



A TERROR *as OLD as* **TIME**

The **ORIGINS** *of*
HORROR

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THE HORROR GENRE WASN'T BORN FROM SPOOKY

LITERATURE OR GORY FILMS – HUMANS HAVE

DEVOURED HORROR NARRATIVES SINCE

THE DAWN OF TIME

WORDS Alice Pattillo

The seeds of horror fiction were carried by whispers of ancient legends, religious superstition and real-life horrors, planted by epic poets and medieval bards, and germinated within the pages of the Gothic novel.

Deriving from the Latin “horrere” – a verb meaning to shudder, bristle or tremble with fear – we, as a species, have enjoyed sharing scary stories for as long as we have told tales.

The earliest were often terrifying cautionary tales, passed down through word of mouth as myths and legends that spoke of death, the afterlife, vengeful spirits, ghosts, monsters and demons. These manifestations warned of and sought to rationalise the very real fears and inexplicable dangers our ancestors faced. Over centuries, such stories shaped world religions and folklore traditions before eventually making their way into the pages of genre fiction.

RELIGIOUS NIGHTMARES

The ancient Mesopotamian *Epic of Gilgamesh* – compiled between roughly 2100 and 1200 BCE and rooted in even older Sumerian tales – features horrifying supernatural beings such as Humbaba, a gigantic guardian whose very presence inspires terror. The Egyptian *Book of the Dead*, meanwhile, served as a magical guide to navigating the perils of the afterlife. The Egyptians believed the dead would encounter a host of terrifying entities capable of destroying souls deemed unworthy.

Almost every ancient civilisation told stories of monsters, demons and restless spirits, developing rituals intended to protect against them. Fear was not merely entertainment; it was woven into daily life, belief systems and social order.

During the Middle Ages, these anxieties became increasingly

ABOVE RIGHT Part of the *Epic of Gilgamesh* inscribed on a tablet from the 17th century BCE

RIGHT The falcon-headed Egyptian god Horus presents a woman, Ani, to Osiris, the god of the dead





ABOVE *The Dance of Death* (1493) by Michael Wolgemut served as a reminder of life's fragility

► entwined with organised religion. Christianity spread across Europe, bringing with it vivid concepts of Hell, damnation and eternal punishment. Good and evil became sharply defined. Pagan deities were recast as devils, folk customs condemned as witchcraft, and demons were believed to lurk everywhere. Churches were adorned with grotesque carvings and murals depicting the horrors awaiting sinful souls.

Perhaps the most influential vision of damnation in Western literature is Dante Alighieri's *Inferno*, the first part of *The Divine Comedy*. Written in the early 14th century, it imagines Hell as a vast realm divided into nine increasingly horrific circles of punishment. Dante's vision inspired generations of artists, from Sandro Botticelli to William Blake and Gustave Doré, helping to establish visual conventions that continue to influence horror today.

Alongside these literary depictions, medieval Europe produced a wealth of macabre imagery: the skeletal figures of *The Dance of Death* (*Danse Macabre*), the nightmarish paintings of Hieronymus Bosch, and richly illustrated bestiaries cataloguing fantastic beasts. Together, they created a visual language of horror long before the genre formally existed.

Fear of the supernatural also fuelled real-world panics. In 1486, German clergyman Heinrich Kramer published the *Malleus Maleficarum* (or "Hammer of the Witches"), a text that helped legitimise witch persecutions across Europe. The resulting witch hunts would continue for centuries. Similar outbreaks of fear followed, including werewolf

panics in 16th and 17th-century Europe and vampire scares in 18th-century Eastern Europe. Though rooted in superstition, social tensions and misunderstood illnesses, these instances of panic left a lasting impression on the cultural imagination and would later provide deliciously rich material for horror writers.

THE RISE OF THE GOTHIC

The Age of Enlightenment unexpectedly provided fertile ground for Gothic literature. Following the Scientific Revolution, reason and empirical thinking increasingly displaced religious explanations of the world. Literature was expected to educate and instruct, while fiction was often viewed with suspicion. Some critics even feared that novels might corrupt readers by blurring the boundary between fantasy and reality.

By the late 18th century, however, many had grown weary of strict rationalism and classical restraint. The medieval past,

once dismissed by Renaissance scholars as a period of ignorance, began to acquire a new allure. Crumbling castles, ruined abbeys, ancient legends and forgotten histories offered an appealing alternative to the orderly certainties of the Enlightenment.

Few embodied this fascination more fully than Horace Walpole. A passionate medievalist, he transformed a modest cottage in Twickenham, UK, into Strawberry Hill House, a fantastical Gothic revival fairytale mansion inspired by medieval ecclesiastical architecture. Inside, he cultivated an atmosphere he called "gloomth" – a blend of gloom and warmth that combined the melancholy mystery of a medieval abbey with up-to-date luxuries and creature comforts.

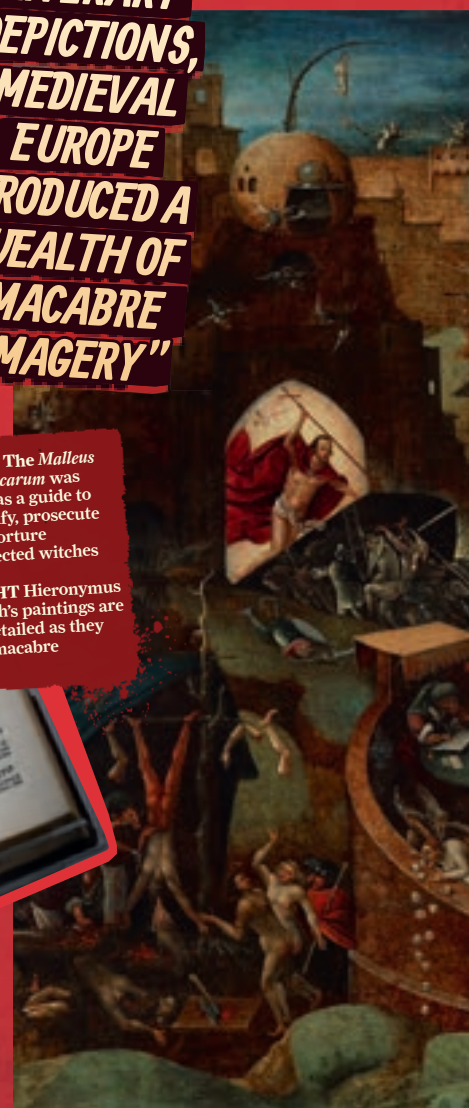
Following a vivid, surreal nightmare at Strawberry Hill House, Walpole wrote *The Castle of Otranto* (1764), establishing the blueprint for the Gothic novel. Featuring a haunted castle, hidden passageways, generational curses, supernatural events, persecuted heroines and tyrannical villains, it established many of the genre's defining conventions.

By the 1790s, Gothic fiction had become a literary phenomenon. Ann Radcliffe refined the form through works

"ALONGSIDE LITERARY DEPICTIONS, MEDIEVAL EUROPE PRODUCED A WEALTH OF MACABRE IMAGERY"

LEFT The *Malleus Maleficarum* was used as a guide to identify, prosecute and torture suspected witches

RIGHT Hieronymus Bosch's paintings are as detailed as they are macabre





ABOVE A scene from *Mysteries of Udolpho* – a key text in the emerging Gothic novel



LEFT Horace Walpole cultivated “gloomth” within his Strawberry Hill House

RIGHT Walpole also wrote *The Castle of Otranto*, which many consider the first Gothic horror novel

such as *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794), introducing psychological suspense and prolonged terror. Her heroines often found themselves trapped not by supernatural forces but by patriarchal systems and abusive authority, laying the foundations for what scholars would later term the Female Gothic.

Matthew Lewis pushed the genre in a darker direction. His scandalous novel *The Monk: A Romance* (1796) embraced demonic forces, occultism, violence and taboo subject matter, demonstrating that horror could be both transgressive and commercially successful.

MONSTERS FOR A MODERN AGE

The 19th century transformed horror. As industrialisation, urbanisation and scientific discovery reshaped society, writers increasingly turned their attention towards new fears surrounding technology and humanity's place in a rapidly changing world. ▶



ABOVE The Brothers Grimm were prolific in bringing dark stories to children

LEFT The Grimms' stories were originally for adults, but were adapted for younger audiences



WEIRD FICTION AND THE BIRTH OF HORROR CINEMA

By the turn of the 20th century, horror had grown tentacles. Rapid advances in science and technology challenged humanity's understanding of itself and its place in the universe. Out of these uncertainties emerged Weird Fiction.

Unlike traditional Gothic tales, Weird Fiction often suggested that the universe itself was vast, unknowable and indifferent. Building on the idiosyncrasies found in the works of Edgar Allan Poe and J. Sheridan Le Fanu, writers such as H.G. Wells, Arthur Machen, M.R. James, Algernon Blackwood and later H.P. Lovecraft replaced haunted castles with cosmic mysteries and ancient forces beyond human comprehension. Through pulp magazines such as *Weird Tales* (1923), horror reached an even wider audience and the foundations for modern supernatural fiction were laid.

At the same time, an entirely new storytelling medium was emerging.

Horror has been integral to cinema since its earliest developments. Its roots can be traced to phantasmagoria shows, which used projected images, smoke and illusion to conjure ghosts and demons before fascinated audiences. Building on this tradition, French filmmaker Georges Méliès created *Le Manoir du Diable* (1896), widely regarded as the first horror film. Lasting barely three minutes in its runtime, it nevertheless still manages to

► The early 19th century also saw renewed interest in folklore. Scholars sought to preserve disappearing oral traditions, most famously through the collections of the Brothers Grimm. Folkloric creatures soon found their way into Gothic fiction.

In 1816, a ghost story competition held beside Lake Geneva produced two landmark works. Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus* (1818) helped establish science fiction while exploring the dangers of unchecked ambition and scientific hubris. John William Polidori's *The Vampyre* (1819) transformed folkloric vampire traditions into the aristocratic predator that would dominate 19th-century horror.

Cheap periodicals and literary magazines expanded horror's audience. Penny dreadfuls filled Victorian newsstands with grisly murders, urban legends and supernatural adventures. Readers encountered characters such as Varney the Vampire, Sweeney Todd and Spring-heeled Jack, blending folklore,

crime and sensationalism into a new form of mass entertainment.

Across the Atlantic, Edgar Allan Poe pioneered the American Gothic. Through stories such as 1843's *The Tell-Tale Heart* and *The Black Cat*, Poe shifted horror inward, exploring guilt, madness and psychological disintegration. His unreliable narrators demonstrated that the human mind could be every bit as terrifying as any monster.

By the late Victorian period, Spiritualism, séance culture, and an obsession with mourning had revived public interest in ghosts and the occult. Eerie supernatural tales were back in vogue, with notable works like Wilkie Collins's *The Woman in White* (1860), Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890), Robert Louis Stevenson's *Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1886), Henry James's *The Turn of the Screw* (1898), Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897) and the sci-fi stories of H.G. Wells breathing new life into Gothic traditions while adapting them to modern concerns.

BELOW *Frankenstein* kicked the door wide open for the dark and macabre stories that followed



pack in devils, witches, apparitions and supernatural transformations.

The medium of film proved uniquely suited to horror. Audiences confined to a darkened room could now witness nightmares unfold before their eyes. During the 1920s, German Expressionist films such as *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (1920) and *Nosferatu* (1922) used distorted sets, dramatic lighting and psychological unease to create some of cinema's most enduring images.

But it was two releases in particular that proved to studio heads that Gothic horror could provide commercially successful full-length feature films, paving the way for Universal Pictures to transform literary monsters Dracula and Frankenstein into a cultural phenomenon in the 1930s. The "Man of a Thousand Faces", Lon Chaney, set an industry standard for on-screen practical special effects when he reimagined two tortured and deformed characters plucked from the pages of Gothic novels for the silver screen. In 1923 he portrayed Quasimodo in *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*, followed by the titular phantom, Erik, in 1925's *The Phantom of the Opera*, utilising his own makeup design skills to create two grotesque and ghastly visages that shocked audiences and left a lasting legacy through horror history.

From ancient myths and religious visions, to Gothic novels, Weird Fiction and the silver screen, horror has continually reinvented itself to reflect humanity's changing fears. Yet its purpose remains remarkably consistent. Horror gives shape to the unknown. It allows us to confront death, uncertainty and the darker corners of our imagination from a place of safety.

Whether whispered around a fire, copied into medieval manuscripts, printed in penny periodicals or projected onto a cinema screen, horror remains one of humanity's oldest and most enduring ways of making sense of fear.

RIGHT The German Expressionism movement still holds influence over modern filmmakers



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LEFT Lon Chaney's cosmetics and acting in *The Phantom of the Opera* were shocking to theatregoers

RIGHT *Nosferatu* was, in everything but name, a *Dracula* adaptation... albeit unofficially

