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## The castle of otranto critical analysis

In order to continue enjoying our site, we ask that you confirm your identity as a human. Thank you very much for your cooperation. The gothic novel is a living tradition, a form that enjoys great popular appeal while provoking harsh critical judgments. It began with Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* (1765), then traveled through Ann Radcliffe, Matthew Gregory Lewis, Charles Robert Maturin.... [Read More](#) » Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto*, is acknowledged by many as the first gothic novel. It was the first of its kind and many of the conventions used by Walpole, which put it in a literary genre of its own, were continued by authors such as Ann Radcliffe and Matthew Lewis. Many of these defining characteristics can be seen within the very first few pages of the text and for the purposes of this essay, to identify some of these conventions used and the relevance of this text to modernity I shall focus this analysis on the passage between pages twenty-four and twenty-six from the Oxford World's Classics edition. The gothic novel emerged during the late eighteenth century and the 'Age of Enlightenment', which emphasised rationality...show more content...In *Otranto*, Walpole challenges his societies views of modernity and transgresses social laws by introducing the theme of incest into his novel with Manfred preying of his deceased son's betrothed, Isabella. This brings into play three defining features which became prevalent within gothic novels of the late eighteenth century: women in distress; women being threatened by powerful males; and the major theme of fear and in this example, specifically female fear. Isabella, a young, virginal woman becomes "half dead with fright" when faced with potential rape and becoming a spoiled woman at the hands of the powerful and threatening Manfred. Such suggestions, by Walpole's age were seen as scandalous and caused moral outrage, a thread that was carried through the gothic genre. This new genre may have provided for many, an escape from the rigid world of enlightenment. It brought to them a world of imagination and allowed them to immerse themselves in a world which had been morally forbidden and they could do it from the privacy of their own homes, allowing their indulgence, and perhaps, immoral thoughts to go unnoticed, providing a way for the darkness and immoral thoughts to come alive outside of the novel. At the end of the novel however, society's moral ideals surface as Manfred retires to a convent after the realisation of his sins and order is restored. In this way, although Walpole is exposing his readers to these ideas, he would *The Castle of Otranto*, often called the first Gothic novel, was published in 1764. Its author, Horace Walpole, was a fascinating man (of whom more below), but so is his most enduring work of fiction. Below, we offer a summary and analysis of *The Castle of Otranto*, and debunk some myths about this classic work of Gothic literature. *The Castle of Otranto*: short plot summary Manfred, the Prince of Otranto (a real place in Italy, although the Otranto of the novel exists on a more fantastical plane), plans to marry his sickly son, Conrad, to Isabella, the daughter of the Marquis of Vicenza. In the absence of the Marquis, Manfred has placed Isabella in the castle for safe-keeping, since he is haunted by a prophecy which states that the Castle of Otranto would pass from the present family to some other, if the 'real owner should be grown too large to inhabit it'. However, before the marriage between Manfred's son and Isabella can take place, Conrad is crushed to death by a giant helmet from a suit of armour. Because of the prophecy, and finding himself without a son and heir, Manfred decides he must divorce his wife and marry Isabella himself. However, Isabella escapes the castle, with the help of a young man named Theodore (who looks uncannily like Alonso, the original Prince of Otranto, whose portrait hangs in the castle). Isabella flees to a nearby church to seek sanctuary there from Manfred. Manfred has Theodore locked up for aiding Isabella's escape; Manfred also suspects Theodore of playing some part in Conrad's death. However, Theodore is released by Matilda, Manfred's kindly daughter, and the two promptly fall in love. The rest of the short novel features a catalogue of chaotic events, involving the appearance of Isabella's father, demanding his daughter back, and a subsequent duel between him and Manfred. However, the two are reconciled and Isabella's father even gives Manfred his blessing to marry his less-than-willing daughter. However, believing Isabella and Theodore have become an item, Manfred walks in on Theodore praying with a woman and, believing it to be Isabella, stabs her - only to discover that he has killed Matilda, his own daughter. We now come to the supernatural finale of the novel, in which the ghost of Alonso (the castle's original owner) grows too big for the castle and starts to destroy it (it was the ghost's helmet that crushed Conrad). The prophecy which so worried Manfred has been fulfilled. In one final twist, it turns out that Theodore, whose looks resemble those of Alonso, is Alonso's heir: Manfred's grandfather had killed Alonso and he had taken over the castle, and the principality of Otranto, himself. Manfred and his wife retire to a monastery and nunnery, Theodore becomes the prince of Otranto, and marries Isabella. *The Castle of Otranto*: analysis *The Castle of Otranto* sprang from a dream its author had: Walpole later wrote that "I had thought myself in an ancient castle (a very natural dream for a head filled like mine with Gothic story) and that on the uppermost banister of a great staircase saw a gigantic hand in armour. In the evening I sat down to write". Walpole thus initiated another long tradition, which is that of authors of Gothic novels and stories taking their inspiration (or, at any rate, claiming they are taking their inspiration) from dreams they have had. Another, later, notable example is Stevenson's story of *Jekyll and Hyde*. However, what Walpole did not initiate was the Gothic story as such: after all, in his account of writing *The Castle of Otranto* he even observes that the dream which inspired the novel was 'a very natural dream for a head filled like mine with Gothic story' (emphasis added), indicating that he had already been immersed in Gothic literature before writing a word of the novel. Indeed, it can be questioned whether he even invented the Gothic novel, even though most histories of the Gothic name-check *The Castle of Otranto* as the genre's starting point. But we can find precursors to the Gothic story in early ghost stories from as far back as the Middle Ages, and plays like Shakespeare's *Hamlet* are shot through with what we'd now call 'the Gothic'; and we can even point to earlier novels or novellas, such as William Baldwin's early narrative *Beware the Cat* (written back in the 1550s), as precursors to the 'Gothic' novel as we conceive it, even if it resembles later masterpieces of the genre such as *Jekyll and Hyde* or *The Beetle* rather than early eighteenth-century Gothic novels like Walpole's. The Gothic craze which Walpole is credited with inaugurating is often said to represent a break away from the orderliness and rationalism of earlier eighteenth-century literature (which is classified as 'classical' because of its love of order, as opposed to 'romantic' literature which embraces disorder and freedom), and *The Castle of Otranto*, thanks to its supernatural elements and emphasis on the breaking-up of order (represented by the edifice of the castle), certainly shows a move away from classicism towards a less orderly vision of the world. However, the novel is nevertheless classical in some respects, namely in its conclusion, which sees the rightful Prince of Otranto restored, and the usurper, whose grandfather had disrupted the true order, banished from office. The author of *The Castle of Otranto*, Horace Walpole (1717-97), was a fascinating figure. He was the son of the first de facto Prime Minister of the United Kingdom, Robert Walpole; the author of what is widely regarded as the first Gothic novel; the coiner of the word 'serendipity'; a big influence on the revival of Gothic architecture in Britain, after he built his own Gothic mansion, Strawberry Hill House, at Twickenham; and he was even the owner of the cat who inspired Thomas Gray's famous 'Ode on the Death of a Favourite Cat, Drowned in a Tub of Goldfishes'. And *The Castle of Otranto* was, if anything, a joke played upon the public: when it was first published in 1764, Walpole claimed it was a genuine account of something that had happened, the manuscript document having come to light. A year later, when the novel was reprinted, Walpole appended the subtitle 'A Gothic Story' and came clean, but in the meantime, he had got the public interested in his tale and had also initiated the 'found' text tradition in Gothic fiction, whereby the narrative is offered to us as a document that has been discovered and edited/published.





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