

Presentation on Gothic Literature transcript

So what is Gothic Literature?

Well, first and foremost, gothic literature is romantic literature, and we see this most in the themes that permeate its most famous works. The supernatural and the rational, the sublime and the mundane, innocence and corruption, individualism and isolation, and even a focus on nature can be found throughout the genre. This is epitomized in the opening pages of Shelly's *Frankenstein*, set on a ship wrecked in the arctic, beset by a blizzard, isolated and surrounded by nature's sublimity, on the hunt for something innocent born of corruption. Indeed, the works of Walpole and Lewis are as Romantic as anything by Wordsworth or Blake, and perhaps even more so, as they often take these themes to the extreme, but more on that later.

So the gothic is certainly romantic literature, but what makes it different from other romantic literature? What makes gothic, gothic? Well, one of the biggest things that makes gothic unique is, as I'm sure you've all imagined is a sinister, dark and despondent tone and aesthetic. Throughout gothic narratives, our broken and despairing characters more often than not find themselves in the darkest of places suffering the most tragic of circumstances. But while this is specifically unique to the gothic, these horrors often allude to a greater theme in romanticism; the horrors of world of men, the corrupting and terror created there, this is despaired, even lamented, in many gothic works. Walpole's *Castle of Otranto* shows this perfectly, with a new window being forced to flee through a dark and unfamiliar place after not only losing her groom to be, but after barley fending off the aggressive sexual advances of her unstable father-in-law.

It is this darkness that brings us to one the other most important elements of gothic literature: setting, and one of two settings are usually found in gothic literature; either a dark and enclosed space, meant to create a sense of unfamiliar confinement, the fear of not being able to escape, or, a wild and

expansive, yet wholly unknown place, meant to create a sense of danger in the unknown, as well as isolation. The cloisters in Walpole's *Otranto* being a perfect example of the former, and the arctic in Shelly's *Frankenstein* a perfect example of the later.

Now, just because the gothic is certainly romantic literature does not mean it deals with certain themes in the conventional romantic way, one such theme being the idea of the past and the present. Where conventional romanticism sees the past as something to be understood for the sake of soulful and artistic appreciation (as seen in most of their themes and settings), gothic literature casts it in a more violent light, often seeing the ideals of the past and the present clash directly throughout their narratives. This is seen in Shelly's *Frankenstein* (and I know, I reference that work a lot, and I will stop when it stops being gothic literature epitomized), when Doctor Frankenstein is ostracized and vilified by his various communities, forced into hiding because his experiments go against the traditional values of polite society, the values of the past narrowing the limits of the future.

But this is seen much more literally in many other gothic works in the form of ghosts. Ghosts are the ultimate symbol of this conflict, literally a spirit of the past manifesting to invariably warn, discourage, condemn or curse the souls of the present.

Now this conflict also shows how the gothic is willing to deal with the extreme, the further ends of the spectrum of human existence, with powerful and emotional situations filled with outlandish occurrences, and this can be found all over *Otranto*, with Manfred representing the most extreme and violent of patriarchal inclinations, with Isabella representing the purest and noblest of romantic feminine innocence, both extremes, as well as the preposterous circumstances of their current situation (a giant helmet crushing their son/fiancé), and in doing so, shows that gothic literature itself exists at the furthest ends of extremity on the literary spectrum.

But of course we could talk about themes and motifs all day, when a real understanding of gothic literature is best gleaned from the life of one of its greatest authors: Horace Walpole.

Horatio Walpole, later known as Horace Walpole, was born in London in late September of 1717 to the then Prime Minister of England, Sir Robert Walpole and his wife Catherine. As with any child born with such a particularly gleaming silver spoon in his mouth, Walpole received the best primary education possible in a southern part of the city called Bexley, then known for its superb tutors and education facilities, before getting his post-secondary education at both Eton College and King's College, Cambridge, where he found himself under the influence of the great theologian Conyers Middleton, shown here, whose views of Christianity, especially regarding superstition and bigotry, would go on to profoundly influence some of Walpole's most famous works.

While still at Cambridge, Walpole also befriended some of the most important thinkers and intellectuals of the time, including poet and professor Thomas Gray, playwright and politician Richard West, and theologian and usher of Lancaster Grammar School, Thomas Ashton, all of whom would have great personal and artistic influence on Walpole and his subsequent works, especially regarding ideas about the divine.

Walpole also had an interesting if stunted political career, serving in parliament 1741 through 1754, and again from 1768 to 1788. A classical liberal through and through, he advocated the moderation of all political ideals, and this would ironically come to juxtapose many of the themes of his gothic writings.

Now, one of the most important aspects of Walpole's literary existence was his home of Strawberry Hill. There in Twickenham, London, Walpole rebuilt the crumbling Elizabethan estate in increments beginning in 1749 until finished in 1776. The home was the first of its kind since the construction of the original, world famous gothic cathedrals that inspired its design. With soaring

buttresses right out of Saint Peter's and ramparts right out of an Italian Castello, the home would come to resemble and even inspire the settings of many a gothic tale, including Walpole's own.

The home was also equipped with its own printing press, though ironically enough, it would not be this press that published his first and greatest work.

Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto*, his first and greatest writings, undoubtedly his most famous work, was ironically enough written and published anonymously in 1764. Historians agree that he chose to do this for the sake of building his own literary credibility on the merits of his work, as opposed to receiving recognition and accolades from his prestigious lineage and prominent political career.

As the story goes, Walpole was inspired to write *Otranto* by a particularly disturbing dream, in which he found himself wandering the dark, arching stairways of his home, when he was suddenly and violently seized by a giant armored fist, startling him awake. And it was said by Walpole himself that it was this vision that inspired both the opening conflict and the setting of the romantic novel.

From its themes of despair, isolation, death and darkness, to its sinister tones and aesthetics, to its violent and extreme characters and happenings, *The Castle of Otranto* truly epitomizes gothic literature, so much so that in later editions the novel was given the official subtitle of *:A Gothic Story*. With Walpole's original preface now widely considered the Gothic manifesto, it would not be unreasonable to assert that this story is the holy, or indeed the unholy, book of the gothic.