

## ENGL 200: Sherlock Holmes in Fiction and Film

### Elements of the Gothic

The "gothic" novel dates back almost to the beginnings of the British novel. It was popularized by Horace Walpole in his novel *The Castle of Otranto* (1764), and immediately spawned a number of literary descendants, including *Frankenstein*, *The Woman in White*, many of the short stories of Edgar Allan Poe, *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, *Bleak House*, *The Turn of the Screw* and Stoker's *Dracula*. It became one of the most popular literary genres in Victorian England, and is the literary ancestor of many of today's horror and supernatural stories. Doyle is by no means the first writer to incorporate the Gothic into the detective genre, but once again he is the Trope Codifier: he sets the template for subsequent uses/adaptations/rejections.

The major literary components (Source: Robert Harris, "Elements of the Gothic Novel," <http://www.VirtualSalt.com/gothic.htm>) of a Gothic story are

1. **Setting in an isolated noble house**, often a castle or manor, sometimes seemingly abandoned, sometimes occupied. The house often contains secret passages, trap doors, secret rooms, dark or hidden staircases, and possibly ruined sections. The house may be near or connected to caves, which lend their own haunting flavor with their twisting passages, claustrophobia, and mystery. (Translated into modern filmmaking, the setting might be in an old house or mansion--or even a new house--where unusual camera angles, sustained close ups during movement, and darkness or shadows create the same sense of claustrophobia and entrapment.)
2. **An atmosphere of mystery and suspense**. The work is pervaded by a threatening feeling, a fear enhanced by the unknown. Often the plot itself is built around a mystery, such as unknown parentage, a disappearance, or some other inexplicable event. Elements 3, 4, and 5 below contribute to this atmosphere. (Again, in modern filmmaking, the inexplicable events are often murders.)
3. **An ancient prophecy** is connected with the castle or its inhabitants (either former or present). The prophecy is usually obscure, partial, or confusing. "What could it mean?" In more watered down modern examples, this may amount to merely a legend: "It's said that the ghost of old man Krebs still wanders these halls."
4. **Omens, portents, visions**. A character may have a disturbing dream vision, or some phenomenon may be seen as a portent of coming events. For example, if the statue of the lord of the manor falls over, it may portend his death. In modern fiction, a character might see something (a shadowy figure stabbing another shadowy figure) and think that it was a dream. This might be thought of as an "imitation vision."
5. **Supernatural or otherwise inexplicable events**. Dramatic, amazing events occur, such as ghosts or giants walking, or inanimate objects (such as a suit of armor or painting) coming to life. In some works, the events are ultimately given a natural explanation, while in others the events are truly supernatural.
6. **High, even overwrought emotion**. The narration may be highly sentimental, and the characters are often overcome by anger, sorrow, surprise, and especially, terror. Characters suffer from raw nerves and a feeling of impending doom. Crying and emotional speeches are frequent. Breathlessness and panic are common. In the filmed gothic, screaming is common.
7. **Women in distress**. As an appeal to the pathos and sympathy of the reader, the female characters often face events that leave them fainting, terrified, screaming, and/or sobbing. A lonely, pensive, and oppressed heroine is often the central figure of the novel, so her sufferings are even more pronounced and the focus of attention. The women suffer all the more because they are often abandoned, left alone (either on purpose or by accident), and have no protector at times.

8. **Women threatened by a powerful, impulsive, tyrannical male.** One or more male characters has the power, as king, lord of the manor, father, or guardian, to demand that one or more of the female characters do something intolerable. The woman may be commanded to marry someone she does not love (it may even be the powerful male himself), or commit a crime.

9. **The metonymy of gloom and horror.** 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. Note that the following metonymies for "doom and gloom" all suggest some element of mystery, danger, or the supernatural.

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

10. **The vocabulary of the gothic.** The constant use of the appropriate vocabulary set creates the atmosphere of the gothic. Using the right words maintains the dark-and-stimulated feel that defines the gothic. Here as an example are some of the words (in several categories) that help make up the vocabulary of the gothic in *The Castle of Otranto*:

**Mystery:** diabolical, enchantment, ghost, goblins, haunted, infernal, magic, magician, miracle, necromancer, omens, ominous, portent, preternatural, prodigy, prophecy, secret, sorcerer, spectre, spirits, strangeness, talisman, vision

**Fear, Terror, or Sorrow:** afflicted, affliction, agony, anguish, apprehensions, apprehensive, commiseration, concern, despair, dismal, dismay, dread, dreaded, dreading, fearing, frantic, fright, frightened, grief, hopeless, horrid, horror, lamentable, melancholy, miserable, mournfully, panic, sadly, scared, shrieks, sorrow, sympathy, tears, terrible, terrified, terror, unhappy, wretched

**Surprise:** alarm, amazement, astonished, astonishment, shocking, staring, surprise, surprised, thunderstruck, wonder

**Haste:** anxious, breathless, flight, frantic, hastened, hastily, impatience, impatient, impatiently, impetuosity, precipitately, running, sudden, suddenly

**Anger:** anger, angrily, cholera, enraged, furious, fury, incense, incensed, provoked, rage, raving, resentment, temper, wrath, wrathful, wrathfully

**Largeness:** enormous, gigantic, giant, large, tremendous, vast

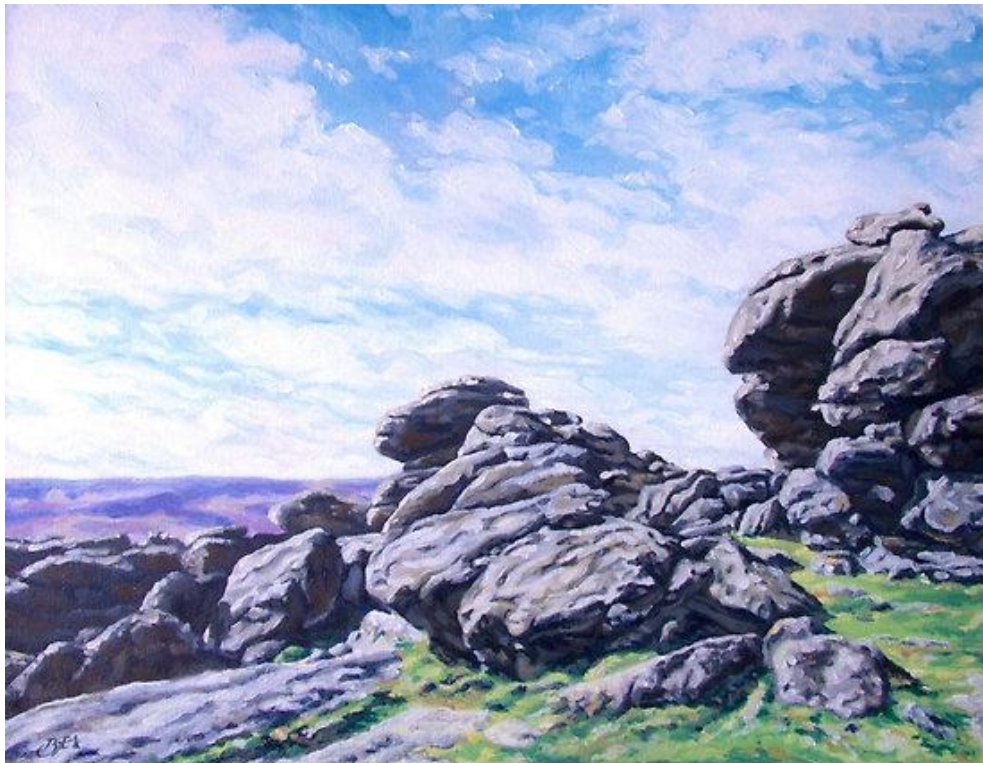
**Darkness:** dark, darkness, dismal, shaded, black, night

**Tropes in the Gothic Novel:**

- The setting itself (especially the architecture), but also the weather, the isolation, the sense of age and decrepitude

- Inherited curses, stories, ghosts, weapons—a sense that the (often unexplained) sins of the fathers are being visited on the descendants
- The virginal maiden
- The tyrant
- Doppelgangers: lookalikes, illegitimate descendants, evil twins, ghosts or projections
- The clumsy or foolish servant
- Disbelieving or pragmatic narrator whose lack of imagination often leads to wrong deductions
- The supernatural (or monstrous or otherwise non-Normal) visitant
- The false solution
- The hero to the rescue

Great Resource: “A Glossary of Literary Gothic Terms” by Prof. Doug Thompson, Georgia Southern University:  
<http://www.saylor.org/site/wp-content/uploads/2012/05/engl403-1.3.1-A-Glossary-of-Literary-Gothic-Terms.pdf>



“Hound Tor, Dartmoor” by Barnaby Edwards

<http://www.redbubble.com/people/barnabyedwards/works/7612721-hound-tor-dartmoor>