

HAUNTED TO HAUNTING: EXAMINING THE EVOLVING PORTRAYAL OF HOUSES IN GOTHIC HORROR LITERATURE

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ABSTRACT

In the field of Gothic horror literature, the ‘grand house’ often embodies far more than simply the backdrop for a narrative’s horrors. By referring to a number of canonical texts, this paper will examine how the portrayal of houses in Gothic literature has changed throughout the centuries. It proposes a twin stream evolutionary timeline – one chronicling the house as a *setting* and one as a *character*. Furthermore, the work explores the genre’s growth in parallel with the increasing and diversifying readership audience, highlighting links between the rates of private homeownership and the portrayal of homes in Gothic literature.

Firstly, the paper studies narrative works from 1750 to 1850, exploring how Walpole and Poe established the primary ‘rules’ for the Gothic setting. Next, it studies the genre’s evolutions in the late 19th and 20th centuries, highlighting the portrayal of iconic locations such as Dracula’s Castle and its employment as a symbolic mirror of its inhabitant. This paper also explores Lovecraft’s *The Shunned House* and Jackson’s *The Haunting of Hill House*, chronicling the developments these texts make for houses as both settings and characters, respectively. Finally, an examination of King’s *The Shining* and Danielewski’s *House of Leaves* to demonstrate the developments of modern and postmodern Gothic. Overall, the paper seeks to highlight the importance of literature as a tool to measure societal change – by combining literary criticism with sociological data, we gain a far more vivid image of a culture’s evolution.

INTRODUCTION

Plato alleged that all art is mimetic of reality (Bloom, Kirsch & Plato, 1968). While certain works may be deemed ‘timeless’, their themes and emotions transcending the circumstances of their creation, they still remain reflective of their environment. Perhaps more than any other medium, literature can aid us in understanding the progression of a society’s opinions towards a chosen subject. Works such as *To Kill a Mockingbird* stand as seminal milestones in our conceptualisation of racial inequality (Lee, 1960). Studying one work in a vacuum, however, reveals very little. Harper Lee’s bold strides are meaningless without a novel such as *Robinson Crusoe* to contrast, whose staggering prejudice highlights the sociological changes occurring over the years (Dafoe, 1719). By examining aspects of literature, we can create a timeline from fiction that mirrors genuine societal change.

Echoing Plato, the house’s ideal role in life and fiction is the same – the providing of sanctuary, family, stability and, as Gaston Bachelard (1958) posits, a space to day-dream. As a result, its position in horror fiction is an inevitable contortion of reality – twisting the traditionally wholesome into something sinister. This study looks to examine that contortion throughout the history of Gothic fiction – a genre characterized by horror, high emotion and, crucially, melodramatic settings (Smith, 2013). This paper explores how the presentation of the house as a backdrop, plot device or even character has evolved across the centuries. Specifically, it proposes that houses in the Gothic literature canon come in two distinct forms – houses as *settings*, and houses as *characters*. The two forms, following distinctly separate developmental streams, have evolved significantly from their generic origins, both in terms of aesthetic portrayal and in their relevance to the narrative. The paper examines a previously underexplored aspect of Gothic criticism, noting how the ratio of the two structures has also shifted considerably: from heavily favouring the setting approach in

the genre’s infancy to almost exclusively utilizing the character stream in more contemporary works.

This paper will also explore the possible reasons for these changes, including the changes in home ownership and the increased accessibility of literature over the years. By incorporating sociological data, it will reflect on the potential for literature to reflect societal shifts.

THE BEGINNINGS

Horace Walpole – *The Castle of Otranto* (1764)

1764 saw the printing of what is commonly considered the first Gothic novel – Horace Walpole’s *The Castle of Otranto* (Walpole, 1764). Going so far as to subtitle the second edition “A Gothic Story”, pioneering the term’s usage in literature, the text simultaneously revels in archaic familial power struggles while laying the groundwork for all future Gothic horror literature. Alongside gloomy atmospheres and spectral hauntings, Walpole established the domineering castle as the premiere backdrop for a work of Gothic fiction.

The castle carries with it many thematic implications that make it crucial to Gothic literature. In a literal sense, they are a testament to the inhabitants’ wealth. Dr Fred Botting (1996) describes Gothicism as “a writing of excess” (p.7), and there is no house as excessive than the castle. Furthermore, the castle is symbolic of antiquity, bringing forth themes of inhabitants’ past transgressions – often realised in the form of ghosts. Finally, as seen in *Otranto*, the castle creates automatic character motivation in the quest for power and wealth.

Walpole’s castle has no independent impact on the plot – it is not a character, merely a setting. But in this role, *The Castle of Otranto* also establishes one final Gothic mainstay. As the tragic narrative climaxes and leaves many of the characters dead or dying, a “clap of thunder” (p. 85) shakes the castle and sends it into ruins. The castle’s collapse parallels that of the family within, thus establishing a metaphorical link between

house and owner that would be echoed throughout a vast majority of Gothic literature.

Edgar Allan Poe – *The Fall of the House of Usher* (1840) and *The Masque of the Red Death* (1842)

Two Edgar Allan Poe stories in particular exemplify the rules set by Walpole whilst foreshadowing the genre's future developments. *The Masque of the Red Death* (Poe, 1842) and *The Fall of the House of Usher* (Poe, 1839) both stand as seminal works in both the American and Gothic literature canon. While undeniably different tales, both *the Red Death* and *the House of Usher* fundamentally rely on the presentation of their respective houses to convey Poe's narrative – the former as a setting and the latter as a character.

As a setting, *The Masque of the Red Death* uses the house as a mirror of the mind of its owner. The narrative describes an apocalyptic virus ravaging a kingdom, causing its manic Prince Prospero to shelter himself and a thousand nobles within his bizarrely decorated abbey. Most notably, within the elites' sanctuary there stands the seven connected rooms that hold the infamous masquerade ball, each chamber invisible from the next, and each coloured an entirely different hue. It is easily inferred that the eccentricity of the abbey's design is symbolic mirror of the Prince's insanity, demonstrating the first stage of the genre's evolution.

Furthermore, Poe's fictional aristocratic dwelling can be considered a critique of the class origins of Gothic writing. Horace Walpole was an esteemed member of the upper class and son of the first British prime minister, while Poe lived mired by poverty and destitution. The shifts in class-literacy relations was not limited to the authors, however. As decades passed, the reading audience grew as more people became literate and had spare time and money for books (Lloyd, 2007). While *The Masque of the Red Death* may take place within an aristocrat's abbey, unlike Walpole's *Otranto*, Poe uses this bizarre home to highlight the out-of-touch nature of Prince Prospero and his elitist comrades. This change is indicative of literature's aptness as a barometer for social progress: Poe's houses are a convergence of literary and sociological evolution.

The Fall of the House of Usher, on the other hand, takes the prototypical ancient stately home in the other direction, making it actively impact on the narrative. "What was it that so unnerved me", the narrator of the story asks, "in the contemplation of the House of Usher? It was a mystery all insoluble; nor could I grapple with the shadowy fancies that crowded upon me as I pondered." (p.1) Rather than focusing upon spectral entities terrorising the home, Poe considers the possibility that the house itself is a supernatural entity. Roderick Usher, the fictional proprietor, posits that the house is 'sentient' and is the root cause of his family's woes. Compared with *The Castle of Otranto*, Keith Eggner (2013) explains, "where Walpole's building is a setting, Poe's is an actor". While the change is in its infancy, this marks the first shift away from the literary house existing purely as a backdrop.

The description of Poe's house in *The House of Usher* is characteristically macabre and adds credence to its role as a character in the narrative. It is labelled as "melancholy" possessing "vacant, eye-like windows", giving it an eerily human aura that further hints. Its trees are decayed, its waters "black and lurid", and its walls are coated in "minute fungi". The House of Usher, both family and home, has seen better times. The obvious connection between the state of the House

and the state of the family is drawn from the title alone. Spitzer (1952) put it simply, stating "The "fall" of the House of Usher involves not only the physical fall of the mansion, but the physical and moral fall of the two protagonists."

The endings of *The Castle of Otranto* and *The Fall of the House of Usher* are comparably cataclysmic. Both climaxes leave their titular homes in ruins after a blast of severe weather and leave their remaining characters to pick up the shattered pieces. However, where Walpole's destruction seems yet another supernatural occurrence in the narrative, Poe develops the device to establish a clear metaphysical connection between the Ushers and their house.

This infant era of Gothic fiction presented readers with the grotesque tales of twisted aristocrats falling victim to tragedies often sparked by their hoarding of, or lust for, wealth. Their homes – each grand, stately, and wholly unachievable to readers of the time – play several roles, at times symbolising the mental state of the inhabitants and at others merely providing a monument to the characters' wealth. Frequently the socioeconomic implications that these houses carry impact the plot – the money, security or social status available drive these Gothic tales forward. Prince Prospero's disease-stricken abbey is not 'haunted' in the traditional sense but steeped in bourgeois elitism. While they may contain characters brimming with aristocracy, the horrors within these walls are purely human. Only Poe's House of Usher suggests otherworldly forces may exist within – or even as – the house itself, foreshadowing the evolution of the genre.

VICTORIAN DEVELOPMENTS

The Victorian period can be viewed as the prime era of Gothic fiction, in which the style evolved and merged with other genres to create new and innovative narratives. As settings and characters, the house's literary depictions developed significantly throughout this period, namely due to the works of Stoker, Lovecraft, and Jackson.

Bram Stoker – *Dracula* (1897)

Castle Dracula is the most iconic location in Gothic fiction, owing significantly to its role as a mirror of its titular owner. The vampire tells the visiting Johnathon Harker, "the walls of my castle are broken. The shadows are many, and the wind breathes cold through the broken battlements and casements" (Stoker, 1897, p.35). Contrastingly, the interior is adorned with "the costliest and most beautiful fabrics" which must be of "fabulous value" (p. 28, 29). Dracula's physical form is ancient and weary while his veins flow with young blood, just as his seemingly desolate abode hides a wealth of trinkets and treasures. Castle Dracula, while only acting as a setting, demonstrates considerable evolution of the genre.

In a notable deleted section from Stoker's original manuscript, rediscovered sometime in the 1980s, we see the initial plan was for a "terrible convulsion of the earth" to send Castle Dracula into ruin. It sees the castle in utter destruction, going so far as to say, "even the hill on which it stood seemed to rise in the air and scatter in fragments" (Miller, 2005). The decision to remove this segment is significant in the history of Gothic houses. It marks a turn from *Usher* and *Otranto*, whose houses coexist entirely with their owners, as Castle Dracula's walls stand uninhabited even after its proprietor's death. Seven years before *Dracula* was published, the United States' census reported 48% of 'dwelling units' were inhabited by their owner (Goodman & Haines, 1991). The rise of homeownership for the middle and lower classes, who had

become a major part of the reading audience, resulted in an increasing importance being bestowed upon houses within literature. Castle Dracula, and those that followed, continue existing when their owners do not because houses were owned by more than the narcissistic aristocracy. The house was no longer a castle – a testament to wealth and familial legacy – but a home, one that shall likely outlast its inhabitants. The castle of Otranto fell because there was no family to continue their legacy; Castle Dracula stood because readers' now viewed houses as more than just monuments to themselves. Literature, as with all art, reflects societal evolution.

H.P. Lovecraft – *The Shunned House* (1924)

Where *Dracula's* pioneering was more thematic than aesthetic, *The Shunned House* represents a mutual evolution. Arguably the most influential macabre writer of the 20th century, Lovecraft's horror was almost exclusively of the cosmic variety – dealing with horrors and entities beyond human comprehension (Lovecraft, 1937). Thus, Lovecraft's works bear little superficial resemblance to those that came before. The traditional Gothic tropes established prior are notably absent – the scheming villain replaced by unknowable cosmic beings and, crucially, the castle being replaced by an unassuming house in Providence, Rhode Island.

The Shunned House is unique in Lovecraft's canon in its reliance on real-world fables rather than his own fictional mythology. The story is grounded in genuine New England history which, as Sturgis (2017) states, "allows Lovecraft to gain verisimilitude for his premise and plot". The story utilizes both real-world folklore and accurate historical documentation to present the reader with a chillingly realistic narrative. The same strive for relative realism is seen in his portrayal of the house itself. The descriptions of the house's exterior, interior, and location are presented in incredible detail – possibly owing to the fact that the fictional shunned house is in a merging of two unrelated homes from Lovecraft's life. The first being a Providence home once lived in by his aunt Lillian and the second an unrelated dwelling in New Jersey which he described as "a hellish place where night-black deeds must have been done" (Cannon, Lovecraft & Joshi, 1999) The events of *The Shunned House* are fictitious, but its connection with reality, especially regarding the setting, demonstrates significant developments within the genre.

Shirley Jackson – *The Haunting of Hill House* (1959)

The early years of Gothic literature told tales of extravagant homes viewed through the lens of extravagant people. As time passed, this formula changed significantly, whether in the manner of *The Shunned House* wherein an architecturally ordinary house was interacted with by ordinary characters, or as in *Dracula* where an extraordinary house was seen by ordinary people. Perhaps the epitome of traditional gothic horror, Shirley Jackson's *The Haunting of Hill House* is firmly in the latter category.

Of the buildings referenced thus far, Hill House shares much common ground with Poe's House of Usher. The basic narrative structures of the two pieces are also comparable, seeing an innocent narrator enter the house at the request of someone who believes it is sentient. However, where the House of Usher held a symbiotic link with its owners, Hill House is an entirely independent entity. The novel's protagonist, Eleanor, even notes that the house "seemed somehow to have formed itself, flying together into its own powerful pattern under the hands of its builders" (Jackson, 1959, p.26). Ljubica Matek (2018) notes that much of Hill

House's eeriness derives from its independence as a force within the narrative: its absolute autonomy. This steadfast apathy denotes "The sense of ultimate defeat and the realisation of human weakness and inadequacy in the face of the Unknown is, in fact, what Gothic is about."

The interior is geometrically alienating – Jackson makes myriad reference to odd-angles and disjointed corners, as well as a labyrinthine floorplan that the characters are continually lost within. It is implied that objects, and even entire rooms, are constantly shifting within the house's walls. With this, we see a further evolutionary step in the portrayal of houses. Hill House is architecturally fluid and structurally independent – it can rearrange itself without need of human intervention. Jackson notes that "it had stood so for eighty years and might stand for eighty more" (Jackson, 1959, p.1). Humanity has but a transient occupation of the house: it will stand for as long as it wills. Where Otranto and even Usher were subservient, Hill House manifested its own creation and thus holds far more power.

In many ways, *The Haunting of Hill House* was a reverie of an older time – an era of looming grey mortar and multi-storied mansions. As Botting (1996) stated, "The architectural and feudal background, the wild landscapes, the aristocratic villains and sentimental heroines, were no longer, in a thoroughly bourgeois culture, objects of terror." It was the ultimate form of the traditional haunted house aesthetic: keeping the device as fresh and innovative without requiring an absolute overhaul of expectations.

As both settings and characters, houses in gothic literature firmly had an established set of rules and characteristics to be relied on. As the former, narratives like *Dracula* perfected utilizing the house to convey crucial character information, while *The Shunned House* demonstrated how to contort genuine reality to create terror. In the latter category, *The Haunting of Hill House* took the idea of Poe's rebelling house and let it blossom into a truly terrifying concept.

CONTEMPOARY AND BEYOND

Gradually, the houses of gothic literature shrunk, and the castle gave way to the semi-detached. Stephen King's *The Shining* embody this aesthetic shift to a tee. Published in 1977, King took the traditional portrayal of horror homes and moulded it to relate to the average reader of the time. The houses of this time were no longer 'haunted' but *haunting* – malevolent entities in their own rights that waged war on their inhabitants.

Stephen King – *The Shining* (1977)

The Overlook Hotel is an iconic location for both literature and cinema. Adorned with long shifting corridors, locked passageways and a looming exterior, King's hotel is the perfect modernised Gothic castle. Mark Fisher (2007) notes that while the hotel "...is no gloomy castle..." nor a "...supernatural relic that will crumble to dust..." "there is no escape from the infinite corridors of the Overlook."

Outside of the physical, the hotel also has a multitude of thematic traits aligned with the castle. Namely, it possesses the same alien quality held by the likes of Castle Dracula or Hill House – it is a place of overt luxury, but the unfamiliarity of its sprawling nature instils fear in the characters. Hotels, in a symbolic sense, are an attempt to replicate the comforting warmth of homes but are inevitably weighed down by the

inescapable unfamiliarity. On a simpler level, the hotel, as with the castle, symbolises wealth – having the means to escape daily life, to have servers wait upon you, and to have your personal comfort placed paramount. In all these senses, the Overlook Hotel is reflective of the Gothic genre playing catch-up. Much of what terrified the populace two-hundred years ago has not fundamentally changed – we still fear the dark, the unknown, and other things incomprehensible – but *The Shining* places these fears in the modern equivalent of the Gothic castle.

The Overlook is aligned significantly with Hill House in its position as the primary antagonist of its narrative. As with Jackson's tale, the ghosts that roam the halls are not merely inhabitants of the hotel but puppets of it. In this way, the hotel has absolute control.

This becomes the prevailing theme throughout this genre as time goes on. It is not frightening enough for novels to portray the inhabitants losing control of their property to another – instead, their houses themselves flip the power dynamics and force their owners out. One can track the genre's position on this theme proportionally to how commonplace home ownership was for the lower and middle classes. Home ownership rates in the United States have risen every decade since the 1950s (United States Census Bureau, 2011) and as such private ownership shifted from a novel concept into a steadfast cornerstone of life.

This shift is reflected in the portrayal of literary houses of horror. *The Shunned House* and tales of that ilk (see *The Woman in Black* or *The Amityville Horror*) are representative of the early homeowner's insecurity of possession. In each of these, a malevolent entity has breached the house and seeks to either exile or annihilate the family within. As decades passed and homeownership rates rose, these anxieties settled, and stories of spectral invasions lost their cultural relevance. As such, the Gothic genre did what it always had and evolved. The typical dynamic adapted from the family contending with spirits haunting *their* house, into the family contending with the house itself.

Mark Z. Danielewski – *House of Leaves* (2000)

If *The Shining* is representative of the contemporary state of Gothicism, then Danielewski's 21st century work is the epitome of the postmodern metafiction. *House of Leaves* presents readers with a simultaneous twin narrative – a satirical fictitious analysis of a terrifying documentary entitled The Navidson Record, and the unsettling annotations of the work's discoverer.

This is where much of the postmodernist contortions on Gothicism lie – while the house on Ash Tree Lane is aesthetically similar to Lovecraft's Shunned House, the presentation of this portrayal is entirely unique. Gone are the atmospheric descriptions of *Dracula* or *Hill House*, the horrors of the Navidson Record are presented in an analytical and academic format that satirises artistic criticism while maintaining genuine terror. The text is filled with quotes and theories from fictional critics of the documentary, as well as dozens of references to genuine real-world works. There are footnotes upon footnotes dotted across the labyrinthine pages, creating a wild textual maze that aptly reflects its subject matter (Danielewski, 2000).

Where other texts subtly inform the reader as to the effects of the building, *House of Leaves* presents scientific facts and figures. The in-book author Zampanó has done the academics' work for them because, ultimately, the Navidsons' house is merely a device to convey meaning and fear. The space within the Navidson's house is infinitely large, rendering the house it exists within impotent and meaningless. As Rune Graulund puts it, "Danielewski's tale of the haunted house is therefore a parable for the postmodern realization that the concepts of the real, the authentic and the true - once stable and familiar concepts - now ring uncannily hollow". (Graulund, 2006)

Danielewski's house is the epitome of the postmodern Gothic – satirising its predecessors while still wielding fear. The grand irony of an infinite house that is ultimately hollow of meaning is the furthest point of this genre's evolution. This does not discredit King's creation, which is symbolic of the more traditional tropes of Gothicism adapting to a modern reading audience. What is demonstrated, however, is the lack of modern interest in the house as merely a setting and a demand for houses that embody so much more.

CONCLUSION

The story of houses and homes in Gothic fiction is a twin-streamed process: the house as a setting and the house as a character. As both reader and authorship were primarily reserved for the wealthy, tales were firmly rooted in the former category. *The Castle of Otranto* stated that the house could not exist without the owners. When houses were utilized as settings, they were merely a plot device or motivation – symbolic of wealth or power, and the lengths people would go to in order to secure or retain them.

Edgar Allan Poe stands out as a crucial figure in the horror house's evolution, both as settings and as characters. His development of both the symbiotic house-owner relationship and the sentient, malevolent house remain central features of the genre today.

The influence of homeownership rising for the general populace has a previously unexamined effect on Gothic horror literature. Horror preys on cultural anxieties, and as private-owned houses became more of a societal cornerstone, so too did their portrayal in fiction adapt and evolve. This can be examined superficially in the aesthetic changes seen when comparing, say, *Dracula* to *The Shunned House*, but also far deeper when investigating the thematic differences between *The Castle of Otranto* and *The Shining*. The shift from a house rebelling to a house wholly overpowering humanity is stark.

House of Leaves demonstrated that the Gothic genre is not, as Fisher stated, obsolete, but simply in a state of evolution. The changing class of the reading populace may have altered the outward face of Gothic fiction, but careful examination of the homes these novels envision reveal a genre that has survived the centuries via constant reinvention. Chronicling this reinvention reveals a society growing and adapting to spaces they can call their own. A house may be just four walls and a roof, but its contents can be infinite.

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