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Gormenghast and the Gothic Edifice

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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.

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*“Il n’y a de long ouvrage que celui qu’on n’ose pas commencer.
Il devient cauchemar.” ~ Charles Baudelaire*

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