

Approaching the gothic tradition

- What are the significant social, political and cultural events and developments of the period from approximately 1750 to 1820?
- What historical information may be useful in developing a thorough understanding of literature, particularly gothic texts, written during the period?
- What does the term 'gothic' mean in its historical sense?
- What is the place of the gothic in today's world?

The term 'gothic' commands a vast semantic field of varied terrain: a range of possible meanings, definitions and associations. It explicitly denotes certain historical and cultural phenomena - in many respects the primary foci of this book - but the connotations and associations are far broader. The chronology on pages 120-121 aims to provide a skeletal outline of key texts and writers; this part will elaborate on the detail and some of the subtleties involved - assembling the parts and attempting to breathe life into the whole.

The historical context

Historically, the Goths were one of several Germanic tribes instrumental in the disintegration of the Roman Empire in the 4th century. In the following centuries historians came to regard the Goths almost generically as all Germans - including, of course, the Anglo-Saxons who settled in the British Isles. From this position, subsequent historians and propagandists were able to proclaim a 'native' freedom-loving gothic tradition within British culture, in opposition to 'foreign' imperialism as epitomised by the Norman invasion of 1066 and the authoritarian rule it ushered in. This was powerful myth making, and its essential elements may be clearly seen in popular legends such as that of Robin Hood, celebrating righteous Anglo-Saxon rebellion against the Norman tyrannical yoke.

By the 18th century, when agitation for political and social reform was gathering momentum, this interpretation of history had a ready and enthusiastic following amongst those who saw authoritarian monarchy, with all its attendant institutions, rules and conventions, as increasingly anachronistic. To celebrate the original gothic love of liberty was in effect to argue for greater contemporary freedom through political reform: the reformist wing of the **Whig Party**, in particular, embraced such ideals in opposition to **Tory** ideology. James Thomson, for example, in his appropriately titled long poem 'Liberty' (1735-1736), celebrated the original Goths:

... untamed
To the refining subtleties of slaves,
They brought a happy government along;
Formed by that freedom which, with secret voice,
Impartial nature teaches all her sons.

(iv 680-684)

Despite this over-simplifying of such history - or perhaps precisely because of it - these ideas found fertile ground in the political landscape of the 18th century and helped to foster the rise of the gothic. At the same time, however, there is evidence to suggest that those on the right of the political spectrum, broadly represented by the Tory Party, also made use of the 'gothic' label for their own political ends. In this interpretation of British history, the gothic represented tradition, hierarchy and aristocracy as against dangerous modern, democratic - or at least populist - ideas. As the critic Victor Sage maintains, '... the term "Gothick" itself is an ambiguous one, incorporating many shades and combinations of association. For the 18th century reader, it was an almost unpredictable intersection of religious belief, of aesthetic taste and political inclination.' (from *The Gothick Novel: A Selection of Critical Essays*, ed. Victor Sage, 1990)

History as narrative rather than science enabled its interpreters to merge times and places without too much concern for accuracy. By the time the term 'gothic' (or 'gothick', as it was more frequently spelled) became fairly common currency in the mid-18th century there had occurred a certain elision of historical epochs, so that gothic seems to have referred to the medieval rather than to the pre-Norman conquest epoch. Thus the text generally taken to be the first - and in many ways archetypal - gothic novel, Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* (1764), was subtitled *A Gothic Story* to hint at the period in which it was set: the medieval. Indeed, Walpole initially concocted an elaborate deceit that the novel was written by an Italian canon, Onuphrio Muralto, some time between the 11th and 13th centuries. The reader must beware here, as always, of trying to put too explicit a fix on the gothic, however. In effect, as with most linguistic developments, including those today, the term may refer to a host of sometimes complementary, sometimes contradictory ideas.

There are so many gothic associations that the whole concept may seem at times indefinable and elusive. Nevertheless, emerging from this rather uneven, often misleading semantic field is a sense of the gothic as recovering and renewing a tradition which valued feelings and sensibility, and which had been all but usurped by the developing dominance of reason as the key to all human problems. Reason and rationality had achieved this pre-eminence as fundamental philosophical characteristics of the historical phenomenon known as the

Enlightenment, itself a reaction against superstition and blind adherence to tradition in favour of scientific, open enquiry. The 18th century was in many ways the high point of the Enlightenment, especially in Britain. In historical terms the medieval period pre-dated the Enlightenment, just as in terms of the growth of each individual person the emotions come before and can therefore be seen as more profoundly human than the insistence on rationality. At the same time, social progress, relying largely on more and more rationally based political and social organisation and on various scientific and technological inventions, had made it comparatively 'safe' to indulge in irrational fantasies. Middle class readers, safely tucked into their stable and unthreatened social positions, could feel secure enough to cultivate imaginary fears and fantasies, in the same way that a child may do, reading horror stories and experiencing the delicious thrill while apparently immune from real danger. This is perhaps to belittle the impact of the emerging gothic, however, for the general trend towards an aesthetic more fully in touch with feeling and emotion was profound and real. Widespread awareness that over-reliance on reason could rob human experience of its essential flavour was increasingly characteristic of the age.

Gothic influences

Many of the early manifestations of what came to be called the gothic were not in the area of literature at all, but in art, in architecture, and in landscape gardening. These art forms provide the contexts for literature; they are also, clearly, more public and generally more expensive in their manifestations. As such, they tended, in the 18th century, to be largely the preserve of the aristocracy. Reading, on the other hand, with widening literacy, was more open to the up-and-coming middle classes, including – particularly for the novel – women.

Art in opposition: Goya and Blake

Emerging from all these connotations and shifts in meaning is a clear sense of the gothic in opposition to neo-classical notions of 'good order' and 'good taste' which were founded on a fundamental belief in rationalism. These neo-classical ideas had emerged as the dominant aesthetic – or sense of what is beautiful and artistically valid – of the later 17th and earlier 18th centuries. As the gothic clearly relates to all art forms, it may be fitting to begin a more detailed examination of the phenomenon in its historical context not with literature, but with a picture: 'The Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters', drawn by the Spanish artist Goya (1746–1828) in 1799. (This picture appears opposite.) It is one of a series of prints, and has been called 'perhaps the most important single image for the historian of the gothic' (from *Gothic: Four Hundred Years of Excess, Horror, Evil and Ruin*, 1998). It depicts a sleeping man slumped at a desk, his face hidden by his arms in a



'El sueño de la razon produce monstruos'

posture suggesting desperation. The pen and paper on the desk seem to indicate that he is a writer. Strange blood-sucking bats hover above, receding into the surrounding darkness; they seem both to emanate from and horribly threaten the prostrate figure. The very title of Goya's picture signals the gothic message: when reason sleeps, as everything must, the hitherto repressed monsters will emerge, both threatening and terrifying precisely because they have been repressed.

Goya's own manuscript notes on a trial proof clarify the message succinctly: 'Fantasy abandoned by reason produces impossible monsters; united with it, she is the mother of the arts and origin of its marvels.' As such, this message prefigures Sigmund Freud's (1856–1939) later insights into psychological repression and its potentially devastating impact on mental health (see pages 102–104). It also finds an echo in the writing of Goya's contemporary William Blake (1757–1827), much of whose poetry deals with the realisation that to repress emotions and feelings is to make them all the more terrifyingly distorted when they do, inevitably, emerge. For Blake, writing in his appropriately titled *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (1793), the angels represent reliance purely on reason, whereas the poet or artist has the duty to uncover the world of the imagination. Thus, '... I was walking among the fires of Hell, delighted with the enjoyments of genius, which to angels look like torment and insanity'. Goya, 'the greatest painter to have had gothic moods' (Davenport-Hines), and the goths also walked among the fires of hell, apparently delighting in the enjoyments of genius. And, as may be seen at various points in this book, more conventional citizens ('angels?') certainly tended to see only torment and insanity.

- Examine as many as possible of works of art which have gothic associations, noting common themes and subjects. As you study more gothic texts, including those featured in this book, try to relate these pictures to the written word. What might the pictorial arts offer in this context that writing might find more difficult to convey?

As well as Goya's 'Sleep of Reason', you may like to consider the following pictures, or other examples by these artists:

'The Nightmare' (1782) by Henry Fuseli (1745–1846)

'Chatterton receiving Poison from the Spirit of Despair' (1780) by John Flaxman (1755–1826)

'Good and Evil Angels' (1795) by William Blake

'The Cross in the Mountains' (1808) by Caspar David Friedrich (1774–1840)

'The Bard' (1817) by John Martin (1789–1854)

'The Death of Sardanapalus' (1827) by Eugene Delacroix (1798–1863)

- 'The Fairy-Feller's Master Stroke' (1864) by Richard Dadd (1817–1886)

- illustrations to Coleridge's 'The Rime of the Ancient Mariner', particularly 'Death and Life-in-Death dicing for the soul of the Mariner' (1875) by Gustav Doré (1832–1883).

✓ Other art forms: gothic buildings and 'landscapes'

Throughout the 18th century, wealthy aristocratic patrons commissioned a series of ever more extravagant gothic buildings and 'landscapes', a trend that would continue well into the 19th century and even beyond. William Kent (1686–1748), an artist, architect and landscape designer, was hired by many wealthy patrons to transform their habitats, and achieved celebrity status. Interestingly, several of the major gothic writers, notably Horace Walpole and William Beckford, also had the enthusiasm and money to have gothic edifices built – at Strawberry Hill and Fonthill Abbey respectively. Kent's ideas, themselves largely borrowed from continental sources, became the inspiration for a generation of designers and their employers, vying with each other to achieve ever more sensational effects. Mock abbeys, castles and hunting lodges (all suitably 'ruined') became increasingly widespread. Kent even went so far as to suggest 'planting' dead trees in order to present an appropriately ghoulish effect. Gothic design was even to become the dominant aesthetic force in Britain – the building symbolic of the very essence of the establishment, the Houses of Parliament, was based on the detailed design drawings of Augustus Pugin (1812–1852). Not all gothic-inspired buildings had similar staying power, however. Beckford's exotic creation Fonthill Abbey, designed by James Wyatt (1746–1813), suffered the collapse of its first grandiose 300 foot tower in 1800, followed by its replacement structure twenty five years later, after Beckford had sold the property. It subsequently fell into complete, genuine (as opposed to feigned) ruin. In a sense this was a fitting gothic culmination of the whole project, and the impression from Beckford's own observations is that it was the process rather than the final product which mattered to him. His description of the building work, in 1808, is itself evocative gothic prose:

... it's really stupendous, the spectacle here at night!... the innumerable torches suspended everywhere, the immense and endless spaces, the gulph below; above, the gigantic spider's web of scaffolding ... immense buckets of plaster and water ascending, as if they were drawn up from the bowels of a mine, amid shouts from subterranean depths, oaths from Hell itself, and chanting from Pandemonium ...'

After such excitement, what satisfaction could there possibly be in simply living in the place?

These very concrete manifestations of the gothic – buildings, pictures, man-made landscapes – perhaps suggest that it was primarily concerned with visible creations rather than the subtleties of inner thoughts and feelings. The critic Emma McEvoy, for example, in her introduction to Lewis's *The Monk*, has noted the fairly widely held view that the 'Gothic is a kind of pre-Romanticism that enacts a literalisation of the Romantic metaphor'. Whereas **Romanticism** proper is held to deal with the subtleties of human feelings and visions in various artistic expressions – mountains, rivers, dreams, for example – the gothic, according to this view, attempted to make these metaphorical insights real and actual. Real 'castles' were indeed built, and whole landscapes changed. In so doing, clearly, much of the metaphorical meaning was in danger of being lost. So the gothic may be seen with hindsight as a rather clumsy, externally orientated transition phase in the progress towards mature Romanticism. There may be something in this, and in the end each student of the gothic has to judge on the available evidence.

- Explore any gothic architectural or landscape garden examples in your own locality, using whatever resources are readily available. Genuine gothic architecture of the medieval period is likely to be limited to cathedrals, churches and abbeys, often featuring such characteristics as gothic arches over windows and doors, flying buttresses, impressive towers, castellated walls, and macabre gargoyles. Some acquaintance with these buildings should help to give a clearer idea of the inspiration for the 'gothic revival' of the 18th and 19th centuries. Examples from these later times may need some discovering: 'follies' (mock towers, hunting lodges and the like) on large estates, often now owned by the National Trust or English Heritage, are certainly fascinating indicators of gothic taste. The National Trust and the local Tourist Information Office should be able to provide information on possible locations.

Poetry

Certainly the gothic was a great borrower of diverse ideas from eclectic sources, many of which will be mentioned in the context of closer textual study in Parts 2 and 3. Spenser, Shakespeare, Milton, German 'Schauer-Romantic' ('horror-romantic') literature, folk tales and ballads, and popular superstitions all found their way into the gothic idiom. One direct precursor of and influence on the gothic, for instance, was the 18th century 'Graveyard' school of poetry: typically, melancholy poems dwelling on the theme of death in a graveyard setting. 'Night Thoughts' (1742), written by Edward Young (1683–1765) and subsequently illustrated by William Blake, contains these lines:

Silence and Darkness! Solemn sisters! Twins
From ancient night ...
Assist me: I will thank you in the grave –
The grave, your kingdom: there this frame shall fall
A victim sacred to your dreary shrine:
But what are ye?

Robert Blair's 'The Grave' (1743) contains an even more explicit invocation to death, which helped to make it one of the most popular poems of its day:

Thrice welcome Death
That after many a painful bleeding Step
Conducts us to our Home, and lands us safe
On the long-wish'd for shore ...

Graveyard poetry both fed upon the contemporary preoccupation with death and encouraged it, instrumental in creating the fertile conditions for the development of the gothic.

However, great care is again needed here: derivative the gothic may be, but it is impossible to find total originality in any artistic movement. Further, the whole concept of originality is a relatively modern phenomenon (largely alien to Shakespeare, for example), and care must be taken lest we judge aspects of the past by present standards. The real question is not so much concerning originality or its lack, but rather in judging how robust, influential, beneficial or purposeful the gothic was to become.

✓ The political context

Inevitably, this book has touched several times on the political background to the rise of the gothic, noting various connotations and paradoxes. The concern here should be not for narrow party politics – although, as previously discussed, the gothic played its part in the contemporary rise of the Whig and Tory political parties – but rather in the broad social and political changes sweeping across Britain and Europe in the 18th and 19th centuries. Gothic reactions to these movements were often crucial in determining what sort of art and literature was produced. The role of the gothic was not limited simply to reacting to events; gothic ideas and feelings were frequently themselves significant influences. The relationship between historical cause and effect is a complex one, perhaps best envisaged as dialectical – simply, dealing with the conflict or harmony between different parts as the method through which the whole develops and changes. In terms of cause and effect, each part may need each other in order that progress is achieved in some sort of synthesis.

The period with which this book is primarily dealing – roughly that between 1750 and 1820 – was notable for the acceleration of change in just about every sphere of human activity. In particular, it would be hard to over-estimate the impact made by the French Revolution of 1789: an international upheaval which sent shock waves around the whole of the western world, and beyond. The implications of the French Revolution still resonate today; then, it was confusion which characterised many people's responses. As Fred Botting has written 'Uncertainties about the nature of power, law, society, family and sexuality dominate Gothic fiction ... linked to wider threats of disintegration manifested most forcefully in political revolution'. (from *Gothic: The New Critical Idiom*, 1996) Another critic, Robert Kiely, maintains that 'gothic fiction was not only about confusion, it was written from confusion'. (from *The Romantic Novel in England*, 1972) Interestingly, there is a striking resemblance between the final years of the 20th century and the 1790s (and in many ways the 1890s too): uncertainty about how to visualise the future, veering from excited optimism to profound despair. Revolutionary politicisation, reactionary nostalgia, and deliberate escapism are all possible reactions, and all are represented in different ways in the gothic. The common sense stoicism – sometimes more resembling defeatism – with which most people greet the prospect of radical change was perhaps less characteristic of the gothic trend.

In Britain the aristocracy certainly had the resources and power to demolish and build, sometimes changing whole landscapes and flattening villages in order to create a more 'gothic' sensation, but in the 18th century an increasingly wealthy middle class was fast catching up. Newly expanding industries and transport systems were the basis of this new-found wealth and prestige, but the British political system changed only very slowly to reflect the shifting balance of power. The calls for reform, even radical reform, came from many quarters, and by no means only from the truly dispossessed in the chaotically growing towns and chronically impoverished countryside. Even while espousing the cause of political reform, middle class ambivalence towards the aristocracy was marked. On the one hand, many looked with awe at the titles and traditions of the landed gentry; on the other hand, rivalry, competition and sheer hard-nosed business acumen ensured aristocratic excess was frequently caricatured and despised. This tension spilled over into the gothic, and in many respects can be seen as the socio-political dimension of the old–new dichotomy already mentioned. A tension also existed in the emerging middle class's relationship with what were then known as the 'labouring classes' – the necessary pool of usually unskilled workers who actually created the new wealth. Any lasting reform in the political system would have to gain a measure of popular support, but there was a great fear amongst those with property that this support might spill into something more seriously revolutionary.

Again, the tension manifests itself in the gothic – often in a certain ambivalence towards the working class (in the form of servants, or, more ominously, 'the mob', for example) among some of its chief proponents.

The representation of revolutionary ideas and emotions and their subsequent containment within a conservative structure is one way of looking at and interpreting the nature of the gothic – at least in terms of its literature (see also Part 4: Critical approaches, pages 95–111). This may seem essentially reactionary, but it is important to realise that key revolutionary thinkers and writers such as Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712–1778), Thomas Paine (1737–1809), William Godwin (1756–1836), and Mary Wollstonecraft (1759–1797) also had a place in the gothic panoply, even if this was peripheral.

Key thinkers and writers

Although he died before the French Revolution, Rousseau was one of its seminal influences, instrumental in helping to create the philosophical climate for revolutionary ideas to thrive. In his own life he seemed to personify an early version of the Romantic outsider, both at odds with, and seeking energetically to transform, his social context. In *Emile* (1762) and *Confessions* (published posthumously, 1781–1788) Rousseau presented a detailed critique of the relations between society and the individual which found echoes – albeit often distorted ones – in gothic and subsequently Romantic art. He was also vilified as a 'gothic scoundrel'. Edmund Burke (1729–1797), a highly influential conservative philosopher and writer, denounced his 'deranged eccentric vanity', while Ann Radcliffe's gothic novel *The Mysteries of Udolpho* may be read as a refutation of Rousseau's educational ideals: her main character Emily corresponding to his fictional Emile.

Thomas Paine developed many of Rousseau's ideas, in life and in his writing, being actively involved in both the American and the French revolutions. His seminal work, *The Rights of Man* (1791–1792), became a rallying call to revolutionary action. Predictably, he too was cast in the role of gothic villain, and both his effigy and his books were regularly burned in Britain. Another key philosopher of the 18th century was William Godwin, whose novel *The Adventures of Caleb Williams* (1794) has a classic outsider theme echoed in many gothic texts, although his own carefully expounded philosophy placed reason high above emotions and feelings. Like Thomas Paine, Godwin was savagely criticised by the establishment press, especially when he married Mary Wollstonecraft. Wollstonecraft herself had dared to extend Paine's sentiments to women as well as men in her most famous work *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* (1792). In terms of the gothic, perhaps the greatest creation of Godwin and Wollstonecraft was their daughter Mary, who, as Mary Shelley, would go on to write the most famous gothic novel of all, *Frankenstein* (1818). Tragically, Mary Wollstonecraft

died shortly after giving birth to her daughter.

For a while, during the height of confusion surrounding the French Revolution, the term 'gothic' was used as an insult by propagandists from both extremes of the political spectrum. Those on the right accused revolutionary thinkers of unleashing uncontrollable, monstrous forces – horrifically gothic by nature – and used grotesquely insulting imagery to characterise their opponents. Horace Walpole, the gothic author, called Mary Wollstonecraft a 'hyena in petticoats', for daring to promulgate radical ideas of sexual equality. Even more vitriolic was his attack on the French revolutionary Jacobins: 'If Macbeth murdered sleep, they have murdered hyperbole, for it is impossible to exaggerate in relating their horrible crimes; nor can the dictionaries of all nations furnish words enough to paint them in the colours they deserve.' In her turn, Wollstonecraft attacked Edmund Burke's support of the pre-revolutionary French 'ancien regime' with a barbed rhetorical question: 'Why was it a duty to repair an ancient castle, built in barbarous ages, of Gothic materials?' And Burke himself (see page 50) had been one of the main influences on the rise of the gothic aesthetic through his exposition of 'the sublime'.

Such was the confused, confusing and incestuous relationship between the key figures of this tempestuous era, especially apparent in their free use of gothic imagery. Whatever the extent of the confusion, however, it is likely that the seeming coincidence of the gothic with revolutionary upheaval in France – and the threat of its spread to Britain – gave gothic imagery a lifeline at a time when its influence was perhaps already beginning to sag. As Maggie Kilgour suggests:

Despite its engagement of contemporary issues, it might have been an aesthetic dead end, a one-shot eccentric mutation on the literary evolutionary line, if the terrifying events of the 1790s had not made it an appropriate vehicle for embodying relevant political and aesthetic questions. While the nature of the past, and its relation to the present, was debated throughout the 18th century, it gained new life with the French Revolution, as the Terror proved fertile for a literature of terror. (from *The Rise of the Gothic Novel*, 1995)

✓ The spiritual context

Political and social uncertainties were rife during the time of the gothic revival, and the period was also characterised by immense spiritual uncertainty. In today's more sceptical, less spiritual climate, it is difficult to appreciate the depths of passionate feeling aroused by religious matters in the 18th century. The radical political thinkers, such as Paine and Godwin, were castigated as much for their challenge to Christianity as for their political beliefs; indeed, the two were inseparable in a quite

different way from today, when questions of religious belief are generally held to be private concerns. There was in many ways a mounting challenge to the privileged position of the 'official' Christianity of the Church of England throughout this period, and aspects of the gothic revival may be viewed as symptomatic of this challenge – even when unintended by particular authors or artists. In the quotation from Marilyn Gaul (page 5 of the Introduction), the gothic is seen as 'a sudden dislocation, challenge to, or loss of faith in the theological interpretation of nature before there was a scientific one to replace it', and there is the clear suggestion that the gothic emanates from a period of spiritual transition and dramatic change in religious outlook. To many commentators there is considerable validity in this interpretation, although it does appear to relegate the gothic to a mere symptom of change rather than a coherent philosophical stance in itself. This is something like the 'pre-Romanticism' argument already encountered, and again it is a question of informed but ultimately subjective judgement as to what status may be given to the gothic in this context.

In an important sense the gothic revival was a reaction – to a century or more where rationalism, empiricism and classicism were the dominant ideological forces – but this is not necessarily to belittle its power or profundity. The 'reaction' argument is certainly one way of looking at the impact of the gothic on mid- to late-18th century society, and tends to emphasise its over-indulgence in areas of human experience hitherto suppressed. Those artists and writers working in the gothic tradition needed to cultivate certain shock tactics, perhaps, to jolt their audiences out of their lethargy: thus the frequent insistence on horrific detail which many at the time (and since) found objectionable. Alternatively, it is possible to see this process in far more critical terms: a descent to the depths of lurid sensationalism, worthy of the worst excesses of today's tabloid press, as a deliberate attempt to undo the steady progress of society towards an ever more civilised ideal. It is in deciding which of these conflicting interpretations to agree with, or on whether to occupy a position at some point between them, that full account needs to be taken of the historical and spiritual context.

Certainly the growth of rationalism and empiricism had led to a devaluation of religious experience – the mystical dimension of religion, to over-simplify a hugely complex issue – although not of religious belief itself. The vast majority of educated people in the middle of the 18th century believed broadly in the Christian creed, but did not necessarily actually experience God in any immediate, profoundly moving or spiritual sense. If nothing else, the gothic put many of its participants, creators and audiences, back in touch with the supernatural. It is possible to argue, as several influential figures did at the time, that this was a negative distortion of any human spiritual dimension. From a more agnostic or atheistic point of view, denying that this dimension has any reality at all, the gothic may simply have

restored mindless fears and superstitions that should have disappeared with the historical Enlightenment during the previous century or two. Christianity itself had developed – and has continued to develop – in such a way as to exclude certain areas of the supernatural from its belief system: specifically the use of ‘magic’, contact with the dead except through conventional prayer, and the belief in idols and demons. Yet, there continued – perhaps still continues – a powerful undercurrent of belief in these kinds of supernatural manifestation. For better or for worse, the gothic deals with these undercurrents, and in some of its later manifestations – the writings of Aleister Crowley (1875–1947), for example – positively celebrate them. As Clive Bloom has pointed out, ‘These excluded areas ... often retain a strong peripheral or inverted relationship with orthodox religion [and] embrace the practices usually termed the occult. In such systems there is a much more direct relationship with the invisible realms ...’. (from *Gothic Horror: A Reader's Guide from Poe to King and Beyond*, ed. Clive Bloom, 1998) It is precisely this ‘inverted relationship’ which is so interesting, suggesting that there is something profoundly spiritual about these occult beliefs and imaginings even when, possibly especially when, they are opposed to more orthodox positions. It may well be that it is this closeness, almost a symbiotic, twin-like relationship, between the orthodox and unorthodox which led to the most forceful criticism and denunciation of the gothic tendency from conventional Christian believers of the time. The harshest criticism of any idea or movement often comes from those closest to it, as a way of avoiding an embarrassing consciousness of this very intimacy.

Coleridge

In many respects the writer who best personifies this combination of fascination for the unconventional in spiritual experience with a deeply felt need to adhere steadfastly to conventional belief is the poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1772–1834). Yet Coleridge is not normally regarded as primarily an exponent of the gothic. Careful reading of Coleridge’s poetry and prose works reveals this fundamental and often paradoxical unease. Consider, for instance, his best known poem, ‘The Rime of the Ancient Mariner’ (1798), which displays many gothic characteristics. In this long poem, the most extraordinary spiritual and imaginative encounters are vividly described in the words of the mysterious, enigmatic Ancient Mariner. Yet, at the end of the poem a relatively tame and conventionally moralistic conclusion seems to be ‘tacked on’:

He prayeth best who loveth best
 All things both great and small;
 For the dear God who loveth us,
 He made and loveth all.

The impression is almost of a dutiful disclaimer, putting such strange and supernatural experiences in their proper place.

In his life too, Coleridge was torn between similarly opposing tendencies, which were never quite resolved; perhaps this is one reason why so many of his works remained unfinished, including the most gothic of them all, ‘Christabel’ (1816) (see pages 74–75). To read Coleridge in the context of the gothic is certainly revealing, for as well as writing verse with distinctly gothic themes, he was one of the most prolific and harshest critics of some key gothic texts. Further, and especially relevant in the spiritual context, much of this criticism is on the grounds of these texts’ religious – or, more specifically, sacrilegious – implications. Here, for example, is Coleridge’s response to Matthew Lewis’s *The Monk* (1796) as it appeared in *The Critical Review*, February 1797, in which he describes Lewis’s

... endeavours first to influence the fleshly appetites, and then to pour contempt on the only book which would be adequate to the task of recalming them. We believe it not absolutely impossible that a mind may be so deeply depraved by the habit of reading lewd and voluptuous tales, as to use even the Bible in conjuring up the spirit of uncleanness. ... a man’s soul had been so poisoned ... that he might extract pollution from the word of purity, and, in a literal sense, turn the grace of God into wantonness.

This is strong stuff indeed; it helps to place the gothic in its controversial contemporary spiritual context, and may allow the modern reader to judge afresh both the critic and the criticised.

✓ Religion and superstition

Writers more central to the gothic revival than Coleridge also provide vivid examples of this combination of descriptive sensationalism on the one hand with an overt moral condemnation of the very matters dwelt on in such detail on the other. In modern media terms, this dualistic approach – profoundly dishonest if consciously carried out – could be likened to some features of the tabloid press, particularly when dealing with the sexual preferences and activities of celebrities, reported in lurid detail but also self-righteously condemned. In the spiritual context of the gothic, this approach frequently featured Roman Catholicism – or, rather, a collection of popular prejudices (all too widespread in Britain at that time) concerning the decadent excesses of the priesthood. In *The Monk*, for example, which has as its central character a Catholic cleric, there is in effect a conflation of Roman Catholicism and blind superstition. Yet, simultaneously, the novel relies precisely on this superstitious element for its appeal, and the various irrational

beliefs are never actually disproved in the narrative. As Emma McEvoy writes in her 1998 introduction to the novel, 'The crux of the matter is that *The Monk*, like many Gothic novels, feeds off a Catholic aesthetic, though it takes its morality from its Protestantism.'

Idolatry is one apparent facet of the Roman Catholic faith which features strongly in several gothic novels; another is indoctrination. In particular, the Inquisition is frequently portrayed in fearful terms, making capital, perhaps, out of the centuries-old folk memories of a predominantly Protestant nation such as Britain. The eponymous hero/villain of *The Monk*, for example, had been moulded into his frustrated, repressed and ultimately evil character by the monks who brought him up: 'The noble frankness of his temper was exchanged for servile humility; and in order to break his natural spirit, the Monks terrified his young mind, by placing before him all the horrors with which Superstition could furnish them.'

The impact of education or indoctrination, and the relationship between the two, was in fact fundamental to the gothic world-view, as it was for the entire Romantic movement. The subject would find perhaps its fullest consideration and debate in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, but it also permeates every other gothic novel to a greater or lesser degree. And of course the nature of the education depends ultimately on the view of human nature which underlies it, especially in terms of the spiritual destiny of human kind. The Romantics, following Rousseau, tended towards a view of human nature as fundamentally good – hence their frequent evocation of childhood purity. In so far as the gothic is part of this movement, its exponents shared this opinion. But the reader can never be quite sure: in the gothic shadows there may be something rather more sinister lurking, and frequent gory descriptions of the effects of evil suggest the opposite of a Rousseauesque celebration of innocence.

Gothic literary forms and audiences

The relationship between the urge to express feelings artistically and the form chosen for their final expression is complex, and sometimes problematic. In literature, the relationship is complicated by the use of language – a defining characteristic of any literature, clearly, but also the necessary vehicle for any human thought beyond the basic and instinctual. So the writer, consciously or not, is using a particular form – a form of words, in fact – as soon as an idea occurs to her or him. This form, however, is not accidental or arbitrary; rather, it is determined partly by the nature of the idea itself, but mainly by the cultural and linguistic context in which the writer exists and works. And the gothic is no exception – gothic forms of literary expression are inextricably bound up in the nature of what it is that is being expressed, the purpose of expressing it, the cultural

context (including the means of producing and distributing texts), and the intended readership.

Gothic partners: the romance and the novel

That the gothic should take the novel for its primary literary expression is of particular significance. In the 18th century (and for long after; even, in some people's opinions, today) poetry was regarded as the most sophisticated and accomplished mode of literature. The novel, a relatively new form, was emerging from the popular romances published to meet the demands of growing literacy, and the accompanying developments in book production and distribution. The vast majority of critics regarded the novel as distinctly inferior. This was not the view of the general public, however, especially the fast growing female readership. Further, several of the writers associated with the development of the gothic novel were women – notably Ann Radcliffe, Mary Shelley, Jane Austen and Emily Brontë – and the very existence of the gothic novel may be seen as dependent on female readers and authors. In one sense, this may have been a reaction to exclusion from the male-dominated 'higher arts' of poetic and philosophical discourse: the natural desire to express oneself finding a new and perhaps more congenial form which only gradually found critical respectability. But what may have started as a reaction to other literary modes rapidly took on its own conventions and identity in the distinctive combination of traditional tales – often self-consciously harking back to a bygone, mythical past – and a definitively modern form. And here, what Fred Botting has termed 'the feminisation of reading practices and markets' played a vital part. In a patriarchal age, this very fact helped to keep the novel, especially the gothic novel, a low-status art form in the eyes of the critical establishment. Literary reviews and criticism were frequently concerned with the dangers to the female sex of too much lurid gothic reading – in a way which often sounds patronising to modern readers. An anonymous article in the *Scots Magazine* of June 1797, for example, addressed itself to the problem of 'the corruption of the female reader'. The article went on to warn that the reading of gothic romances is:

... liable to produce mischievous effects ... some of them frequently create a susceptibility of impression and a premature warmth of tender emotions, which, not to speak of other possible effects, have been known to betray women into a sudden attachment to persons unworthy of their affection, and thus to hurry them into marriages terminating in their unhappiness ...

Fascinating here, as if unhappy marriages were not bad enough, is the thinly veiled threat of 'other possible effects'. The equation of certain types of reading with moral

degradation of the innocent strikes a modern note, although the emphasis today is more likely to be on different media than print. But a ready market was assured, and authoritative (male) warnings often only served to increase the attractiveness of 'dangerous' reading.

In the context of the criticism noted above, the word 'romance' was an emotionally laden one, simultaneously belittling the object of criticism and signalling potential moral danger for the innocent reader. Initially romances were genuinely medieval, but these were supplemented throughout the 18th century by contemporary tales of medieval chivalrous adventure, more often than not translated from French (and that in itself was enough to alarm many establishment critics). For some commentators the terms 'novel' and 'romance' were virtually interchangeable. In 1751, John Cleland in a review of Smollett's *Peregrine Pickle*, for example, derided '... romances and novels which turn upon characters out of nature, monsters of perfection, feats of chivalry, fairy enchantments, and the whole train of the marvellously absurd [and] transport the reader unprofitably into the clouds...'. As the century went on, however, other critics began to draw a distinction between romance and novel, with the latter clearly to be the more admired. The gothic author Clara Reeve (1729–1807), in her appropriately titled *The Progress of Romance* (1785), wrote, 'The Romance is an heroic fable, which treats of fabulous persons and things. – The Novel is a picture of real life and manners, and of the times in which it was written.' Eventually, the novel was able to develop as a literary form through a creative synthesis of both romance and realism; by the time Mary Shelley wrote *Frankenstein* in 1818, she was able to describe outlandish, gothic events in the context of a chilling, compelling realism. It is perhaps the most lasting and beneficial influence of the gothic that it was instrumental in bringing about this synthesis: giving flavour and magic – romance, in effect – to a literary form which might otherwise have become marginalised by its own insistence upon social realism as the highest form of literary representation.

Genres: poetry and drama

The novel and/or romance may be seen as the principal form of literary expression for the gothic sentiment, yet other genres are also important. Poetry and drama both played important parts in giving form to the gothic. Varieties of poetry clearly have a close relationship to the medieval or mock-medieval romance in particular, and this closeness is underlined by frequent and sometimes lengthy poetic quotations in gothic novels, either within the narrative or as prefixes to individual chapters, for example, in *The Monk* (1796) and *The Italian* (1797). Given the self-conscious attempt by many gothic writers to hark back to medieval themes and modes of story telling, this fondness for verse is hardly surprising, for the novel

simply did not exist in medieval times. Ballads, sung or recited without the encumbrance of having to be written down, were particularly close to the gothic heart, dealing as they frequently did with sensational tales of love, betrayal and death, liberally laced with supernatural elements. Because they were originally passed on by word of mouth, in the context of a largely illiterate oral tradition, ballads opened themselves to wide thematic and narrative variations: a breadth of scope which again appealed to the gothic sensibility with its insistence on a comparatively free rein for the imagination.

The position of drama is less obviously apparent, in that few of the huge number of dramatic adaptations of gothic novels have survived and none has found its way into the modern repertoire. Nevertheless, in the 18th and early 19th centuries, when literacy, although spreading, was still the preserve of the minority, play versions of key texts were extremely popular and helped to bring fame and fortune to their authors. Matthew Lewis, for example, was content to write only the one novel, *The Monk*, and devote his subsequent literary career to writing for the stage – with considerable popular success at the time, but with little or no surviving reputation. Producers of plays went to enormous lengths to achieve sensational effects through stage management, props, fireworks and the like – the equivalent, perhaps, of the efforts of Hollywood in presenting ever more spectacular special effects in the modern age.

With only rudimentary copyright regulations in place, fortune did not necessarily go the originators of the ideas, and it was possible for any one novel to spawn a vast number of dramatic versions with varying degrees of aesthetic or popular success – or indeed of faithfulness to the 'original'. There have been countless stage versions of *Frankenstein*, for instance, starting with the play by Richard Brinsley Peake (1792–1847) *Presumption: or The Fate of Frankenstein* (1823). This play, as its title suggests, gave a particular slant to the narrative and focused on the highly dramatic process of laboratory creation (in the novel largely left to the reader's imagination). For the most successful of gothic novels, dramatic renditions (for both stage and, subsequently, large and small screens) have all but supplanted the original in the popular imagination. The prime examples here are, of course, *Frankenstein* and *Dracula*, to such a degree that recent film adaptations – *Mary Shelley's Frankenstein* (directed by Kenneth Branagh, 1994) and *Bram Stoker's Dracula* (directed by Francis Ford Coppola, 1992) – have included the names of the original authors in their titles, presumably in an attempt to restore some authenticity to these particular versions.

In less tangible ways too there seems to be a close relationship between gothic fiction and drama. In gothic novels there is frequently a vividly dramatic sense of sensational action, often engineered by melodramatically evil characters who seem to play to an audience, at times almost in terms of a farce or even a pantomime.

Other characters also often tend towards the stock parts of melodrama: the hapless, innocent female; the well meaning but imaginatively limited patriarchal figure; the scheming older woman; and the handsome – if not always effective – young male aristocrat. In the form of gothic novels, as distinct from the content, there are also frequent striking echoes of the stage: the multiplicity of short plots, each with its own partial climax within the whole; carefully contrived scenes within scenes presented by different narrative voices; and artfully stage-managed tableaux. This apparently 'formulaic' tendency, with the widely accepted view that melodrama is vastly inferior to drama proper, is not necessarily to belittle the gothic novel. The best of them transcend their own formal limitations, often through a subtle sense of irony about those very limitations. Certainly the gothic writers tended to beg, borrow and steal, sometimes indiscriminately, across traditional artistic divides. But the effect could be liberating. In many ways it is precisely this cross-fertilisation between the literary genres – and between a wide range of art forms such as pictorial art and architecture, as already noted – which again may mark a distinctive contribution of the gothic to the development of imaginative literature over the past two centuries. The imaginative combination of the dramatic narrative, the vividly pictorial and the emotionally poetic may be seen as a strikingly modern breaking down of barriers – a precursor, perhaps, of the finest achievements of the cinema in more recent years.

Production and distribution of gothic texts

Clearly, the cinematic innovation in the 20th century and beyond has only been possible because of the technical progress that took place in film making, advertising, distribution and consumption, to say nothing of the creation of an appropriately enthusiastic audience through direct and indirect advertising. In rather different ways, great changes in the publishing industry in the 18th and 19th centuries had a similarly profound impact on the rise of the gothic. Sophisticated technical developments in the printing industry allowed for far greater, and more legible, print runs than had hitherto been possible, and there was accompanying progress in the means of textual distribution. Taken together, these changes meant that the expanding, enthusiastic readership of gothic texts – and, as mentioned above, the audience for gothic plays – could be more and more efficiently reached.

One particularly effective way of getting hold of gothic texts immediately after they rolled off the press was through privately run **circulating libraries**, to which individuals could subscribe for a fee. Well before the introduction of the lending system of public libraries that we know today, these circulating libraries performed an important dissemination function. Several sprang up across the country, often with a particular textual specialisation in mind. As far as gothic texts are concerned, the most influential and widely patronised circulating library was the Minerva Press

Library, established in London by William Lane in 1773. As the name suggests, this establishment – along with most others of a similar nature – was not simply a circulating library but also a printing press, and in its 1790s heyday was responsible for the creation of thousands of gothic editions. Writers not normally associated with the gothic revival, such as the youthful Leigh Hunt (1784–1859), were avid and enthusiastic subscribers, and the wide circulation certainly ensured that the gothic stayed firmly in the public eye. Influential reviewers, even when generally hostile to gothic texts, could not afford to ignore them, and notoriety spawned by unfavourable reviews in the vast range of reviewing journals only served to guarantee a still larger readership.

There is even an air of under-the-counter pornography distribution in some of the contemporary accounts of the workings of such libraries. Consider, for instance, these words from an anonymous circulating library manager, in *Pratt's Family Secrets* (1797), referring to gothic texts euphemistically as 'good things ... sometimes tricked between muslins, cambrics, silks, sattins and the like, or rolled in a bundle, then thrown into a coach by some of my fair smugglers; the old ones, meanwhile, Mams and Dads, never the wiser'. Observations like these give fascinating insights into the flavour of the times, particularly in the easy dismissal of 'the old ones', and one can imagine many modern parallels. Unsurprisingly, these establishments gained a notorious reputation; Sir Anthony Absolute, a character in Richard Sheridan's (1751–1816) *The Rivals* (1775), declared that 'A circulating library ... is an evergreen tree of diabolical knowledge.' A sense of the irony in these words notwithstanding, there were many, particularly amongst 'the old ones', who were ready to agree with the redoubtable Sir Anthony. With the passing of the intense vogue for gothic reading, at its height in the 1790s, there was a corresponding decline in the popularity of the circulating libraries as purveyors of gothic material. By the 1820s even William Lane's Minerva Press had diverted its attention to the newly expanding and much less controversial market for edifying children's literature. Significantly, in their newly respectable roles such as that adopted by the Minerva Press, circulating libraries continued to thrive well into the 20th century. They included institutions that would subsequently become household names, including W.H. Smith's and Boots, and throughout the 19th century performed a powerful censorship over newly published material: a far cry from their sometimes rather shady gothic beginnings.