

A black and white illustration featuring several Gothic motifs. At the top center is a human skull. To its left is a candelabra with several lit candles. Below the skull and candelabra is a small, ornate coffin. To the right of the skull is a large, detailed rose. The entire scene is set against a dark background with some foliage. The text "Elements of Gothic Literature" is centered in a white, serif font.

Elements of
Gothic Literature

1. Setting in a castle or old mansion.

The action takes place in and around an old castle or an old mansion, or the ruins of an old castle or mansion. Sometimes the edifice is seemingly abandoned, sometimes occupied, and sometimes it's not clear whether the building has occupants (human or otherwise). The castle often contains secret passages, trap doors, secret rooms, trick panels with hidden levers, dark or hidden staircases, and possibly ruined sections.

The goal of the dark and mysterious setting is to create a sense of unease and foreboding, contributing toward the atmospheric element of fear and dread. Darkness also allows those sudden and frightening appearances of people, animals, ghosts, apparent ghosts, or monsters.

2. An atmosphere of mystery and suspense.

The work is pervaded by a threatening feeling, a fear enhanced by the unknown. This atmosphere is sometimes advanced when characters see only a glimpse of something – was that a person rushing out the window or only the wind blowing a curtain? Is that creaking sound coming from someone's step on the squeaky floor, or only the normal sounds of the night? Often the plot itself is built around a mystery, such as unknown parentage, a disappearance, or some other inexplicable event. People disappear or show up dead inexplicably.

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." Ancient, indecipherable maps showing the location of amazing treasure represent another variant of the ancient prophecy aspect.

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." Sometimes an omen will be used for foreshadowing, while other writers will tweak the reader by denying expectation -- what we thought was foreshadowing wasn't.

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. As you might imagine, Hollywood uses special effects to a large degree to provide fire, earthquakes, moving statues, and so forth, often blurring the line between human-produced, natural, and supernatural events.

6. High, even overwrought emotion.

The narration may be highly sentimental, and the characters are often overcome by anger, sorrow, surprise, fear, 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. (In horror-Gothic films, when the guy tells the girl, "Stay here; I'll be right back," you pretty much know that one of them will soon be dead.)

8. The metonymy of gloom and horror.

Metonymy is a type 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. (This explains why they never oil the hinges on the doors in Gothic novels.) 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

9. The vocabulary of the Gothic (DICTION).

The constant use of the appropriate vocabulary set creates and sustains 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

10. The Onomatopoeia of the Gothic.

Onomatopoeic words resemble the sound they name. For example, "buzz" when spoken supposedly resembles the sound of a buzzer. Many onomatopoeias are not very close in actual sound, but they convey the meaning to the reader. Here are some onomatopoeias frequent in Gothic works, allowing appropriate fearful sound effects to arise from the printed word.

Creak	grind	howl
moan	whisper	scream
squeak	whoosh	crash
sigh	bam	growl
groan	bang	snarl
clank	shriek	bark
slam	knock	hiss

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