

# **Gothic-postmodernism**

## **Voicing the Terrors of Postmodernity**

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## **Part I: Defining Gothic-postmodernism**

## Chapter 1: Defining Gothic-postmodernism

To reiterate, this study considers the sublime effects of terror as the heart of Gothic and Gothic-postmodernist literary exploration. Significantly, enunciating aspects of the sublime effects of terror is the primary function of Gothic rhetoric. It is also the primary task of postmodernist art and literature as it is perceived as a route to the unknown, unrepresentable aspects of self and reality. Consequently, each chapter of this book, in seeking out a definition, analyses each of the chosen texts with sublime terror as a starting point, holding it to be the genre's central dialogical element. It is the most apparent common denominator between the Gothic and postmodernism, which establishes the intensity of the relationship between the two in both literary and philosophical terms and will, thus support the definition of each work under the tenets laid out here as Gothic-postmodernism.

The conventions accepted here as characterising the emergence of Gothic-postmodernism as a new and distinct literary genre include: the blurring of the borders that exist between the real and the fictional, which results in narrative self-consciousness and an interplay between the supernatural and the metafictional; a concern with the sublime effects of terror and the unrepresentable aspects of reality and subjectivity; specific Gothic thematic devices of haunting, *the doppelgänger*, and a dualistic philosophy of good and evil; an atmosphere of mystery and suspense and a counter-narrative function. Though analysing of the interaction of these Gothic and postmodernist characteristics as Gothic-postmodernism, it becomes clear that shadows and gloom, turbulent landscapes and demonised, ghastly or monstrous characters are a central part of the generic substance of Gothic-postmodernism, and subsequently of its representation of otherness: the 'subterranean areas behind everyday experience' (Carter 2006, 133).

More specifically, Gothic-postmodernism can be understood as a distinct genre by its own self-consciousness. Within the genre, multiple levels of self-irony tender a unique set of meta-discourses which run subversively against mainstream society and the literature that claims to represent it. Its meta-narratives operate to disrupt the dominating narrow accounts of history, religion, culture and identity by referring to inverted versions of the same, often implied by fantastic devices. Mikhail Bulgakov's novel is a worthy example, as is Rushdie's and more explicitly Amis's, which literally invert the narrative to present history in reverse. Similarly, Samuel Beckett, setting a precedent for Gothic-postmodernist writers, attempts a deconstruction of the narrative construction of the self in his minimalist, spiralling prose which leads through the infernal circle of subjectivity and eventually solipsism.

The term 'Gothic-postmodernism' is necessary for his analysis as it denotes a distinct generic mutation in literature. Through particular use of this term it will become clear that the Gothic, as the descriptive term of Gothic-postmodernism, functions to fulfil the expression of the darkness of postmodernity, while postmodernist aspects operate to establish ontological and epistemological standpoints that query accepted ethical and moral 'realities', which have long been the focus of Gothic subversion. As a result, in a single term it is possible to communicate the extent to which the two literary ideologies, the Gothic and the postmodernist, have come to be intertwined into a controversial mode of writing that could be referred to as a literary monster. Its fascination with terror, the negative and the irrational, and its hostility toward accepted codes of reality, place it firmly in the realm of revolution. What is often terrifying is that this revolution is against humanity itself, a humanity that has become increasingly secular and that has become too familiar with overarching concepts of the transcendent. Through the terror of Gothic-postmodernist texts, we can question our own unconscious fears, beliefs and prejudices, not only in terms of the desire that instigates them, but also in terms of the repercussions for society in general. This locates the genre as a literary blend of many theoretical approaches to subjectivity, in a pivotal role in contemporary literary development.

Arguably, this definition has important implications for our perspective on the Gothic more so than in our view of postmodernism.

By defining Gothic-postmodernism as a genre, distinct in its own right, this study suggests and supports the idea that Romantic Gothic, Victorian Gothic and modernist Gothic/ Gothic modernism, among others, logically represent separate genres. Thus, this definition aims to actualise the genre Gothic-postmodernism with a specific guide to its focus: that being the perceived survival of the Gothic as opposed to the concept of its revival. Spooner, in her recent study of the Gothic as it relates to postmodern culture, has in her approach opted for the quite common 'revival' theory in relation to the Gothic, noting that '[t]here is no original Gothic; it is always already a revival of something else' (Spooner 2006, 10). She adds, in conclusion, that though the 'Gothic may be a set of discourses that thrives on revival... in the context of postmodernity this process has been short circuited... [and the Gothic] now it simply exposes the void at the heart of modern consumer culture' (Spooner 2006, 155).

The former comment can be considered as valid to an extent in respect of the idea that the 'original Gothic' of Walpole and Radcliffe, as it has been accepted by critics, is underscored by an impression of earlier Gothic attitudes in literature such as those of Shakespeare, Webster, Goethe and 'graveyard poets' of the school of Robert Blair. But, while the Gothic certainly revived a selection of traits from these earlier, dark texts, it had clearly, from its various highpoints in the writing of Mary Shelley and Bram Stoker, for example, evolved into something new. There was effectively a birth of a new progeny which involved a transmutation of generic and genetic components.

This definition contends that Gothic-postmodernism can be accounted for in relation to a scheme of evolution and its generic metamorphosis pertains distinctly to episodes in the development of literary history. *Fin de siècle* realism can be deemed partly responsible for the emergence of the decadent Gothic; modernism, for the hellish Gothic visions of subjectivity in Eliot and Beckett; and postmodernism for the hauntological, terrified characters of Auster, Vonnegut, Ellis and Rushdie. Robert Stam has criticised this approach to genre by claiming that it is both empiricist and essentialist to see a genre as 'evolving', referring to it as a biological approach (Stam 2000, 128-9), suggesting the implication that only those genres which are well-adapted to their functions survive. This view, however, essentially misconstrues the biological metaphor and so it is necessary

to stress, in response to his comment, that the survival of the Gothic, is not an example of the survival of the 'fittest' in literature, but the survival of a universally necessary topos of counter-narrative or release, which maintains a balance within the genre of modern literature.

Finally, and quite importantly, throughout this definition, the Gothic aspects of postmodern theories will be utilised in literary analysis. In this, a distinctive postmodern perspective and theoretical approach to the genre, will be offered in support of the inherent links that exist between the Gothic and postmodern paradigms. Significantly, the theories outlined in this definition all bear undercurrents that are definitively Gothic while being inspired by Gothic themes of terror and death. Lyotard's approach to the postmodern sublime, which can be seen as directly related to terror will be of primary relevance to this study. It relates directly to the functions of the Gothic-postmodernist text, specifically to the fiction of validating Lyotard's stated obligations to the inconceivable real by presenting the unrepresentable. Furthermore, and related to Lyotard's interpretation of terror and postmodernity, Baudrillard's 'spirit of terror' and 'culture of death', is related directly to Gothic-postmodernist literary inscriptions. In his critique of postmodern culture, Baudrillard's discourse of terror appears to be linked to traditional Gothic themes and concerns. Significantly, he draws on the Gothic idea of the spectre and sublimity in terror in claiming that terrorism is a spectre that plagues us all as part of our desire for symbolic death and the realisation of the impossible real.

Of the theories to be discussed and applied, Derrida's hauntology is most broadly applicable to the chosen texts. While Derrida's hauntology is fundamentally concerned with history, it is suggestively appropriate to the literary text. According to Derrida, and in line with the basic manifesto of Gothic literature, we should embrace the spectres that haunt as an intrinsic part of our present situation, thus destabilising the structural ideologies that maintain their otherness, in this case, language. Derrida's Gothic vocabulary is of great importance and can be seen even more obviously in the subtitle of his interview 'Passages – From Traumatism to Promise': 'prepare your self to experience the future and welcome the monster' (Derrida 1995, 385). Intriguingly, his critique of Marx's ontology of commodity value, Derrida picks up on the power of the metaphor of

the spectre as that 'indispensable', 'bodiless body' which haunts the Thing from both inside and out to the point where it becomes a 'dead-ling Thing' (Derrida 1994, 4). This would, arguably, mimic such Gothic literary creations as Frankenstein's creature and the many ghosts of similar fictions which haunt the present in search of 'presence' and symbolic value.

Like Derrida, Lyotard and Baudrillard, Žižek, too imparts a particularly Gothic imaginary in his interpretations of Lacan; his analysis of first and second death, and his theory of the sublime. Notably, Žižek's version of the sublime relates directly to Lyotard's and is more than relevant to understanding how the Gothic sublime is manifested in certain postmodernist texts. According to Žižek, the sublime is 'paradox of an object which, in the very field of representation, provides a view, in a negative way of the dimension of what is unrepresentable'; that which may allow us to 'experience the impossibility of the thing' (Žižek 1998, 203). Doubly significant, in this, are the implications of 'the Thing'. In Žižek's model, *Das Ding* bears admitted connotations with 'The Thing' in science-fiction horror and also in the Gothic (Žižek 1998 132). His ideas seem to encapsulate the Gothic drive of postmodern theories and are a point of relation between those already mentioned.

But to return to the question of genre: in his study of genre, Stam poses the necessary question: are genres really 'out there' in the world, or are they merely the constructions of analysts? Is there a finite taxonomy of genres or are they in principle infinite? Are genres timeless Platonic essences or ephemeral, time-bound entities? Are they culture-bound or transcultural? (Stam 2000, 14). From a poststructuralist perspective, certainly, genres are the constructions of analysts. However, as construction in and through language is indispensable to existence and to our relative knowledge of self and of the world, the construction of genre is consequently indispensable to our understanding of art and literature. In this sense, there is an infinite nomenclature of genres according to the infinite number of literary texts that will be written, each text contributing to a change in the genre, which awaits linguistic construction. For this reason, I would disagree with John Hartley who argues that 'genres are agents of ideological closure — they limit the meaning-potential of a given text' (O'Sullivan et al. 1994, 128). On the contrary, they are agents of discourse which further the meaning potential of given texts by



relating them to other works in the construction of genre. Christine Gledhill accurately states that there are no 'rigid rules of inclusion and exclusion... Genres... are not discrete systems, consisting of a fixed number of listable items' (Gledhill 1985, 60). Instead they focus on the interpretative spaces opened up for readers, and through the dialogic potential of intertextuality tend, to transcend time and culture, as will be demonstrated through the case of Bulgakov's *The Master and Margarita*.

Tangential to the issue of 'genre', questions arise in relation to the relevance of a theoretical approach to the Gothic particularly when, as Spooner points out that due to its expansive nature the Gothic, like postmodernism is amenable to numerous and often disparate theories. This is 'because its components can be reorded in infinite combinations, because they provide a lexicon that can be plundered for a hundred different purposes, a crypt of lady part that can be stitched together in a myriad of permutations' (Spooner 2006, 156). In light of this, Derrida's analysis of genre, which argues that 'a text cannot belong to no genre, it cannot be without... a genre... [every text participates in one or several genres, there is no genreless text]' (Derrida 1981, 61), offers a significant answer. Literary critics who deal with the classification of genres are effectively taking part in the indispensable practice of constructing a context through language. In Derrida's view a text cannot be identified in any respect, except as part of the chain of signification by which all texts are differentiated from one another.

Interestingly, Tzvetan Todorov, in his work on the fantastic, at one point refers to Vladimir Propp's theory of genres in a similar approach to Derrida's and states that critics, like scientists, do the necessary job of classifying the world into species, genres, types etc. (Todorov 1973, 6). While this is a valid statement, it is important to take into account that 'genre is uncategorical: it is a shifting serotic space where a certain range of textual possibilities may be formed in order to interact meaningfully... [and] we can only map the contours of this space' (Reid 1989, 209). In this sense, my argument for the definition of Gothic-postmodernism also recommends a redefinition of genre as inherently linked to context and culture; as a voice for the ideological and social discourses that define an age and subsequently propose modes of identification to readers. From this perspective and with an open and arguably poststructuralist approach to genre, and a

stark focus on the literary and theoretical implications of terror and the sublime, this study will prove that it does not suffice to say, as many critics have, that the Gothic is a genre that has seeped into all literary movements, including postmodernism, filling a small but significant role in providing an outlet for social and imaginative energy. It is an active generic component in Gothic-postmodernism; a genre, that should be appreciated on its own terms.