

Gothic Documents: Critics and Theories due Tuesday 10 March in class

Please read all of the two packets, mark them up and take notes. This packet (4 pages) includes a discussion of terror versus horror. The other packet includes Teresa A. Goddu's "Introduction to *American Gothic*."

Terror and Horror: Is there a difference?

The following are excerpts from two classic twentieth-century articles hashing out just what "the Gothic" is. I've taken the excerpts and the intro from *The Gothic: Texts for Study*, an online anthology for a course at Virginia. Written and Compiled by: Christine Ruotolo, Ami Berger, Liz DeGaynor, Zach Munzenrider, and Amanda French, which you can find here:

<http://graduate.engl.virginia.edu/enec981/Group/chris.terror.html#hume>

Although the novels commonly referred to as "Gothic" are united by certain thematic and stylistic conventions, they seem to vary a great deal in the emotional responses they seek to elicit from readers. Ann Radcliffe herself was among the first to draw an affective dividing line down the middle of the newly emergent genre. Conservative and rational in her own approach to the Gothic, Radcliffe clearly objected to the shocking scenes depicted in *The Monk*, and it is widely believed that she wrote *The Italian* as a protesting response to Lewis' novel. She elucidated her stance in an 1826 essay entitled "On the Supernatural in Poetry," in which draws upon Edmund Burke in order to distinguish between terror and horror in literature. She argues that terror is characterized by "obscurity" or indeterminacy in its treatment of potentially horrible events; it is this indeterminacy that leads the reader toward the sublime. Horror, in contrast, "nearly annihilates" the reader's responsive capacity with its unambiguous displays of atrocity.

Although Radcliffe uses examples from Shakespeare, rather than Gothic novels, to articulate her position, later critics have consistently adopted the terms "terror" and "horror" to distinguish between the two major strains of the Gothic represented by Radcliffe and Lewis respectively. Devendra Varma was one of the first critics to seize upon this distinction, characterizing the difference between terror and horror as the difference between "awful apprehension and sickening realization," with Radcliffe the sole representative of the former and Beckford, Maturin, Shelley and Godwin allied with Lewis in representing the latter. Robert Hume has also embraced this distinction, although in slightly different terms: he argues that the horror novel replaces the ambiguous physical details of the terror novel with a more disturbing moral and psychological ambiguity. In a sharp rebuttal to Hume, Robert Platzner has questioned the rigid categories of terror and horror, quoting

from *Udolpho* to demonstrate that Radcliffe herself often crosses the line between the two. He calls for a more methodical and text-oriented approach to characterizing the Gothic novel.

Robert Hume, "Gothic Versus Romantic: A Revaluation of the Gothic Novel," *PMLA* 84 (1969): pp. 282-290.

Terror dependent on suspense or dread is the *modus operandi* of the novels of Walpole and Radcliffe. *The Castle of Otranto* holds the reader's attention through dread of a series of terrible possibilities—Theodore's execution, the (essentially) incestuous marriage of Manfred and Isabella, the casting-off of Hippolita, and so on. Mrs. Radcliffe's use of dramatic suspension is similar but more sophisticated. She raises vague but unsettling possibilities and leaves them dangling for hundreds of pages. Sometimes the effect is artificial, as in the case of the black-veiled "picture" at *Udolpho*, but in raising and sustaining the disquieting possibility of an affair between St. Aubert and the Marchioness de Villeroi, for instance, she succeeds splendidly. Mrs. Radcliffe's easy manipulation of drawn-out suspense holds the reader's attention through long books with slight plots.

The method of Lewis, Beckford, Mary Shelley, and Maturin is considerably different. Instead of holding the reader's attention through suspense or dread they attack him frontally with events that shock or disturb him. Rather than elaborating possibilities which never materialize, they heap a succession of horrors upon the reader. Lewis set out, quite deliberately, to overgo Mrs. Radcliffe. *The Monk* (1796), like *Vathek* (1786), *Frankenstein*, and *Melmoth the Wanderer*, gains much of its effect from murder, torture, and rape. The difference from terror-Gothic is considerable; Mrs. Radcliffe merely threatens these things, and Walpole uses violent death only at the beginning and end of his book. The reader is prepared for neither of these deaths, which serve only to catch the attention and to produce a climax, respectively.

Obviously a considerable shift has occurred. Is its purpose merely ever greater shock? Or has the Gothic novelists' aesthetic theory changed? Terror-Gothic works on the supposition that a reader who is repelled will close his mind (if not the book) to the sublime feelings which may be realized by the mixture of pleasure and pain induced by fear. Horror-Gothic assumes that if events have psychological consistency, even within repulsive situations, the reader will find himself involved beyond recall.

This change is probably related to a general shift in conceptions of good and evil.... Walpole and Mrs. Radcliffe maintain the proprieties of a strict distinction between good and evil, though in *Manfred* and *Montoni* they created villain-heroes whose force of character gives them a certain fearsome attractiveness, even within this moral context. But with the villain-heroes of horror-Gothic we enter the realm of the morally ambiguous. Ambrosio, Victor Frankenstein, and Melmoth are men of extraordinary capacity whom circumstance turns increasingly to evil purposes. They are not merely monsters, and only a bigoted reading makes them out as such.

To put the change from terror-Gothic to horror-Gothic in its simplest terms, the suspense of external circumstance is de-emphasized in favor of increasing psychological concern with moral ambiguity. The horror-Gothic writers postulated the relevance of such psychology to every reader; they wrote for a reader who could say with Goethe that he had never heard of a crime which he could not imagine himself committing. The terror novel prepared the way for a fiction which though more overtly horrible is at the same time more serious and more profound. It is with *Frankenstein* and *Melmoth the Wanderer* that the Gothic novel comes fully into its own.

Robert L. Platzner, "'Gothic versus Romantic': A Rejoinder," *PMLA* 86 (1971): 266-74.

[W]hen Mr. Hume, in search of a theoretical model of the mechanism of Gothic sensibility, turns to the Burkean concept of the sublime and its attendant emotions, he finds in the distinction between terror and horror not only a satisfactory *modus operandi* for Radcliffean Romance but an adequate principle of differentiation for all Gothic Romance after Radcliffe. What I would object to in all this is not the very existence of an esthetic of terror or even the fact of its importance to Mrs. Radcliffe and her contemporaries...[n]o, what I propose to students of the Gothic is that any reinterpretation of this genre must proceed beyond or outside of the constricting framework of late-eighteenth-century esthetic theory, for if we are to establish the groundwork for a new appraisal of the Gothic imagination we will have to provide for the theoretical differentiation of mythopoetic tendencies that cannot be accounted for in terms of either "terror" or "horror".

I would suggest, further, that there are reasons for doubting the final adequacy of neo-Burkean sensationalism, or any of the distinctions it makes possible between gradations of terror and their

source, even if we restrict ourselves to the Radcliffe- Lewis-Maturin era. I, at least, remain unconvinced that Mrs. Radcliffe's rationale for terror is in fact the governing principle behind all of her work. It appears, rather, that far from never crossing the boundary between terror and horror, Mrs. Radcliffe compulsively places her heroine in situations of overwhelming anxiety in which a gradual shift from terror to horror is inescapable. Let us agree, for example, to dismiss the notorious "veil" scene as too crudely melodramatic to be properly representative, and focus on a more modestly terrifying episode that occurs sometime later in the same chapter:

"A return of the noise again disturbed her; it seemed to come from that part of the room which communicated with the private staircase, and she instantly remembered the odd circumstance of the door having been fastened, during the preceding night, by some unknown hand. Her late alarming suspicion concerning its communication also occurred to her. Her heart became faint with terror....she saw the door move, and then slowly open, and perceived something enter the room, but the extreme duskiess prevented her distinguishing what it was. Almost fainting with terror, she had yet sufficient command over herself to check the shriek that was escaping from her lips....but then, advancing slowly towards the bed, [it] stood silently at the feet where the curtains, being a little open, allowed her still to see it; terror, however, had now deprived her of the power of discrimination, as well as that of utterance."

How far is Emily from that annihilation of sensibilities that is characteristic only of pure "horror"--a hairbreadth? What is the practical utility of insisting upon a critical distinction that belies rather than discloses the dramatic character of events or sensations? No doubt some such dichotomy between titillation and revulsion is necessary to express the shift in tone and subject one encounters as one moves from the school of Radcliffe to the *Schauerroman* of Lewis or Maturin and its singular preoccupation with the perverse and the occult. Once again, however, I find (as in the relation between Gothicism and Romanticism) the continuity between *Udolpho* and *The Monk* at least as instructive as the discontinuity. Regarded in this light, Lewis' marginally pornographic Romance is but an actualizing of the incipient or imagined horrors of an Emily or an Adeline. Put another way, the paranoiac apprehensions of the Radcliffean heroine become the real crimes of an Ambrosio, no slight distinction to be sure. But transcending even such a distinction is the undeniable *presence* of evil, whether manifest as free-floating dread or demonic temptation.