

## **Alienation and Abominations: Terror and Horror in Classic Gothic Novels and My Own Writing**

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### **Abstract**

Eighteenth-century Gothic novelist Ann Radcliffe writes of two methods of invoking sensation in the reader: terror and horror. Terror “expands the soul and awakens the faculties,” while horror “contracts, freezes, and otherwise annihilates them.”<sup>1</sup> In a 1971 article, Robert L. Platzner argues that Radcliffe believed in the distinction between terror and horror, but a contemporary perspective “must proceed beyond or outside of the constricting framework of late-eighteenth-century esthetic theory.”<sup>2</sup> The purpose of this research was to determine whether the dichotomy between terror and horror exists, and to consider the relevance of Radcliffe’s theory in particular and the Gothic genre more broadly on modern horror writers. The difference between terror and horror is still important in our modern world, and that terror can be divided into subcategories, including social terror: those who should help us most do the least out of ignorance or malice. During this research, five works were read and analyzed. Work began with the first Gothic novel, *The Castle of Otranto* by Horace Walpole, followed by examples of terror, Radcliffe’s *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, and horror, Matthew Lewis’s *The Monk*. Research then moved to the standout novels *Frankenstein* and *Dracula*. This experience with the Gothic novel bestowed a greater grasp of plot, character, and terror and horror; the author was then equipped to expand one of her own short stories. The original story is a character’s transformation into a monster taking place during a presentation to her classmates. The revised story utilizes physical and mental isolation as characters’ humanity crumbles apart; no authority figures can see this. This is a form of social terror, a feature of every Gothic novel often overlooked in favor of bumps in the night and grotesque monsters.

**Keywords:** gothic terror, gaslighting, psychological terror

### **1. Introduction**

Is it possible to write a modern Gothic novel? Southern Gothic explores issues of prejudice and race within peeling, decaying plantation houses, but can a writer more directly translate conventions and patterns from the original Gothic novels to her own work? Gothic novelists in the 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries wrote during a time of shifting class and religious boundaries. What scared their audiences may no longer scare us. Two events coincided with the beginning of this study into the Gothic genre that made me sensitive to what I needed to keep and leave behind as I rewrote my story, “Knowing is Half the Feast,” into “Losing Face.”

I spent the first 23 years of my life under the self-perpetuated illusion that I had some mental impairment, due to my slight disability, that people ignored. I believed having this meant that each eccentric moment, every ordinary slip or mistake, was a symptom of a problem that no one else acknowledged. Last year, a doctor informed me that my handicap is only physical. Everyone around me *wasn't* denying a reality I knew was true.

Shortly after this freeing revelation, my alcoholic father reacted badly to a request to go no-contact, and I sought a

restraining order. In his response, my father denied being a threat, and claimed that I made it all up. He attempted to negate a childhood spent fighting him for car keys and being targeted for existing. He said I have schizophrenia and histrionic personality disorder. My sister and my mother sent statements in accord. If they all agreed, *was* I crazy? The judge did not agree with my family. Someone in a position of power believed me. What if she felt that parents have their children's welfare in mind, and that I fabricated my own past? This is the kind of terror we need in today's world: less fear of Dracula, or Frankenstein's monster, and more fear of others' authority over us and the weakness of our own minds, which I call "societal terror."

## 2. Literary Background

In the situation described above, this family is no different from the capricious, self-obsessed counts and lords in Ann Radcliffe's *Mysteries of Udolpho*. These characters mistreat and deceive the naïve heroine Emily from self-interest as much as malice, and the fear comes less from the supernatural and more from how people treat Emily. Radcliffe, one of the most popular Gothic authors of the late eighteenth century, defines two ways of invoking sensation in a reader: terror "awakens the faculties," while horror "annihilates them"<sup>1</sup>. She does not make a distinction between terror that awakens the faculties and that which subjects us to the cruelties of people and psychology. *Mysteries* more explicitly creates and debunks supernatural terrors; Radcliffe makes use of the fear that comes from relations with others, but in the 18<sup>th</sup> century this dynamic was the situation in which a friendless young woman inevitably finds herself. Given our more egalitarian world, this is a tool to be used instead of a given. There is a constant note of both original terror and societal terror throughout Gothic novels, and these can be more heavily utilized when we drop other aspects of 18<sup>th</sup>-century Gothic novels. As life becomes more hectic, how we interpret the world and how we act toward others becomes more vital.

Per Horace Walpole, the author who first made use of the term Gothic to describe his novel, the genre seeks to subject ordinary people to extraordinary circumstances. It Walpole's attempt to blend two previous Romantic genres that, separately, bore significant faults. Walpole claims that "In the former, all was imagination and improbability. In the latter, the great resources of fancy have been dammed up, by a strict adherence to common life."<sup>3</sup> He set his novella *The Castle of Otranto* in a vaguely foreign place that does not exist, and notes in his first, anonymous preface that the story *might* have been written during the First Crusades. Here, Walpole creates a foundation for other storytelling devices among Gothic authors. *Castle* is supposedly a found manuscript; *Frankenstein* was originally published anonymously like *Castle*, and it features nested stories, as with *The Monk*, that permit Mary Shelley and Matthew Lewis to cram a variety of genres into their novels. Like *Frankenstein*, *Dracula* uses nothing but journal entries and news articles. These aspects are central to the feel of original Gothic novels, but use of "found" manuscripts seems artificial to a population that does not write nearly as personally as the nouveau-learned classes in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. We also do not need as much variety or as many nested stories in a single work when we can publish at the speed of blog.

As Americans, we need to leave behind some of these artificial writing tools and the collective psychological history borne by British authors of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. The Gothic architecture that names the genre comes from the Goths who sacked Rome. They represent the seedy underbelly of Europe to which more *civilized* writers in the 1700s could safely return to find catharsis while class and religion were at a furor around them. Gothic writers turned Catholic authority figures and convents into representations of danger and woe for the same reason: during a time when rationality was supposedly replacing religious and supernatural events, Anglican writers flirted with the mysticism surrounding the Catholic faith, even unto the surviving connection between vampires and crosses. We do not have that sort of tumult here and now; we are more focused on economic and political upheaval than cultural or religious ones. Convents are largely gone, and short of people making vampires out of the Eucharist and the predator priest scandals, religious taboos are less of a focus for us than they were for 18<sup>th</sup>-century authors. Oppressive Gothic architecture sets the tone—but we have fewer castles in America.

The boundaries of what affect us change with time and location—and scientific progress. In the introduction to her collection titled *The Female Thermometer*, literary critic Terry Castle presents Sigmund Freud's perspective that the uncanny arises from childhood fears and desires that have been warped into abstraction by repression.<sup>4</sup> The only reason the idea of dolls coming to life or doppelgangers hold such terror over us is because they intrude on a world that cannot host them. Freud points out that fairy tales featuring toys that come to life or impossible circumstances never create the uncanny, because we leave reality at the door. Castle goes on to apply this to 18<sup>th</sup> century society: in the attempt to be more empirical, scientific minds instead fertilized the fields from which the uncanny stems. More was impossible, so moments when those things seemed to intrude on our lives became more inescapable. The era

sought to shine a light, but it only made the shadows more numerable.

### 3. The Uncanny and Suspension of Disbelief

Theoretically, this means that there are even more occasions in our world for the uncanny to happen: there is more that cannot happen that might intrude in our stories. We run into the same problem as we have with storytelling devices that now come across as artificial, however: we are more cynical and surer in our world than people in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. We can still attain the goals of catharsis and terror if we pay attention to the world we have and the fears to which our psyches respond. In this context, that fear is the dissonance between ourselves and other people, and ourselves and our own minds.

Though societal terror is now important enough to classify as a tool by itself, the original Gothic novels paved the way with terror through power dynamics: in *Castle*, Manfred is a lord and tyrant who terrorizes a friendless young woman to be his bride; *The Monk* features the faked death of a heroine solely so that a respected abbot can rape her at his whim; the terror in *Mysteries* does not start until Emily's loving father dies and she is left in the hands of cruel foreigners; the eponymous character in *Frankenstein* is an authority figure who has been given no boundaries, and his defiance of the laws of nature results in the imprisonment and execution of an innocent woman he could save; and, finally, the vampire slayers' desire to isolate Mina Harker from dark knowledge means they are unable to protect her from the very monster they fight. The focus on the manipulation of women in these novels seems biased in today's world, but this preponderance of female victims and lack of feminine agency emphasizes the focus on social dynamics as a literary tool so universal it becomes part of the scenery. Now that we have a wider, more connected, busy universe around us, no one's place in the mental landscape is a sure thing. Anyone can misremember, and everyone can be psychologically isolated by his loved ones or himself.

Gaslighting is a buzzword now, but it encapsulates the sense that we cannot trust those around us—and, in today's world, we cannot trust our own minds. For some people, Nelson Mandela died in prison and never became president of South Africa—though Wikipedia says they are wrong. How off, how often, does our perception of reality need to be, before we are crazy? This is the future of Gothic terror. The real threat, as evinced in these Gothic novels, is that of the dynamics of power against the main characters. What we need in our modern Gothic is also the sense of our minds giving way like paper, the idea that we might not see correctly, that those who seem to lie may be telling the truth—but what would that mean for our memories and minds? Alone in our heads, how do we know what is normal?

Radcliffe goes out of her way to explain every supernatural event in *Mysteries* as due to wax skeletons, hidden pirates spooking maids, or extremely good acoustics causing people to hear sounds from across the castle; she felt her audience needed the lesson. We do not need Radcliffe to disprove the supernatural for us; we are, as a majority, born cynics and rationalists. Now we need to disprove the authority others hold over us when the situation is their word against ours. We need to experience the catharsis of proving that a main character is sane and see the tyrants that control his or her life falter because we will never be able to say what we wish we could to our parents, or to our bosses. We experience the terror, in simulation, of being unable to control our own lives, or believe in our own senses; through the stories we find our reality and our independence.

### 4. Final Product

Over the summer, the author researched these Gothic novels in preparation for turning her short horror story, "Knowing is Half the Feast," into modern American Gothic. In the resulting story, "Losing Face," we begin with a framing device featuring Eric's estranged wife, Angela, returning to a small town in Maine, from her home in Alaska, when Eric goes missing. After this, we see a tribute to Gothic journal entries: the first two pages are shift reports written by our protagonist, Eric. He is a care assistant at St. Giles's mental hospital. The first page has an assessment mentioning the black, ruinous bleeding skin Eric noticed on the patient Gail Cooper. Eric's handwritten narration after these pages begins with Eric's friend—a doctor at the hospital—calling Eric out for the assessment. This doctor submitted the second report after he refused to accept Eric's version; Eric fished his first report out of the trash to present it with the rest of the journal we are reading along with Angela. When Eric and his friend stare directly at the wounds in the patient's neck, when Eric rubs off the black blood on the doctor's white coat, the doctor sees nothing.

What follows is the degradation of Eric's home life and career connected to the physical breakdown in Gail Cooper. Eric should be able to depend on the educated doctors for whom he works, but none of them see what Eric sees. Either he is crazy, or the world is insane. The story takes more inspiration from *Dracula* than the other Gothic novels in that

there is no malevolent authority willfully deceiving Eric or harming Cooper. Instead, it is with the best of intentions that a crew pins Cooper down to clean her up. Only Eric sees the way the washcloth removes swaths of Cooper's humanlike shell, and only Eric sees that the other care assistants are gripping inside the cracked-open holes in her limbs to get a better hold on her. Eric spent years working with people who scream at the sights inside their own heads, and now his mind is falling apart.

There are other attempts at multimedia in mimicry of the journal entries of old, such as a moment with Angela's phone on the page, and a picture of, presumably, Angela and Eric in silhouette. If the author had more time and resources, she would have used web pages and blog posts. She still believes these kinds of things—while fun and interactive—detract from the focus for modern readers. Societal terror is a more indirect tool for the Gothic genre than standard terror. It should deal with people, whether that is the space inside our own heads, or the dynamic between people. Stephen King's novel *Misery* is a close cousin to the contemporary American terror we seek here. *Misery* features an isolated area, a rickety, old house, and a crazy caretaker with the protagonist entirely in her power. This book only lacks the mental terror: internal gaslighting. The novel's protagonist, Paul Sheldon, never questions that Annie might not be insane. He never considers or is driven to think that she is right; Paul is too established as an adult and a successful writer to believe, as Emily does in *Mysteries*, that he must be in the wrong for the punishments visited upon him, and Annie is too consistently and bizarrely crazy. King's *The Shining* is a perfect example of our version of Gothic: Jack Torrance and his family become caretakers of an isolated hotel. There, they are at the mercy of the hotel's malignant past, and Jack terrorizes his family as reality and truth decay.

In theory, Eric should be as established as Paul. He is middle-aged, he has a job, and a family. Like Jack Torrance, however, he is susceptible to the past in a way he never thought possible. His age makes him vulnerable to doubts about his competence, especially around the more authoritative younger generation embodied by his doctor friend. His family turns out to be nothing like he thought it was; he and his sons are the same kind of monster as Gail Cooper, and almost everything Eric knows consists of false memories implanted by his own nature. These monsters have a similar effect on those around them, and Angela was kidnapped without ever knowing it. She ran because they were gone, and she had a clear mind. Now she is back, and the children muddle her mind as much as their father ever did.

The author does not make the claim that "Losing Face" and *The Shining* are more in line with her concept of Gothic horror than *Misery* because the latter is realistic, while the former feature the supernatural. If Annie turned out to be a creature that fed on people's connection to literary characters, and Paul's choice to kill off *Misery* meant she would wither and die, this would not necessarily be Gothic if Paul still maintained his senses and stability even after the loss of a thumb and a foot at Annie's hands.

## 5. Conclusion

We need Gothic fiction, regardless of geography and historical baggage. There is a place inside our heads in which true anxiety may be found. All we can do with the world we are given is perceive it, and our perceptions are not consistent. As we struggle with the world around us, the issues around which we focus and the stories through which we find catharsis are ones that grapple with our own perspectives. We are more connected to everyone in the world now than we have ever been; we should feel more harmonious, yet the cacophony of psyches often makes us feel more out of place and isolated. We need the catharsis found in narratives of societal terror because it allows us to feel and overcome the limitations and doubts we will never truly escape.

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