Text: Building Skills in English 11–14

1 Features of Gothic stories

Gothic stories became popular around two hundred years ago, and have remained popular ever since. Gothic stories and films are usually about ghosts and horror and they often include these features:

- wild and remote places
- dark and gloomy settings
- graveyards, tombs and corpses
- family curses and dark secrets
- supernatural powers
- mysterious and frightening creatures, people or ghosts
- old, ruined, isolated castles and mansions, often with secret passages and mysterious towers
- nightmares, madness and mental torment
- science used for evil or disastrous purposes
- worrying and unusual natural events (storms, full moons, etc.).

Activity 1

Look carefully at the list of Gothic features above and make a list of stories and films (for example, Dracula or Raven’s Gate) that have some of those features in them.

Activity 2

Read these four story openings:

A

Jane leaned on the railing of her apartment balcony, gazed across the shiny, blue sea of the bay, and sighed with happiness. This was going to be the perfect holiday. And best of all, there would be no more Tom.

B

Heath Manor finally rose into view behind a line of dense, gloomy fir trees. The closer we got, the more it looked like a brooding monster – battered and bruised, but still menacing. A fierce wind tugged at its broken shutters.

C

A sudden dark shadow swept across the bright moon, momentarily blocking out its light. Sarah stumbled against a gravestone that was leaning towards the path like a cracked and crooked tooth. An owl gave a ghostly hoot.

D

‘Surrender!’ boomed the voice of the Stragor commander. ‘Surrender, or we will destroy your ship and all on board.’ Martin Strang, leader of Solar Expedition 29, was not easily scared. He readied the stun missile tubes.

Which two of these are most Gothic? Briefly explain why.

Activity 3

Frankenstein, by Mary Shelley, is one of the most famous Gothic novels ever written. Read the extract below, where the narrator, Dr Frankenstein, describes the moment when the monster he has been creating finally comes to life.

How can I describe my emotions at this catastrophe, or how delineate the wretch whom with such infinite pains and care I had endeavoured to form? His limbs were in proportion, and I had selected his features as beautiful. Beautiful! – Great God! His yellow skin scarcely covered the work of muscles and arteries beneath; his hair was of a lustrous black, and flowing; his teeth of a pearly whiteness; but these luxuriances only formed a more horrid contrast with his watery eyes, that seemed almost of the same colour as the dun white sockets in which they were set, his shrivelled complexion and straight black lips.

The different accidents of life are not so changeable as the feelings of human nature. I had worked hard for nearly two years, for the sole purpose of infusing life into an inanimate body. For this I had deprived myself of rest and health. I had desired it with an ardour that far exceeded moderation; but now that I had finished, the beauty of the dream vanished, and breathless horror and disgust filled my heart. Unable to endure the aspect of the being I had created, I rushed out of the room, and continued a long time traversing my bedchamber, unable to compose my mind to sleep.

Assess your progress

This table shows you how to get better at the key reading skills used on these two pages. How well are you doing?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level 3</th>
<th>Level 4</th>
<th>Level 5</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pick out and describe some basic features of Gothic texts</td>
<td>Explain how Gothic features are different from those of other sorts of story</td>
<td>Consider how the way a text is written affects its meaning</td>
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<tr>
<td>Comment on how the reader is supposed to feel</td>
<td>Understand a writer’s purpose – even when it is not obvious</td>
<td>Explain the difference between an author’s and a character’s viewpoints</td>
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Biography

Mary Shelley is best known as the author of the novel Frankenstein, which was published in 1818. Her husband was the Romantic poet Percy Bysshe Shelley.