

Introduction to the Gothic Tradition

"The Gothic Tradition"

by Kathy Prendergast

"Gothic" originally referred to a style of art produced in Europe in the latter part of the Middle Ages, or medieval period (12th to 16th centuries). While the Gothic style is most frequently associated with architecture, it can also apply to sculpture, panel painting, illuminated manuscripts, stained glass, jewellery and textiles produced in that period.

The "Goths" were a northern Germanic tribe, one of many so-called "barbarian" pagan tribes which invaded former territories of the Christian Roman Empire following the fall of Rome in the 4th century A.D. These waves of invaders, who were absorbed by Christianity, brought an architectural and artistic sensibility which was very distinctive from the Classical or Greco-Roman style. Whereas the [Greco-Roman style](#) was subtle and controlled, the [Gothic style](#) was extreme, seemingly uncontrolled, larger than life, intended to invoke a strong emotional response, whether awe, pity, compassion, horror or fear. In human representation, where the Classical style was both naturalistic and idealistic, the Gothic style was crude, caricature-like, grotesque and exaggerated. (Visual link showing contrast, eg. Gothic pieta vs. Michelangelo's classical rendering, or crucifixion motif emphasizing the physical suffering of Christ.) These examples could be compared to ["expressionist"](#) art, a style pioneered in the late 19th-early 20th century in which the artist seeks to express emotional experience rather than impressions of the physical world.

"Linear expressionism" is the term used to describe the architectural style (link expanding on the term, with visuals.)

The Gothic style expressed the essence of the Catholic faith, concerned with creating a sense of the numinous, of the presence of God, while still incorporating older Pagan (nature-worship) symbolism: gargoyles, elemental spirits whose purpose was to ward off evil; leaves (particularly in cathedrals); an architectural aesthetic based on the characteristics of the forests:

Forests were the first temples of God....The forests of the Gauls passed in their turn into the temples of our fathers, and our oak forests have thus preserved their sacred origin. These vaults incised with leaves, these socles that support the walls and end brusquely like broken tree trunks, the coolness of the vaults, the shadows of the Sanctuary, the dark aisles, the secret passages, the low doors, all of this evokes in a Gothic church the labyrinths of the forests; it all makes us conscious of religious awe, the mysteries, and the divinity." - Francois-Rene Chateaubriand (1768-1848) from *Genie du Christianisme* (quoted in James Snyder's *Medieval Art: Painting, Sculpture, Architecture - 4th - 14th Century*)

[Exeter Cathedral, completed by 1360, provides an excellent example of medieval Gothic architecture.](#)

Gothic art expressed the apocalyptic ("millennial anxiety," sense that a great day of judgement and/or catastrophic change is at hand, which some writers see paralleled in our own age) mood of the period, and the strong belief in the authority of God and the Church combined with the need to understand the meaning of suffering and death.

The role of the artist: in the earlier part of the Gothic period, artists were generally anonymous and not expected to express themselves personally in their work, but later on personal imaginativeness of the artist became a strong factor in pictorial art. Eg., 15th century painter [Hieronymus Bosch](#), whose paintings were like scenes from nightmares, distinctive in their violent, and surreal imagery.

[Click here to visit the Webmuseum's Gothic art page.](#)

The term "Gothic" was never actually applied to any of these art forms until after the era was over. With the arrival of the Renaissance and the Enlightenment, (link further explaining both these terms, or a separate link for each) anything medieval came to be seen as backward and primitive, associated with brutality, superstition and feudalism, and the era was labelled "The Dark Ages" (a term no longer much in use.) Gothic was therefore used derisively until a revival of interest in everything medieval occurred in the mid-to-late 18th century.

2. *The Gothic tradition in literature:* In the 18th century, at the same time that the novel was coming into its own as an established literary form, many novelists began to look to older, oral and Romantic traditions (eg., the Arthurian legends) as a literary source - essentially, a reaction against ideas of the Enlightenment and realistic literary conventions. Romanticism was a literary genre preferring grandeur, picturesqueness, passion, and extraordinary beauty as opposed to finish and proportion; subordinating whole to parts, or style/form to content. Like the Gothic art style, Romanticism was considered the opposite of classical, and also particularly medieval in character. The Gothic novel, distinctive for its fascination with the horrible, the repellent, the grotesque and the supernatural, in combination with many of the characteristics of the Romantic novel, was (and still is) seen by some critics as a sub-genre of Romanticism, and by others as a genre in its own right.

How did this literary form come to be called "Gothic," an artistic term? The connection is in the emphasis on emotion. Gothic art and architecture was intended to have a magical or preternatural effect on the viewer, evoking a sense of awe, terror, insignificance, vulnerability, or the sense of being at the mercy of a higher power which is a particularly medieval world view. The Gothic building, old, unfamiliar, mysterious and menacing in its "Dark Ages" associations, was the perfect setting for a story intended to terrify or otherwise overwhelm the reader. Dangerous natural settings such as forests and mountains were also effective. The point was to remove the reader from the ordinary, everyday world of the normal and the familiar:

The world of Gothic fiction is characterized by a chronic sense of apprehension and the premonition of impending but unidentified disaster. The Gothic world is the fallen world, the vision of fallen man, living in fear and alienation, haunted by images of his mythic expulsion, by its repercussions, and by an awareness of his unavoidable wretchedness....Gothic heroes and heroines are on their own, stumbling alone, sometimes in foreign countries, through appalling complexities of decision and action, obliged to find their own solutions or go under; estrangement from family ties is their normal condition....Protagonists are frequently orphans, or they are foundlings or adopted, their family origins mysterious." (Ann B. Tracy, *The Gothic Novel 1790-1830: Plot Summaries and Index Motifs*).

Action in the Gothic novel tends to take place at night, or at least in a claustrophobic, sunless environment. Innumerable motifs (link to a complete list) typical of Gothic fiction have been identified, some of which are: haunted castle; ascent (up a mountain high staircase); descent (into a dungeon, cave, underground chambers or labyrinth) or falling off a precipice; secret passage; hidden doors; the pursued maiden and the threat or rape or abduction; physical decay, skulls, cemeteries, and other images of death; ghosts; revenge; family curse; blood and gore; torture; the *Doppelgänger* (evil twin or double); demonic possession; masking/shape-changing; black magic; madness; incest and other broken sexual taboos.

It is generally agreed that the first, or the first major Gothic novel was Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* published in 1764. This novel set the standard for all other gothic novels to follow. Other canonical texts include *Vathek* by William Beckford (1786), *The Monk* by Matthew Lewis (1796), *Mysteries of Udolpho* by Ann Radcliffe (1797) and Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818). Novels incorporating Gothic elements which were written after this period, while they may still be called "Gothic," are not considered as a part of the Gothic canon. (Eg., Bram Stoker's *Dracula*; Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre*.) And of course, many 20th century writers continue to draw upon the tradition (eg., Umberto Eco's *The Name of the Rose*; Gustav Meyrink's *The Golem*).

Psychologically, the Gothic novel is generally understood to serve a fundamental human need, partly what Virginia Woolf called "the strange human need for feeling afraid," but also the need to retain links to the past: folk tales, superstitions, and oral traditions such as medieval ballads, romance, epic and legend, all of which contained elements of the supernatural. Storytelling throughout the ages has served two important functions: to create a communal, emotional experience in the listeners and to impart strong moral lessons, albeit in an entertaining format. Gothic fiction continues that tradition in a literary form.

[Link to "Frankenstein and the Cultural Uses of Gothic"](#)

Bibliography

Tracy, Ann B. *The Gothic Novel 1790-1830: Plot Summaries and Index to Motifs*. Louisville: The University Press of Kentucky, 1981

Snyder, James. *Medieval Art: Painting, Sculpture, Architecture -- 4th-14th Century*. New York: Abrams, 1989.