

The Picaresque Novel

OR

Novel of Horrors

(B.A Part I English  
(Honours))

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The novels of horror which sprang during the closing years of the 18th century were the expressions of Romantic trends. Richardson stirred the sentiments of the people with the novels of sentiments. People accepted his novels as a welcomed relief from the typical products of the age of reason. Rousseau's impact further paved the way for novels of feeling and emotion. Rousseau invited his middle-class readers to shed their social controls and to travel back to the "state of nature". This nostalgic longing for the past drew them into the realms of medieval craft and superstition. Element of horror and terror made the people hungry for the sense of wonder and surprise. The novel of horror thus harmonized with the needs of the time, and are considered historically important because they exhibited a shift from reason to sentiment and from sense to sensibility.

Mackenzie was not an original writer. He was almost a direct disciple of Rousseau. The theme of his novel "The Man of Feeling" is thin and his treatment lacks psychological subtlety. His hero is a defenceless victim of paralyzing passion. His sentimentalism is shallow and overdone. The unbridled sentimentality often verges on pessimism. But whatever his artistic achievement, Mackenzie is undoubtedly a forerunner of the novel of sentiments.

"The Castle of Otranto" by Horace Walpole is another work altogether. It is the clever achievement of an enquiring mind. He creates the impression of vague, terror and anxious suspense, and his situations are clothed

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in the supernatural atmosphere. But his supernatural effects are often overdone and excessive. Gigantic portents, ghostly appearances, conflicts in age betwixt (Death patched) castle graveyards and ghosts — these are the stuff of Walpole's novel set in the background of medieval Italy. And many a novel of the succeeding period was to make frequent use of these stock figures and situations.

Though Clara Reeve was inspired by Walpole, she was not a mere imitator. She specialized in the expression of middle-class sentiments which often sounded sincere. Her use of the supernatural was cautious and tempered by reason. "The Old English Baron" is the most representative of Clara Reeve's work.

Ann Radcliffe was a genius in this sphere. She brought glory and art to the novel of horror. Her influence can be traced in the works of such great writers as Walter Scott, Coleridge and Shelley. Her hypnotic art cast a magic upon her readers and transported them beyond the confines of the material world. She knew the art of creating a definite sense of apprehension through intense delicate suggestion. Though such suggestive images as that of a rusty dagger, an exhumed corpse, a veiled picture, a forbidden door; she could create a feeling of dramatic intense suggestion and supplement it with the most incredible image and manipulation of the most unlikely characters. Being a Protestant and Radcliffe could not bring herself to her belief in supernatural presences. Her novels as such are often superficial and unconvincing in their treatment of supernatural element. Her style too often monotonous, laboured and burdened with unnecessary detail. But "The Mysteries of Udolpho" will remain memorable for its picturesque setting and its suggestion of obscure spiritual presences.

Lewis was another man practicing this art in a more popular than artistic manner. He had a keener eye for the sensational than Mrs. Radcliffe. "The Monk" combines terror with sensual desire and physical horror. In his novels, the psychological

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development initiated by Richardson degenerates into unrelieved morbidity. But, there can be no doubt that he does succeed in striking terror among his readers, and too that shadows the darker aspect of English Romanticism. He strengthens the artificial literature initiated by Walpole at the cost of middle class sentimentalism. His novels are destitute of sentimentalism and moral depth. The atmosphere is heavy and unreal. His novels are oversimplified, and his art lacks Mrs. Radcliffe's subtlety. Lewis handled his themes clearly, but also roughly.

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