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Gormenghast and the Gothic Edifice

A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts
in
English Literature
at Massey University, Palmerston North, New Zealand.

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2003
Abstract

The Gothic genre is most commonly defined according to a diverse range of character types, themes, and devices of plot, mood, and setting, and this diffusion has made its application as a unified description a contentious one. This thesis develops a cohesive vocabulary for describing Gothic literature, and applies that vocabulary to a series of novels whose categorization has proven controversial, due to the ambiguities of the popular perception of the Gothic genre.

Derived from a close reading of four iconic Gothic texts – Horace Walpole’s *The Castle of Otranto*, Ann Radcliffe’s *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, Edgar Allan Poe’s “The Fall of the House of Usher,” and Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s “The Yellow Wallpaper” – and from various perspectives of Gothic criticism I argue that the archetypal setting of Gothic works, the edifice, plays a central role in Gothic literature through its role in creating the fundamental Gothic properties of verticality, interiority, and pastness.

I then argue that Peake’s Gormenghast series – comprising *Titus Groan*, *Gormenghast*, and *Titus Alone* – demonstrates in the first two novels this centrality of the edifice to Gothic literature and in the third novel the fact that the physical edifice is not a compulsory component of Gothic literature, but rather acts solely as the most effective expression of the underlying Gothic properties and the point whereby they interrelate. Furthermore, I demonstrate that these properties are applicable not only to the works of the genre itself, but to the critical perspectives that are used to explain it.
Acknowledgements

"Il n'y a de long ouvrage que celui qu'on n'ose pas commencer.
Il devient cauchemar."  ~ Charles Baudelaire

I'd like to thank my supervisor, Dr. Jenny Lawn, for her continued attention and encouragement throughout the formation of this thesis. For their sustained assistance, I would also like to thank the faculties of the School of English and Media Studies and the School of Language Studies at Massey University.

The support (both in terms of morale and in a more tangible sense) of my family – my father and mother, Don and Jill Ellis, and siblings Gareth, Siska, Morgan, and Frazer – and friends – Cath, Chris, David, Greg, Jeremy, Mike, and Mike – has proven incalculably helpful, and without it I doubt the conclusion would ever have been reached.

For listening and offering commentary, I wish to gratefully acknowledge Helen Cain and Tamsyn Knight, and special thanks go out to Ian Johnson and Siobhan Leinhard, whose interest in Peake and hauntings respectively inspired me in the first place.
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