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Honors Gothic Literature
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The Island of Dr. Moreau

The Island of Dr. Moreau is a creepy Gothic science fiction novel written by H. G. Wells that was very cutting edge for its time dealing with vivisection, the morality of turning animals into people or vice versa, and several other less pressing issues. Wells creates a very creepy but different Gothic environment in this novel.

In the novel, Wells establishes a horrific setting and premise from which he builds and creates a classic horror gothic novel. He does this through his use of the grotesque and revolting in the descriptions of the animals and then general idea that animals can be turned into people. Wells states in description of the "Boy-Sloth":

“Then something cold touched my hand. I stared violently, and saw close behind me a dim pinkish thing, looking more like a flayed child than anything else in the world. The creature had exactly the mild but the repulsive of a sloth, the same low forehead and slow gestures.” (59)

The grotesque descriptions are not the only way Wells goes about creating this horror in the readers. He also achieves this same means by creating a feeling of solitude and terror in the main character which is then also in turn transferred to the reader. Pendick continually talks of his fear of the animals and being alone with the “manimals.” Wells states:

“...and the hyena-swine ran, laughing savagely, by my side. I staggered on, my head reeling, and my heart beating against my ribs, tired almost to death, and yet not daring to lose sight of the chase, lest I should be left alone with this horrible companion. I staggered on in spite of infinite fatigue and the dense heat of the tropical afternoon.” (97).

This horror allows for a throwback to the old *Castle of Otranto* and the terror gothic and the sublime, which allows this to be classified as a classic example of the Gothic.

The Island of Dr. Moreau is a stunning Gothic novel portraying many of the ethical issues of the late 19th century. Wells creates a horrific atmosphere that inspires fear in the reader.

Why did Moreau go to all the trouble of folding back the skin of the animals instead of just shaving them? How did he alter their brains?

Why did Wells take all the stabs at religion? And were they all stabs or us reading into it?

Why did Wells use swine in so many animals? Is there any symbolism?

Bram Stoker's *Dracula* is one of the most definitive texts within the Gothic genre. Whenever one thinks of vampires it is Stoker's version of the mythos that comes to mind. Every vampire tale written after *Dracula* was inevitably influenced by Stoker's portrayal of the infamous count. What is it about this tale that makes it stand out above the rest, altering the Gothic writers' view of vampire tales to date? Although there are too many aspects to discuss one is particularly clear, Stoker has written a novel which addresses not one, but several social anxieties prevalent in British culture during the Victorian era. It is in part due to this multifaceted approach that Stoker was able to catch the attention of such a wide variety of readers and change the face of Gothic literature forever.

There are three particular social anxieties that can be traced throughout *Dracula*. One of the most obvious is the fear of devolution popularized by those who had read the work of Charles Darwin. The vampire itself illustrates this fear. The question raised by a creature which can procreate without sex but must feed off of the blood of others creates an interesting problem. Is the vampire a higher form of human life or a lower form? If it is a higher form than what does that say about the human race as it exists. Stoker's vampires are certainly smart and fascinating, but they are also carnal in their need for food. If this is the next step in human evolution it is hardly pretty. If, however, the vampire is a step lower on the food chain, then what can be said about the tendency for humanity to undo its own progress? If a monster like Dracula can be created then surely many more monsters can and will exist to degrade humanity until it is hardly recognizable as such. Dracula's form of procreation alone is indicative of how particular this fear was. If a lower being can drag others down with it simply for the purpose of attaining food then how quickly will all of humanity follow in its foot steps? It is only a matter of time until the vampires outnumber the normal humans.

Stoker conveniently brings up a related question regarding who is a "normal" human. Although Britain was a huge empire at the time that Stoker was writing, the British were still largely xenophobic—this is perhaps why they tried to conquer everyone they met. Dracula himself is a foreign force who hails from a country in eastern Europe. In a sense Stoker is simply illustrating the fear that Britain had of being overtaken by the foreign. Dracula is, after all, trying to take over England in a backward sort of way by turning its citizens into vampires one by one. Interestingly enough the foreign forces can only be combated by more outsiders. It is Van Helsing who has all of the answers necessary to combat Dracula. Only through foreign beliefs and knowledge can foreign fears be combated.

Finally, Stoker attempts to grapple with the issue of the "new woman" through his depictions of Lucy and Mina. Mina, in particular, is Stoker's answer to this new fear. She is intelligent and useful. Ultimately Mina is the one who leads them to Dracula so that he can be vanquished. She isn't, however, without qualities possessed by a proper Victorian woman. She likes to cook and is interested in the welfare of her husband. She is learning things because they are helpful to him. In the end her knowledge is described in masculine terms. Mina is also revered as the paragon of virtue—a description that is often saved for the Victorian woman. This, however, simply endears her to the men all the more. She is, in a way, a middle ground. Mina can be both feminine and intelligent and the men in the novel revere her all the more for mixing the two worlds.

Questions:

1. What else makes *Dracula* a definitive text? Do the stereotypical elements have anything to do with its Gothic-ness?
2. What should we make of the way that *Dracula* becomes the benchmark for all other vampire novels?
3. Although Stoker plays with several different social anxieties does he really offer any resolution to them or is he merely using them to draw in readers?
4. What aspects of *Carmilla* and *Varney* does Stoker use to formulate his vampire mythos? How can we tell?
5. Is the vampire a devolved form of human life or a superhuman form of life?
6. Why is Britain so xenophobic?
7. Is Stoker intentionally drawing parallels between Mina Harker and Queen Elizabeth by using masculine descriptions for her intelligence?

I graded the other one - I thought it very interesting!

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Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* was published in 1764 at the tail-end of Neo-Classical literary genre. Knowing that the book might not be well-received, Walpole hid his authorship and claimed the book was written during the medieval period before he "found" and "translated" it. Walpole felt it was necessary to hide behind this lie because gothic literature was seen as barbaric, crude, and crass to the Neo-Classics, who valued order, logic, and reason. Therefore, when *Otranto* ended up being successful, Walpole revealed his authorship in the second edition and claimed the work as his own. Ironically, the interesting part in all this is the shift in the readers' views once they discovered Walpole authored the book in their modern day, as opposed to it being a medieval piece. According to E.J. Clery's book, *Supernatural Fiction: 1762-1800*, the *Monthly Review* reviewed the first edition of *Otranto* as a high quality book, saying that the "language is accurate and elegant, the characters are highly finished." Contritely, that same review said the second edition, containing the same novel, was full of "barbaric superstitions of Gothic devilism!" (Clery 53). Not only does this statement reinforce the idea that Neo-Classics disliked Gothic literature, but more interestingly, it brings attention to the superstitions that pervaded the time period.

In Gothic literature the characters are always hiding secret histories and family mysteries. Many of the characters are dark, unknown, and experience glimpses of the supernatural throughout the novel. While the *Monthly Review* claimed the Gothic genre was vulgar and "modern," or not suited for young readers, these very assumptions revealed their own superstitions towards Gothic literature. When Walpole claimed to be the translator of *Otranto* the book was read as a prestigious literary classic, so the gothic conventions of the book were rectified by the fact that it was a "classic." Clery asserts this point by saying "The aim is both to legitimate a literary novelty [gothic novels] by association with the classical cannon..." (56). Because Walpole did not reveal his authorship of the book, readers could put aside the gothic factors as historical, and therefore, safe. However, once Walpole revealed himself the *Monthly Review* immediately changed opinions, revealing their own "gothicness" by clinging to superstitions about the gothic genre. Neo Classics believed that because *Otranto* was a contemporary Gothic novel it was unsafe to the minds of young readers, who would be corrupted by "'unjust prejudices, perverse opinions, and incongruous combinations of images' which may ruin the reader for everyday life" (Clery 58). Due to the fact that Neo-classics valued realism, reason, and order; and they feared that the dark, mysterious, foreboding elements of Gothicism would skew the minds of young readers into thinking that everyday was like a Gothic novel. These two points: that *Otranto* was only acceptable as a medieval novel and not a modern work, and that young people would be jaded by reading gothic literature, are both very superstitious ideas amidst a culture that valued reason and order. Judging from this, perhaps the Neo-classics were more prepared for gothic literature after all. In *Otranto*, superstition is pervasive throughout the novel, and the very people who insult *Otranto* for its "devilish" qualities adhere to their own superstitious beliefs.

Works Cited

Clery, E.J. *Supernatural Fiction: 1762-1800*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1995. 53-67.

Questions:

- 1) How did Gothic literature become something natural and positive versus what it was in the 18th century, crude and barbaric?
- 2) If Gothic literature was so unacceptable at the time, why is it that so many people read the novel after the first edition, and even after the second?