

The Gothic novel

- ◆ A genre that has been rediscovered over the past 40 years or so
- ◆ It is indicative of the deep transformations of the cultural discourse of late 18th c
- ◆ “Gothic fiction” then evolves into a genre and its many spin offs, transformations etc
- ◆ **“gothic” as a connotation (an “umbrella-term” today)** is different from the bulk of fiction that was produced in the late decades of the century

THE GOTHIC/"GOTHIC"/ GOTHICISM

- ◆ By extension, it came to designate the macabre, mysterious, fantastic, supernatural, and, again, the terrifying, especially the **pleasurably terrifying**, in literature more generally.
- ◆ Gothic in Victorian literature (for example, in the novels of Dickens and the Brontës),
- ◆ Gothic in American fiction (from Poe and Hawthorne through Faulkner)
- ◆ Gothic in films, television, and videos in postmodern culture.

The Gothic novel

- ◆ Some elements in common with the "Age/Literature of Sensibility":
- ◆ The vogue for the *picturesque*
- ◆ Emphasis on fantasy, imagination, sensibility and the *appraisal of emotion*
- ◆ The cult of the *sublime and beautiful**
- ◆ The importance of *natural landscape* as a setting for the extraordinary adventures of the plot
- ◆ The abyss, the chasm, *vertical paradigms of space*

Gothicism and Orientalism

The European Romantic imagination was saturated with Orientalism, but it reflected persistent ambivalence concerning the East, complicated in Britain by colonial anxiety and imperial guilt.

pleasurable terror and pleasurable exoticism operating in a kindred way



The Gothic novel

- ◆ The young maid's virtue is constantly under threat or persecuted
- ◆ Young women are generally coveted and predated by evil men who want to possess/marry/murder them
- ◆ Spirits, ghosts, revenants, mysterious presences
- ◆ The ending is almost invariably positive
- ◆ But the dominant mood and emotion is that of strong emotion, the **SUBLIME**, **TERROR** and **ASTONISHMENT**

The Gothic novel

- ◆ THE GOTHIC novel's main characteristics are clearly at odds with Augustan/NEOCLASSICAL PRINCIPLES AND IDEALS
- ◆ And oriented to a fascination with an obsession with **death, the uncanny, uncontrollable passions**
- ◆ The fictional world of the gothic novel gives form to amorphous fears and impulses common to all mankind, recurring to a combination of different elements (from the unconscious to fairy tale, myth, folklore, and romance)
- ◆ Early Gothic novels differentiate starkly between good and evil
- ◆ ***THE GOTHIC NOVEL DISCOVERS 'THE PLEASURES OF EVIL'***
- ◆ *(hence, to oversimplify a complex issue, its longevity as a genre)*

The Gothic novel AND THE SUBLIME

- ◆ The Gothic novel's opposition to the neoclassical ideals is largely indebted to the rediscovery of the Sublime, theorized by the philosopher Edmund Burke in his highly influential
- ◆ ***A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful (1757)***
- ◆ Modeled on the Hellenistic **Pseudo Longinus' *Peri Hypsous***
- ◆ The sublime and the beautiful represent *the primary categories of aesthetic experience*
- ◆ **The beautiful is essentially a social category** lodged primarily in form (what is small, delicate, smooth)
- ◆ **The sublime is a representation of experience** capable of instilling fear by bringing someone to **the perception of fear for his own self-preservation**

The Gothic novel AND THE SUBLIME

Burke's Treatise:

Whatever is fitted in any sort to excite the ideas of pain, and danger, that is to say, whatever is in any sort terrible, or is conversant about terrible objects, or operates in a manner analogous to terror, is a source of the sublime; that is it is productive of the strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling...But as pain is stronger in its operation than pleasure, so death is in general a much more affecting idea than pain; because there are very few pains, however exquisite, which are not preferred to death; nay, what generally makes pain itself, if I may say so, more painful, is that it is considered as an emissary of this kind of terrors. When danger or pain press too nearly, they are incapable of giving any delight, and are simply terrible; but at certain distances, and with certain modifications, they may be, and they are delightful, as we every day experience (Burke)

◆ **Ann Radcliffe, *The Italian* (1797), pp. 62-63**

Ellena accepted the cool refreshment offered her, the first she had taken on the road. Her companions having emptied their glasses drew up the blind, and, notwithstanding the almost intolerable heat of noon, the carriage proceeded. Fainting under its oppression, Ellena entreated that the windows might be open, when the men, in compliance with their own necessity rather than with her requests, lowered the blinds, and she had a glimpse of the lofty region of the mountains, but of no object that could direct her conjecture concerning where she was. She saw only pinnacles and vast precipices of various-tinted marbles, intermingled with scanty vegetation, such as stunted pinasters, dwarf oak and holly, which gave dark touches to the many-coloured cliffs, and sometimes stretched in shadowy masses to the deep vallies, that, winding into obscurity, seemed to invite curiosity to explore the scenes beyond.

The Italian: an example of the sublime

Below these bold precipices extended the gloomy region of olive-trees, and lower still other rocky steeps sunk towards the plains, bearing terraces crowned with vines, and where often the artificial soil was propped by thickets of juniper, pomegranate and oleander. Ellena, after having been so long shut in darkness, and brooding over her own alarming circumstances, found temporary, though feeble, relief in once more looking upon the face of nature; till, her spirits being gradually revived and elevated by the grandeur of the images around her, she said to herself, 'If I am condemned to misery, surely I could endure it with more fortitude in scenes like these, than amidst the tamer landscapes of nature! Here, the objects seem to impart somewhat of their own force, their own sublimity, to the soul. It is scarcely possible to yield to the pressure of misfortune while we walk, as with the Deity, amidst his most stupendous works.

The Gothic novel

- ◆ **GOTHIC FICTION IS PRIMARILY CONVENTIONAL: *IT SOON BEGINS TO RE-USE AND TRANSFORM ITS OWN MATERIAL IN AN INTERTEXTUAL WAY***
- ◆ **AUTHORS MADE USE AND MODIFIED EACH OTHER'S DEVICES**
- ◆ ***IT CAN BE CONSIDERED AS PART OF SENTIMENTAL FICTION***
- ◆ ***A COMMON TRAIT LIES IN A PECULIAR FORM OF SYMBOLISM FOUND IN GOTHIC TALES***
- ◆ **Not allegory, because the referents are deliberately undeterminate**
- ◆ **Gothic fiction is also indebted to Shakespeare, Spenser, the Graveyard poets, antiquarianism and sentimentalism**

The Gothic novel

- ◆ The foundational text: Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* (1764):
- ◆ A new genre is created out of the combination of many different components
- ◆ Subgenres followed and flourished:
 - ◆ sentimental
 - ◆ Historical
 - ◆ Orientalist, Horrific
- ◆ The tradition continues well into the 20th c with its continual transformations and adaptations
- ◆ Among the **highlights of Gothic fiction**:

The Gothic novel

- ◆ William Beckford *Vatheck* 1782-6
- ◆ Ann Radcliffe's *The Mysteries of Udolpho* 1794 (the persecuted maid, romance, novel of sensibility, triumph of middle class moral values, the libertine evil male is finally destroyed and virtue preserved)
- ◆ *The Italian*
- ◆ (**ITALY** once more (Elizabeth and Jacobean drama) becomes an **ideal setting for a horrific sublime**)
- ◆ Matthew Gregory Lewis, *The Monk* (1796) perhaps the masterpiece of the genre
- ◆ Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein* (1818)

- ◆ Gothicism and Orientalism are often interacting
- ◆ sensationalism and exoticism are kindred experiences: unreality, otherness

The Gothic novel

Most notably: with reference to the '**female Gothic**' (*authored by women writers - Ann Radcliffe, M. Shelley - and depicting women in the Gothic*)

There are 4 important aspects:

The gendered construction of the Female Gothic heroine and hero

THE LINK BETWEEN THE GOTHIC "PLACE" AND FEMALE
SEXUALITY

The conflation of money and class issues with issues of femininity

The Gothic space

the construction of space in the Gothic novel is largely **sexualized and gendered especially in relation to female sexuality and fears of sexuality**

The traditional setting of a castle or a (Catholic) abbey which can be a place of safety against external assaults but has as its foundations a complicated maze of underground vaults and dark passages and in its bedrooms sliding panels and trapdoors

It is the setting of sexual fantasies of penetration and violation and it is figured then in terms of "inner space"

The Gothic space

the Gothic building, traditionally a castle has a signifying function in identifying a woman's body when she is experiencing the conflict over sexual arousal

In this critical interpretation place is suggestive of the fact that the heroine's most sinister enemy is in fact her awakening sexuality!

The Gothic sublime

The passion caused by the great and sublime is Astonishment

Terror is the ruling principle of the sublime

Ann Radcliffe: *On the Supernatural in Poetry*, 1802

Distinguishes between **TERROR** and **HORROR**

Respectively: positive and negative effect of an emotion

Only terror can be a source of the sublime

The Castle of Otranto

Many features which become established conventions of the genre already appear in the seminal novel *The Castle of Otranto* (1764)

a medieval tale with a medieval setting, villain hero, ghosts and wonders - derived from medieval romance: Walpole innovates the novel by turning to antiquity (see the *Ossian poems*, 1795)

Walpole's preface: an attempt to blend the two kinds of romance, the old and the new

- ◆ An indirect narration: the first Gothic characteristic in its presentation is *the ancient manuscript rediscovered: it imparts an indirect air of strangeness*

The novel is constantly on the verge of bathos: theatricality and amusement! *a sudden change from sthng that is beautiful, moral or serious , to sthng that is ordinary, silly or unimportant*

The Castle of Otranto

Thus, in the first of the Gothic novels, the problem of evil is already presented as a psychological problem created in the ambience of the family (Manfred's obsession with offspring to ensure possession of the castle)

Characters are simplified figures

Correspondences between physical appearance and spiritual state

A sort of symbolic nightmare

The central device is the most famous of all Gothic devices:

THE IDENTITY OF THE CASTLE OR HOUSE WITH ITS OWNER
AND A MANIFESTATION OF HIS MIND

AS A SITE OF CONFINEMENT /ENTRAPMENT FOR OTHER
CHARACTERS WHO ARE DOMINATED AND CHASED BY HIM

The Castle of Otranto

- ❑ THE GREAT DEAL OF SEXUAL SYMBOLISM ALSO ADDS TO THE EXPLORATION OF THE VILLAIN'S PERSONALITY
- ❑ The central theme is the psychological aberration of incest (a staple item in Gothic Fiction) and the editor draws attention to that
- ❑ The responsibility of fathers whose bad deeds affect the lives of their children