, ii). But it was not until the nineteenth century and the rise of Gothic fiction that the region was selected as a suitable locale for supernatural creatures. A collection of tales by Alexandre Dumas, *Les Mille et un Fantomes* (1849), includes a story about a vampire who haunts the Carpathians; in “The Mysterious Stranger” (anonymous, 1860), a vampire Count terrorizes a family in this area. Best-known may be Jules Verne’s romantic adventure, *The Castle of the Carpathians* (1892), in which the narrator cites the prevalence of beliefs in a host of supernatural creatures, including vampires that quench their thirst on human blood. But it was Stoker’s *Dracula* that firmly established Transylvania as a land of superstition and horror.

In its representation of Transylvania, *Dracula* encodes the negative stereotypes that dominated much of nineteenth-century British travel literature, some of which Stoker consulted. Indicative of an increased interest in the more remote parts of Europe, these accounts reveal and perpetuate an attitude that weaves its way insidiously through the pages of Stoker’s novel, and from there into twentieth-century popular culture. Victorian travelers

habitually presented their readers with invidious comparisons between Western science and Eastern superstition, between Western civilization and Eastern barbarism. Various sources that Stoker (who never visited the region) consulted refer to Transylvania with a variety of derogatory labels: a “hotch-potch of races,” the “odd corner of Europe,” “beyond the pale of Western civilization,” a “fearful place, grim and phantom-haunted.” Little wonder that the author settled on Transylvania and even less that some of the same attitudes permeate *Dracula*.

Stoker’s original intention was to use Styria (in Austria) as Count Dracula’s homeland, but as a result of his research, he made the change to Transylvania. One of his chief sources was “Transylvanian Superstitions” published in July 1885 in *The Nineteenth Century* and written by Emily Gerard, the Scottish wife of a Hungarian cavalryman. “Nowhere else,” Gerard writes, “does this crooked plant of delusion flourish as persistently and in such bewildering variety.” In *Dracula*, Jonathan Harker notes with a similar smugness, “I read that every known superstition in the world is gathered into the horseshoe of the Carpathians, as if it were the centre of some sort of imaginative whirlpool.” Gerard’s article also provided Stoker with some of the folklore surrounding *Dracula* and his castle: St. George’s Day, “the eve of which is still frequently kept by occult meetings taking place at night in lonely caverns or within ruined walls”; hidden treasures and “the light they give forth, described as a bluish flame”; and the wolf that “continues to haunt the Transylvanian forests.” Also from Gerard came the term “*nosferatu*,” as well as the use of garlic and the wooden stake.

Dracula depicts Transylvania as a backward region inhabited by wild animals and superstitious peasants – an appropriate residence for a monster who emerges from his lair to threaten Victorian England! The novel opens and closes in Transylvania. In spite of the fact that only Chapters 1-4 and part of Chapter 27 take place in Transylvania, it leaves an indelible impression on the reader. As a world of dark and dreadful things, it assumes the dimensions of myth and metaphor: a land beyond scientific understanding, a part of the “primitive” East, Europe’s dark unconscious, a descent into wildness. But most significantly, from Transylvania comes Count Dracula, who embodies late-Victorian England’s worst fears about degeneration, atavism, and devolution. This Transylvanian, who poses a threat to the pure bloodlines of England, must be first driven back to his homeland and then destroyed on his native soil.

Since the publication of *Dracula*, the myth of Transylvania has been reinforced through films and fiction. To begin with, there are the movie renditions of the novel. The first, *Nosferatu* (1922), refers to Transylvania as “the land of phantoms.” This theme is developed further in Universal’s *Dracula* of 1931, which established the paradigm

for decades to come: a land of eerie shadows, superstitious peasants and craggy mountains with a castle, enshrouded in fog, perched on a steep precipice. In this film, Count Dracula is even portrayed by a Transylvanian-Hungarian actor, Bela Lugosi. Transylvania features prominently in *Bram Stoker's Dracula* (1992) as part of that film's fusion of the fictional and historical Draculas. Transylvania has been prime real estate for other vampire fiction and film ever since.

A voice-over in *Hammer's The Brides of Dracula* (1960) intones: "Transylvania -- land of dark forests, dread mountains and black, unfathomed lakes. Still the home of magic and devilry." In the comedy *Transylvania 6-5000* (1985), the mayor wants to turn a Transylvanian town into a Dracula theme park for tourists. *Daughter of Darkness* (1989) concerns a woman who travels to Transylvania in search of her lost father (who, of course, turns out to be a vampire). *Subspecies* (1991) and its sequels were shot on location in Romania, as was *Dracula Rising* (1993). And who can forget *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* (1975) with its "Transylvanian Convention." Even Grandpa Dracula of "The Munsters" refers nostalgically to the "old country."

Dracula documentaries have also forged this link with shots of gloomy castles, while sepulchral voices make these statements: "many would prefer to feel that he [Count Dracula] can still be lurking somewhere in the mist-shrouded mountains of Transylvania" (In Search of Dracula, A&E, 1978); or "The misty mountains and dark ruined castles of Transylvania are an ideal location to set tales of Gothic horror" (*Origin of the Vampire*, A&E, 1994). The very word "Transylvania" can be counted on to arouse a chill of anticipation.

But is there any actual connection between Transylvania and vampires? To begin with, the word "vampire" is not of Romanian origin. *The Oxford English Dictionary* says it is Slavic, akin to the Serb "vampir" and Russian "upyr." The Romanian word "strigoi," sometimes loosely translated as "vampire," is used more often for "ghost," "witch," "wizard" or "reanimated dead." The territories that now comprise Romania are mentioned only briefly in early accounts of vampires; Hungary, Poland, Moravia, Silesia and Serbia appear more frequently. During the nineteenth century, the connections became somewhat more pronounced. Joseph Ennemoser referred in *The History of Magic* (1854) to Wallachia as the land "where the blood-sucking vampire hovered the longest, a superstition of the most revolting kind."

There is a widespread tendency among Romanians to deny the existence of vampire figures in their folk beliefs. This is due, in part, to a problem with semantics. To the

modern Romanian, the word "vampire" refers to a supernatural figure that originates in Western culture and may be extended to describe bloodthirsty murderers. During the Communist regime (up to 1989), vampire fiction (including Dracula) was banned in Romania, as representative of the "decadent" West. In addition, there has a determination to counteract the notion that Romania is the home of the vampire and that the world's most notorious vampire (Dracula) bears the nickname of one of Romania's national heroes. This has created a significant dilemma for Romanian tourism officials who are eager to capitalize on Dracula as a drawing card for foreign visitors, but who face strong opposition at home to presenting Stoker's Count as a Romanian icon. Nowhere is this better illustrated than in the current dispute in Romania over the proposed Dracula theme park.

For most people today, Transylvania is still perceived as a mysterious, mountainous, mist-shrouded region, a kind of "never-never-land" deep in the forbidding Carpathian Mountains. Travel writers and Dracula enthusiasts help to perpetuate this stereotype by waxing eloquent when they describe this region. For example, in the November 1994 issue of *LIFE*, Marilyn Johnson writes:

Once upon a time, the mysterious and creepy realm of Dracula seemed like a figment of Bram Stoker's imagination. But it turns out that the inspiration for this dark kingdom is real, found in a Romanian province. The mist-covered mountains are real, the crumbling castles are real, the howling wolves, swooping bats, peasants making the sign of the cross, all real.

A similar tendency is evident in media coverage. Writing in 1995 of the World Dracula Congress, Julius Strauss of *The Guardian* noted that "Even today, Eastern Transylvania is a land of misty mountains, superstitious, rural peasants, growling bears and howling wolves." Not surprisingly, Romanians (especially Transylvanians) today are somewhat confused, and even bemused, by such responses.

Even though Transylvania had already been associated with the far-away and the mysterious, it was Bram Stoker's fortuitous decision to change the locale of his vampire's abode that assured the name a permanent place in twentieth-century popular culture. So predictable to this very day is the response to the name "Transylvania" that it is questionable whether the "real" place can ever be represented.

Bats, Vampires & Dracula

by Elizabeth Miller

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Ever wonder which came first -- the bat or the vampire? How did bats become so associated with Count Dracula that the poor maligned creatures are forced to lurk in the recesses of twentieth-century popular culture? Is it all the fault of that Irish writer Bram Stoker and his novel *Dracula* (1897)? Hopefully, the following paragraphs will answer these (and other) questions.

As all bat lovers know, there is a species known as the "vampire bat," the most common of which is *Desmodus rotundus*. Found only in Mexico and parts of Central and South America, they feed primarily on the blood of livestock. A vampire bat will bite its prey with razor-sharp teeth while the prey is sleeping. Rather than suck the blood, it laps it up, much as a cat laps milk.

As for vampires, those blood-sucking monsters of fiction and film, these have "existed" since ancient times in the folklore and mythology of most cultures both in Europe and elsewhere. It appears that when the blood-lapping bats were first observed by Spanish explorers in Central and South America their natural habitats, they were given the label "vampire" because of the fact that, unlike all other species of bats, these live off the blood of their prey.

Bats were associated with the mysterious and the supernatural long before Stoker's novel appeared in print. As creatures of the night, bats fit in well with the motifs of Gothic fiction. A bat-like vampire appears, for example, as an illustration in the novel *Varney, the Vampire*, which appeared fifty years before *Dracula*.

But it is Bram Stoker's novel that cemented the connection between bats and the vampires of folklore. While he was working on his novel in the 1890's, Stoker came across a clipping in a New York newspaper concerning vampire bats which directly influenced the following

comment by Quincey Morris in *Dracula*: "I have not seen anything pulled down so quick since I was on the Pampas and had a mare ... One of those big bats that they call 'vampires' had got at her during the night and ... there wasn't enough blood in her to let her stand up." Stoker obviously did not know (or chose to ignore) the fact that the vampire bat is quite small.

But Stoker's major contribution to the association of vampires with bats was his introduction of the idea that a vampire could shapeshift into the form of a bat (as well as a wolf and mist). For example, in his pursuit and seduction of Lucy, Count Dracula frequently disguises himself in the form of a large bat which flaps at her window. In Stoker's novel such a "vampire bat" is, of course, quite capable of attacking and draining humans.

This motif found its way into the movies. While the first film based on *Dracula*, "Nosferatu" (1922) did not use bats -- here the connection was with rats -- the 1931 classic Universal Studios "Dracula" starring Bela Lugosi certainly did. This was the movie that provided the twentieth century with its most memorable and lasting images of Count Dracula (including the bats), images that survive to this very day.

Even the medical community has latched on to the Dracula-bat connection! A Venezuelan research team have isolated a previously unknown anticoagulant glycoprotein from *Desmodus rotundus* (the common vampire bat). This substance targets activated forms of blood coagulation factors, thus inhibiting them immediately. Named "draculin," this anticoagulant agent promises to be significant in the development of improved drugs to fight heart disease and stroke.

Bram Stoker would certainly be amazed!