

Gothic versus Romantic: A Revaluation of the Gothic Novel

Author(s): Robert D. Hume

Source: *PMLA*, Vol. 84, No. 2 (Mar., 1969), pp. 282-290

Published by: Modern Language Association

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1261285>

Accessed: 04-11-2016 13:16 UTC

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at
<http://about.jstor.org/terms>



Modern Language Association is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *PMLA*

GOTHIC VERSUS ROMANTIC: A REVALUATION OF THE GOTHIC NOVEL

BY ROBERT D. HUME

THE Gothic novel has not fared well among literary critics, even in this age of sympathetic evaluations of largely forgotten minor works. Literary histories treat the subject with chilly indifference or condescension, granting it only cursory attention.¹

It is usually assumed that all Gothic novels are much the same, and that the form is defined by the presence of some stock devices. These "Gothic trappings" include haunted castles, supernatural occurrences (sometimes with natural explanations), secret panels and stairways, time-yellowed manuscripts, and poorly lighted midnight scenes. Such "Gothicism" is only too often ridiculous, even in the hands of its leading exponents. In consequence, the Gothic novel writers have been associated with "the sub-literary depths of romanticism . . . into [whose] noisome fastnesses we need not descend."²

The object of this essay is to suggest that the Gothic novel is more than a collection of ghost-story devices, "the product of a dilettante interest in the potentialities of the Middle Ages for picturesque horror."³ Specifically, I wish to do three things: to analyze the characteristics and development of the Gothic novel; to define the essence of that "Gothic" which can be significant for Walpole, Melville, and Faulkner alike; and to set the original Gothic novels in better historical perspective by defining their relation to the romantic literature of the same period.⁴

As a historical form the Gothic novel flourished between 1764 and 1820; Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* and Maturin's *Melmoth the Wanderer* are its limits of demarcation. The appearance of the form has been variously accounted for.⁵ But in general it can be seen as one symptom of a widespread shift away from neoclassical ideals of order and reason, toward romantic belief in emotion and imagination. Horace Walpole saw his novel as part of a resurgence of romance against neoclassical restrictions: "the great resources of fancy have been dammed up, by a strict adherence to common life."⁶ Within the limits of the cliché, we can view the Gothic novel as a manifestation of Northrop Frye's age of growing "sensibility" to aesthetic impressions. Like the work of Ossian, Smart, and Sterne, the Gothic novel is part of the new "literature of process" which reflects its creator's mind.⁷

The literature of the later eighteenth century attempts to rouse the reader's imaginative sympathies; the particular device employed toward this end by the Gothic novel writers is terror, which Burke had stressed as a factor in emotional involvement in his *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757). By Walpole's account in his "Preface to the First Edition," "terror" is "the author's principal engine" and serves to grip and affect the reader.⁸ To what end we will have to see. First, some discriminations must be attempted.

There were three varieties of novel widely current in the late eighteenth century, sentimental-domestic (the novel of manners), "Gothic," and didactic. *The Vicar of Wakefield* (1766), *The Castle of Otranto* (1764), and *Caleb Williams*

¹ Historically, the term "Gothic" is applied to the novels of Walpole, Mrs. Radcliffe, M. G. Lewis, Mary Shelley, and Maturin. It can be extended to include such works as *Wuthering Heights*, *Moby Dick*, and Faulkner's *Sanctuary*. The work of Poe, Hawthorne, and Charles Brockden Brown, though not discussed here, is actually part of the original Gothic tradition; at that period literary fashions in America ran about a generation behind those in Europe.

² Samuel Chew, *The Nineteenth Century and After*, Book IV of *A Literary History of England*, ed. A. C. Baugh, 2nd ed. (New York, 1967), p. 1196.

³ David Daiches, *A Critical History of English Literature*, 2 vols. (London, 1960), II, 740.

⁴ That Gothicism is closely related to romanticism is perfectly clear, but it is easier to state the fact than to prove it tidily and convincingly. There is a persistent suspicion that Gothicism is a poor and probably illegitimate relation of romanticism, and a consequent tendency to treat it that way. There are those, indeed, who would like to deny the relationship altogether. James Foster, in his *History of the Pre-Romantic Novel in England* (New York, 1949), pp. 202, 186-189, ignores Walpole almost completely, while discussing Ann Radcliffe's work as "a special development of the sentimental novel" (p. 262) and dismissing Gothicism as mummery imported into sentimental fiction.

⁵ Montague Summers calls the form romantic escapism; J. M. S. Tompkins blames its appearance on incipient romanticism and the bad taste of contemporary readers; Lowry Nelson believes that Gothic novels are the product of their authors' pursuit of "daydreams and wish fulfillment." See Montague Summers, *The Gothic Quest* (London: Fortune Press, n.d.), pp. 12-13; J. M. S. Tompkins, *The Popular Novel in England* (Lincoln, Neb., 1961), pp. 208-209; Lowry Nelson, Jr., "Night Thoughts on the Gothic Novel," *YR*, LII (Dec. 1962), 238.

⁶ *The Castle of Otranto*, ed. W. S. Lewis (London, 1964), "Preface to the Second Edition," p. 7.

⁷ Northrop Frye, "Towards Defining an Age of Sensibility," *ELH*, XXIII (June 1956), 144-152.

⁸ *Otranto*, "Preface to the First Edition," p. 4.

(1794) are examples of each type respectively. The popularity of "Gothic" trappings quickly brought about their absorption into the other varieties of novel. (*Caleb Williams* exhibits some of them.) In consequence it is sometimes said that there are several kinds of Gothic novel. These are usually described as (1) sentimental-Gothic, novels which utilize ghosts and gloomy-castle atmosphere to enliven sentimental-domestic tales (e.g., Clara Reeve's *The Old English Baron*). (2) Terror-Gothic, the most nearly "pure" Gothic novel (e.g., Mrs. Radcliffe's *The Mysteries of Udolpho*). (3) Historical-Gothic, in which the Gothic atmosphere is used in a historical setting (e.g., Sophia Lee's *The Recess*).⁹ These divisions are unsatisfactory. "Terror-Gothic" is too inclusive a category, lumping Radcliffe and Lewis together as it does. And the historical novel must at some point be distinguished from the Gothic.

J. M. S. Tompkins speaks of the "historical novel or Gothic Romance" which "in their origin . . . are not easily distinguishable."¹⁰ It is perhaps more accurate to say that the historical novel is an offshoot or development of the Gothic novel. The relationship is essentially accidental. Gothic novels are set in the past and are, as Tompkins says, at least "nominally historic,"¹¹ but they show no serious interest in veracity of fact or atmosphere. For Mrs. Radcliffe, the sixteenth century is as Gothic as the thirteenth. Walpole dabbled in the genuinely medieval, but his good characters, like those of the other Gothic novelists, are simply a projection of late eighteenth-century ideals, while his villain is a later development of the villain-hero of Jacobean drama.¹² The historical element in the Gothic novel does little more than contribute to the freedom conferred by distance in time and space. A novel like *The Recess* (1785), which makes use of historical personages, is in reality a sentimental-domestic novel transposed into a supposedly historical situation with Gothic trimmings added for savor. If wearing a wool tie makes me a sheep, then *The Recess* is a Gothic novel. The novels of Jane Porter and Scott are the first novels whose *basis* is a specific historical setting.¹³

I am suggesting, in short, that some Gothic novels are more than the sentimental fiction of the day fitted with outlandish trappings, in which case "sentimental-Gothic" and "historical-Gothic" are misnomers.

What are the distinctive characteristics of the "Gothic" novel? What features in common are to be found in the obviously dissimilar works of

Walpole, Beckford, Lewis, Radcliffe, Mary Shelley, and Maturin? Answering these questions involves us in a dual task. First we must trace the evolution of the form, trying to see what produces its unity of impression. Second, we must attempt simultaneously to recognize the serious features of Gothic writing, distinguishing between the trappings which gave the eighteenth-century form its name and the essentials which the early examples share with novels in entirely different periods.

What techniques, objectives, and concerns do these novels have in common? One of their most prominent concerns, though seldom discussed, might grandiosely be called a psychological interest. As early as Walpole (1764) there is a considerable amount of concern for *interior* mental processes. Justifying his use of the supernatural, Walpole says, "Allow the possibility of the facts, and all the actors comport themselves as persons would do in their situation."¹⁴ The true Gothic novels pick up and advance the sort of psychologizing which Richardson began in *Clarissa* (1748). I say "advance" because, while they are neither so thorough nor so subtle as Richardson, they move into deeper and more emotionally complex situations. Robert Lovelace is a simpler character than Lewis' Ambrosio. But although Ambrosio is a more repulsive person, his responses to his own urges and actions are far more complicated and meaningful than Lovelace's irresistible impulse and consequent remorse.

Gothic novels display the reactions of their characters to trying or appalling situations. But their heroes and heroines are not subjected to trials merely for the sake of exhibiting fine feeling, as in the sentimental novels of the period—*The Old English Baron* (1777), for example, whose hero Edmund is truly a trial of the reader's patience. Mrs. Radcliffe enjoys something of the sentimental outlook, but she seldom indulges in Mackenziesque feeling for its own sake. It should not be forgotten that at one of the key points in *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, M. St. Aubert, on his deathbed, gives his daughter the following advice:

"Above all, my dear Emily," said he, "do not indulge

⁹ For this set of distinctions see Montague Summers, p. 29.

¹⁰ Tompkins, p. 208.

¹¹ Tompkins, p. 227.

¹² See Clara F. McIntyre, "The Later Career of the Elizabethan Villain-Hero," *PMLA*, xl (1925), 874-880.

¹³ I refer specifically to *Thaddeus of Warsaw* (1803) and *The Scottish Chiefs* (1810), and Scott's *Waverley* (1814). *Thaddeus* is more a contemporary romance than a historical one, but the method employed is much the same.

¹⁴ *Otranto*, "Preface to the First Edition," p. 4.

in the pride of fine feeling, the romantic error of amiable minds. Those, who really possess sensibility, ought early to be taught, that it is a dangerous quality, which is continually extracting the excess of misery, or delight, from every surrounding circumstance. And, since, in our passage through this world, painful circumstances occur more frequently than pleasing ones, and since our sense of evil is, I fear, more acute than our sense of good, we become the victims of our feelings, unless we can in some degree command them."¹⁶

Another distinctive feature of the early Gothic novel is its attempt to *involve* the reader in a new way. In the sentimental literature of the age one is invited to admire fine feelings; in Gothic writing the reader is held in suspense with the characters, and increasingly there is an effort to shock, alarm, and otherwise rouse him. Inducing a powerful emotional response in the reader (rather than a moral or intellectual one) was the prime object of these novelists. In this endeavor they prepared the way for the romantic poets who followed them.

Gothic novels are often ridiculed for their use of the supernatural, though no one condemns Coleridge, say, for introducing it in "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner." The supernatural can be used crudely (witness Walpole's gigantic helmet), but this is no reason to condemn it outright. In his review of *The Monk* Coleridge gives an excellent defense of the use of the supernatural in fiction:

The romance-writer possesses an unlimited power over situations; but he must scrupulously make his characters act in congruity with them. Let him work *physical* wonders only, and we will be content to *dream* with him for a while; but the first *moral* miracle which he attempts, he disgusts and awakens us. Thus our judgment remains unoffended, when, announced by thunders and earthquakes, the spirit appears to Ambrosio involved in blue fires that increase the cold of the cavern. . . . But when a mortal, fresh from the impression of that terrible appearance . . . is represented as being at the same moment agitated by so fleeting an appetite as that of lust, our own feelings convince us that this is not improbable, but impossible; not preternatural, but contrary to nature. The extent of the powers that may exist, we can never ascertain; and therefore we feel no great difficulty in yielding a temporary belief to any, the strangest, situation of *things*. But that situation once conceived, how beings like ourselves would feel and act in it, our own feelings sufficiently instruct us; and we instantly reject the clumsy fiction that does not harmonize with them.¹⁶

Direct use of the supernatural in fiction contravenes our ingrown idea of the essential realism of narrative fiction; symbolic use of the supernatural bothers us much less, particularly in poetry.

But where realism is not the desired object—and it is not in the Gothic novel—supernaturalism seems a valid enough device for removing the narrative from the realm of the everyday. And this the Gothic novels clearly try to do. What Coleridge says about his part of the *Lyrical Ballads* is applicable:

The incidents and agents were to be, in part at least, supernatural; and the excellence aimed at was to consist in the interesting of the affections by the dramatic truth of such emotions, as would naturally accompany such situations, supposing them real. And in *this* sense they have been to every human being who, from whatever source of delusion, has at any time believed himself under supernatural agency. . . . my endeavors should be directed to persons and characters supernatural . . . so as to transfer from our inward nature a human interest and a semblance of truth sufficient to procure for these shadows of imagination that willing suspension of disbelief for the moment, which constitutes poetic faith.¹⁷

Among the significant Gothic novelists, only Ann Radcliffe bothers to produce natural explanations for all seemingly supernatural effects, and many readers find her explanations more distracting than the apparent events which occasion them. Too much attention has been paid to a convention which we should accept as readily as we accept the authorial presence in *Tom Jones* or the symbolic levels of *Ulysses*.

The distinguishing mark of the early Gothic novel is its atmosphere *and* the use to which that atmosphere is put. The involvement of the reader's imagination is central to the Gothic endeavor, even in an attempt as relatively crude as Walpole's. In retrospect the Gothic atmosphere seems mechanical, even in the greatest of these novels, but originally its purpose was to arouse and sensitize the reader's imagination, giving it further play than it ordinarily enjoyed, and the use of the supernatural was clearly meant to contribute to this imaginative stimulus.

Among the novels of the period 1764–1820 a distinction seems necessary between the novel of "terror" and the novel of "horror." This distinction has its origin in the aesthetics of the mid-eighteenth century. As Mrs. Radcliffe puts it, "Terror and horror are so far opposite, that the first expands the soul, and awakens the faculties to a high degree of life; the other contracts,

¹⁶ *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, ed. Bonamy Dobrée (London, 1966), pp. 79–80.

¹⁷ *Critical Review*, Vol. XIX (Feb. 1797); reprinted in *Coleridge's Miscellaneous Criticism*, ed. T. M. Raysor (Cambridge, Mass., 1936), p. 373.

¹⁸ *Biographia Literaria*, ed. J. Shawcross, 2 vols. (Oxford, 1965), II, 5–6.

freezes, and nearly annihilates them. . . . neither Shakespeare nor Milton by their fictions, nor Mr. Burke by his reasoning, anywhere looked to positive horror as a source of the sublime, though they all agree that terror is a very high one."¹⁸ In short, terror opens the mind to the apprehension of the sublime, while (according to Mrs. Radcliffe) the repugnance involved in horror closes it.

Terror dependent on suspense or dread is the *modus operandi* of the novels of Walpole and Radcliffe. *The Castle of Otranto* holds the reader's attention through dread of a series of terrible possibilities—Theodore's execution, the (essentially) incestuous marriage of Manfred and Isabella, the casting-off of Hippolita, and so on. Mrs. Radcliffe's use of dramatic suspension is similar but more sophisticated. She raises vague but unsettling possibilities and leaves them dangling for hundreds of pages. Sometimes the effect is artificial, as in the case of the black-veiled "picture" at Udolpho, but in raising and sustaining the disquieting possibility of an affair between St. Aubert and the Marchioness de Villeroi, for instance, she succeeds splendidly. Mrs. Radcliffe's easy manipulation of drawn-out suspense holds the reader's attention through long books with slight plots.

The method of Lewis, Beckford, Mary Shelley, and Maturin is considerably different. Instead of holding the reader's attention through suspense or dread they attack him frontally with events that shock or disturb him. Rather than elaborating possibilities which never materialize, they heap a succession of horrors upon the reader. Lewis set out, quite deliberately, to overgo Mrs. Radcliffe. *The Monk* (1796), like *Valhek* (1786), *Frankenstein*, and *Melmoth the Wanderer*, gains much of its effect from murder, torture, and rape. The difference from terror-Gothic is considerable; Mrs. Radcliffe merely threatens these things, and Walpole uses violent death only at the beginning and end of his book. The reader is prepared for neither of these deaths, which serve only to catch the attention and to produce a climax, respectively.¹⁹

Obviously a considerable shift has occurred. Is its purpose merely ever greater shock? Or has the Gothic novelists' aesthetic theory changed? Terror-Gothic works on the supposition that a reader who is repelled will close his mind (if not the book) to the sublime feelings which may be roused by the mixture of pleasure and pain induced by fear. Horror-Gothic assumes that if events have psychological consistency, even within repulsive situations, the reader will find himself involved beyond recall.

This change is probably related to a general shift in conceptions of good and evil. Regarded in the Renaissance as philosophically and practically distinct, they drew ever closer in the next two centuries. This movement culminated in the "confusions" of good and evil common among some romantics and epitomized in Blake's *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* and Byron's *Cain*.²⁰ No Augustan would have felt that Satan was the hero of *Paradise Lost*. Walpole and Mrs. Radcliffe maintain the proprieties of a strict distinction between good and evil, though in Manfred and Montoni they created villain-heroes whose force of character gives them a certain fearsome attractiveness, even within this moral context. But with the villain-heroes of horror-Gothic we enter the realm of the morally ambiguous. Ambrosio, Victor Frankenstein, and Melmoth are men of extraordinary capacity whom circumstance turns increasingly to evil purposes.²¹ They are not merely monsters, and only a bigoted reading makes them out as such.

To put the change from terror-Gothic to horror-Gothic in its simplest terms, the suspense of external circumstance is de-emphasized in favor of increasing psychological concern with moral ambiguity. The horror-Gothic writers postulated the relevance of such psychology to every reader; they wrote for a reader who could say with Goethe that he had never heard of a crime which he could not imagine himself committing. The terror novel prepared the way for a fiction which though more overtly horrible is at the same time more serious and more profound. It is with *Frankenstein* and *Melmoth the Wanderer* that the Gothic novel comes fully into its own.

Because *Frankenstein* (1817) continues to be read as a horror story, serious critical discussion of it is rare. But it is both a skillfully constructed book and one of real psychological insight. The presence of an explorer (Robert Walton) as narrator is not merely a device for transmitting the story, but serves also as a parallel and reinforcement for the book's main themes. The idea which pervades the book is that of Promethean overreaching. Victor Frankenstein tries to become a

¹⁸ This widely quoted passage is from a posthumous article in the *New Monthly Magazine*, Vol. VII (1826).

¹⁹ Critics have often called *The Monk* a work of terror-Gothic, but such a description both fails to differentiate it from Mrs. Radcliffe's work and runs counter to the aesthetics of the day.

²⁰ This progression is suggested by Lowry Nelson, pp. 256-257.

²¹ Mrs. Radcliffe's Schedoni is close to this group; in *The Italian* (1797) she seems clearly to show the influence of *The Monk*.

god, and the endeavor destroys him. "Life and death appeared to me ideal bounds, which I should first break through, and pour a torrent of light into our dark world. A new species would bless me as its creator and source. . . . No father could claim the gratitude of his child so completely as I should deserve theirs."²² Victor Frankenstein is a figure similar to Thomas Mann's Adrian Leverkühn; he destroys his humanity for the sake of a "break through" not properly belonging to man.

The being which Victor Frankenstein creates (and meant to be beautiful)²³ mirrors in its outward form his own inward deformity. The early history of the monster, which craves love, is an ironic reflection of Frankenstein's personality, for he can neither love nor respond properly to human feeling. The present-day confusion in comic-book terminology between Frankenstein and his monster is not surprising, for Frankenstein is a monster, and in a real sense he *is* the monster. Again and again Frankenstein calls himself the murderer of his family and friends; at first he is blaming himself for having let loose so dangerous a being, but as the novel advances we recognize that he has a half-mad understanding that the monster is enacting in objective form the implications of his own inhumanity. This is what makes the story seem truly uncanny. Senseless butchery by an inhuman monster would be frightening, but no more; here it is not senseless, but all too reasonable.

Victor Frankenstein is explicitly described as a man with originally benevolent impulses and great potentiality for good. His striving for a more than human greatness destroys the warmth of his humanity, and gradually he becomes totally involved with the monster which objectifies all his own inadequacies. Their final, mad chase to the north reflects literally their abandonment of society and their total absorption with their mutual self.

Melmoth the Wanderer is the last and clearly the greatest of the Gothic novels of this period. Melmoth himself is the epitome of the romantic villain-hero, a hybrid of the Wandering Jew and Milton's Satan with a bit of the Flying Dutchman thrown in. The book's structure is thematically simple but narratively elaborate; it consists of a series of tales inside each other, each told from a different standpoint. The theme is sadism, moral and physical, religious and social. Melmoth wanders, destructive and self-damned, fruitlessly seeking a salvation which his self-willed character prevents. The reader is repelled by his sadism, but cannot help feeling the tragic stature given

Melmoth by the immensity of his suffering. This ambiguity in the reader's response Melmoth shares with such characters as Frankenstein and his monster, Macbeth, Captain Ahab, and Leverkühn. The reader sees clearly that Melmoth, like Marlowe's Faustus, is damned not by what he does, but by his own proud despair of forgiveness and salvation. In the love of Immalee Melmoth is offered redemption; he is a Dutchman who cannot believe in the efficacy of his Senta.

What then in these Gothic novels is mere mummery and what, if anything, is more than that? The prime feature of the Gothic novel, I believe, is its attempt to involve the reader in special circumstances. Terror-Gothic plays on the reader's response to suspense, while horror-Gothic attempts to involve him with the villain-hero protagonist. Both types share an interest in the characters' psychology, and both kinds may be regarded as statements or correlatives of the author's state of mind.

This last point requires amplification. The key characteristic of the Gothic novel is not its devices, but its atmosphere. The atmosphere is one of evil and brooding terror; the imaginary world in which the action takes place is the author's objectification of his imaginative sense of the atmosphere. In other words, the setting exists to convey the atmosphere. Neither suspense nor horror is dependent upon a particular setting or atmosphere. *The Hound of the Baskervilles* and *Last Exit to Brooklyn* are not Gothic novels.²⁴ The Gothic novel uses its atmosphere for ends which are fundamentally psychological, though its actual use ranges from the relative crudity of Walpole to the subtlety of Mary Shelley and Maturin.

Wild landscapes, ruined abbeys, and the like, were merely a convenient convention, a standardized method of achieving the desired atmosphere. The more significant components of the Gothic novel are as follows. (1) A setting in space or time or both sufficiently removed from the reader of 1800 that there would be no intrusion of everyday standards of factual probability and morality. Thus most of the stories are set in Southern France, Spain, Italy, or Germany, and usually in the sixteenth century or earlier. Time and place are irrelevant (real historicity is very slight) as long as they are vague or remote. Beck-

²² Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein* (New York: Doubleday, n.d.), p. 48.

²³ *Frankenstein*, pp. 50-51.

²⁴ Obviously both terror and horror can be established in an "ordinary" setting. But this would not fulfill the Gothic novel's need to escape the interference of everyday standards and moral judgment.

ford's *Vathek* is sometimes discussed as an "oriental tale" in the tradition of *Rasselas*, but it is basically a Gothic novel whose oriental setting provides the necessary "distance."²⁵ (2) There is a moral norm present in the story. The villain-hero is thus measured against a standard which the reader recognizes as close to his own everyday outlook. Walpole's Theodore and Isabella, Mrs. Radcliffe's Emily St. Aubert and Adeline (the latter in *The Romance of the Forest*), and Lewis' Raymond de las Cisternas and Lorenzo de Medina all serve this normative function. Mary Shelley presents Frankenstein's friend Clerval as an ordinary, decent man. Maturin's use of multiple narrators fulfills the same function. Although the reader is to be immersed in an extraordinary world, he must not feel that its psychological (as distinct from its factual) bounds are utterly foreign to him. If he does, then the story loses its immediacy for him; any application to his own mind is ruled out. (3) The action derives from a complex villain-hero. Even in stories as relatively black and white as *The Castle of Otranto* and *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, Manfred and Montoni are much more than stock villains, just as Ambrosio is much more than a stock hypocrite in *The Monk*. Frankenstein and Melmoth are impressively grandiose characters whose undoubted stature is compounded of dark aspirations and great force of character. The world and atmosphere of the Gothic novel are like its "terrific" protagonists—fearsome and profoundly ambiguous. (4) The confusion of evil and good which the Gothic novel reflects in its villain-heroes produces a non-Christian or anticlerical feeling.²⁶ Coleridge seriously accused Lewis of blasphemy in *The Monk*,²⁷ and the book long remained exurgated under the odium of blasphemy. Mrs. Radcliffe (particularly in *The Italian*) is sometimes anticlerical. To some extent the feeling is simply anti-Catholic. Maturin (a clergyman) is extremely critical of all churches, but particularly the Catholic Church. Mary Shelley, her mother's daughter, largely ignores religion. These writers simply cannot find in religion acceptable answers to the fundamentally psychological questions of good and evil which they were posing. This failure is reflected in their satire on both religious institutions and the simplicity of a religious morality.

Seen in these terms the Gothic novel becomes one kind of treatment of the psychological problem of evil. In its earliest form it is filled with "crude claptrap," but increasingly it takes on a "symbolic resonance"²⁸ as external suspense is subordinated to involvement in moral ambiguity.

This analysis pushes the case for these novels rather hard. I am offering it in an attempt to offset the common view that they have nothing but amusement value. Emphasis on the serious quality of these early Gothic novels makes their relationship to the later Gothic novels much clearer.

Wuthering Heights, *Moby Dick*, and Faulkner's *Sanctuary* are all Gothic novels. Each one creates a very distinct world of its own—as novels of manners or social conditions do not. All three novels possess a distinctive and pervasive atmosphere. Though all occur in contemporary time, each is isolated in space; Faulkner's decaying South, Melville's whaling ship, and Brontë's desolate country residences are far removed from the reader's sphere of experience. Similarly, each novel presents a clear standard of the ordinary. Melville's Ishmael and Brontë's Mr. Lockwood serve as both narrators and moral norms. Faulkner's scheme is more complex, but Horace Benbow and his sister Narcissa may be seen as the twin poles of ordinary morality. Ahab, Heathcliff, and Popeye are in their different ways the villain-heroes around whom each book is built. And each novel has an anti-Christian element: Joseph in *Wuthering Heights*; Melville's fighting Quakers; Faulkner's savage portrayal of a Baptist minister and typical Christian charity.²⁹

Moby Dick is perhaps the greatest of Gothic novels, and an almost perfect example of the form. In the microcosmic world of the whaling ship Ahab is the completely dominant villain-hero. He is a figure of immense stature, a good man, a kindly man of real humanity (witness his relations with Starbuck), but a man gripped by a deadly monomania which will destroy him and his companions with him. Symbolic-critical readings of the book always break down after a certain point, for like other Gothic novels *Moby Dick* ends in moral ambiguity; there is no message, no moral, no final statement of right and wrong. *Moby Dick* is for Ahab what the monster is for Frankenstein. In the literal sense he is only a whale, and Ahab's vengeance is ridiculous. In a symbolic sense, who can say? The white whale may be the symbol of evil in the world—or not. Ahab is a madman, and yet he remains a complex and tragic figure. Like Melmoth he wilfully per-

²⁵ Perhaps it should be noted that the horrors in *Vathek* are set on so grand a scale that the story verges on burlesque. The result is a lighter, almost ironic tone which is quite different from the serious blood and thunder of *The Monk*.

²⁶ See Nelson, p. 251.

²⁷ *Critical Review*, pp. 373-376.

²⁸ Nelson's terms, pp. 247-248.

²⁹ *Sanctuary* (New York: Modern Library, 1959), pp. 151, 216-217.

sists in his own delusion. Yet he succeeds in carrying his crew with him, and the reader follows, irresistibly drawn into a mad and exalted quest. Ahab is a Promethean figure: if the sun insults him, he will strike at it, come what may. Very skillfully, Melville involves the reader with Ahab; we follow the narration of Ishmael into the situation, and then the narration vanishes, leaving us immersed in Ahab's world. In a similar manner we are drawn by Lockwood's narration into the self-contained world of *Wuthering Heights*. Both books leave us with great ambiguities; good and evil, love and hate are intertwined until they are inseparable. Motives which we might praise or blame without a second thought in our everyday worlds appear to us in the Gothic context as beyond judgment. We are brought to see the hurts of Ahab and Heathcliff, to appreciate their complexities, and ultimately to decline judgment on the damage they do to themselves and to others. As is the case with Melmoth, tragic stature compensates for apparent inhumanity.

Sanctuary (1931) is quite differently constructed, and yet certainly remains a Gothic novel. It is a book about the pervasiveness of moral evil. Like some of the early Gothic novels it has been popular on account of its sensational elements: rape with a corn cob, brothel scenes, and mob-burning of an innocent man—and this has hampered serious discussion of the book.

Faulkner dispenses with the convention of a heroic villain; Popeye is an impotent, vicious monster. But Faulkner went to some pains, in a chapter (xxx) he added when revising the book, to make it clear that even Popeye cannot be held morally responsible for his actions. He is merely the victim of a syphilitic father and an insane grandmother. The novel's point is that all men are victims of the evil in human nature: there can be no good distinct from evil, and so there can be no definitive distinction between them. Systematically, Faulkner demolishes the illusions of the idealistic Horace Benbow, whose belief in justice and the distinction between good and evil collapses as he is forced to recognize his own suppressed potentiality for violent sexual response.

Sanctuary is an extreme and violent book, but a powerful one. The world Faulkner creates is diseased and disgusting; its effectiveness depends on the reader's willingness to be drawn into a world of evil in which nothing admirable is effective. There is no tragic grandeur here, no compensatory greatness. Faulkner's novel is a statement of despair over the inescapability of evil.

The pervasive atmosphere of perversion and the macabre is the backdrop to Faulkner's demand that we recognize and agonize over the evil which is inextricably bound up with the good in every human being. If the book can be said to have a message, it is simply that there are no answers; even Popeye must be absolved of personal responsibility.

This much should be clear by now: the Gothic novel offers no conclusions. In its fully developed form it attempts to involve the reader in a special world in whose atmosphere of evil man is presented under trying circumstances. It emphasizes psychological reaction to evil and leads into a tangle of moral ambiguity for which no meaningful answers can be found.

With a clearer idea of the essentials of the Gothic novel we are ready to return to problems set aside earlier—the origin of the Gothic novel and its relation to romanticism. It is plain enough that the early Gothic novel is part of the movement away from neoclassicism and toward romanticism. Walpole subtitled his novel "A Gothic Story"; in the mid-eighteenth century "Gothic" meant basically antique and barbarous with reference to architecture. In this context it carried the connotation of the rude, wild, and irregular—by eighteenth-century standards, the Shakespearean. Walpole's imaginative excesses are part of a widespread reaction against the dominance of Locke's mechanistic concept of the mind. Even Mrs. Radcliffe, whose sense of decorum and propriety is notorious, was closer to Wordsworth than to Pope in her admiration of the sublime. The early Gothic novels, to borrow Walpole's terms again, were "romances,"³⁰ unrestrained exercises of that imagination against whose excesses Dr. Johnson warned so sternly.

Gothic and romantic writing are closely related chronologically and share some themes and characteristics, such as the hero who is a guilt-haunted wanderer. Both have a strong psychological concern with interior mental processes. The realistic novel, the novel of manners, and neoclassical poetry generally lead the reader to contemplate the exterior actions of the life around him. In sharp contradistinction, Gothic and romantic writing usually lead the reader to consider internal mental processes and reactions. The one sort of writing is basically social in its concern, the other essentially individual.³¹ It is

³⁰ *Otranto*, "Preface to the Second Edition," pp. 7–8.

³¹ Montague Summers makes a distinction between literature which is a reflection of life and literature which leads away from life, calling the latter the expression of the roman-

from this absorption with the individual that Gothic and romantic writing gain their preoccupation with the mind.

Yet though the same set of conditions gave rise to both Gothic and romantic writing, and though they share many characteristics, they remain quite distinct. Their difference has always been easier to recognize than to define; here I wish to attempt the distinction with reference to some Coleridgean literary theory.

The key characteristics of Gothic and romantic writers are concern with ultimate questions and lack of faith in the adequacy of reason or religious faith to make comprehensible the paradoxes of human existence. English romanticism in its first form (early Wordsworth and Coleridge; Keats and Shelley) can be viewed as an attempt to find the emotional certainty of revealed religion directly from nature rather than from God. From nature alone the romantics attempt to derive feelings which earlier in European history were organized and sustained in a supernatural Christian framework.³² The romantics turn to "imagination," which, according to Coleridge, recasts the objects of the exterior world into a new and more profoundly "true" reality, giving the materials with which it chooses to work a unity and meaning which they do not possess in their original form.³³ It is the imagination which serves the romantics as their vehicle of escape from the limitations of the human condition.

The Gothic writers, though possessed by the same discontent with the everyday world, have no faith in the ability of man to transcend or transform it imaginatively. Their explorations lie strictly within the realm of this world and they are confined to the limits of reason. Thus the writers of Gothic never offer intuitive solutions; they cannot present the sensed order found by the romantics in their highest flights. The Gothic literary endeavor is not that of the transcendent romantic imagination; rather, in Coleridge's terms, Gothic writers are working with fancy, which is bound to the "fixities and definites" of the rational world.

In saying this I do not mean to denigrate the Gothic novel. Within the *Biographia Literaria* fancy is sharply distinguished from imagination, but its present connotation of frivolous and whimsical is by no means necessary.³⁴ Secondary imagination is that faculty of the mind which may surmount the limitations of this world to seek clarity and truth in a world of permanence beyond it. Fancy, on the other hand, however seriously it is used, can find only paradox, never high truth. Fancy will never appear to resolve the

deepest conflicts and contradictions of this world; this is precisely what the romantics try to do, and what the Gothic novel never does.

The early Gothic novels can be considered the precursors of romanticism in their concern with sensibility, the sublime, and the involvement of the reader in a more than rational way. Gothic also prepares the way for and shares the romantic "confusion" of good and evil. But where Gothic remains darkened by the necessary ambiguities of its conclusions, romantic writing assumes the ultimate existence, if not the easy accessibility, of clear answers to the problems which torment man in this world.

From this perspective a writer like Byron seems closer to the Gothic camp than to the romantics. Biographically, he is practically the archetype of the Gothic-romantic hero, but as a romantic poet he fits only uneasily the type delimited by Wordsworth, Keats, and Shelley. Perhaps it is his Augustan affinities which so severely undermine his faith in the transcendent power of imagination, but Byron's cosmic despair is not offset even by his glorying in the mysterious grandeur of heroes modeled on himself. *Manfred*, *Cain*, and *Childe Harold* are all more Gothic than romantic in their moral confusions and ultimate paradoxes. Byron shows few signs of faith in the romantic metaphysic; his escape from his existential predicament, if it comes at all, comes in the comic perspective of *Don Juan*.³⁵

In the twentieth century most writers have accepted human limitations and uncertainty more easily than those writers of earlier centuries who believed that man is intrinsically a great and noble being. Yeats was perhaps the last great

tic spirit (Summers, pp. 17-18). This can scarcely be the case; romantic literature de-emphasizes external action, but if it led away from life it would be either worthless or pointless. Great romantic—and Gothic—literature has more than amusement value.

³² See D. G. James, *Matthew Arnold and the Decline of English Romanticism* (Oxford, 1961), p. 21, and Ch. i, passim; and D. D. Perkins, *The Quest for Permanence* (Cambridge, Mass., 1965).

³³ *Biographia Literaria*, I, 202. See my forthcoming essay in *JAAC*, "Kant and Coleridge on Imagination."

³⁴ In a much later period of his life (after having abandoned the romantic poetic endeavor and turned to the Anglican Church) Coleridge himself seems to take the view that imagination is used in serious writing and fancy in less profound work (*Table Talk*, 1833). This later view has often been used—erroneously, in my opinion—as a gloss on the definitions in the *Biographia Literaria* (1817).

³⁵ I have concentrated almost entirely on Gothic as a novel form, but there is certainly Gothic poetry as well—"Christabel," for example. "The Eve of St. Agnes," despite some architectural and atmospheric resemblances, does not, I believe, so qualify.

romantic writer. Gothic writing too has been on the decline, for evil is explained away sociologically today. Yet occasionally, as with *Sanctuary* and perhaps Thomas Mann's *Dr. Faustus* (1947), a novel is still written with the Gothic aims and characteristics.

Looking back, it may seem that we have come a long way from the Gothic novels of Horace Walpole and Mrs. Radcliffe. So indeed we have. But it is not always easy to see in a single work all of the implications which attach to it. *The Castle of Otranto* is a terror story, but it is also the beginning of a form. Walpole opened possibilities of which he was but dimly aware. Yet, in speaking of a new kind of "romance" in which the "fancy"³⁶ is freed from restraint to treat the psychological reactions of men and women in "extraordinary positions," Walpole says that "if the new route he [Walpole] has struck out shall have paved a road for men of brighter talents, he shall own with pleasure and modesty, that he was sensible the plan was capable of receiving greater embellishments than his imagination or conduct of the passions could bestow on it."³⁷ He was quite correct.

I have tried to treat the early Gothic novels less as terror stories than as experiments in a literary form which later came to full flower. Knowing the overall development of the form is a great aid to recognizing the promise of the early novels. We look now at Shakespeare's first plays and see signs of the coming greatness we know is there; looking at Marlowe's work we have no idea whether he would have developed further. With

the great Gothic novels—*Frankenstein*, *Melmoth the Wanderer*, *Moby Dick*—to open our eyes, we can see the considerable aesthetic potential latent in the form crudely forged by Walpole and developed by Radcliffe and Lewis. The later, greater Gothic novels do not appear full-blown from nowhere. They inherited a form and tradition which had undergone half a century of exploratory development.

Gothic and romantic writing spring alike from a recognition of the insufficiency of reason or religious faith to explain and make comprehensible the complexities of life. We may distinguish between Gothic and romantic in terms of what they do within this situation. The imagination, Coleridge tells us, reveals its presence "in the balance or reconciliation of opposite or discordant qualities."³⁸ Romantic writing reconciles the discordant elements it faces, resolving their apparent contradictions imaginatively in the creation of a higher order. Gothic writing, the product of serious fancy, has no such answers and can only leave the "opposites" contradictory and paradoxical. In its highest forms romantic writing claims the existence of higher answers where Gothic can find only unresolvable moral and emotional ambiguity.

UNIVERSITY OF PENNSYLVANIA
Philadelphia

³⁶ Walpole uses the terms "fancy" and "imagination" interchangeably.

³⁷ *Otranto*, "Preface to the Second Edition," pp. 7–8.

³⁸ *Biographia Literaria*, II, 12.