

# Gothic Fiction: A Bridge between a Troubled Past and an Uncertain Future

One of my enduring childhood memories is of curling up in bed one night when I was about ten and leafing excitedly through the pages of an abridged version of Bram Stoker's [Dracula](#). I was spellbound, I remember – utterly in thrall to the deepening, claustrophobic sense of dread, and the increasingly unfathomable events. The opening section of the novel, in particular, stays with me to this day: the conventional and rather stuffy British solicitor, Jonathan Harker, travelling deeper into a land where his treasured framework of beliefs – progress, reason, industry, and moderate Anglicanism – means nothing. Transylvania is a land where wolves roam the mountain passes, where blue flames flicker above buried treasure, and where certain places are so feared, so reviled, that local people refuse even to speak of them. And then there is the Count himself: a creature who should not exist but indisputably *does*, an abomination to God and Man alike.

Now, of course, looking at *Dracula* with the more critical eyes of adulthood, I can see that it is not an outstandingly good novel in terms of its literary merits. It has, however, proved irresistible to masses of readers ever since it first appeared in bookshops. Indeed, its influence upon me was such that, in a nod to the date of *Dracula*'s first publication, I set my Victorian ghost story [The Quickening](#) specifically in 1897. Whilst I was writing *The Quickening*, I was preoccupied with the *fin de siècle* tensions that are also there just beneath the surface of *Dracula*: the tension between past and present, and the sense that something that *belongs* in the past has intruded, violently, in the here and now. And these tensions, it seems to me, are essential to an understanding of the Gothic genre.

The definition of “Gothic” fiction is, of course, subject to debate. Arguably it is less a genre than a sensibility, or a rather vague catch-all that encompasses a multitude of themes, styles, and material. The first Gothic novel is generally agreed to have been Horace Walpole's [The Castle of Otranto](#). The novel was seminal, not least because, in Walpole's words, it “was an attempt to blend two kinds of romance, the ancient and the modern. In the former all was imagination and improbability; in the latter, nature is always intended to be, and sometimes has been, copied with success.” Walpole, by combining much that was of the “old” romance with the more realistic style favoured by authors of the “new” romances, created something genuinely “novel”. *The Castle of Otranto* contains many fantastic elements, but the characters are envisaged as real people, acting – and reacting –

as real people would. It also offers something of a blueprint for the Gothic genre: there's a castle, obviously, an ancient prophecy, untimely deaths, endangered heroines, and inexplicable events. More than that, perhaps, there is the atmosphere created by Walpole. An air of gloom, mystery, and danger hangs over the entire story. And there is also one of the key elements of Gothic fiction: the idea of something that originates in the past (a family curse, in this case), but which has unfortunate repercussions for those living in the modern world.

In *Dracula*, the Count has no place in Jonathan Harker's milieu of Victorian capitalism and reason, or in his comforting philosophy, in which moderate Christianity melds effortlessly with social and scientific progress. The Count, instead, is representative of the past, of Europe's bloody history, and of feudalism. Stoker's Count, though far removed from the historical figure of Vlad Țepeș, mentions his family's past as warriors against the invading Turks, and boasts of his aristocratic blood and ongoing position as a *boyar*, or noble:

*"We Szekelys have a right to be proud, for in our veins flows the blood of many brave races who fought as the lion fights, for lordship. . . . Is it a wonder that we were a conquering race, that we were proud, that when the Magyar, the Lombard, the Avar, the Bulgar, or the Turk poured his thousands on our frontiers, we drove them back?"*

But the Count also acknowledges that the world has changed; indeed, one of the most notable things about this being from the past is the extent to which he understands the present. "The warlike days are over," he admits. "Blood is too precious a thing in these days of dishonourable peace" – a rather ironic statement, given the Count's preferred means of sustenance.

Ranged against the Count, meanwhile, are an initially rather uninspiring group of middle-class, mostly male, mostly British foes, who are the quintessential products of "these days of dishonourable peace". Jonathan Harker's journey into Transylvania is carried out largely by train. His fiancée, Mina, is adept at shorthand and typing. Quincey Morris is a Texan, a representative not just of modernity, but of the New World. Dr Van Helsing is a scientist who has experimented with blood transfusion, and stands at the cutting edge of Victorian medicine – but who has, curiously, not lost his respect for the old ways, or for the mysteries that stand in defiance of scientific convention. "Do you not think," he asks, "that there are things which you cannot understand, and yet which are,

that some people see things that others cannot? . . . Ah, it is the fault of our science that wants to explain it all, and if it explain not, then it says there is nothing to explain.”

As this rather ragtag group of vampire-hunters set out to track down and destroy the Count, they make full use of modern inventions: they rely upon the postal service, OS maps, and modern newspapers; telegrams fly back and forth; they record their impressions in diaries and by phonograph. There is even reference to the use of a telephone, in what is probably one of the first literary mentions of telephony.

The forces of modernity are, on the surface, more than a match for Dracula. And yet – in an interesting twist – though science and technology may be instrumental in locating the Count, his destruction can only be achieved by means of the old folk remedies: a stake through the heart, garlic, decapitation, and Holy Water. And here, it seems to me, is something that cuts right to the heart (no pun intended) of the Gothic genre: the theme of a threat from the past that lingers, and continues to influence the present. The threat remains as powerful as it ever was; the passage of time, with all that that entails, does little or nothing to lessen its influence. And while the threat *may* in due course be dispatched by modern means, it is just as often susceptible only to older cures.

This threat can take many forms. It is often supernatural in nature, but it might equally be entirely natural; it may be a queasy mixture of the two. For British writers, it was often explicitly equated with Catholicism (a particularly bizarre and lurid example is Matthew Gregory Lewis’s [The Monk](#)): Catholic-baiting has, after all, been a popular sport in Britain since the Reformation. Whatever the precise nature of this threat, though, it endangers the wellbeing or very life of those living in the present.

*Dracula* might well have had an influence on another highly popular Victorian novelist, S.R. Crockett, whose works have recently been republished in their entirety by Cally Phillips (see the [Ayton Publishing](#) website for more information). In *The Black Douglas*, many of the elements of *Dracula* – a sinister aristocrat from a foreign land, a castle with a terrible reputation, the significance of blood – are also apparent. Indeed, there is one particular passage that bears an uncanny resemblance to *Dracula*, though this may be coincidental: a woman whose child has been abducted hammers, screaming, at a castle door, begging for his return: “Give me my boy, murderer! Restore me my son!” In one respect, though, it is very different: far from being set in the Victorian era, as *Dracula* is, the action takes place in the mediaeval past, and evokes both its perceived romance and its many dangers, real and imagined. This is a world of fair maidens, noble knights, and enchantment of the kind that Crockett’s readers might have felt lacking in their world of

industry and progress; it is also, however, a world of black magic, arbitrary power wielded to wicked ends, and lurking danger. The villain Gilles de Retz (a “good Catholic and ardent religious”, as Crockett refers to him) is an embodiment of the dangers posed by the past; yet his wickedness is balanced by the nobility, courage and devotion displayed by other characters. *The Black Douglas*, like *Dracula*, seems to stand at the point where a genuine attachment to modernity and its benefits intersects with a nostalgic yearning for the romantic, hopelessly lost past.

Dark secrets, lingering danger, terrible deeds, simmering sexuality . . . Gothic literature was, and is, a potent brew. Interestingly, it was born in a Europe that was shedding superstition and adopting instead an increasingly scientific and secular worldview. Did the Gothic movement represent something of a rebellion? The “carnival effect” – the temporary discarding of established norms and morality, the release from common constraints – cannot be underestimated. Certainly Gothic fiction catered to the human yearning for mystery and danger, and for a past that continued to attract even as it repelled. But – and as I hope to show in the next section – Gothic fiction had no less tortuous a relationship with modernity and progress.

## **Gothic Fiction, Modernity, and Fear of the Future**

In the previous section, I talked briefly about Gothic fiction’s deeply ambivalent attitude toward the past, yet it also tends to have a somewhat troubled relationship with the forces of modernity. It is significant, perhaps, that Gothic fiction was born in a Europe that was being reshaped by the Enlightenment and rocked by the world-shattering events of French Revolution. In the words of the Marquis de Sade, Gothic fiction was “the necessary fruit of the revolutionary tremors felt by the whole of Europe.” Just as the Romantics felt that the Enlightenment was reductionist, ignoring mystery, imagination and sentiment, so too the Gothic represented something of a rebellion against a society that seemed to be turning its back on the darkness and the irrational. In his essay *The Uncanny*, Freud argued that, the modern veneer of rationalism notwithstanding, we are, both collectively and as individuals, prone to a “primitive”, animist mode of thought. Gothic fiction seems haunted by this dichotomy.

Like many rebellions, of course, the Gothic was driven (and riven) by mixed feelings. I spoke yesterday of the “carnival effect” of Gothic literature, the way it temporarily overthrows norms and the established framework of reality, and allows the reader to enter

a world of mystery, the supernatural, and intense passions. Yet Gothic novels often end with a welcome return to normality; perhaps, indeed, when contrasted with the excess and terror explored by Gothic writers, normality becomes vastly more attractive.

Obviously, both the Enlightenment and the French Revolution marked profound turning points in human history. In the wake of these events, no regime, however stable it seemed, could take its survival for granted. Government, Monarchy, and Church were all now vulnerable to challenge, and the accelerating process of Enlightenment thought could no longer be contained or suppressed. This might have been a liberating, exhilarating time, but it was also a time of profound fear. The crumbling ruins and derelict castles of Gothic fiction seem emblematic, almost, of the tottering state of social and intellectual structures; the mediaeval past that frequently appalled now also held a strange charm and fascination as a perceived refuge from the chaos of modernity.

Just as the nature of a threat from the past may vary tremendously, so too do the potential perils of modernity. In the previous section I talked about the tension between past and present to be found in *Dracula*, yet that novel also taps into fear of the future. Reading the novel, you often sense that Bram Stoker is peering into the near-future, and is not altogether comforted by what he sees there. Certainly his character Mina makes frequent, scornful references to the “New Woman”, a proto-feminist who was making her presence felt in the late nineteenth century. Mina herself often assumes a passive, submissive role in the novel – she expresses the desire “to be useful to Jonathan” (hence her typing and shorthand), and speaks in almost rapturous terms of the bravery and nobility of the men surrounding her. Yet, interestingly, when we first meet her she is an independent woman, supporting herself through her work as a schoolmistress, and is later described as having a “man’s brain”. Far from taking a back seat in the novel, she is instrumental in driving the plot forward and orchestrating the hunt for Dracula.

In Mary Shelley’s [\*Frankenstein\*](#), the threat presented by the future is one that continues to frighten people: that of science run amok, released from all inhibiting factors. Victor Frankenstein is a highly modern figure: he seeks to “penetrate into the recesses of nature and show how she works in her hiding-places”; he considers that life can be stripped of its mystery and understood in purely mechanical terms. In the figure of Victor, we can see something of Shelley’s own milieu. Her progressive father, William Godwin, exposed his daughter to the scientific, philosophical and political ideas of the time; she would no doubt have been familiar with the concept of using dead bodies for the study of anatomy, and the idea that revivification could be achieved by means of electricity. This idea was actually the

basis of the work of one Giovanni Aldini, a doctor who attempted to reanimate the dead by means of bio-electric Galvanism.

Unlike those of Aldini, Frankenstein's experiments meet with a degree of success, at least on the surface: the creature is not only brought to life, but is strong and healthy, and later develops intelligence, emotion, and the power of speech – all the traits, in fact, which we consider fundamentally human. Yet the creature is an outcast, feared and excluded on account of its ugliness and *otherness*. In its rage, it seeks revenge on human society, and especially upon the man who created it. Furthermore, there is something unholy about the creature's very existence, as Shelley herself suggests: "supremely frightful would be the effect of any human endeavour to mock the stupendous mechanism of the Creator of the world." There is also perhaps an echo of the Romantic unease about the Enlightenment, of the fear that feeling, nature, and mystery would be crushed by rationalism. It is significant, perhaps, that the creature, deprived of human contact and affection, eventually reacts with rage and aggression to the humans who have shunned it. *Frankenstein* continues to resonate because it addresses an issue that is now more contentious than ever: when, why, and how does science go too far? At what point does the genuine desire to improve lives become unjustifiable meddling?

A modern take on the Frankenstein story is [\*The Frankenstein Inheritance\*](#) by Simon Cheshire, in which a descendant of the original Dr Frankenstein, Wolfgang von Frankenstein, continues his grandfather's experiments – with terrible results. The original experiments, however, seem somewhat crude compared to Wolfgang's achievements, which include the scientific manufacture of human flesh and body parts. Such advances could, of course, be put to very good use, as the doctor explains: "The blind shall see with mechanical eyes, the injured shall have their limbs regrown and their scars healed. Pills to soothe the brain. Fresh hearts and replacement lungs." So far, so benign; but Frankenstein's ambitions actually go far beyond this. "Soon," he continues, "improvement and repair will no longer be enough for the human race. Then, I will offer them *perfection* . . . Artificial flesh, new bodies, from modern factories. No more death! . . . The choice will be an easy one: stay human and die, weak and broken and diseased; or become one with the new flesh, *my* creation, and live in health and beauty for eternity. Once Mankind makes that choice, Nature will have been defeated, forever."

In [\*The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde\*](#), R.L. Stevenson presents us with a similar dilemma. Dr Jekyll is, like Dr Frankenstein, interested in science's potentially beneficial effects upon humanity and society. Unlike Frankenstein, however, his particular

area of concern is not the prolonging of life or the reversal of death, but morality. To Jekyll, the brutal, primitive side of humans – “the beast within”, if you like – is something to be overcome and denied. To this end, Dr Jekyll experiments upon isolating it from the more rational, civilised part of the character. Victorian society – like all societies, including those that may potentially exist in the future – demanded of its inhabitants that they repress certain aspects of their own personalities, perhaps to an unnatural degree. *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* suggests that the suppression and denial of aspects of one’s self can hardly have positive results.

A modern Gothic novel that I greatly admire is Sarah Waters’ [\*The Little Stranger\*](#), and here too we see an example of Gothic fiction’s ambivalent attitude toward the future. The novel is set in the years immediately following World War II: a Labour government is in power, the National Health Service is on its way in, and the old social structure is on its way out. Rural physician Dr Faraday is in many ways representative of the changing times: of humble origins, he’s a self-made man whose rise coincides with the fall of the landed gentry. Yet he too seems in many ways uneasy about this quiet revolution, or evolution: in particular, he’s worried about the impact of the NHS on his livelihood, while in more general terms he seems to yearn for the more settled and orderly world he remembers from his childhood.

Faraday has lived all his life in the shadow of the local manor house, Hundreds Hall, and the Ayres family, its owners. He remembers it, and them, as grand, impressive, imposing; yet when he’s called in to treat a supposedly sick maid, he finds dearth, decay, and a kind of controlled desperation. The much-depleted Ayres family – tortured war veteran Rod, plain spinster Caroline, and their frail, embittered mother – have property, but no money, no prospects and, seemingly, no place in a society that is leaving them behind. The crumbling state of the Hall emphasises the corresponding state of the family who live there.

“I gather that neglecting the servants is a capital offence these days,” says Rod at one point. “They’re to get better treatment than us, apparently.” This is just one of the utterances in which the family members betray their distaste for, and discomfort with, the new. It is not altogether sour grapes: the Ayreses, for all their history and reputation, are unable to compete in this new world, which constantly bewilders them. Faraday, the man of the future, at one point offers to treat Rod’s war wounds with a new, largely untested form of electrical therapy. The new intrudes upon life at the Hall later in the novel, with altogether less benign results, when the Ayreses invite their *nouveau riche* neighbours to

dinner; in a dramatic turn of events, Hundreds Hall seems to turn on these unwelcome representatives of all that is new and threatening. This is one of the many odd events that take place in the house, events that force the reader to ask whether there is a ghost, or whether the family is just haunted by the memory of their glorious past and their uncertain future.

*The Little Stranger* is a perfect example of how Gothic fiction, even as it casts an ambivalent eye on the past, can also express profound discomfort with modernity and the projected future. Perhaps de Sade was right: in times of change and uncertainty, the past, for all its horrors, can provide us with a useful emotional refuge. Gothic fiction, then, though sometimes dismissed as being unsophisticated, actually asks some very pertinent and complex questions about society, about philosophical and scientific trends, and about our very nature as human beings. These questions are as vital now as they ever were; and in the next section I shall discuss four literary classics that used elements of Gothic fiction to explore them.

## **Four Literary Classics: Gothic Fiction and Big Questions**

Gothic fiction is occasionally seen as being unsophisticated, unduly sensational, and cliché-ridden, of producing penny dreadfuls and potboilers but little of real literary merit. Certainly as a genre it occasionally veers perilously close to self-parody, and indeed sometimes embraces it – Jane Austen’s [\*Northanger Abbey\*](#) is a notable example. Yet the charge that it is unsophisticated is unfair, and far from the truth. Few, I think, would deny that the four novels I’m going to talk about in this section are literary classics; and all four used elements of Gothic fiction to explore questions about human nature and society.

[\*Wuthering Heights\*](#) begins, as does much Gothic literature, with an unsuspecting stranger arriving in a strange, inhospitable place. *Wuthering Heights* is a house poisoned by hatred and cruelty, mired in gloom, and haunted by memories. It may even be literally haunted: Lockwood, the unfortunate stranger, experiences a nightmare or vision of the dead Catherine, beating at the window and pleading, “Let me in – let me in!” If it is a dream, it is a terrifyingly real and immediate one. Later, Lockwood says that the house is “swarming with ghosts and goblins.” And, just as the novel begins with a ghostly experience, so it ends with one: a local rumour springs up to the effect that Heathcliff is not at peace, but continues to haunt the living: “the country folks, if you ask them, would swear on the Bible that he *walks*.”

As in much Gothic fiction, the characters seem to be almost subservient to place. The setting here is a character in its own right: both the Heights and the moorland surrounding it seem to define and determine many of the traits displayed by the human characters. Dispossession and banishment, also staples of Gothic fiction, are powerfully demonstrated here: Catherine is banished from the Heights, by marriage and then by death; the rightful heir is stripped of what is legally and morally his. The loss of one's rightful place, of one's home, is almost tantamount to death itself.

More interesting, perhaps, is the way in which Emily Brontë explores and analyses the various strands of the human personality, in a way that bypasses traditional moral judgements and actually seems rather closer to modern psychoanalysis. In *Wuthering Heights*, we are invited to contemplate the divided self, to understand the different elements of the human character by means of a study of duality. The tone is set, perhaps, by Brontë's unconventional narrative form. A story within a story, the account is commenced by Lockwood and then handed over for the most part to Nelly Dean. No one person has absolute access to the truth, in *Wuthering Heights*; the story comes to us by degrees, and from varying viewpoints.

This is appropriate, for *Wuthering Heights* is a novel of differing perspectives, and of contrasts. Heathcliff's fiery, obsessive desire is compared to Edgar Linton's more controlled and inhibited courtship. Catherine's desperate, passionate need for Heathcliff is quite distinct from her more conventional affection for the man she chooses to marry. The wildness and austerity of *Wuthering Heights* itself forms a clear contrast to the respectability and gentility of Thrushcross Grange and the Linton family. Throughout the novel, these different elements seem to be in a state of almost constant war; they clash, oppose one another, and give rise to almost unbearable tension. They also seem to be representative of the different facets of human nature: the rational and the irrational, the conventional and the unconventional, the personal and the social. We are all, in part, the violent, selfish Heathcliff, just as we are all in part Mr Hyde. We can repress this side to our personality, but we cannot defeat it entirely. How can we reconcile the diverse strands of our characters, and become balanced human beings?

Brontë offers no clear solution, but she does hold out the hope that we can achieve such a balancing act. At the end of the novel, when Heathcliff, Catherine and Linton are all dead, when all their battles are fought and their victories and defeats tallied, a delicate synthesis and resolution is achieved. In the famous final sentence, as Lockwood stands by

their graves – all three are buried together now, in a symbolic realisation of the harmony that eluded them in life – he says:

*“I lingered around them, under that benign sky; watched the moths fluttering among the heath, and hare-bells; listened to the soft wind breathing through the grass; and wondered how any one could ever imagine unquiet slumbers, for the sleepers in that quiet earth.”*

Charlotte Brontë’s [\*Jane Eyre\*](#) also contains many aspects of Gothic fiction, which are combined with Romanticism to form a distinctly Victorian novel. Mr Rochester is a standard Gothic hero, or antihero: gloomy, Byronic, haunted, and with a suggestion of some skeleton in his closet. Thornfield Hall is a place of mystery and secrets. There are certain parts of the house, certain rooms, that no one visits. There are strange sounds in the night, and occasional sightings of someone, or something; inexplicable fires break out; mysterious visitors appear from overseas, and it soon becomes clear that they have some connection with Rochester’s past. There is also a strain of the supernatural in the novel: the young Jane, locked in the red room of her aunt’s house, believes she sees a ghost. Jane has prophetic dreams, and lightning strikes a tree on the night she agrees to marry Rochester. Later in the novel, Jane hears Rochester calling to her, though miles separate them.

In contrast to the inward-looking questions posed by *Wuthering Heights*, *Jane Eyre* looks outward, and protests loudly at what it sees. Jane must contend not only with Rochester’s past, but with her own. She is an orphan, cruelly treated by relatives and teachers; during the novel, she must liberate herself from the shadow of her own history. “Resurgam” is the word engraved on her childhood friend’s gravestone; it might equally be a statement of Jane’s progress as she arises from the poverty and misery of her childhood and youth. Jane is also conscious of her position as a relatively lowly, female member of a socially-divided and male-dominated society, and resents it. “It is my spirit that addresses your spirit,” she tells Rochester at one point, “just as if we had both passed through the grave, and we stood at God’s feet, equal – as we are!”

Ironically, though Jane’s own experiences as the “other” have given her sympathy for orphans, women, and the poor, there is one character who notably fails to win much sympathy: Rochester’s first wife, the “mad” Bertha Mason. Though not a supernatural being, she is presented in a distinctly vampiric way. Jane actually calls her a “vampire”;

when she attacks her own brother “she sucked the blood . . . [and] said she’d drain my heart.” Bertha’s appearance is described in a way that emphasises her otherness: “It was a discoloured face – it was a savage face. . . . the lips were swelled and dark, the brow furrowed, the black eyebrows widely raised over the bloodshot eyes.” Bertha’s origins in the West Indies – and, possibly, her mixed race – are seen here as a thing of horror, a threat to the order and safety of Jane’s English surroundings. Is Bertha Mason a symbol of the threat supposedly posed by foreignness, as well as the exploitation and misunderstanding inherent in the colonial enterprise? Jean Rhys, in her inspired prequel to *Jane Eyre*, [\*Wide Sargasso Sea\*](#), cast doubt on the assumption that the first Mrs Rochester is mad; instead, she filled in her back story, painting her as the victim of prejudice, colonialism, racism, and Europe’s tangled history with its Empires.

Charles Dickens’ [\*Great Expectations\*](#) is something of a genre-bender, containing elements of realism, the thriller, and the *Bildungsroman*. Yet it also contains many elements of Gothic literature. Pip’s miserable childhood, set on the edge of bleak marshes where thick fogs roll in from the coast and escaped convicts roam the lonely countryside, is a Gothic nightmare. Later, when Pip goes to meet Miss Havisham, he finds that her home, Satis House, is an almost stereotypical Gothic setting. Miss Havisham herself – abandoned on her wedding day, clinging to the past, and yet laying her own particular plans for the future – is thoroughly Gothic. Time, literally, stands still for her: she keeps her house exactly as it was when she was jilted at the altar, and has stopped all the clocks. Pip even experiences a nightmare vision of her body hanging in the brewery attached to Satis House – a strange touch, drawing attention to the Havisham family’s mercantile past, and the normality and industry that Miss Havisham herself has shunned. Hanging, perhaps, is symbolic of her state of suspension. Yet, as in much Gothic fiction, she is not *confined* to the past that ensnares her: her actions will have profound implications for Pip’s future.

In *Great Expectations*, as in much Gothic fiction, the question of identity is a vexed one. Miss Havisham, trapped in the identity of the spurned bride, only changes when she feels remorse; the burning of her wedding attire is symbolic of this. The identity of Pip’s benefactor is unknown, as is that of Estella’s father. Magwitch escapes from his old identity and assumes a new one in Australia. Pip himself, born in a certain place and milieu, seems desperate to shed his past and assume a new character. He finds his lowly origins excruciatingly embarrassing, lamenting “that I was a common labouring-boy; that my hands were coarse; that my boots were thick . . . and generally that I was in a low-lived bad way.” And yet, ironically, the novel opens with the young Pip examining the gravestones of

his parents – the key to his identity, his own personal “missing link”. He even, pathetically, tries to create a mental image of them, based on their tombstones. This leads to some intriguing questions: how much of our identity is determined by our family and birth, and to what extent is it self-determined? Can we change our identities?

*The Hound of the Baskervilles* is perhaps the most famous and well-loved of Conan Doyle’s Sherlock Holmes books, and is undeniably Gothic in themes and ambience. From the onset, there is tension between the natural and the supernatural. The Baskerville family is believed to be cursed and terrorised by a ghostly hound; one of their members is said to have died because of it. Baskerville Hall – isolated, desolate, very old, and surrounded by moorland – is a classic Gothic setting. History seems to hang heavily over the story; local sites of historic interest are frequently referred to, and Holmes even hides out in an ancient hut at one point.

*The Hound of the Baskervilles*, then, in common with much Gothic fiction, highlights the bizarre, the unexplained, and possibly the inexplicable; but, of course, what match is that for Holmes’s relentless logic? Holmes, a man of science and reason, seeks to unveil the all-too-natural causes of the family’s troubles. Holmes is symbolic of modernity and the scientific method, perhaps: he applies logic, reason, evidence and intelligence even to something as emotive and mysterious as a ghostly hound. Sir Henry Baskerville, the new heir, is also something of a modernising force. He talks about his desire to renovate the Hall, in particular by adding electric lights: “I’ll have a row of electric lamps up here inside of six months,” he declares at one point. Yet even as he makes such plans, the narrator, Watson, draws the reader’s attention to the “dim line of ancestors” on display in the Hall. It is almost as though Baskerville cannot escape his own history, and the weight of that history.

Of course, it is Holmes’s logic that allows the threat to be overcome and neutralised. And yet, interestingly, there is a very slight ambiguity in the ending. The curse of the Baskervilles lives on, albeit through the agency of a human being, rather than a supernatural force. In common with much Gothic fiction, the conclusion allows us to relax – but not entirely. The world we return to following an excursion into Gothic terror is not the same world that we left behind.

And this tension, it seems to me, would have been particularly pertinent to a late Victorian audience. Science and progress were rapidly rendering superstition obsolete, and yet the Victorian obsession with the mediaeval past, with spiritualism and the supernatural, was at high tide. *The Hound of the Baskervilles*, in common with much

Gothic fiction, seems, in part, to be a literary attempt to pick apart those tangled threads and make sense of them. Gothic fiction, though it may deal with the unlikely and unrealistic, is actually very good at expressing a society's needs and preoccupations – a theme I want to explore further in the next section.

## **An Ongoing Tradition: Modern Gothic and Southern Gothic Fiction**

So far, I've argued that Gothic fiction has a long, proud, and sophisticated history. In this section, and the next, I hope to show that this tradition is far from over. Gothic literature is preoccupied with the past; but, like the spectres it raises, it cannot be consigned to the past. It will, I think, be a long time before anyone drives a stake through this genre's heart.

Daphne du Maurier's wonderful novel [\*Rebecca\*](#) is, though presumably set in the 1930s, thoroughly Gothic. Many of the stock elements of Gothic fiction are here: the remote country house, a cast of secretive and occasionally bizarre characters, a skulking servant, a naive heroine, and even the suggestion of a supernatural presence. But there is nothing old-fashioned or *passé* about *Rebecca*. Here the Gothic thrives in the 1930s, sitting comfortably alongside telephones, telegrams, cars, newspapers, and trips to Monte Carlo, the watering-hole of the rich and famous. Here, too, the Gothic is used to unearth psychological truths, which in turn lends the story subtlety and sophistication. The characters are not stereotypes, but rounded human beings with complex motivations. Manderley, like many a Gothic mansion, is a metaphor for past secrets. Rebecca, though dead, is a constant presence, dominating the house and the people who live there.

The heroine – whose name we never learn – ironically struggles throughout the novel with the question of her own identity. Her parents are dead, and she has been reduced to acting as a hired companion; she does not seem to exist in her own right, and is in any case uneasy with who she is. Following her marriage, she becomes “Mrs de Winter” or “the *second* Mrs de Winter”, but she does not feel comfortable in this role. Her husband, idealising her as an innocent, fails to recognise her autonomy and individual needs; indeed, he actively conceals the truth from her, when finding out the truth is precisely the thing that will save her as an individual. *Rebecca* speaks urgently of the curious dynamic of relationships between the powerful and the powerless, as well as the extent to which the past influences the present, and to which unpalatable truths may be concealed beneath attractive facades. What could be more relevant to the years just prior to World War II?

Gothic fiction continues to evolve; it is not confined to its native soil of Europe, nor to the time that gave birth to it. A striking example of this is the sub-genre of Southern Gothic fiction. The American Deep South of the Southern Gothic genre is a haunted place, figuratively if not literally; it is troubled by the spectres of poverty and decay, and overshadowed by the lingering remnants of racism and slavery. The birth of Southern Gothic can perhaps be traced back as far as Mark Twain's unidealised portrayal of Southern life, but it came of age during the twentieth century. The tools of Gothic fiction – the macabre, the unravelling of secrets, and decay – were used to explore Southern society, values and history, to critique these things, and to examine the contrasts and connections between the past, present, and future. Key authors in the Southern Gothic genre have included William Faulkner, Truman Capote, Harper Lee, Cormac McCarthy, Carson McCullers, Tennessee Williams, and Anne Rice. (Eudora Welty is often added, though she herself apparently denied any links to the genre.)

One of the most famous works in the Southern Gothic canon is Harper Lee's [\*To Kill a Mockingbird\*](#). The South, as depicted by Lee, is a place of tension: tension between past and present, between poor whites and even poorer blacks. The forces of good and evil are far larger than the small town, Maycomb, in which they are played out, and the themes much broader than the story itself. Maycomb is, for the most part, quiet and humdrum, but Lee inserts a number of strange occurrences that seem out of place there, and yet add immeasurably to the novel's power. There is an unnatural fall of snow, the appearance of a mad dog, and a house fire; the children are attacked on, of all evenings, Hallowe'en night. Above all, there is the largely unseen, mysterious Boo Radley, a living ghost, the focal point of local superstitions and fears. Boo, of course, is not actually a ghost; Maycomb and the Deep South are haunted not by spirits, but by lingering racism, inequality and violence.

Hatred and prejudice work almost as a poison, corrupting minds and souls; the blameless are destroyed by it. Innocents such as Jem and Scout are seen to go from childhood naivety to having experienced evil, which they must then incorporate into their world views. For some, the transition is still more difficult, if not impossible: Boo Radley, shaken by his experiences of the world, reacts by retreating from it.

Carson McCullers' [\*The Ballad of the Sad Café\*](#) turns societal norms and gender stereotypes on their head with its grotesque, defiantly un-stereotypical characters. Miss Amelia is over six feet tall, with muscles like a man; bad-tempered and fiercely independent, she is a woman who openly defies traditional femininity. Equally unconventional is Cousin Lymon, the little hunchback who appears one day in Miss

Amelia's town claiming to be her relative. The small town in Georgia in which this occurs is, as in a fairytale, sleeping – until it is brought to life, not by a kiss, but by the love that develops between Miss Amelia and Cousin Lymon, and by the town café that they reopen together. Unlike a fairytale, however, the effect is not permanent, and there is no happily ever after.

In *The Ballad of the Sad Café*, the past cannot be sidestepped: it returns, with a vengeance, to cause havoc in the present. Miss Amelia's ten-day marriage, years before, to the town bad boy will not be forgotten, but comes back to haunt her. Miss Amelia is trapped, almost, in her own past. Indeed, the theme of imprisonment is a constant: one character has just been released from prison, and others are portrayed as the prisoners of isolation, poverty and Fate. The novella even begins and ends with reference to a chain-gang labouring in the fields.

Small-town Georgia has here a rich, disturbing atmosphere: there is poverty, solitude, and loneliness, but there is also a profound, almost spiritual, melancholy and sense of subdued desire. As in the case of *To Kill a Mockingbird*, society and its standards are questioned, probed and deconstructed. Gothic fiction has occasionally been derided for its sensationalism and noxious influence (all that spectacle and transgression can't be good for readers, seems to be the argument), but Southern Gothic is a fine example of how Gothic fiction can be used to examine, understand, and criticise societal norms, gender and racial stereotyping, and cultural paradigms.

Another offshoot of the Gothic genre is Suburban Gothic, a sub-genre that focuses on the anxiety and alienation of life in the 'burbs. The tension between individuality and conformity is often a theme in Suburban Gothic, which is hardly surprising: the very fabric of suburban life seems designed to encourage orthodoxy, but the people living in the suburbs – particularly young people, who do not generally have much choice as to their place of residence – are as individualistic and disparate as ever. Richard Matheson's [\*I Am Legend\*](#) and Shirley Jackson's [\*The Haunting of Hill House\*](#) both contain elements of what might be termed Suburban Gothic. A novel that is not usually classified as Gothic in any sense, but which I think deserves a mention here, is Richard Yates' [\*Revolutionary Road\*](#). Frank and April Wheeler are trapped in a stultifying existence that they themselves can scarcely endure. Theirs is a common story: an unplanned pregnancy and a hasty marriage are followed by the drudgery of earning money for their young family and caring for their suburban home. Frank goes out to work in a dull office job; April stays at home, embittered by her failure to make anything of the acting career she once craved. On the surface, their

home is bright and pleasant, and the Wheelers themselves an almost picture postcard couple. Appearances, as we all know, can be deceptive: in reality, the Wheelers are imprisoned by their past mistakes, crushed by their present lives, and unable to see any realistic future at all; they take refuge in dreams, which in the end only increases their desperation.

The Suburban Gothic genre is still young, but it has plenty of scope. Many, if not most, inhabitants of the Western world now live in the suburbs, and any genre that examines the way in which we live can only be a good thing. Nor is Suburban Gothic unique; the Gothic sensibility continues to find new outlets. Tasmanian Gothic and Southern Ontario Gothic spring to mind: in these relatively new sub-genres, writers continue to use Gothic conventions to examine and critique social conditions.

Gothic fiction adapts, then, and will continue to adapt. And this leads me neatly to the part of this article concerned with self-publishing. It's by no means fanciful, I'd suggest, to say that self-publishing will play its part in Gothic literature's development and future; and in the final section I'll be examining some quality self-published works of Gothic fiction.

## **Indie Publishing and the Gothic Future**

In the previous four sections of this article, I hope I've shown how diverse and vigorous Gothic fiction is. Something else that is both diverse and vigorous at the present time is the self-publishing and indie publishing scene, and I hope – and expect – that Gothic fiction will make its mark here too. Recently, therefore, I set out to read some good quality, indie Gothic novels. I received many suggestions of books that might fit the bill; due to time constraints, sadly, I couldn't read them all, but I do hope to get around to them in due course. And, of course, I'm aware that in any case I've only really scratched the surface. If anyone out there knows of any other quality works of self- or indie-published Gothic fiction, do please let me know: [mari.biella@gmail.com](mailto:mari.biella@gmail.com).

A novel that owes much to du Maurier's *Rebecca* is Linda Gillard's recently-published [Cauldstane](#). When Jenny Ryan, a professional ghost writer, travels to the Scottish Highlands to work on the autobiography of the eccentric Sholto MacNab, the Laird of Cauldstane, she thinks she has stumbled upon her dream job. She is initially enchanted by the castle and its diverse inhabitants; yet she soon realises too that both the castle and the MacNab family represent "a building and way of life in its death throes." Cauldstane is something of a museum, holding the detritus of centuries, and its inhabitants are

oppressed by the weight of their own history. “Let Fear be Far from All” is the family motto, but in fact the MacNabs live in an almost constant state of fear, whether it be fear of their future prospects (they have property but very little ready money) or a rather more intangible unease. There is even a curse that supposedly dictates that any woman marrying a Cauldstane heir will either die young or remain childless. Interestingly, an in an echo of *The Hound of the Baskervilles*, very few people really believe in the curse, but it continues to throw a shadow over the family, and is never actually disproved.

Cauldstane is dominated – as are many Gothic castles and mansions – by a portrait, in this case of Sholto’s second wife Meredith. Meredith was a dominant presence when she was alive, and – as in du Maurier’s *Rebecca* – she seems to become even more dominant following her death. Jenny too is soon affected by the shadow thrown by Meredith, and this rather atypical heroine must fight for the place and family she has come to love. *Cauldstane* is a story about how certain people can continue to affect those around them even after their physical deaths; it is also, socially, rather pertinent to our times. Scotland, and Britain in general, has many living remnants of a previous social order, like the MacNabs and Cauldstane; can they retain their position in a rapidly changing society, or must they be swept away by the force of progress?

Simon Cheshire’s [\*The Frankenstein Inheritance\*](#), which I mentioned the second section in this article, is both a tribute to Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* and a fabulous foray into Victorian Gothic in its own right. In this take on the original story, Victor Frankenstein’s grandson has continued the family experiments, and has indeed expanded and refined them. Victoria and Albert, two eerie children brought to London from Germany by a kindly scientist, Professor Marchbanks, are the results. Victoria and Albert are highly unusual: they look strange, have what appears to be stitching on their bodies, and are extremely strong and agile. They are phenomenally intelligent, and yet have no memory beyond a few days before. The children are haunted by the mystery of their own origins; like the creature in *Frankenstein*, they are also doomed to be misunderstood and maltreated by a world that is threatened by mystery, rather than through any fault of their own.

This is the start of a marvellous Gothic thriller, written in an epistolary style reminiscent of *Dracula*, comprising letters, journal entries and newspaper clippings. The sense of experiencing something almost as it happens increases both the realism and the tension, as the children attempt to survive on their wits in the hostile world of Victorian London. This is Victorian London as it exists in almost everyone’s imagination: horse-

drawn carriages, fog, and East End slums where you almost expect to find Jack the Ripper lurking in the shadows.

There is also a serious question here: Frankenstein's original experiments with life and human tissue have not only been expanded and improved, but are now seen as having the potential to dovetail neatly with capitalism and consumerism. The possibility of not only prolonging life, but enhancing it in a variety of ways, meets with financial opportunism in a way that seems only too plausible in our modern world.

Dennis Hamley's [\*Of Dooms and Death\*](#) (the first book in the series *The Long Journey of Joslin de Lay*) takes us right back into the mediaeval past from which so much Gothic fiction takes its inspiration. Yet even here history continues to pose a threat. Joslin de Lay is overshadowed by the mystery of his own past and identity. The remains of a plague village overshadow the English town of Stovenham, whose inhabitants are haunted by this constant reminder of their terrible shared history. There are people, too, who come from the past, and yet whose influence upon the present will be profound – and far from benign. Joslin de Lay – an immediate outsider, not least because he is French and therefore from a country which is at war with England – arrives in Stovenham just as it is shaken by the first in a series of terrifying and inexplicable murders. Unfortunately, he arrives via the plague village, which makes him almost a living reminder of the past, and a focal point of suspicion.

As with much Gothic fiction, *Of Dooms and Death* deals with the recurring, and thorny, problem of identity. Joslin, newly orphaned, does not really know who he is; his journey will, perhaps, reveal something of his history. He is suspected of being the murderer, and – symbolically, perhaps – dons a disguise to protect his true identity. Reasonably enough, he suspects the motives and identities of those surrounding him. The victims of the murders are revealed in an eerie, disconcerting way which I can't really talk about without giving a good deal away. There is also, of course, the question of the *real* identity of the assassin who “works unseen and invisible . . . Truly like the serpent at noonday.”

So many good books, so little time . . . I'm currently reading J.D. Hughes's [\*And Soon the Song\*](#). I doubt I'll finish it before my deadline for this article arrives, so I can't say a great deal about it, other than that I'm enjoying it tremendously. Here too there seems to be something nasty reaching forward into the present from the past. Hearthstone Hall, a Gothic-style mansion, is described as “a mouth of darkness waiting to suck in the innocent.” And those innocents come in the disparate forms of Charlie, a tough New York photojournalist, and ex-paratrooper and jailbird Tom. These characters evidently have

personal histories that not even they fully understand or appreciate. I've a feeling that this is a novel that is going to keep me guessing, and I'm anxious to find out what happens next.

In the category of independent rather than self-publishing, I have to mention Cally Phillips' monumental achievement in republishing the complete works of the now-unfashionable S.R. Crockett (see the [Ayton Publishing](#) website for more details). I talked about *The Black Douglas* in my first post, which certainly fits into the Gothic genre, as I understand some of Crockett's other works do. Crockett is not nearly as popular as he was during his lifetime, so it's highly unlikely that a traditional publisher would see fit to revive his works. This brings me to one of the most significant aspects of self- and indie-publishing: it enables writers, editors and advocates to disregard and bypass current literary fashions.

Fashion is, of course, transitory; that, indeed, is its entire point. I've nothing against popular and commercially successful books, which generally are so for the simple reason that people like them, and often for very good reasons – a fact with which you can't really argue, surely? Nor can you argue with the simple fact that traditional publishing houses are businesses, and have therefore to make their decisions in accordance with financial imperatives. Anyone who wishes to write and read with regard to rather more weighty considerations, however, might have difficulty doing so in a world dominated solely by the question of commercial viability.

Gothic fiction, like everything else, goes in and out of fashion. One year, publishers won't even consider adding a certain novel to their lists, simply because they doubt they can make much money from it; five or ten years later, they might be desperate to cash in on the latest craze. Writers were once dominated by such simple, brutal business considerations, but now, given the (relative) ease of independent publishing, we need no longer be slaves to fashion. If there is just one aspect of self- and indie-publishing that I find exciting and significant, and which may add immeasurably not just to Gothic fiction but to literature in general, it is this.

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