

## The Gothic Legacy: How 19th-Century English Writers Shaped the Modern Horror Genre

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### Abstract:

This article explores the evolution of 19th-century English horror fiction, tracing its transformation from Gothic supernaturalism to psychological terror. It examines how key writers, including Mary Shelley, Edgar Allan Poe, Bram Stoker, and Robert Louis Stevenson, established foundational horror tropes that continue to influence modern literature and film. The study highlights the shift from external supernatural fears to internal psychological horror, demonstrating the genre's lasting impact on contemporary storytelling. By analyzing thematic and narrative developments, this paper argues that 19th-century horror not only defined the genre but also shaped its future adaptations and cultural relevance.

### Keywords

*Gothic horror, psychological horror, 19th-century literature, Mary Shelley, Edgar Allan Poe, Bram Stoker, Robert Louis Stevenson, modern horror, literary evolution, supernatural fiction.*

### Introduction

As a genre, horror literature has long been associated with exploring fear, the unknown, and the supernatural. Originating from folklore and myth, horror fiction evolved significantly in the 19th century, particularly through the rise of Gothic literature, which introduced key themes such as haunted spaces, supernatural beings, and psychological terror. The Gothic novel, which first emerged in the late 18th century, provided the foundation for the horror genre by blending the mysterious, the grotesque, and the sublime to evoke a sense of unease in readers (Botting, 2005). This period also saw an increasing fascination with the macabre, the uncanny, and the blurred boundaries between reality and imagination, which shaped the literary conventions of horror fiction.

The 19th century marked a critical transition in the horror genre, as writers began to move beyond traditional supernatural themes and embrace more psychological and existential concerns. Early Gothic horror stories often depicted external threats, such as ghosts, monsters, and demonic forces, but by the mid-to-late 19th century, horror literature increasingly explored internal fears, such as

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madness, repressed desires, and the duality of human nature. This shift reflected broader cultural anxieties in Victorian society, including fears related to scientific progress, urbanization, and the fragility of human reason (Punter & Byron, 2004).

This article argues that the evolution of 19th-century English horror fiction—from Gothic supernaturalism to psychological terror—laid the foundation for modern horror literature. The discussion will explore three key aspects of this transformation. First, it will examine the role of Gothic fiction in establishing fundamental horror tropes, such as haunted mansions, mysterious villains, and supernatural occurrences. Second, it will analyze the shift from external supernatural horror movies to internal psychological fears, particularly in the works of authors like Edgar Allan Poe and Robert Louis Stevenson. Finally, it will consider the lasting impact of 19th-century horror literature on modern horror fiction, demonstrating how its themes, narrative techniques, and psychological depth continue to shape the genre today.

## 2. Methods

This study adopts a comparative literary analysis approach to examine the development of the horror genre in 19th-century English fiction. By analyzing key texts from major horror writers of the period, the article explores how common themes, character archetypes, and narrative techniques contributed to the transformation of Gothic horror into psychological terror. The methodology focuses on three primary areas: comparative analysis of major horror works, thematic examination, and evaluation of literary influence on modern horror fiction.

First, a comparative analysis is conducted between early 19th-century Gothic horror and later psychological horror to trace the genre's evolution. This involves identifying key differences between supernatural horror—exemplified by Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818) and Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897)—and more psychologically driven horror narratives, such as Edgar Allan Poe's tales of madness and Robert Louis Stevenson's exploration of duality in *Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (1886). These works are examined concerning their respective historical and cultural contexts to understand how horror fiction responded to shifting societal anxieties (Hogle, 2002).

Second, the study investigates common literary themes, character archetypes, and narrative techniques that define 19th-century horror fiction. The theme of the uncanny—the eerie sense of familiarity in the unfamiliar—is explored in texts where the supernatural intersects with psychological horror. Similarly, character archetypes, such as the tragic monster (Frankenstein's creature), the unreliable narrator (Poe's protagonists), and the divided self (Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde), are analyzed to understand their role in constructing fear. Narrative techniques, including first-person unreliable narration, fragmented storytelling, and atmospheric descriptions, are examined to assess how they enhance the horror experience (Smith & Hughes, 2003).

Finally, this study evaluates how these 19th-century literary elements shaped later horror fiction, particularly in modern psychological horror and contemporary Gothic narratives. The article considers the legacy of these works in modern horror literature and cinema, demonstrating how their thematic and structural innovations continue to influence contemporary storytelling. Through

this approach, the study aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the 19th-century horror genre's evolution and its lasting impact on literary history.

### **3. Results & Discussion**

#### **3.1. Gothic Tradition as the Foundation of Horror Fiction**

The Gothic tradition played a foundational role in shaping horror fiction, establishing many of the genre's defining motifs and narrative structures. Central to Gothic horror were supernatural elements, such as ghosts, curses, and haunted mansions, which served to evoke fear and uncertainty in readers. These tropes, often set in dark, mysterious landscapes, reinforced the themes of isolation and existential dread, which later evolved into the psychological horror of the late 19th and 20th centuries. Haunted castles and eerie abbeys, such as those depicted in Ann Radcliffe's *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794), became symbolic spaces of fear, where the boundaries between reality and the supernatural were blurred (Miles, 2002).

Another crucial component of early Gothic horror was its aesthetic of terror and the sublime. Inspired by Edmund Burke's philosophical exploration of the sublime as an overwhelming, almost paralyzing form of beauty, Gothic literature sought to provoke both awe and fear in its audience. This aesthetic is particularly evident in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818), which merges the grandeur of Romanticism with the existential horror of scientific overreach. Shelley's use of dramatic landscapes, from the icy Arctic to stormy mountaintops, serves to amplify the emotional intensity of the narrative while reinforcing the isolation of both Victor Frankenstein and his creature (Botting, 1996).

Early Gothic writers played a pivotal role in defining horror tropes that remain relevant today. Mary Shelley, for instance, pioneered the concept of the tragic monster, a figure both feared and pitied, which later influenced modern horror characters such as Dracula and Dr. Jekyll/Mr. Hyde. Similarly, Radcliffe's use of psychological terror rather than overt supernatural horror laid the groundwork for later developments in the genre. These foundational elements not only shaped 19th-century horror fiction but also provided a framework that continues to influence contemporary horror literature and film.

#### **3.2. The Shift from External Fear to Psychological Horror**

By the late 19th century, horror fiction experienced a significant transformation, shifting its focus from external supernatural threats to internal psychological fears. While early Gothic horror relied on ghosts, haunted mansions, and supernatural curses to evoke fear, later horror narratives increasingly explored the complexities of the human mind, introducing themes of madness, duality, and repressed desires. This transition reflected broader Victorian anxieties about science, morality, and the fragility of human reason, marking a shift from traditional Gothic horror to a more introspective and psychological form of terror (Luckhurst, 2005).

One of the most prominent themes in late 19th-century horror fiction was mental instability and the fear of the divided self. Robert Louis Stevenson's *Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (1886) exemplifies this transformation by externalizing the struggle between good and evil within a single individual. Unlike traditional Gothic monsters that are distinctly otherworldly, Mr. Hyde

represents the dark, primal instincts lurking within human nature, suggesting that the true horror lies within the self. Similarly, Edgar Allan Poe's *The Tell-Tale Heart* (1843) explores the paranoia and guilt-induced madness of its unreliable narrator, illustrating how psychological horror stems from internalized terror rather than external supernatural forces (Smith, 2016).

This psychological shift in horror fiction coincided with the rise of urbanization and modern social fears, replacing the isolated medieval landscapes of Gothic fiction with the uncertainties of urban life. The anonymity and moral ambiguity of rapidly growing cities became fertile ground for horror narratives that explored crime, repression, and the loss of individual identity. In *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*, the fog-covered streets of Victorian London serve as an unsettling backdrop to the protagonist's inner moral decay, reflecting the city's dual nature—civilized on the surface but hiding corruption within. This replacement of supernatural horror with psychological and social anxieties laid the groundwork for modern horror fiction, influencing later psychological thrillers and existential horror narratives.

### **3.3. Key Writers and Their Lasting Influence on Modern Horror**

The 19th century produced some of the most influential horror writers, each of whom contributed unique thematic and structural elements that continue to shape modern horror fiction. From scientific horror to psychological terror and supernatural dread, these authors established fundamental literary conventions that remain central to the genre today.

One of the most pivotal figures in the development of horror fiction is Mary Shelley, whose novel *Frankenstein* (1818) is considered the birth of science fiction horror. Shelley's narrative goes beyond traditional Gothic themes by integrating scientific ambition and ethical dilemmas, making the novel a precursor to modern horror's exploration of science as a source of terror. The novel's central figure, Victor Frankenstein, embodies the dangers of unchecked scientific progress, while the creature represents society's fear of the unknown and the consequences of playing God. This theme persists in modern horror films and literature, from H.P. Lovecraft's cosmic horror to science fiction thrillers such as *Alien* (1979) and *Jurassic Park* (1990) (Mellor, 1988).

Another major contributor to the evolution of horror fiction was Edgar Allan Poe, whose works emphasized psychological horror and unreliable narrators. Unlike Shelley, who externalized horror through monstrous creations, Poe focused on inner terror, guilt, and the descent into madness. Stories like *The Tell-Tale Heart* (1843) and *The Black Cat* (1843) explore the fragility of the human mind, often through first-person narrators who are themselves the source of horror. Poe's influence on modern horror is evident in the rise of psychological thrillers, particularly in the works of Stephen King, Shirley Jackson, and psychological horror films such as *The Shining* (1980) (Hayes, 2002).

The fear of the 'Other' found its most famous representation in Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897), a novel that popularized vampiric horror and introduced many of the conventions still associated with the vampire mythos. Stoker's *Dracula* was not merely a supernatural monster; he was also a reflection of Victorian fears about foreign invasion, sexuality, and disease. The novel's underlying anxieties—such as the threat of the unknown foreigner corrupting English society—resonate in

modern horror narratives, from vampire fiction like *Interview with the Vampire* (1976) to contemporary zombie apocalypse films (Byron, 2013).

Finally, Robert Louis Stevenson's *Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (1886) provided one of the most enduring explorations of duality and morality in horror fiction. The novel's portrayal of a seemingly respectable man who transforms into a monstrous version of himself encapsulates the fear of repressed desires and the dual nature of humanity. The themes of split identity and moral corruption have influenced countless works, from modern psychological horror films like *Fight Club* (1999) to contemporary explorations of multiple personality disorder in *Split* (2016) (Arata, 2005).

Each of these 19th-century horror writers not only defined the genre in their time but also left a lasting impact that continues to shape modern horror fiction, cinema, and psychological thrillers.

### **3.4. The Impact of 19th-Century Horror on Modern Literature**

The influence of 19th-century horror fiction extends far beyond its original context, shaping the narrative techniques, themes, and psychological depth of modern horror literature and cinema. The enduring themes of Gothic horror—including isolation, repressed fears, and the monstrous 'Other'—continue to serve as the backbone of contemporary horror fiction. Elements such as haunted houses, supernatural beings, and the psychological descent into madness can be found in modern horror works, demonstrating how Gothic horror laid the groundwork for contemporary storytelling (Punter & Byron, 2004).

One of the most significant aspects of 19th-century horror's legacy is its adaptation into modern literature and film. Classic horror stories such as *Frankenstein* and *Dracula* have been reinterpreted in countless ways, from faithful retellings to radical reimagining's that reflect contemporary anxieties. For instance, Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* has inspired adaptations ranging from James Whale's 1931 film to the 2015 modern reworking *Victor Frankenstein*. Similarly, Bram Stoker's *Dracula* has been continuously adapted, from the early silent film *Nosferatu* (1922) to contemporary horror series like *The Strain* (2014-2017). These adaptations not only preserve the core Gothic themes of horror and monstrosity but also update them to fit modern audiences, demonstrating the timeless appeal of 19th-century horror narratives (Hughes, 2012).

Beyond supernatural horror, the relevance of psychological horror in modern storytelling owes much to Edgar Allan Poe and Robert Louis Stevenson's psychological explorations. The emphasis on mental instability, unreliable narration, and internalized terror pioneered in works like *The Tell-Tale Heart* and *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* continues to influence modern horror authors. Writers like Stephen King have adapted these psychological horror elements into novels such as *The Shining* (1977) and *Misery* (1987), where the real horror emerges from the protagonist's psychological unraveling rather than an external supernatural force. Similarly, modern horror films like *Black Swan* (2010) and *The Babadook* (2014) draw upon themes of duality, madness, and repressed trauma, echoing the psychological fears explored in 19th-century literature (Freeland, 2020).

Ultimately, 19th-century horror literature provided the foundation for modern horror storytelling, introducing themes and techniques that remain integral to the genre today. Whether through direct adaptations, thematic inspiration, or psychological horror elements, the legacy of Gothic and psychological horror continues to shape contemporary fiction, ensuring that the fears of the past remain eerily relevant in the present.

## Conclusion

The 19th century was a transformative period for horror fiction, shaping the genre's evolution from Gothic supernaturalism to psychological terror. Early Gothic literature established the foundation of horror through haunted settings, supernatural beings, and themes of fear and the unknown. As the century progressed, horror fiction shifted towards psychological exploration, emphasizing mental instability, duality, and repressed fears. This transformation not only reflected broader Victorian anxieties but also laid the groundwork for modern horror narratives. The works of Mary Shelley, Edgar Allan Poe, Bram Stoker, and Robert Louis Stevenson introduced fundamental horror tropes and storytelling techniques that remain central to the genre today.

Beyond its literary contributions, 19th-century horror has had a lasting cultural impact, influencing modern literature, film, and popular culture. The continuous adaptation of *Frankenstein*, *Dracula*, and *Jekyll & Hyde* demonstrates the timeless appeal of these narratives, as each generation reinterprets them to reflect contemporary fears. Additionally, the rise of psychological horror in modern fiction owes much to Poe and Stevenson's explorations of the human psyche, influencing authors like Stephen King and filmmakers such as Alfred Hitchcock and Jordan Peele. The genre's cultural and psychological depth ensures that it remains relevant, engaging audiences by tapping into primal fears and existential anxieties (Hogle, 2002).

Future research could further explore the global impact of 19th-century horror literature, particularly its influence on non-Western horror traditions. Investigating how Gothic and psychological horror themes have been adapted into different literary and cinematic traditions, such as Japanese horror, Latin American Gothic, and Eastern European folklore-based horror, could provide a broader understanding of the genre's cross-cultural significance. Additionally, examining contemporary reinterpretations of classic 19th-century horror stories in modern literature, video games, and digital media could offer insights into how new technologies shape the evolution of horror storytelling.

Ultimately, the horror genre continues to thrive because of the foundational contributions of 19th-century literature, proving that the fears of the past still haunt the imagination of the present.

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