



The Gothic Novel

Supernatural And Gothic Literary Themes

Supernatural motifs appear throughout literature but are most prominent in the literary genre labeled "Gothic," which developed in the late eighteenth-century and is devoted primarily to stories of horror, the fantastic, and the "darker" supernatural forces. The English Gothic novel originated with the publication of Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* (1765), which Walpole called a "Gothic story."

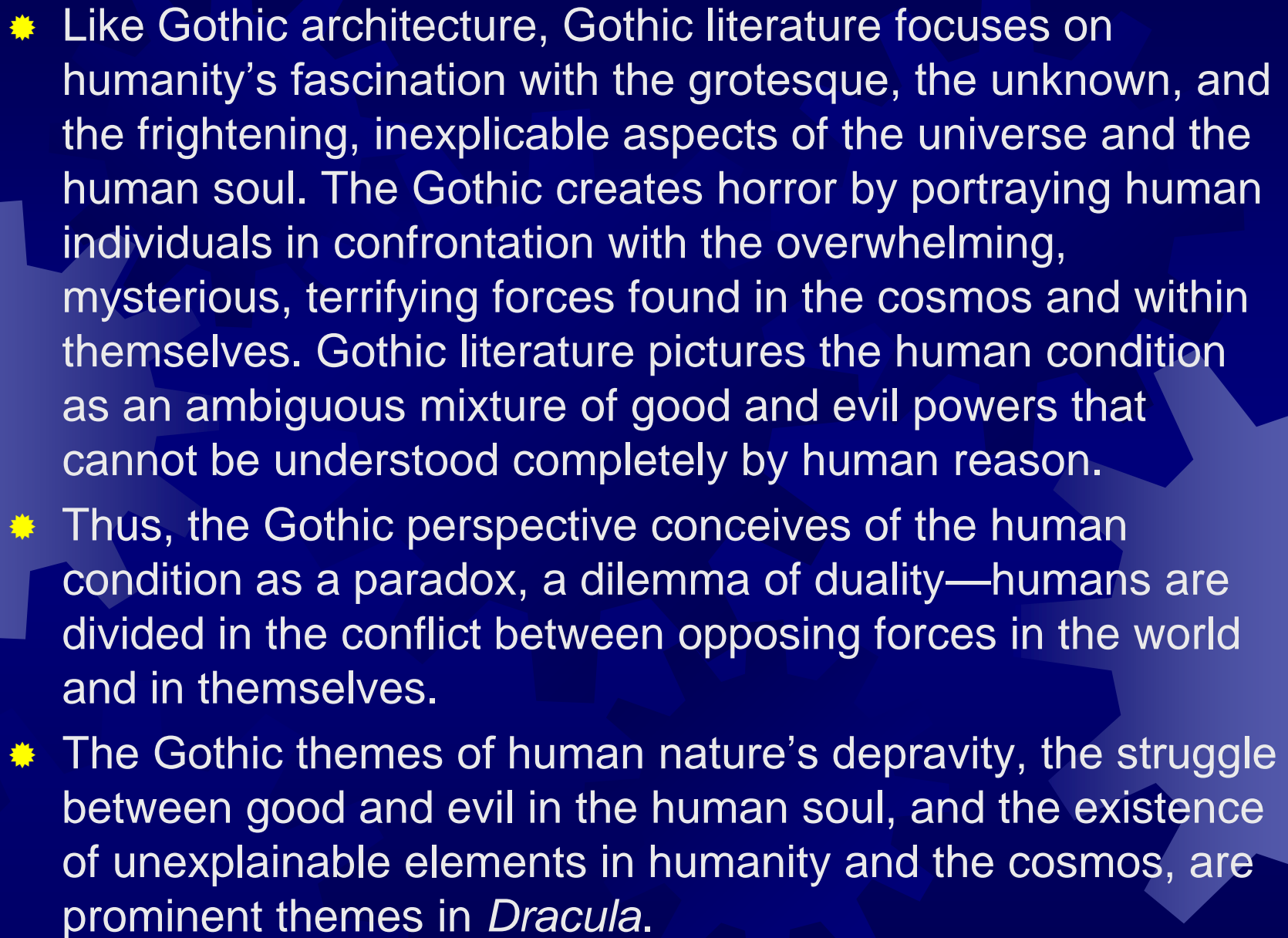


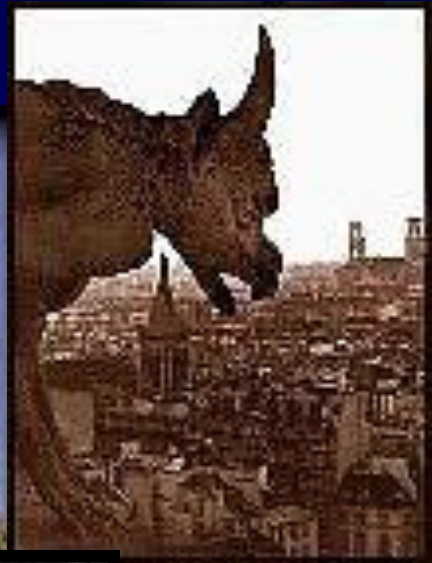
- ☀ Gothic literature derives its name from its similarities to the Gothic medieval cathedrals, which feature a majestic, unrestrained architectural style with often savage or grotesque ornamentation (the word "Gothic" derives from "Goth," the name of one of the barbaric Germanic tribes that invaded the Roman Empire).
- ☀ The vaulting arches and spires of Gothic cathedrals reach wildly to the sky as if the builders were trying to grasp the heavens; and the cathedrals are covered with a profusion of wild carvings depicting humanity in conflict with supernatural forces—demons, angels, gargoyles, and monsters.



- ★ The architecture evokes the sense of humanity's *division* between a finite, physical identity and the often terrifying and bizarre forces of the infinite. The Gothic aesthetic also embodies an ambition to *transcend* earthly human limitations and reach the divine.



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- ★ Like Gothic architecture, Gothic literature focuses on humanity's fascination with the grotesque, the unknown, and the frightening, inexplicable aspects of the universe and the human soul. The Gothic creates horror by portraying human individuals in confrontation with the overwhelming, mysterious, terrifying forces found in the cosmos and within themselves. Gothic literature pictures the human condition as an ambiguous mixture of good and evil powers that cannot be understood completely by human reason.
 - ★ Thus, the Gothic perspective conceives of the human condition as a paradox, a dilemma of duality—humans are divided in the conflict between opposing forces in the world and in themselves.
 - ★ The Gothic themes of human nature's depravity, the struggle between good and evil in the human soul, and the existence of unexplainable elements in humanity and the cosmos, are prominent themes in *Dracula*.



Importance of Setting

- ★ The setting is greatly influential in Gothic novels. It not only evokes the atmosphere of horror and dread, but also portrays the deterioration of its world. The decaying, ruined scenery implies that at one time there was a thriving world.

Setting Elements

- a castle, ruined or intact, haunted or not;
- ruined buildings which are sinister or which arouse a pleasing melancholy;
- dungeons, underground passages, crypts, and catacombs which, in modern houses, become spooky basements or attics;
- labyrinths, dark corridors, and winding stairs;
- shadows, a beam of moonlight in the blackness, a flickering candle, or the only source of light failing (a candle blown out or an electric failure);
- extreme landscapes, like rugged mountains, thick forests, or icy wastes, and extreme weather

Gothic plot devices

- ✱ action at night, or at least in a claustrophobic, sunless environment;
- ✱ 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 *Doppelganger* (evil twin or double); demonic possession; masking/shape-changing; black magic; madness; incest and other broken sexual taboos

metonymy of gloom and terror

- ★ Metonymy is a subtype of metaphor, in which something (like rain) is used to stand for something else (like sorrow).
- ★ For example, the film industry likes to use metonymy as a quick shorthand, so we often notice that it is raining in funeral scenes.

Metonymies that suggest mystery, danger, or the supernatural:

wind, especially howling	sighs, moans, howls, eerie sounds
rain, especially blowing	clanking chains
doors grating on rusty hinges	gusts of wind blowing out lights
footsteps approaching	doors suddenly slamming shut
lights in abandoned rooms	crazed laughter
characters trapped in a room	baying of distant dogs (or wolves?)
ruins of buildings	thunder and lightning

Supernatural & Gothic Literary Motifs

A motif is a repeated theme,
image, or literary device.

Look for these common supernatural and
Gothic motifs in *Dracula*.



Forbidden Knowledge or Power/ Faust Motif

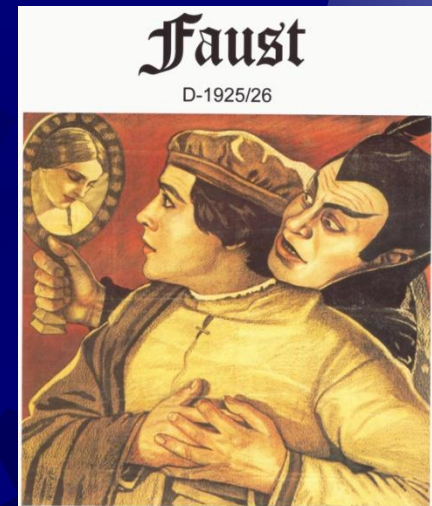
Faust

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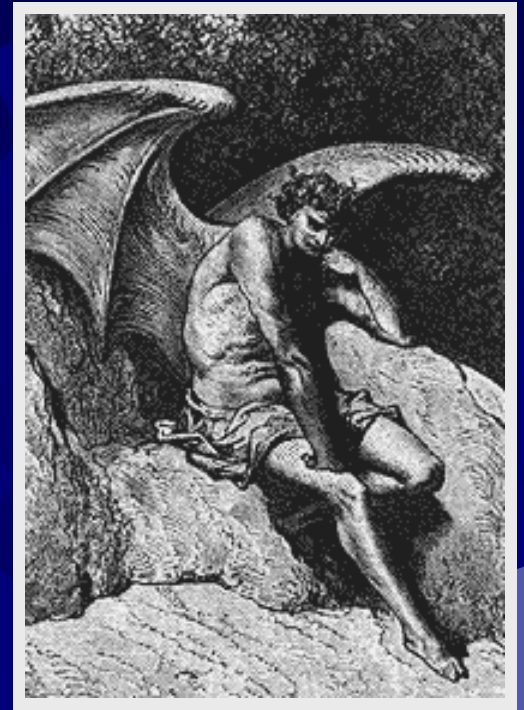
Forbidden Knowledge or Power/ Faust Motif:

Forbidden knowledge/power is often the Gothic protagonist's goal. The Gothic "hero" questions the universe's ambiguous nature and tries to comprehend and control those supernatural powers that mortals cannot understand. He tries to overcome human limitations and make himself into a "god." This ambition usually leads to the hero's "fall" or destruction; however, Gothic tales of ambition sometimes paradoxically evoke our admiration because they picture individuals with the courage to defy fate and cosmic forces in an attempt to transcend the mundane to the eternal and sublime.



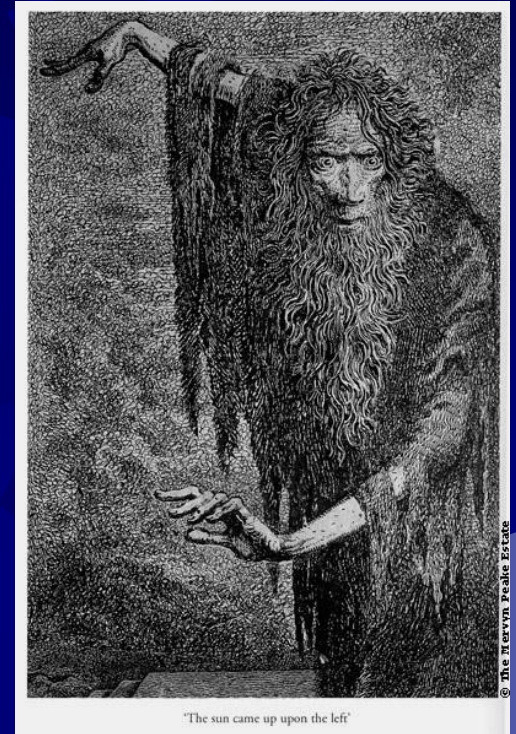
Monster/Satanic Hero/Fallen Man:

The courageous search for forbidden knowledge or power always leads the hero to a fall, a corruption, or destruction, such as Satan's or Adam's fall. Consequently, the hero in Gothic literature is often a "villain." The hero is isolated from others by his fall and either becomes a monster or confronts a monster who is his double. He becomes a "Satanic hero" if, like Satan, he has courageously defied the rules of God's universe and has tried to transform himself into a god. Note: the mad scientist, who tries to transcend human limitations through science, is a type of Satanic hero that is popular in Gothic literature (examples include *Dr. Jekyll* and *Frankenstein*).



Multiple Narrative/Spiral Narrative Method:

The story is frequently told through a series of secret manuscripts or multiple tales, each revealing a deeper secret, so the narrative gradually spirals inward toward the hidden truth. The narrator is often a first-person narrator compelled to tell the story to a fascinated or captive listener (representing the captivating power of forbidden knowledge). By revealing to us their own souls' secrets, these narrators reveal the secrets of humankind's soul.



Dreams/Visions:

Terrible truths are often revealed to characters through dreams or visions. The hidden knowledge of the universe and of human nature emerges through dreams because, when the person sleeps, reason sleeps, and the supernatural, unreasonable world can break through. Dreams in Gothic literature express the dark, unconscious depths of the psyche that are repressed by reason—truths that are too terrible to be comprehended by the conscious mind.



Signs/Omens:

Reveal the intervention of cosmic forces and often represent psychological or spiritual conflict (e.g., flashes of lightning and violent storms might parallel some turmoil within a character's mind).

