The English Gothic novel: A Brief Overview

The English Gothic novel began with Horace Walpole’s *The Castle of Otranto* (1765), which was enormously popular and quickly imitated by other novelists and soon became a recognizable genre. To most modern readers, however, *The Castle of Otranto* is dull reading, the characters are flat, with the exception of Manfred, the villain, the action moves with no emphasis and little suspense, despite the supernatural manifestations and a maiden’s flight through dark, creepy vaults. But eighteenth century readers were fascinated and thrilled by the remote, medieval setting, and the supernatural, all of which have been imitated so frequently and poorly that they have become stereotypes. The genre takes its name from Otranto’s medieval or Gothic setting; early Gothic novelists tended to set their novels in remote times like the Middle Ages and in remote places, like the Middle East. (Matthew Lewis’s *The Monk*, 1796, and William Beckford’s *Vathek*, 1786).

What makes a work Gothic is a combination of at least some of these elements:

- a castle, ruined, intact or haunted
- ruined buildings which are sinister or melancholy
- dungeons, crypts, underground passages, catacombs
- labyrinths, dark corridors, and winding stairs
- shadows, a moonbeam in the blackness, a candle flickering
- extreme landscapes, like rugged mountains, thick forests, icy wastes, and extreme weather (Frankenstein, your 9th grade reading).
- omens and ancestral curses
- magic, supernatural manifestations, or the suggestion of the supernatural
- a passionate, willful villain-hero or villain.
- a passionate, willful heroine or a curious heroine who faints and needs to be rescued frequently from terrible dangers.

The Gothic creates feelings of gloom, mystery, and suspense and tends to the dramatic and the sensational, like incest, diabolism, necrophilia, and unnamed terror, all of which figure in *Wuthering Heights*.

The Gothic, and *Wuthering Heights*

The novel definitely contains Gothic elements, but it is also much more than just Gothic. Boundaries are trespassed, specifically love crossing the boundary between life and death, the taboo of social class, and family ties. The patriarchal family is portrayed as cruel. A heroine is imprisoned and forced into a marriage, although she has professed to love the man she’s forced to marry. There are ghosts and a touch of vampirism at the story’s conclusion. Graves are opened and closed again. Violent weather plagues the moors, and those who ramble on them. Two households, Wuthering Heights and Thrushcross Grange, are set in opposition on the moors and dales of Yorkshire. Dogs both attack and are tortured. The novel’s ending leaves us with doubts about the eternal fate of the protagonists.

As you read look for the following:
• the frame narrative structure and the shifting point of view

• the function of Yorkshire dialect in the novel. (I recommend reading it aloud to understand what Joseph is saying).

• the motifs of weather, doubles, and windows

• dark, diabolical imagery and dog imagery as it relates to the characters

• the Gothic elements you find as you read

• the forms of love in the novel and the effects of various types

• the theme of revenge and its impact on the characters

• the role of the supernatural in the novel and the purpose it serves

I recommend you make a family tree of the Earnshaws, the Lintons, and the Heathcliffs to help you keep the characters straight.

Book marking for these elements is encouraged, but not required. The novel has 34 chapters, and the characters and narrative structure can be confusing, so any post it notes you wish to add will only aid you in your understanding of the imagery and themes. In AP 12 it is neither feasible nor viable to closely read every page of text, due to the many texts we read.

Enjoy the summer reading! The novel is available at Barnes and Noble, or you may order it on-line, with the original preface by Ellis and Acton Bell, the Brontes’ pseudonyms, and I am available at cpastor@kusd.edu or 657-6567 before 8 P.M. Monday through Friday. If you have any questions about the work of the class, don’t be afraid to call or see me in Room 246.