

Gothic features in Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto*



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Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* was the first gothic novel, and thus was the originator of many of the distinctive features that have pertained throughout the history of the genre. Early gothic was characterized by the rejection of enlightenment thinking in favor of the intense emotion and the supernatural, expressed in this extract particularly through the drama of a chase sequence. While the passage mainly uses third person narration, Walpole utilizes free indirect discourse to provide an insight into the princess's consciousness. This is shown through the multiple rhetorical questions such as "Yet where conceal herself?". Providing a voice for the consciousness of the princess helps to articulate a sense of intense anxiety, fitting the character neatly into the gothic trope of the damsel in distress. Indeed, the thoughts that passed "rapidly through her mind", reflect the urgency of the 'chase' sequence, a characteristic of the gothic – reflected even today in modern slasher movies – where the persecuted female flees the persecutor. Indeed, these roles also reflect the established social order, as the aristocratic "princess" is the heroine, whereas Manfred and his "domestics" – likened almost to property – are demonized. This reflects context of early gothic literature and the strict societal hierarchies that were in place. Religious symbolism is also used within the extract, as the princess seeks respite with the "holy virgins" who will supposedly protect her. Walpole is reflecting the idea of virginity equating to purity, which is juxtaposed to the predatory and sexually charged nature of the chase. By sanctifying the princess, he presents her as a morally pure victim in need of rescue from the deviant Manfred. Religion is also addressed through the alliterated 'c's in the line "whose convent was contiguous to the cathedral", which induces an almost rhythmic quality. Arguably this emphasizes the connotations to

Catholicism; indeed, an obsession with Catholic practices is characteristic of many early English gothic novels, for example, *The Monk*, which follows a murderous catholic monk who preys on young women, or Ann Radcliffe's "*The Mysteries of Udolpho*". Walpole is no exception to this trend, and the extract makes use of these contemporary fears. Perhaps the most characteristically gothic feature is the setting, including the eponymous castle itself, which dominates almost every line in the passage. The majority of the passage takes place in the "subterraneous regions" of the castle, built up of "intricate cloisters", typical of gothic architecture. Indeed, the early gothic coincided with a revival of such architecture, and indeed *The Castle of Otranto* was inspired by a nightmare in Walpole's own faux-gothic house (Strawberry Hill House). Within the narrative of the gothic novel, these structures often are externalizations of the owners themselves, thus Manfred's almost anthropomorphized castle takes on a predatory nature. In the extract this is reflected in the "grating" of the "rusty" hinges, emphasizing the imagery of decay and the archaic. Moreover, the fluctuations in sound from "awful silence" to the pathetic fallacy of the "blasts of wind", suggest that nature itself has taken an antagonistic role. One could also interpret the exploration of the "long labyrinth of darkness" from a psychological perspective, as the external setting becomes a way of exploring the dark recesses of the mind. The final line "she was ready to sink under her apprehensions" certainly lends itself to this interpretation, as the princess's interior mind is almost externalized within the claustrophobic and labyrinthine setting. Thus the first gothic novel begins a long trend of seeing gothic settings as a reflection for the psychological, where characters have to go deep into the recesses of the castle to explore their own deep

rooted fears, captured perhaps most famously in the exploration of the Counts castle in Dracula. Indeed, in this passage the deep rooted fears – bordering on melodrama – are succinctly expressed in the sentence “ words cannot paint the horror of the princess’s situation”. As mid-18th literature was characterized by long sentences, Warpole use this short simple sentence to add dramatic effect. Not even the narrator is capable of articulating the fear of the situation. To conclude, this passage has a great deal of familiar tropes that are quintessential of early gothic, from the distinct presence of Catholicism and societal hierarchy. It also maintains tropes that remain in later gothic literature, such as the damsel in distress (seen in the 21st century via contemporary horror movies) and the gothic castle setting. However, the passage is unique in that it is arguably the originator of these very tropes that eventually became staples of the genre, and is thus crucial to the history of the genre as a whole.