

Dr. Katherine D. Harris
Gothic Novel (Engl 113, Fall 2006)

Why are these two examples of effective (and even inventive) writing?

Sample Student Writing: Summary

Through “Fuseli to Frankenstein,” one can begin to understand the factors and circumstances that contribute to the birth of a Gothic period, in art and in literature. Beginning with the Gordon Riots of 1780, it is clear that Britain is experiencing religious conflict and societal angst that will soon become apparent in the eccentricity of its art. While the riots are sparked by religious tension, those involved are seen as touched by madness. The once self-proclaimed reasonable, enlightened, modern culture of London has, in one evening, reduced itself to a very primitive, chaotic people driven to violence by mob-mentality. Having gone from a very quiet and civilized city, to wild and unpredictable, London sets the scene for the Gothic genre in art and the written word.

At this very time, three London painters, Henry Fuseli, William Blake, and James Gillray have established themselves. While Fuseli and Blake may very well have experienced the riots of 1780 first-hand, Gillray’s work displays a direct influence by the happenings of that evening. As the idea of the “Sublime” becomes popular in the culture of 1780’s Britain, many of these artists look to themes of the Gothic in the classics and history in order to produce works of a dark and horrific nature. Very few artists of this time depict in their works the ideas found in modern Gothic literature. Interestingly enough, while new tales of gloom and doom are being created by the writers of the period, the painters and engravers are looking to the past works of Dante, Milton and Shakespeare for dark inspirations. One such painting by Fuseli, “Satan Summoning His Legions,” is a good example of the awe inspiring nature of Gothic art. One cannot look at Satan’s stance without feeling the dread and the admiration it demands, two emotions called upon by the Gothic in general.

The Gothic romance, with its use of male heroes and morally conscious women gives to the public of this time period perfect male and female role models, considering that Britain’s soldiers are being accused of corruption and its women of an increasing looseness and shallowness inspired by modern culture. At this time, much like present day America, Britain’s wars are being fought over seas, leaving British society in comfort and idleness. With lives full of all the conveniences middle class can offer and danger so far away, much of Britain’s society looks to the Gothic in all of its horrible glory for distraction and entertainment, one might say, in order to feel emotion, albeit negative.

Sample Student Writing: Your Nightmare

August 31, 18-

Dear Dr. Harris,

I hope this letter finds you well, though I cannot claim to be well as I write this letter. I have just woken from a frightful dream that has left me in a state of perturbation. I must ask you to indulge me, for I must relay the contents of this disturbing vision. I suspect that the cause of my nightmare is due to my reading of Mrs. Shelley's Frankenstein. Father forbid me to read the book, so I must confess to my disobedience and admit that my nightmare is a just punishment. In the dream, I found myself observing from a distance the silhouette of a castle. Then suddenly I was inside the castle looking out of the largest window and observed myself in the distance viewing myself at the window. It disturbed me to view my double observing me, but I felt compelled to walk through the many rooms rather than try to solve that mystery. All of the ground floor rooms were empty or contained furniture covered in white cloths. The rooms on the upper floors contained canopy beds covered in cobwebs and the smell was dank and musty. There was no freshness to any of the rooms. I decided to return to the ground floor to make my escape, but found instead that I had entered a dark hallway. The moonlight from a high window illuminated a long sliver of space along the wall and there I noticed a trail of skulls leading to another door. I slowly opened the door with an overwhelming sense of dread. Inside the room I saw myself on a bed with a horrible creature perched upon my body. This scene frightened me, but I became even more horrified when suddenly, I became the demonic creature perched upon my body! I felt such malicious joy at observing my own terror and disgust. Why would I have such a nightmare? What can it mean? I cannot write any more, but hope I can speak further when next we meet.