

# The Rise of Gothic literature during the 18th-Century Romantic Period

Gauri Jeevan Nambiar

Class- 11 C, School – Gems New Millennium, Al Khail

## Abstract

This paper discusses the rise of Gothic literature, a genre known for its prevailing atmosphere of horror, mystery, and terror, during the 18th-century Romantic period. Romanticism was a literary, artistic, and philosophical movement originating in the 18th century as a reaction against Neoclassicism, emphasising imagination, fantasy, and emotion. Through detailed analysis of events of the era, this paper explores how and why gothic literature swept the world into a frenzy. The research concludes by examining the impact and continued relevance of gothic literature in the modern age.

## Research Objectives

- To understand the rise of Gothic literature during the era of romanticism.
- To delve deeper into the literary works of famous Gothic Authors.
- To comprehend Gothic literature's impact in the modern era.

## Introduction

Gothic literature, characterized by looming terror, mystery and dark fantasies, is a genre of fiction that rose to popularity around the late 18th century. The term 'Gothic' came from a sub-tribe of the Germanic peoples, the Goths, who were thought to have contributed to the fall of the Roman Empire. Additionally, their reputation of being barbaric earned them the title 'Barbaric Peoples'. Such fiction was termed "Gothic" because its origins were drawn from medieval architecture, particularly settings such as castles, monasteries and ruins.

Gothic fiction was widely believed to have begun with Horace Walpole, who, under a pseudonym, published a dark and foreboding novel, "The Castle of Otranto" in 1764. The novel discusses locations like a dark and isolated castle, and characters like paranormal beings, and how an innocent woman escapes the control of a sinister man. A darker, more intense strain of gothic fiction thrived in Germany before it was introduced in England by Matthew Gregory Lewis's novel, 'The Monk' (1796).

## Background of Horace Walpole

Horace Walpole (born on September 24, 1717, London, England- died March 2, 1797, London) was an English writer best known for writing the first Gothic novel in English, 'The Castle of Otranto'. In this work, he laid the foundation for a new literary genre that embraced imagination, fear, and the supernatural. Walpole's architectural interests, his fascination with medieval designs, and his taste for the supernatural strongly influenced the creation of Gothic literature.. Besides his major novel, 'The Castle of Otranto', he published many non-fictional works and a small collection of stories titled *Hieroglyphic tales* (1785).

**Key words:** Barbaric peoples, medieval architecture, pseudonym, paranormal, supernatural.

### **Literature Review**

Gothic literature is a genre of writing, characterised by the inclusion of dark, supernatural elements, both in the event it portrays and the settings it explores. Writers following this genre use many literary techniques, such as setting, characters, and themes, to create an atmosphere of unease and suspense. Critics note that Gothic literature references gothic architecture from the European Middle Ages, as these tend to be common settings in this genre. After the publication of Walpole's Gothic novel, the genre grew over the next couple of decades, especially in the 1790s when the genre was at its peak of popularity. Although Walpole's work was the first to be formally called "Gothic literature," earlier writings also contained similar elements; they simply weren't classified under this genre yet. Gothic literature as a genre may have been named in the 18th century, but it was born many years earlier. Early gothic authors looked to the past for inspiration, and what they found was a terrifying era that was abundant with strict religious practices, ritual, disease, and brutal law enforcement and punishment. It is no coincidence that Gothic literature often dwells in the medieval past, with stories frequently set amidst the architectural setting of the time.

### **Characteristics of Gothic literature**

Gothic literature are characterised by multiple recurring elements such as emphasis on medieval setting, a supernatural theme and unsettling characters such as monsters, demons, witches, ghosts, etc. These figures often serve as antagonists, playing a vital role in creating fear by threatening the characters and wreaking havoc in their surroundings. Their ugly and distorted appearance further intensify the atmosphere of horror, creating feelings of shock and suspense and hence giving the reader that intended rush of adrenaline. Another prevalent feature in gothic works is paranormalism, describing a phenomenon that takes place outside scientific understanding and normal human experiences. By incorporating such supernatural events, gothic authors allow readers to unlock a deeper sense of emotion and heighten their sensory responses.

### **Connection between Gothic literature and Romanticism**

The principles of the Romantic period lay the very foundations of Gothic's darker implications. Romantic authors mostly wrote about the things that couldn't be attained and complexities in human emotion. This prominence of human emotion along with cultural and political transformations deeply influenced the style of writing in gothic literature. Gothic writing closely resembles the very idea of romanticism, both are the product of a reaction against everyday reality. But while romantic writing is the product belief in higher harmonious order, Gothic writing offers an unsettling exploration into humanities fragility and vulnerability.

### **Key authors and their works**

The development and popularity of Gothic literature were largely shaped by the contributions of influential authors. Through their works, these authors establish key ideas of gothic fiction by blending emotion and going beyond normal human experiences. Some of the most popular authors include Mary Shelley, Edgar Allan Poe, Ann Radcliffe, Matthew Gregory Lewis, Charlotte Brontë, Horace Walpole, and so many more.

1. **Mary Shelley:** Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley (born August 30, 1797, London, England- died February 1, 1851, London) was an English novelist who was best known for publishing '*Frankenstein*' (1818), a book that combines the ideas of romanticism and gothic fiction.
2. **Edgar Allan Poe:** Edgar Allan Poe (born January 19, 1809, Boston, Massachusetts, U.S. - died October 7, 1849, Baltimore, Maryland) was an American poet, critic, editor and short story writer. He was mostly known for his focus on unsettling themes and his book '*The Macabre*'. Poe not only shaped gothic literature but paved way for detective fiction and continues to inspire several authors around the world.
3. **Ann Radcliffe:** Ann Radcliffe (born July 9, 1764, London, England- died February 7, 1823, London) was a popular English gothic novelist who was a pioneer in developing a literature of horror. The first novels, *The Castle of Athilin and Dunbayne* (1789) and *A Sicilian Romance* (1790), were published anonymously. Her third novel '*The Romance of the Forest*' (1791), gained her fame. Her next work '*The Mysteries of Udolpho*' (1794) made her a famous English novelist.
4. **Matthew Gregory Lewis:** Matthew Gregory Lewis (born July 9, 1775, London, England- died May 14, 1818, at sea) was an English novelist and dramatist who became very popular for his gothic work '*The Monk*' (1796). Thereafter, he was called 'Monk' Lewis.
5. **Charlotte Brontë:** Charlotte Brontë (born April 21, 1816, Thornton, Yorkshire, England- died March 31, 1855, Haworth, Yorkshire) was English Novelist, popular for her book '*Jane Eyre*' (1847), an influential narrative of a woman who is in conflict of her natural and social conditions.

### Impact and Legacy

It is no doubt that gothic fiction continues to play a massive role not only in the literature industry but also in films and art works. Contemporary gothic works often blend traditional elements with modern anxieties of the present, such as psychological isolation, self-hatred, etc, and dystopian visions of the future. This combination allows the genre to remain relevant while adapting to rapidly changing societal fears.

Furthermore, Gothic literature has evolved through its combination with other genres, resulting in a unique form of narratives. For example, Gothic themes intertwined with Romance, as seen in '*Twilight*', where supernatural characters coexist with emotional desire and conflict. Similarly aspects of comedy are merged with gothic ideas such as '*I Have a Bad Feeling About This*'. Gothic fiction also influenced the central ideas of 'Horror' films/movies, where the character's gory appearance or distorted features resemble ones in gothic novels, demonstrating the genres swift ability to mirror global concerns while maintaining traditional themes.

### Conclusion

In conclusion, the rise of gothic works during the era of Romanticism was not just an accident but a response to the cultural and emotional shifts of the time. Romanticism's focus on fantasies, rebellion and emotion against societal norms, established the foundation for gothic fiction, where supernatural beings, paranormalism and human limitation are discussed. Through central themes such as eerie settings, unsettling characters and emotional conflict, gothic fiction challenged contemporary ideas of reason and rationality. Additionally, the works on many influential authors paved the way for gothic fiction's lasting relevance. Ultimately, Gothic literature is a powerful mode of expression, revealing humanity's fascination with darker aspects of human experience and the unknown.

### Student reflection

Working on this paper allowed me to gain a deeper understanding of the rise of Gothic literature during the 18th-century romantic period. While writing the paper, I understood that Gothic literature wasn't just about the paranormal but rather, it was an expression of emotional, societal and political changes. The process of research taught me virtues like patience and how to connect literature to its broader cultural aspect, making the topic intellectually beneficial and engaging.

### ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

I express my sincere thanks to my instructor Ms. Vasantha who guided me to the successful completion of this project.

I take this opportunity to express my deep sense of gratitude for her individual guidance, constant encouragement and immense motivation which have sustained my efforts at all stages of this project work. I extend my sincere thanks to my principal Ms. Fatima Martin and Ms. Teresa for their support and for all the facilities provided for the preparation of this project work.

In the end, I would wish to thank my parents and friends, who motivated me to continue my work.

### Bibliography

1. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/bitesize/articles/z8dwqfr>
2. <https://courses.lumenlearning.com/atd-herkimer-westerncivilization/chapter/the-germanic-tribes/>
3. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/bitesize/articles/z9cssk7#zh9vwwx>
4. <https://borrow.nypl.org/search/card?recordId=20548853>
5. <https://www.gradesaver.com/the-castle-of-otrantostudy-guide/summary>
6. <https://resources.saylor.org/wwwresources/archived/site/wp-content/uploads/2012/12/THE-CASTLE-OF-OTRANTO-1.pdf>
7. <https://www.kent.ac.uk/ewto/projects/anthology/horace-walpole.html>
8. <https://www.britannica.com/art/Gothic-novel>
9. <https://guides.library.ucla.edu/c.php?g=1340840&p=9884679>
10. <https://www.twinkl.ae/teaching-wiki/gothic-literature>
11. <https://ashleybgarcia.medium.com/the-connection-between-gothic-romantic-c22137c077d0>
12. <https://bpl.bibliocommons.com/v2/list/display/2434864889/2467379249>
13. <https://www.twinkl.ae/blog/features-of-gothic-literature-definitions-and-teaching-resources>
14. <https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/pmla/article/abs/gothic-versus-romantic-a-revaluation-of-the-gothic-novel/B4FED8DD2DA9A21AD4A62ECF8CEB785A>
15. <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Mary-Wollstonecraft-Shelley>
16. <https://www.gilliamwritersgroup.com/blog/gothic-storytelling-the-legacy-of-edgar-allen-poe>
17. <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Ann-Radcliffe-English-author>
18. <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Matthew-Gregory-Lewis>
19. <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Charlotte-Bronte>
20. <https://www.sparknotes.com/lit/janeeyre/context/literary/jane-eyre-and-the-gothic-tradition/>