Chapter 1

The Concept of the Gothic Down the Ages.

Horror in literature has always had both repulsion and fascination over millions of readers down the ages. Fear, as A.E. Mander says, is one of those few emotions that have a stranglehold on the human psyche. The human mind has often felt an inexorable pull – a pressing attraction for events and experiences that run a chill down the spine. And that is exactly what gothic literature pivots round. Gothic literature has never really bagged the pride of place in literature, yet, it has stuck on all the same. There have been phases when the literature of terror has repulsed and appalled readers. Yet, it has cropped up again only to be devoured eagerly by hundreds of voracious readers.

One feels that gothic literature is centred on mystery both in regard to the feelings it evokes, and its themes. One wonders what it was that accounted for the popularity of the gothic genre. Analysis of the responses that gothic literature rouses in the minds of readers calls for a proper definition of the genre. The Columbia Viking Desk Encyclopedia defines the gothic romance as “A type of novel which flourished in the late 18\textsuperscript{th} and early 19\textsuperscript{th} centuries in England. Mystery of each tale is heavily tinged with horror derived from gloomy background of medieval architecture and with terror of the supernatural” (2\textsuperscript{nd} edition, 717). The Encyclopedia chooses to chronicle the journey of the gothic from the late 18\textsuperscript{th} century to the early 19\textsuperscript{th} century, though a
study of the history of literature would show that the gothic, as a literary mode, had been there even earlier and had continued to exert its influence on literature even after the early 19th century. Right from the plays of Seneca (C.4B—AD65), down to the 16th—17th century Revenge Plays of Kyd and Webster, the theme of the gothic has prevailed in series of scenes of bloodshed and mayhem and mystery. Even Shakespeare assimilated the motif of horror in plays like Hamlet or Macbeth where ghosts, revenge and carnage often loomed large.

Thus, drama had seen the inroad of the gothic trend of horror right from the early stages, and the trend stretched on intermittently even through the twentieth century literature. In the definition of the gothic according to the Encyclopedia, the stress is on the evocation of the feeling of horror.

Gothic literature was written, with the aim of rousing this feeling of horror in the minds of the readers. Sigmund Freud (1856-1939), ponders upon the exact analysis of this feeling of 'horror' in his essay "The Uncanny "(1919), by taking up E.T.A. Hoffman's The Sandman as a test case. Freud describes the feeling of unrest and unease caused by gothic events, as 'Unheimlich'. A German word, 'unheimlich' is the contrastive opposite to 'heimlich' which would mean familiar, native or belonging to home. So, 'unheimlich' is something that is 'non-familiar', 'non-native' and 'not belonging to home' - so to speak. But that does not necessarily mean that the unheimlich is something totally strange or unfamiliar to us. I would prefer the word 'non-familiar' to 'unfamiliar' because the unheimlich relating to the gothic, hangs loose
somewhere between the familiar and the unfamiliar. Freud, as translated by James Strachey, says,

"The Uncanny" derives its terror not from something externally alien or unknown but — on the contrary—from something strangely familiar which defeats our efforts to separate ourselves from it

(219)

Something that is totally 'alien or unknown' — as Freud puts it — rouses awe and wonder, not dread. But, it is only when the reader is made to hover between the familiar and the unfamiliar, between reality and unreality, that he loses his wits. Terror of the unknown takes over as the brain loses its power to define what it is perceiving. That is why a dead body gives us the creeps. It is not altogether unfamiliar, for the human form is probably one of the most deeply ingrained sights in our comprehension. Yet the world after death, life after death — if any— baffles us; as it is unknown to us. Hence the dread—the feeling of the unheimlich —the uncanny.

As Freud further says:

"Many people experience the feeling (of the uncanny ) in the highest degree in relation to death and dead bodies, to the return of the dead, and to spirits and ghosts. There is scarcely any other matter , however upon which our thoughts and feelings have changed so little since the very
earliest times, and in which discarded forms have been so completely preserved under a thin disguise, as our relation to death. Two things account for our conservatism: the strength of our original emotional reaction to death and the insufficiency of our scientific knowledge about it. (221).

The gothic uncanny rises out of the strange duality of knowledge and dark ignorance about the world of death. Death and life after death (if any) has remained an area shrouded in folds of mystery throughout the ages. Men have recoiled from the very idea of death because of the inevitable sense of loss and void it entails. Churches and religious sects have tried to explain it as a gateway to another world—the world of the afterlife. In the process, ideas of Hell ensconce themselves in the human mind. And Hell was almost synonymous with torture, suffering, pain, madness—all leading to an insurmountable feeling of fear in the human psyche. Hell became one of the chiefest ingredients for rousing dread and horror in the human mind. So, writers of the gothic, in a bid to evoke hair-raising jitters in the reader's psyche, inevitably fell for creating simulacra of Hell in their works. Right from the miracle plays of yore, Hell continued to be a big fear-factor. In later works, the idea of Hell transmuted itself into something closer to reality. Hell came to be epitomized in haunted houses and the Devil enjoyed a new lease of life in the form of the gothic tormentor in horror stories.
Horace Walpole (1717–1797) was the person who flagged off this trend of the gothic with its evocation of Hell through eerie settings and atmosphere, in his novel *The Castle of Otranto* (1764). In fact, before that, the term 'gothic' had never been used to describe the trend of the grotesque in literature. Roundabout the twelfth to sixteenth centuries, 'gothic' — a term derived from the word 'goth' (a Germanic tribe), was used to signify a particular form of medieval architecture characterized by pointed arches and vaults. In the mid-eighteenth century, the Society of Antiquaries was founded, thereby, stoking up an interest in antique architectural forms — the gothic being one of them. At that time Horace Walpole, in a wave of revived curiosity in gothic architecture, built his home atop Strawberry Hill, Twickenham, near London, a la the gothic fashion. Then he set up a press in his 'gothic' castle and brought out his first ever novel, *The Castle of Otranto*, subtitling it, 'a gothic story'. Maybe the subtitle owed itself to the fact that it was born out of a 'gothic castle' press. It could have been because the storyline had a twelfth or thirteenth-century gothic castle as its fictional backdrop. The plot centres on the tale of intrigue and bloodshed, showing how Alphonso, the rightful heir to the castle of Otranto, was poisoned by the ancestors of Manfred, the present usurper. According to a prophecy, the ghost of Alphonso, who haunts the underground dungeons and huge rooms of the castle, grew too huge to squeeze into the castle one day, thereby throwing the castle down. Absurd and
almost ridiculous though it might sound to a modern ear, the story — the first ever
gothic one — did break fresh ground in fiction. It set a trend — the trend of the gothic
novel — with an ample overdose of horror, bloodshed, intrigue, torture, incarceration,
incest, and a trail of ghosts or spooks haunting the lonely nooks of the castle, making
weird, shuddering noises while dragging along clanking chains and shackles.
Apprehensive about the adverse impact the novel would create on the minds of the
readers, Horace Walpole published the first edition of the novel pseudonymously as
a 'Story translated by William Marshall, Gent, from the original Italian script of
Onuphrio Muralto, Canon of the Church of St Nicholas at Otranto'. Swept off by the
runaway success of the novel, Walpole disclosed his identity in the preface to the
second edition of the novel.
Inspired by his success, others took the cue from him — and out came a full oeuvre of
gothic novels written along the same trend. Mrs Ann Radcliffe wrote out her famous
novels such as The Mysteries of Udolpho (1794), The Italian (1797) and The
Romance of the Forest (1791). Clara Reeve wrote The Old English Baron (1778).
William Beckford wrote Vathek (1786). Mathew Gregory Lewis brought out The Monk
(1796). So enormous was the popularity of The Monk, that Lewis even gained the
sobriquet 'Monk Lewis' among his readers.
All of these novels, known collectively as the gothic novels, were written in more or
less the same style. The components of these successful horror tales would be
ghosts, ghouls, haunted houses, secret tunnels, captives tormented to distraction,
exotic back-of-the beyond settings and eerie happenings, drawing heavily on the
supernatural. Sometimes, there would be an effort to explain the supernatural so as
to heighten its plausibility, as in the Radcliffean novels. An exemplary passage from
*The Mysteries of Udolpho* will suffice to explain the point:

Retired to her (Emily's) lonely cabin, her melancholy thoughts still hovered round the body of her deceased parent, and, when she sunk into a kind of slumber, the images of her waking mind still haunted her fancy. She thought she saw her father approaching her with a benign countenance; then smiling mournfully, and pointing, his lips moved; but instead of words, she heard sweet music borne on the distant air, and presently saw his features glow with the mild rapture of a superior being. The strains seemed to swell louder, and she awoke. The vision was gone; but music yet came to her ear in strains such as angels might breathe. (83).

Here Mrs. Radcliffe conjures up an aura of supernatural fantasy with the sedate, bereaved heroine, Emily, hallucinating about her deceased father St. Aubert. Yet, the author keeps herself within the discreet limits of plausibility by telescoping the vision into a dream. She even rationalizes it by hinting afterwards that there really was music playing in reality that had filtered through the fitful sleep of the distracted girl and prompted the vision of her dead father:
It was music, and not an illusion of her imagination... she unclosed the casement to listen to the strains, that soon gradually sunk to a greater distance, and tried to discover whence they came. The obscurity prevented her from distinguishing any object on the green platform below; and the sounds became fainter and fainter, till they softened into silence. She listened, but they returned no more. (84).

In *The Italian*, too, the text is steeped with awful visions of the supernatural which often comes encased in the diaphanous veneer of dreams, thereby making it explicable by reason to some extent:

... Vivaldi again laid his head on his pillow of straw, and soon sunk into a slumber. The subject of his waking thoughts still haunted his imagination, and the stranger, whose voice he had this night recognised as that of the monk of Paluzzi, appeared before him. Vivaldi, on perceiving the figure of this unknown, felt, perhaps, nearly the same degrees of awe, curiosity, and impatience that he would have suffered, had he beheld the substance of this shadow. The monk, whose face was still shrouded, he thought advanced, till, having come within a few paces of Vivaldi, paused, and lifting the awful cowl that had hitherto concealed him, disclosed — not the countenance of
Schedoni, but one which Vivaldi did not recollect ever having seen before. ... Vivaldi at the first glance shrunk back; — something of that strange and indescribable air, which we attached to the idea of the supernatural being, prevailed over the features; and the intense and fiery eyes resembled those of an evil spirit, rather than of a human character. He drew a poniard from beneath a fold of his garment, and as he displayed it, pointed with a stern frown to the spots which discoloured the blade; Vivaldi perceived they were of blood! He turned away his eyes in horror, and, when he again looked round in his dream, the figure was gone. (98).

The passage above suffices to make the point that these gothic novels offer dollops of the spooky and the spectral, to create the effect of the unheimlich. Yet, in some cases, the author made clear efforts to stretch the boundaries of the unnatural to touch the safety zone of rationality, like in the passages from Radcliffe. Tsvetan Todorov, in his book on the gothic, The Fantastic separates the explained gothic from the unexplained. He slots the gothic incidents into two categories — the uncanny gothic, i.e. the incidents which do raise tremors but can be rationalized, and the marvellous, i.e. the incidents having supernatural overtones which are meant to be accepted with a willing suspension of disbelief:
Indeed, we generally distinguish, within the literary gothic, two
tendencies: that of the supernatural explained (the “uncanny”), as it
appears in the novels of Clara Reeves and Ann Radcliffe; and that
of the supernatural accepted (the “marvellous”), which is
characteristic of the work of Horace Walpole, M.G.Lewis and
Maturin. (75)

True enough, Lewis, in *The Monk*, does not attempt any rationalisation of the
episodes where the monk visualises ‘Madona’ descending to him and making
voluptuous love to him. In Walpole’s *The Castle of Otranto* too, no rational
explanations have been attempted in the chapters where the huge hand appears, or,
when the enormous ‘helmet’ of Alphonso squashes Conrad, the son of Manfred, to
death. The readers are expected to accept the ghostly and shiver with the thrill of the
supernatural, in all its weird eerieness. An excerpt from Walpole’s *The Castle of
Otranto* will perhaps go a long way in proving my point:

The servant, who had not stayed long enough to have crossed
the court to Conrad’s apartment, came running back breathless,
in a frantic manner, his eyes staring, and foaming at the mouth.
He said nothing, but pointed to the court. The company were
struck with terror and amazement... The fellow made no
answer, but continued to point toward the court-yard, and at last
after repeated questions put to him, cried out, “Oh! The helmet!
the helmet” ....Manfred, who began to be alarmed at not seeing his son, went himself to get information of what occasioned this strange confusion. ...The first thing that struck Manfred’s eyes was a group of servants endeavouring to raise something that appeared to him a mountain of sable plumes. He gazed without believing his sight. "What are we doing?" cried Manfred, wrathfully; ‘where is my son?’ A volley of voices replied, “Oh! My Lord! The Prince! The Prince! The helmet! The helmet”.

Shocked with these lamentable sounds, and dreading he knew not what, he advanced hastily— but what a sight for a father’s eyes—he beheld his child dashed to pieces, and almost buried under an enormous helmet, an hundred times more large than any casque ever made for human being, and shaded with a proportionable quantity of black feathers (7)

Walpole never explains away this gory, ghastly sight under the subterfuge of dreams like Mrs. Radcliffe. Nor does he make up any rational justification of the helmet. It is just the supernatural in all its fantastic, grotesque splendour.

The gothic novels of this mid-eighteenth century were more or less written with these same effects of the horrific and the terrible, evoked by awful scenes of death, bloodshed and ghastly sights. The gothic novelists of this era, zeroed in on the ubi sunt and danse macabre motifs. The technique they used was mostly similar. They piled up horror upon
horror, building up the readers’ suspense to a crescendo through hair-raising incidents. A line quoted from Mary Shelley's Introduction to *Frankenstein* would sum up the aim of the gothic novelists of horror:

... I busied myself to think of a story ... one which would speak to the mysterious fears of our nature, and awaken thrilling horror --- one to make the reader dread to look round, to curdle the blood, and quicken the beatings of the heart. If I did not accomplish these things, my ghost story would be unworthy of its name. (iv)

It is evident that the novelists like Walpole and Radcliffe had no other ulterior motive than raising goose pimples by a vivid picturisation of all that was horrid and macabre.

About the same time, in the mid-eighteenth century, when Walpole and the rest flourished their art with elan, Germany saw a similar literary movement in the form of the genre of *Schauerroman* ('shudder' novel in German) which came hand-in-hand with the *Ritter-und-Rauberroman* ('knight and robber novel' in German). The *schauerroman* included the novels by authors like Kotzebue, Tieck, Weit Weber, Musaus and Heinse, all of whom revelled in the creation of the gothic through horror-rousing episodes of the macabre. But I shall desist from a detailed discussion on them as I intend to concentrate on the history of the English gothic literature.
The gothic literature found a very receptive reader-circle when it emerged in the eighteenth century. One can discern a number of socio-political and psychological reasons for the same on a quick survey of the history of the time. For one thing, the eighteenth century was an age that witnessed tremendous political and social upheavals. The whole of Europe was rocked by the chain of events, which culminated in the Fall of the Bastille in 1789 and the execution of Louis XVI in 1793. Almost the whole of Europe was directly involved in the revolutionary wars in which Republican France confronted the older Monarchies between 1793 and 1815. Thus, it was easy enough to guess that in that politically tense ambience, individuals would grab at a chance to flee reality momentarily into the make-believe world of romances and fantasies.

Moreover, the eighteenth century went through a social cross-over from rural agrarianism to industrialization, as more men turned to ‘urban-centred industry’. The old ways of living according to the time of seasons gave place to modes of living according to the time of the machine and the time of the employer (Punter 413).

Under these circumstances, society, bound in shackles of industrialization and sophistication, did not leave much scope for individual heroic action. Thought alone remained unfettered. Imagination still did not lose its flight. Thus came the yearning for a genre that would create adventurous extra-natural situations, often bordering on the grotesque:
The writers who achieved the greatest popular success in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century were those who created simpler, more colorful imaginative worlds, dominated by heroes of supernatural effectiveness. Schiller's Karl Moor and Goethe's Faust fired the imagination of Europe. Scott rose to fame with Marmion, which again features a villain-hero, compellingly free from conventional ethics (Butler.2)

True enough, 'the colourful, imaginative worlds, dominated by heroes of supernatural effectiveness' worked magic with the reading public who were by then tired of the drudgery of a mechanised mode of life and the anxiety of a politically tense ambience of the newly evolving industrial lifestyle. The Romance came as a breath of fresh air and the gothic novel, as an off-shoot of Romance, worked wonders.

Over and above that, the eighteenth century witnessed the emergence of science into the general mainstream of life. The trickle of scientific knowledge succeeded in weaning man away from his old religious beliefs. Yet all ills and woes of life were not explained away satisfactorily by science, as medical and other sciences had not made much progress until the twentieth century. Man, falling between the pulls of fantasy and reality — was in a flummoxed state. There was this natural urge to revert back to the native, naïve beliefs and ideas, whenever science failed to deliver. The gothic romances catered perfectly to the instinctively superstitious consciousness, thereby drawing immense popular responses.
Thus, the gothic with its paraphernalia of spooks, spectres, haunted landscapes and infernal villains, enjoyed its heyday in the eighteenth century.

IV

But, following the course of literary history, one finds the gothic waning in popularity with the end of the century. This maladie-fin-de-siècle could be attributed to a turn in the collective psyche of the reading public. The gothic with its infernal settings, diabolical characters and demoniacal happenings, came to epitomize evil in the minds of the readers just as the sentimental novel lost ground as it represented a tendency of abetting the emotions of the heart against parental authority, law and conventional morality. Thus, the gothic with its so-called ‘unholy’ contraption went off the shelves after the 1790's.

But then, this unputdownable genre stirred up afresh in the nineteenth century, with a fresh array of gothic novels. William Godwin’s *Mandeville* (1817), Mary Shelley’s ever famous *Frankenstein* (1818), James Hogg’s *Confessions of a Justified Sinner* (1824), R.L.Stevenson’s *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1886), *Bram Stoker’s Dracula* (1897) – there was an endless list of tales written in the gothic mode in the new upheaval of the trend in the nineteenth century. Such was the force of this resurgence, that poetry too came to be heavily tinged with the gothic hues. Geraldine in Coleridge’s *Christabel* (1797), the spectral bloodsucker in Byron’s *The Giaour*
(1813), the figure of Misery in Shelley's *Invocation to Misery* (1818) and the merciless damsel in Keats's *La Belle Dame Sans Merci* are all gothic characters up to the hilt. As for the gothic novels like *Frankenstein, Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* and *Dracula* took the reading public by storm. But on an analysis of the gothic as used in these novels of the new phase, one finds certain trends that were not there in the earlier, older gothic of the 18th century (Walpole, Radcliffe et al.). The chief novelty that catches the eye is a distinct bent towards the world of the psyche, apart from the world of spectral beings and happenings. In fact, the genre of the gothic is inextricably intertwined with a study of psychology, as far as its effect is concerned. Unless the gothic succeeds in drawing the optimum level of fear and terror from the human mind by applying as much pressure of the uncanny as it can, it fails in its final effect. But this time, in the 19th century, not only was the effect linked to the human psyche, but, the devices for creating that gothic effect too, were so. Thus, *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* could be interpreted as a story of a split personality – someone whom modern-day psychologists would dub a schizophrenic. *Frankenstein* centres on a monster created by a medical scientist with loving care and then despised for its ugly, ghastly exterior. But then, this calls for a serious after-thought about the definition of good and evil. Despite its horrid appearance, it had a mind too. Would it ever really have turned into the killing machine it became, had it not been for the repulsion and hatred it met with from everybody — most of all its own creator? The story could be read as an allegory for the baffling duality between appearance and reality, good and evil, crime and innocence. Again, analyzed from yet another angle, *Frankenstein* could be a vivid study in psychology. The monster could be an outer projection of
Frankenstein’s own id, with its baser, lowly thoughts and desires. Aija Ozolins in her article titled “Dreams and Doctrines: Dual Strands in Frankenstein”, published in the journal *Science-Fiction Studies* 2 in a 1975 issue, says:

> there is ample evidence in the novel that the creature functions as the scientist’s baser self. Frankenstein’s epithets for him consistently connote evil: devil, fiend, demon, horror, wretch, monster, monstrous image, vile insect, abhorred entity, detested form, hideous phantasm, odious companion and demoniacal corpse. Neutral terms like creature and being are comparatively rare (105).

As Ozolins points out, the very fact that the monster is never called a creature or a being, denies its entity as a separate personality. It is just an allegorical projection of all that is evil in Frankenstein’s—or everyman’s—mind. Frankenstein himself vouches for this fact in numerous instances:

> He is my own vampire, my own spirit let loose from the grave, and forced to destroy all that was dear to me.(131).

After each murder that monster commits, Frankenstein blames himself—or rather his double, his other self—"I not in deed, but in effect, was the true murderer ."(126)
The motif of the double, or more technically, the doppelganger, came forth as a projection of the mind. But problems arise when Frankenstein refuses to come to terms with his other self -- his darker self. Unlike Shakespeare's Prospero, who accepts Caliban in saying "This thing of darkness I acknowledge, mine", Frankenstein flees reality. He flees self-knowledge, losing himself in the external world of experiments and science when he should have accepted the responsibility of the nether forces working in him. Thus *Frankenstein* stands as a novel that attempts an exploration of the mysterious and often paradoxical realm of the human mind.

*Dracula* -- yet another spine chilling horror story in this later-gothic tradition, has to do with the mind too, though from a separate viewpoint. The vampire, living in his remote, yet splendid castle, was the typical picture of the aristocrat. When the same vampire chooses to feed on the blood of normal people, it could be interpreted as the symbolic depiction of the torment meted out to the proletariat by the bourgeois. The fear of a hierarchic structure of society could have given rise to vampire legendry.

Thus, a study of all these novels of this comparatively newer phase of gothic literature shows that this time the novels were more intricate, more thoughtful, more serious and more sophisticated. The contraptions of the traditional gothic were there, as in the spooky castle of Dracula or the hideous diabolism of Frankenstein's monster, but those were transmuted to suit a more serious outlook. There were no inner objectives behind writing these novels, apparently, other than providing a
complex spectrum of responses in the form of the gothic, that was this time, more thoughtful and psychologically oriented.

V

The mid-nineteenth century saw three quiet, determined girls with rebellious and intellectually adventurous mindsets rise on the horizon of English literature. Charlotte, Emily and Anne Bronte, then, came at a time when the gothic was one of the genres that were ruling the roost. These three sisters too, never denied its presence. In fact, sequestered in the distant Haworth parsonage of their father, these three sisters adopted the genre of the gothic in all its grotesque sinisterness. But being the revolutionary souls that they were, it was almost impossible that they would accept the prevailing trend and produce yet some more run-of-the-mill potboilers. They did take up the cue from tradition. They took up the spooky paraphernalia of the old gothic of Walpole and Radcliffe, absorbed the more intellectual gothic of the Frankenstein mould, and then improved upon all that with their own individual talent. Theirs was the gothic with a difference. They did achieve the usual hair-raising effects with spectral settings and events. They did portray the gothic sense of anxiety and the uncanny in their novels. But they did it all not with the sole aim of rousing terror and fear in the minds of the readers. Analyses of their novels show that their greater aim was to jerk the readers awake to certain issues and thoughts that needed probing into, yet were so sensitive and delicate that talking of them openly was
almost impossible in the face of the conservative Victorian moral codes and fastidiousness.

In Emily Bronte's *Wuthering Heights*, one finds spirits walking hand in hand. The very house, 'Wuthering Heights', looks every inch a gothic castle. Heathcliff, the gruff inmate of the house is just another avatar of the conventional gothic tormentor. But, below the surface of the traditional gothic, Emily wanted to probe the psyche of Catherine, and analyse her ambitions, frustrations and passions. There are numerous other issues that she explores, which will be taken up later on.

In *Jane Eyre* too, for instance, Charlotte Bronte presents Thornfield Manor as the typical gothic setting. The corridors of the house are chilled by a demoniacal laugh of the mad woman in the attic that sets the desired eerie tone to the novel. Later still, Jane Eyre comes across a figure on all fours, that paces up and down in a dark attic. She later comes to know, to her shock, that this 'creature' was the earlier wife of Mr. Rochester, who was then on the verge of marrying Jane. Charlotte, through this grisly incident, wishes to probe the question Rochester's ethics. She tacitly prompts the reader to question whether Rochester was actually right in locking his mad wife up in an attic instead of getting her attended to medically. Many other issues are there that Charlotte digs deep into behind the apparent folds of the gothic. Anne Bronte, too, begins her novels like *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, in a gothic fashion by evoking mystery in the description of the Hall as well as its sole inhabitant. But, behind that lies a more serious analysis of the trauma of a woman suffering from a spoilt marriage. The Brontes had the daring mind to explore issues that were very, very controversial in that conservative era. They even dared to talk of hush-hush
topics like the libidos of a repressed mind, desires subdued by social inhibitions and needs of liberation in the female mind. Repression and subdued feelings arise mostly where so-called uncivil, ungainly desires are concerned. Such desires are often erotic, sexual. Repression of such desires leads to a compensation of the unfulfilled, through fantasy. As Freud says, "a happy man never fantasises, only an unhappy one does" (146). The brain loses its balance. The person flips in and out of fantasia so often that the border between reality and imagination fades out in his abnormal mind. This is when paranoia sets in gradually but inexorably. Thus, paranoia or madness becomes yet another ingredient of the gothic in the newer novels of the Brontes. Repression of the desires of the mind under the pressure of an insular psycho-social structure is what is responsible for such derangement. Dealing with the delicate question of repressed desires of love and passion, the gothic novels thus, often become erotic at the base. David Punter observes:

Gothic fiction ... knows that to channel sexual activity into the narrow confines of conventionality is repressive and, in the end highly dangerous, that it is a denial of Eros, and ... Eros so slighted returns in the form of threat and violence. The beast within cannot be killed, but that is because he derives his strength from the pressure with which he is held down by the smooth faced man on the outside (411).
Man, with his conscious will to prove himself an abiding and perfect citizen of the world, finds it imperative for himself to keep some of his instinctive desires muffled under a blanket covering of social and moral norms. Yet what struggles in asphyxiated suppression does not die. It only surfaces later, in more violent proportions. It is the gloom brought about by such abnormal situations that the newer mode of gothic fiction portrays.

The Brontes focus on the themes of eroticism and sexuality in their portrayals of their fiery, stormy and passionate heroines. Thus, their probing the hitherto tabooed topic of sexuality in women in a Victorian society which preferred women more to be seen than heard, was almost revolutionarily feminist. Theirs were rebel minds talking of controversial issues under the deceptively simple and spicy sugarcoating of horror novels.

Robert Heilman takes the novels of Charlotte Bronte into his purview and terms as 'the New Gothic' this tendency in Charlotte to highlight controversial issues, psychic problems, the after-math of psychic disorder and constant warring against social constraints. The New Gothic, according to Heilman, comes thematically as a projection of tumultuous passion in characters, and stylistically through modern ploys like undercuts in the gothic gloom interspersed with comic diversions and symbolic suggestions:

Aside from partial sterilization of banal gothic by dry factuality and humour, Charlotte goes on to make a much more important, indeed, a radical-revision of the mode ...that discovery of passion,
that rehabilitation of the extra-rational, which is the historical office of gothic, is no longer oriented in the marvellous circumstance but moves deeply into the lesser known realities of human life. This change I describe as the change from the "old gothic" to "new gothic" (180).

What Heilman wants to convey is that in Charlotte, the gothic effect is evoked just as intensely as in the older gothic fiction of the Walpole tradition. The only difference is in the mode or method of evocation. Walpole and his likes slid more towards fantasy by conjuring up spirits and haunted houses to create the feeling of awe and wonder. Charlotte brings out the same awe and wonder, but through an explicit probing into the realm of reality – far removed from fantasy. She goes deep down into human psyche to delve out the mysteries of passion, desire and emotions. That is what Heilman called the 'new gothic' in Charlotte.

But, on a closer look, I find that Emily and Anne Bronte, too, used the traditional methodology of the gothic, and yet improvised upon it by raising thought-provoking issues behind the façade of a simplistic gothic story. So, if their novels followed the same trend as Charlotte's, then there is no reason whatsoever of not slotting their novels, too, in the group of the new gothic. I would prefer to say that all three Bronte sisters broke fresh ground by setting up a novel trend of the new gothic. They spearheaded the movement of portraying serious issues behind the seemingly puerile veneer of a gothic story. They even enrich the genre of the gothic with symbolism, naturalistic descriptions, psychic analyses of passionate characters. The
overall ambience of brooding and foreboding – in a word – the unheimlich of the
cventional gothic was there, but unlike the older school of the Gothic novels where
the uncanny was drawn from the objective world of ghosts and spooks, the 'new
gothic' in the Brontes focussed more on the subjective world of blitzy emotions,
feelings and desires to draw forth the gothic feeling of unease, fear and awe. Thus, in
Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre*, the gothic soon outlives the petty tremors provided by
a house with desolate corridors haunted and chilled by the deadly laughter of a
bestial mad woman in the attic. The storyline goes on to trace the duality of a mind
torn between love, ethicality and self-esteem. The novel explores the gothic of
passion as Jane debates on what to do with her emotions and reality. In Emily
Bronte's *Wuthering Heights*, one shudders in horror at the overt display of a
disintegrating mind in Catherine Earnshaw as she wastes away in the desperation of
frustrated emotional needs. The gothic there lies in the lurid display of a frenzied
tumult of passion. The gothic 'props' serve as objective correlatives for the fullest
expression of the distraught psyche. Thus, the haunted castle can become a symbol
of authoritarianism and asphyxiating helplessness. The mirror images that distress
Cathy in *Wuthering Heights*, can well be interpreted as the epitomisation of the
disparity between what she became and what she wanted to be. Archetypes have
changed their connotations with the Brontes. For instance, big, foreboding mansions
in the Bronte novels acquire connotations different from those in the old Gothic
novels. In the ur-gothic, they were the archetypes of the den of the monstrous villain
as we find in the castle of Otranto or the big castle atop the Appenines in *The
Mysteries of Udolpho*. But in the Brontes, the big houses like Wuthering Heights, or
Thornfield Mansion or Wildfell Hall are archetypes of psychic incarceration and helpless desperation, born out of frustrated ambitions, repressed desires and unfulfilled wishes to surpass the bounds of social imperatives. The Brontes, behind the cover of the gothic, unfurled stories that offered ideas and thoughts too daring to be voiced aloud by women in that Victorian society. With them, the gothic came to signify, 'the mode of open horizons beyond social patterns, rational decisions and institutionally approved emotions' (Boumelha 25). The Bronte sisters dared to transcend the bounds of propriety set by insular “social patterns”. The passion displayed in their characters went beyond rationality. They preferred to let their hearts rule over their heads. So, instead of sitting and wondering, like Andrew Marvell’s ‘Coy’ mistress, about what they ought to do, they tried to do what they wanted to, even if their deeds defied social code and approval. This point will be taken up in more detail in the later chapters.

The Bronte novels, then, are not Literature of Honor in the conventional sense. These sisters, in their novels, have absorbed and reinterpreted the gothic, among other components of the literary tradition, in the light of their modern attitude and sensibility. In each age, every major author feels the need of a new kind of literature, when the existing traditional forms appear to be inadequate. An author is often moulded by the age and his or her text is conditioned by social forces. The Brontes too, have discovered a new map of consciousness, of the human mind and these glimpses of psychic reality elevate their works into the category of ‘The New Gothic’.
Thus, a coup de oeil over the history of the gothic literature shows how subtle but overtly perceptible change has come over the gothic fiction, its meaning and range.
Chapter-1 : Works Cited


