

1 Features of Gothic stories

You are learning:

- to understand the main features of Gothic stories.

Gothic stories became popular around two hundred years ago, and have remained popular ever since. Gothic stories and films are usually about ghosts and horror and they often include these features:

- wild and remote places
- dark and gloomy settings
- graveyards, tombs and corpses
- family curses and dark secrets
- supernatural powers
- mysterious and frightening creatures, people or ghosts
- old, ruined, isolated castles and mansions, often with secret passages and mysterious towers
- nightmares, madness and mental torment
- science used for evil or disastrous purposes
- worrying and unusual natural events (storms, full moons, etc.).



Activity 1

Look carefully at the list of Gothic features above and make a list of stories and films (for example, *Dracula* or *Raven's Gate*) that have some of those features in them.

Activity 2

Read these four story openings:

A Jane leaned on the railing of her apartment balcony, gazed across the shiny, blue sea of the bay, and sighed with happiness. This was going to be the perfect holiday. And best of all, there would be no more Tom.

B Heath Manor finally rose into view behind a line of dense, gloomy fir trees. The closer we got, the more it looked like a brooding monster – battered and bruised, but still menacing. A fierce wind tugged at its broken shutters.

C A sudden dark shadow swept across the bright moon, momentarily blocking out its light. Sarah stumbled against a gravestone that was leaning towards the path like a cracked and crooked tooth. An owl gave a ghostly hoot.

D 'Surrender!' boomed the voice of the Stragor commander. 'Surrender, or we will destroy your ship and all on board.' Martin Strang, leader of Solar Expedition 29, was not easily scared. He readied the stun missile tubes.

Which **two** of these are most Gothic? Briefly explain why.

Activity 3

Frankenstein, by Mary Shelley, is one of the most famous Gothic novels ever written. Read the extract below, where the narrator, Dr Frankenstein, describes the moment when the monster he has been creating finally comes to life.

How can I describe my emotions at this **catastrophe**, or how **delineate** the wretch whom with such infinite pains and care I had **endeavoured** to form? His limbs were in proportion, and I had selected his features as beautiful. Beautiful! – Great God! His yellow skin scarcely covered the work of muscles and arteries beneath; his hair was of a **lustrous** black, and flowing; his teeth of a pearly whiteness; but these **luxuriences** only formed a more horrid contrast with his watery eyes, that seemed almost of the same colour as the dun white sockets in which they were set, his shrivelled complexion and straight black lips.

The different accidents of life are not so changeable as the feelings of human nature. I had worked hard for nearly two years, for the sole purpose of **infusing** life into an inanimate body. For this I had deprived myself of rest and health. I had desired it with an **ardour** that far exceeded moderation; but now that I had finished, the beauty of the dream vanished, and breathless horror and disgust filled my heart. Unable to endure the **aspect** of the being I had created, I rushed out of the room, and continued a long time **traversing** my bedchamber, unable to compose my mind to sleep.

Biography



Mary Shelley is best known as the author of the novel *Frankenstein*, which was published in 1818. Her husband was the Romantic poet Percy Bysshe Shelley.

Explanations

- catastrophe** disaster
- delineate** describe
- endeavoured** tried
- lustrous** shiny
- luxuriences** riches
- infusing** putting
- ardour** passion
- aspect** appearance
- traversing** moving across

- 1 Look again at the list of Gothic features on page 58. Write down the ones you find in the extract from *Frankenstein* above.
- 2 Explain how the narrator feels about the monster he has created. Use a table like the one below to explore his feelings.

Word or phrase	What it might show about the narrator's feelings
catastrophe	Catastrophe means disaster so the narrator feels that he has done a terrible thing.

Assess your progress

This table shows you how to get better at the key reading skills used on these two pages. How well are you doing?

Level 3	Level 4	Level 5
Pick out and describe some basic features of Gothic texts	Explain how Gothic features are different from those of other sorts of story	Consider how the way a text is written affects its meaning
Comment on how the reader is supposed to feel	Understand a writer's purpose – even when it is not obvious	Explain the difference between an author's and a character's viewpoints

