



FRANKENSTEIN AND THE BIRTH OF THE GOTHIC NOVEL

By Mary Shelley's birth in 1797, the novel as a form of literature had been practiced for only a few decades in Western culture. One of the earliest novels in English, *Tristram Shandy* by Laurence Stern, was published in 1759. *Tristram Shandy* is a ribald, comic novel with an irreverent narrator and a wandering plot. Other novels of the time, like *Evelina* by Fanny Burney, published in 1778, are more typical of the genre: *Evelina's* subtitle is *The History of a Young Lady's Entrance into the World*, and it is a coming of age novel of the heroine, who enters society, learns to make decisions about proper behavior in relationships, and is rewarded with marriage to a Lord by the end of the novel. Thus two often warring purposes of early novels are exemplified by these two early novels: one, to entertain, and the other, to educate. "Educate" in this context meant to teach correct moral behavior, as a large percentage of a newly literate class in England with the leisure time to read were women. Novels that failed to educate, and instead set out to entertain, were often seen as lesser, or even corrupt forms of literature.

The Gothic novel shared in these beginnings. One of the earliest gothic novels was the *Castle of Otranto*, written by Horace Walpole and published in 1758. Walpole wrote under a pseudonym for the 1st edition, however, claiming by the book was translated from the original Italian work written by Onuphrio Muralto. This tactic was to both protect the real author from criticism and give the novel a sense of "verisimilitude," or realism. By making the novel seem more "real," the author could try to avoid the typical criticisms launched against "frivolous" or even "corrupt" novels of the day. Another strategy to give the novel a realistic feel was to write it as an **epistolary** novel, or a series of letters written by one character or multiple characters. *Dracula* uses this format to tell the entire story!

With Walpole, these early tales of terror gained their gothic name, as in the third edition, he called *Castle of Otranto* “a Gothic tale,” referring to the Gothic castle that the story occurs within. “Gothic”

THE
CASTLE OF OTRANTO,
A
GOTHIC STORY.

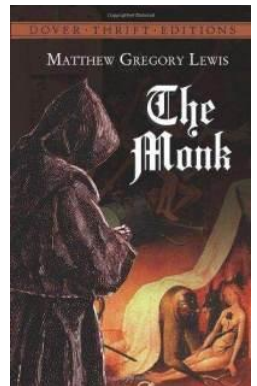
— Fama
Fingitur spolia, tanta ut Per, et Caput uni
Reddatur ferre. — HOR.

THE THIRD EDITION.

L O N D O N:
Printed for WILLIAM BATHOE in the Strand.
M.DCC.LXVI.

literally refers to a particular time period in architecture, lasting from the 12th to the 16th century in Europe. Thus the very earliest “gothic” novels often occurred in antique, haunted settings, where the true horror had occurred decades, if not centuries before in some “gothic” past. So the timeless motif of the haunted house in gothic and horror fiction actually began as a haunted castle!

In another famous early gothic tale that was immensely popular, an ancient monastery, with secret stairways and crypts galore, was the setting for Matthew Lewis’s *The Monk*, which told the story of a pious monk corrupted by a mysterious and beautiful woman with supernatural powers, as well as describing the sufferings of a pair of star-crossed lovers. Other motifs (or reoccurring themes) of these gothic novels were:



- A damsel in distress, usually blonde and beautiful
- The heroic protagonist: knight, or gentleman who saves all in the end, often by losing his own life
- The “sidekick” or helper to the Hero: often a secondary, more intelligent character to the Hero, who assists him in his heroic actions and decisions
- A human adversary/antagonist, who often inadvertently lets loose a supernatural evil
- The supernatural evil: a vengeful ghost, monster, etc. who creates all sorts of chaos, but is eventually tamed at the end; often winds up turning on the “adversary” who released him/her/it
- A haunted or supernatural setting: a house, castle, woods, etc.

As this genre progresses, of course, these motifs get toyed with. Many current horror stories feature a heroic damsel who has little need of a knight to save her, such as “Alice” in the Resident Evil movie series. Alice plays several interesting roles through this series, first as one the scientists who create a deadly evil in a “damsel in distress” who suffers amnesia but then quickly evolves into the heroic protagonist, and then by the later films has become a Frankenstein-like creature, created by the Umbrella corporation, the true antagonist of the series.



By the time Mary Shelley reached adulthood, gothic novels were hugely popular. No doubt she read



many of them, but her childhood was unusual in that her parents, well educated revolutionaries, greatly encouraged her education far beyond that the typical upper class young woman of the day. Her father, William Godwin, was a well known philosopher who advocated a non-violent overthrow of the current British institutions of monarchy, aristocracy, government and the church. Mary Shelley's mother was Mary Wollstonecraft, who wrote a famous treatise called *A Vindication of the Rights of Women*, advocating for full voting and economic equality for women. Remember that they lived during the time of the French and American Revolutions, so heady ideas of equality and overthrow of

oppressive governments were thrilling if disturbing topics of the day.

At age 17, Mary fell in love with the then-married Percy Bysshe Shelley, who was already a renowned poet and follower of Godwin's revolutionary theories. Mary and Percy Shelley ran off to Italy together, and married after Percy Shelley's wife committed suicide a few years later. Mary had already born a stillborn daughter.

Mary Shelley's preface to her 1831 edition of *Frankenstein* tells of the famous story of her novel's conception. John Polidori, mentioned as one of the companions in the ghost story challenge, went on to write a best-selling novel, called *The Vampyre*, which is the first published vampire story in English.

Mary Shelley continued to write after *Frankenstein*, however, none of her other novels or essays gained the same popularity. She lost 3 children to miscarriages, nearly losing her life during one of them. She also died relatively young, at age 53, due to most likely a brain tumor. *Frankenstein*, written when she was only 19, continues as her most enduring work.