

Visitors from beyond the Grave

Ghosts in World Literature

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THE INFLUENCE OF *THE CASTLE OF OTRANTO* IN *THE SHINING*, OR THE RECEPTION OF EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY GOTHIC GHOSTS IN STEPHEN KING'S LITERATURE

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ABSTRACT: This chapter aims at drawing a thematic and formal outline of the eighteenth-century Gothic novel (focussing mainly on Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto*) and its reception on the current American Gothic, led by Stephen King. To do this, we start from the assumption that there are several constant parameters in the evolution of the Gothic genre, namely: the limits of rationality and passions, the family ties, the settings, the claustrophobic atmosphere, etc. Due to King's enormous literary production, one of his most relevant works has been chosen: *The Shining*, in order to carry out a comparative analysis underlining the reception, the evolution and the interferences of elements from the beginnings of the Gothic literature.

KEYWORDS: Gothic literature, Walpole, King, interference, reception.

The beginnings of Gothic literature took place in a historical and cultural moment with numerous attempts to open up new forms of cultural expression and new topics – many of them arose when looking back at the past. In this context, Addison, mainly known for founding *The Spectator* with Richard Steele, posed a challenge in 1712 where he encouraged the *literati* to dispel the reason, and write ghost stories that triggered “a pleasing kind of Horror in the Mind of the Reader”¹. Addison stressed that these type of stories “bring up into our memory the stories we have heard in our childhood, and favour those secret terrors and apprehensions to which the mind of man is naturally subject”². Some years later, in 1721, Parnell wrote ‘A Night Piece on Death’ – the poem that originated the Graveyard School³ – as a sort of response to the challenge:

¹ Huertas 2012: 26.

² Addison 1712.

³ The “Graveyard poets” or “Graveyard School poets” were a group of pre-Romantic writers of the 18th century, whose poetic works focused on pessimistic reflections about death. Blair, Parnell, Gray, Goldsmith and MacPherson, among others, belong to these “Graveyard poets” that, as Blair set on “The Grove” (1787: 8) “Midst skulls and coffins, epitaphs and worms: / Where light-heel'd ghosts, and visionary shades, / Beneath the war, cold moon (as fame reports) / Embody'd, thick, perform their mystic rounds.” Their interest in mystery, as well as in popular and traditional English poetic forms, have led them occasionally to be considered as precursors of the Gothic genre.

Why then thy flowing sable stoles,
Deep pendant cypress, mourning poles,
Loose scarfs to fall athwart thy weeds,
Long palls, drawn hearses, covered steeds,
And plumes of black, that, as they tread,
Nod o'er the scutcheons of the dead?⁴

Nevertheless, it was not until four decades later when *The Castle of Otranto* was published and, due to its relevance, Horace Walpole is considered in the annals of universal literature as the pioneer of the Gothic genre⁵. It cannot be forgotten, however, the peculiarities of the qualifying term 'Gothic':

The attachment of the term *Gothic* to the literature of terror is quite a recent development –and almost entirely accidental. (...) The addition [of 'a Gothic story'] was a flippant paradox chiefly intended, one infers, to annoy stuffy critics who objected to the experiment. After all, how could a Gothic story have a modern author? (...) After *Otranto* the only significant work in which 'Gothic' appears in a subtitle was Clara Reeve's *The Old English Baron*. The "Gothic novel" is thus mostly a twentieth-century coinage⁶.

The first edition of *The Castle of Otranto: a Story* was published in Walpole's Strawberry Hill Press⁷ on Christmas Day 1764, although it is necessary to highlight that the author decided to publish the novel anonymously. The unexpected success and the enormous spreading among the contemporary elite motivated Walpole to recognise his authorship in the second edition, published in April 1765. Considering the novelty of the work, however, Walpole decided to justify his purpose and add this term to the subtitle: *The Castle of Otranto: a Gothic Story*:

an attempt to blend the two kinds of Romance, the ancient and the modern. In

⁴ See Huertas 2012.

⁵ The Gothic is often seen as a literary genre, although some critics, including Clery 2011 and Miles 2011, state that there is "a cultural phenomenon known as Gothic writing" where diverse textual typologies interfere with each other. These authors highlight, indeed, that the relevance of the Gothic as a genre has not diminished over the decades, but it continues with unceasing artistic expressions – not only limited to literature.

⁶ Clery 2011: 21.

⁷ The acquisition of Strawberry Hill marked a turning point in Walpole's life and literary production. It was a mansion built from 1749 to 1753 following the French Gothic style, although it actually presents an eclectic amalgam, including pointed arches, towers, gargoyles, etc. Walpole, as a remarkable connoisseur, ordered the construction of a library, a gallery, a cloister, a refectory, an entrance hall and the wall. The installation of his own press (*Officina Arbuteana* or *Elzevirianum*) not only gave Walpole loads of additional work, but also enjoyment and pleasure. The Strawberry Hill Press allowed him the edition of his poems for his distinguished guests, as well as the first editions of *The Castle of Otranto*.

the former, all was imagination and improbability; in the latter, nature is always intended to be, and sometimes has been, copied with success. Invention has not been wanting; but the great resources of fancy have been dammed up, by a strict adherence to common life. (...) The actions, sentiments, conversations, of the heroes and heroines of ancient days, were as unnatural as the machines employed to put them in motion. The author of the following pages thought it possible to reconcile the two kinds. Desirous of leaving the powers of fancy at liberty to expatiate through the boundless realms of invention, and thence of creating more interesting situations, he wished to conduct the mortal agents in his drama according to the rules of probability; in short, to make them think, speak, and act, as it might be supposed mere men and women would do in extraordinary positions⁸.

Walpole's attempt to combine these two types to create fiction is based on the fact that the author seemed to observe certain deficiencies in both 'kinds of romance'. On the one hand, Walpole considers that modern literary works are essentially mimetic, since they are based on the imitation of nature; on the other hand, he found old works as implausible and hard to believe, especially because of the unnatural definition of the characters. Regarding these considerations, Clery considers that "Walpole seems to be suggesting, to allow a modern reader a proper point of identification"⁹. As a result, the genre originated by Walpole was sporadically imitated by some contemporary authors, but they only started from the decade of 1790's, when the Gothic gained a prominent position in Europe as well as in the United States.

The persistence of the genre on both sides of the Atlantic in the last 250 years, however, has not entailed an exact, concrete definition of the Gothic for two main reasons: the huge number of works, and its adaptability and flexibility. In spite of this variation, we consider *The Castle of Otranto* to establish a series of distinctive features that may help us to identify fiction works belonging to this genre. This chapter aims at highlighting, considering these characteristics together with its evolution over the years, the influence of the 18th century Gothic (and especially of Walpole's work) in Stephen King's *The Shining*.

THE CONTINUOUS ATTRACTION FOR HORROR STORIES: DEFINING THE GENRE AND KING'S REVITALIZATION OF THE AMERICAN GOTHIC

Unanimously considered the initiator of the Gothic genre, Walpole reached with *The Castle of Otranto* an enormous influence in most European countries in the last years of the 18th century and in the 19th century, especially in

⁸ Walpole 1766: xiv.

⁹ Clery 1994: 40.

England, France and Germany. In fact, the turn of the century witnessed the beginnings of the distinctive features of the American Gothic. The cultural role that the Gothic played in Europe was against the predominant movement, the Enlightenment, as the American Gothic arose from an outright rejection of the search for happiness aimed at by the 'American dream'. The most remarkable characteristic of the beginnings of the American Gothic was the new possibilities of innovation in literature. As a consequence, the Gothic genre is used with a series of literary resources suggesting a reflection on American history, as well as metaphors focusing on local obsessions combined with motifs – and even sceneries – of the English Gothic. This can be seen in the prologue of *Edgar Huntly*:

One merit the writer may at least claim:—that of calling forth the passions and engaging the sympathy of the reader by means hitherto unemployed by preceding authors. Puerile superstition and exploded manners, Gothic castles and chimeras, are the materials usually employed for this end. The incidents of Indian hostility, and the perils of the Western wilderness, are far more suitable; and for a native of America to overlook these would admit of no apology. These, therefore, are, in part, the ingredients of this tale, and these he has been ambitious of depicting in vivid and faithful colours. The success of his efforts must be estimated by the liberal and candid reader¹⁰.

Fifty years later, Hawthorne published his masterpiece *The Scarlett Letter* (1850) and, unlike Brown, went a step further locating the plot in the puritan Boston of the 17th century. In a sense, there is a certain connection with another of the works by Walpole – *The Mysterious Mother* – as it deals with its two main topics: sin and blame. Nevertheless, “for a fully realized aesthetics of the corpse and the darkest attractions of death, Hawthorne’s work required the supplement of Edgar Allan Poe”¹¹. Poe, traditionally considered as a sort of “underworld inhabitant” due to his numerous excesses, made use of the Gothic genre to reflect his obsessions – and it could even be affirmed that the elements of Poe’s works, like the coffins representing an extreme claustrophobia, shape series of ambitions and wishes impossible to achieve.

In this light, and despite that part of the critics who state that marvellous and fantastic elements typically belong to horror literature, we consider that the distortions of reality also play an essential role when provoking fear or anxiety. There are several recurrent elements that may lead to this feeling of anxiety: response to the other/strange, loss of important persons or of a part of the body, separation, surrender, responsibilities of the adult life, fear of the death, and the

¹⁰ Brown 2007: 3

¹¹ Savoy 2011: 180.

loss of the body functions in the old age, among others¹². The main concerns of the 18th-century Gothic are not really different from the contemporary Gothic, as it continues to emphasize the limits of passion and rationality, the fear of the strange/unknown, and family ties: “there is now no question that the Gothic, particularly in prose or verse, narrative, theatre, and film (...) has become a long-lasting and major, albeit widely variable, symbolic realm in modern and even postmodern western culture, however archaic the Gothic label may make it seem”¹³. In fact, the meaning of a work as a horror story may vary in specific details, although the articulation of the genre ensures its attachment to it. The Gothic genre, thus, is defined by a combination of themes and formal resources, despite its variability and adaptability.

Despite the enormous diffusion of Gothic stories in the 19th century, it was not until the 20th century when the term ‘Gothic novel’ was coined – especially because of its popularization after the Second World War. In the 1970s, Stephen King opened the path of Gothic bestsellers with *Carrie* (1974), whose adaptation to the big screen by Brian de Palma (1976) entailed a higher impact among the population. In 1977 after the release of *Salem’s Lot* (1975), King published *The Shining*, also adapted for the screen (Kubrick 1980). The impact King has had in current literary studies is undeniable¹⁴; in this light, as mentioned above, this chapter focuses on *The Shining*, the novel that firmly confirmed him as a preeminent author in the genre.

EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY GOTHIC ELEMENTS IN *THE SHINING*

The enormous success of King’s third novel, *The Shining*, firmly established him as a preeminent author in the genre, as it was then reassured thanks to his prolific literary production. It is widely considered that *The Shining* was inspired by the short stories “The Fall of the House of Usher” (Poe 1839), “The Masque of the Red Death” (Poe 1842), and “The Veldt” (Bradbury 1950); as well as by the novels *The Haunting of Hill House* (Jackson 1959), and *Burnt Offerings* (Marasco 1973). Together with these influences, there are some elements from Walpole’s 18th century Gothic also present in *The Shining*; in this chapter, we will focus mainly on four, namely: i) the settings; ii) the stifling claustrophobic atmosphere; iii) family ties, paying a special attention to the relationship father-son; and iv) ghosts and supernatural elements.

¹² See Mack 1970.

¹³ Hogle 2011: 2.

¹⁴ Indick 1985; Hoppenstand and Browne 1987; Strengell 2005a and 2005b; Simpson and McAleer 2014.

1. The settings: The Castle of Otranto vs. the Overlook Hotel

One of the main features from the beginnings of the Gothic genre is the setting, that is, the scenario where action takes place totally or partially:

a Gothic tale usually takes place (at least some of the time) in an antiquated or seemingly antiquated space – be it a castle, a foreign palace, an abbey, a vast prison (...). Within this space, or a combination of such spaces, are hidden some secrets from the past (sometimes the recent past) that haunt characters, psychologically, physically, or otherwise at the main time of the story.

These hauntings can take many forms, but they frequently assume the features of ghosts, spectres or monsters¹⁵.

This feature was already highlighted in Walpole's work, in which his own castle entitled the "Gothic story". *The Castle of Otranto* takes place inside the walls of an old castle located in Italy, due to the fascination for the Mediterranean environment from the beginning of the genre till the 1850s. Its relevance lies in the fact that the castle holds a curse tormenting its inhabitants, as the principality has been usurped by Manfred – not its real owner. The medieval castle transforms itself, thus, as another character participating in the plot (the revenge and subsequent recovery of the power by the legitimate heir) and with a relevant expressive power. In this light, "[t]he castle is central to the fable and seems to have a life of its own. It traps and conceals; its walls frame almost all the main events with a specificity on which Walpole prided himself"¹⁶. This feature can be observed in the following excerpt:

A clap of thunder at that instant shook the castle to its foundations; the earth rocked, and the clank of more than mortal armour was heard behind. Frederic and Jerome thought the last day was at hand. The latter, forcing Theodore along with them, rushed into the court. The moment Theodore appeared, the walls of the castle behind Manfred were thrown down with a mighty force, and the form of Alfonso, dilated to an immense magnitude, appeared in the centre of the ruins¹⁷.

As we mentioned previously, Walpole was inspired by his own "castle" in Strawberry Hill for the detailed description of the different passages of the castle of Otranto, such as "(t)he lower part of the castle was hollowed into several intricate cloisters; and it was not easy for one under so much anxiety to find the door that opened into the cavern"¹⁸.

¹⁵ Hogle 2011: 2.

¹⁶ Clery 2011: 26.

¹⁷ Walpole 1766: 194.

¹⁸ Walpole 1766: 22.

Like Walpole, King was also inspired by a real setting to create the Overlook Hotel: The Stanley Hotel in Ester Park, Colorado; which has become one of the most well-known and spooky buildings of modern horror. After his two first novels located in his native Maine, King decided to look for a change of setting in his new book, so he actually checked into the Stanley Hotel, being the only guest there. Similar to the castle of Otranto, this hotel holds a curse that hounds the characters, the Torrances, giving a notorious relevance to the building from the beginning of the story. While the hotel manager warns Jack in the job interview, Danny is warned by his imaginary friend Tony with the word “REDRUM” to stay away from one of the rooms:

And in the bug, which moved upward more surely on the gentler grade, he kept looking out between them as the road unwound, affording occasional glimpses of the Overlook Hotel, its massive bank of westward-looking windows reflecting back the sun. It was the place he had seen in the midst of the blizzard, the dark and booming place where some hideously familiar figure sought him down long corridors carpeted with jungle. The place Tony had warned him against. It was here. It was here. Whatever Redrum was, it was here¹⁹.

2. Claustrophobic atmosphere

Related to the previous section, the setting where the action takes place – either the castle or the hotel – is clearly related to the claustrophobic atmosphere hounding continuously the characters, as can be compared in the two following excerpts:

The gates of the castle she knew were locked, and guards placed in the court. Should she, as her heart prompted her, go and prepare Hippolita for the cruel destiny that awaited her; she did not doubt but Manfred would seek her there, and that this violence would incite him to double the injury he meditated, without leaving room for them to avoid the impetuosity of his passions. Delay might give him time to reflect on the horrid measures he had conceived, or produce some circumstance in her favour, if she could for that night at least avoid his odious purpose. –Yet where conceal herself! how avoid the pursuit he would infallibly make throughout the castle! As these thoughts passed rapidly through her mind, she recollected a subterraneous passage, which led from the vaults of the castle to the church of St. Nicholas²⁰.

“I suspect that what happened came as a result of too much cheap whiskey, of which Grady had laid in a generous supply, unbeknownst to me, and a curious condition which the old-timers call cabin fever. Do you know the term?” Ullman offered a patronizing little smile, ready to explain as soon as Jack admitted his

¹⁹ King 1977/2012: 90.

²⁰ Walpole 1766: 21.

ignorance, and Jack was happy to respond quickly and crisply. "It's a slang term for the claustrophobic reaction that can occur when people are shut in together over long periods of time. The feeling of claustrophobia is externalized as dislike for the people you happen to be shut in with. In extreme cases it can result in hallucinations and violence — murder has been done over such minor things as a burned meal or an argument about whose turn it is to do the dishes"²¹.

The sensation of claustrophobia connected to the setting increases in Jack throughout the novel and, together with his growing addiction to alcohol, the main character sees how the hotel has a direct influence in his behaviour:

He almost fell over the drinks cart that was being wheeled along by a low-browed man in a white mess jacket. His foot rapped the lower chromed shelf of the cart; the bottles and siphons of top chattered together musically.

"Sorry," Jack said thickly. He suddenly felt closed in and claustrophobic; he wanted to get out. He wanted the Overlook back the way it had been... free of these unwanted guests. His place was not honoured, as the true opener of the way; he was only another of the ten thousand cheering extras, a doggy rolling over and sitting up on command²².

3. Family relationships

Family ties are also a recurrent element from the beginnings of the Gothic as a genre. Walpole is especially attracted to family problems²³: in the case of *The Castle of Otranto*, these ties are related to revenge, in order to restore the honour and the principality to the legitimate heir. This idea of revenge is backed by a supernatural being, a ghost (discussed later). This association between family and revenge is not exceptional and, in fact, it is commonly used to justify the appearance of ghosts:

"Behold in Theodore the true heir of Alfonso!" said the vision: And having pronounced those words, accompanied by a clap of thunder, it ascended solemnly towards heaven, where the clouds parting asunder, the form of St. Nicholas was seen, and receiving Alfonso's shade, they were soon wrapt from mortal eyes in a blaze of glory.

The beholders fell prostrate on their faces, acknowledging the divine will. The first that broke silence was Hippolita²⁴.

²¹ King 1977/2012: 12.

²² King 1977/2012: 515.

²³ *The Mysterious Mother* is a clear example of this attraction, as it even addresses the complex topic of incest.

²⁴ Walpole 1766: 195.

In 20th century fiction, however, there was a significant rise (though not studied with much depth) of the issue of children in horror literature. As a consequence, daily family relationships and very realistic characters put particularly emphasis on father-son ties in several works written by King, where *The Shining* is not an exception. King, about this novel, said:

When I wrote *The Shining*, for instance, the protagonist of *The Shining* is a man who has broken his son's arm, who has a history of child beating, who is beaten himself. And as a young father with two children, I was horrified by my occasional feelings of real antagonism toward my children. Won't you ever stop? Won't you ever go to bed? And time has given me the idea that probably there are a lot of young fathers and young mothers both who feel very angry, who have angry feelings toward their children. But as somebody who has been raised with the idea that father knows best and Ward Cleaver on 'Leave It To Beaver,' and all this stuff, I would think to myself, Oh, if he doesn't shut up, if he doesn't shut up...²⁵

The writer used Danny to emphasize the madness of Jack Torrance, although the defencelessness position of the boy is difficult to address, thus reflecting an undeniable critic of our society. In fact, "Writers like King no doubt use the child to portray the faults of the adults, but in the process they offer adult readers disturbing images of victimised and victimising children"²⁶.

Furthermore, *The Shining* underlines the special tie between father and son, although it is the mother who really protects and cares for him. The following excerpt shows certain resignation from the mother due to the impossibility for her of having a closer relationship with her son, who is "his father's boy":

She had stuck with Jack more for Danny's sake than she would admit in her waking hours, but now, sleeping lightly, she could admit it: Danny had been Jack's for the asking, almost from the first. Just as she had been her father's, almost from the first. (...) He loved his mother but he was his father's boy²⁷.

4. Ghosts

In the first prologue of *The Castle of Otranto*, the inclusion of ghosts and paranormal phenomena is justified because "Miracles, visions, necromancy, dreams and other preternatural events, are exploded now even from romances. That was not the case when our author wrote (...). Belief in every kind of prodigy

²⁵ Beahm 1995.

²⁶ Martin Alegre 2001: 105.

²⁷ King 1977/2012: 77.

was so established in those dark ages, that an author would not be faithful to the *manners of the time*²⁸.

According to Walpole, these representations would be associated to the superstitions of medieval Catholicism. This “accurate” image of medieval beliefs in ghosts presented by the author, however, is somewhat ambivalent: while it is occasionally seen like mockery and even provokes the scepticism of the noble characters, in others, especially in the case of Father Jerome, it is described as an honest man of strong moral convictions (to whom Manfred and Hippolita even asked for redemption). We find these two clearly opposing views in the following fragments – the first (A) being in a certain teasing tone, and the second (B) substantially more profound:

(A) Replied Manfred: Frederic accepts Matilda's hand, and is content to wave his claim, unless I have no male issue –as he spoke those words three drops of blood fell from the nose of Alfonso's statue. Manfred turned pale, and the Princess sunk on her knees²⁹.

(B) Manfred, who hoped by the confessor's means to come at the youth's history, readily granted his request: and being convinced that Father Jerome was now in his interest, he ordered him to be called and shrive the prisoner. The holy man, who had little foreseen, the catastrophe that his imprudence occasioned, fell on his knees to the Prince, and adjured him in the most solemn manner not to shed innocent blood³⁰.

Paranormal phenomena in *The Shining* are subtler, as they seek to capture and hold the attention and bewilderment of the reader. On the one hand, we find Danny's invisible friend who provides information – and sometimes even leads the boy to lose consciousness. Throughout the novel, it is unclear if it could be a schizophrenic disease or a direct contact with the supernatural:

“No,” he whispered. “No, Tony please — ”
And, dangling over the white porcelain lip of the bathtub, a hand. Limp. A slow trickle of blood (REDRUM) trickling down one of the fingers, the third, dripping onto the tile from the carefully shaped nail —
No oh no oh no —
(oh please, Tony, you're scaring me)
REDRUM REDRUM REDRUM
(stop it, Tony, stop it)
Fading³¹.

²⁸ Walpole 1766: vii.

²⁹ Walpole 1766: 164.

³⁰ Walpole 1766: 81.

³¹ King 1977/2012: 47.

On the other hand, we cannot forget the relevance of Jack Torrance in this section on ghosts and supernatural phenomena. The hotel tries to influence and even possess Danny, but as it cannot do it, the Overlook does not hesitate to possess Jack, releasing its anger on him until he finally ends his own life:

Danny darted out of her arms then and raced down the corridor. She looked after him, and as he vanished around the corner, back at Hallorann. "What if he comes back?"

"Your husband?"

"He's not Jack," she muttered. "Jack's dead. This place killed him. *This damned place.*" She struck at the wall with her fist and cried out at the pain in her cut fingers³².

CONCLUSION

Horace Walpole inaugurated a genre in the mid-eighteenth century, whose influence continues today. The elements Walpole introduced in *The Castle of Otranto* have been adapted to later fiction works in Europe and, from the 19th century, also in the United States – where the variant of the American Gothic was developed.

In spite of the direct influence that Edgar Allan Poe has exerted on Stephen King, one of the most relevant bestseller authors nowadays, we can draw some connections with the beginnings of the genre in Strawberry Hill. To do this, we have tried to show this influence in certain elements of *The Shining* already present in *The Castle of Otranto*, namely: settings, claustrophobic atmosphere, family relationships, and ghosts and paranormal phenomena.

It is unquestionable that the early stages Gothic were as a reaction against rationality, and the development of this genre has needed a change of the motifs – currently, a mixture of entertainment and criticism against current society. Nonetheless, there are certain elements that continue from the very beginnings of the genre, and can be observed even in the most recent Gothic works. In this light, we consider that further studies should also continue to investigate these interferences, influences and connections.

³² King 1977/2012: 637.