

## GOTHIC NOVELS AND IRIS MURDOCH'S NOVEL "THE UNICORN"

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**Abstract:** This article provides a brief overview of Gothic novels and famous Gothic writers. At the same time, the article describes and briefly analyzes Iris Murdoch's novel *The Unicorn*.

**Key words:** gothic, fiction, fairy tale, fear, monster, Iris Murdoch.

Literature enriches a person's spiritual world along with giving pleasure. Someone likes to read quiet, classic, scientific or adventurous works, while someone is a supporter of scary works. Among them are works in the Gothic style. Gothic novels have been popular since the 18th century. A Gothic novel can be characterised by its setting and content. Gothic novels are often set in a decaying castle, mansion, or abbey, and contain mystery, suspense, terror, or something otherworldly that cannot be rationally explained.[1]The term 'Gothic' is also the name for a genre of literature that evolved in the 18th century, drifted in and out of fashion during the 19th century, and has now taken off again. Over the course of the Gothic novel's development, it has also influenced horror, supernatural and mystery literature. So, what makes up a Gothic novel? Some mystery? A ghost or two? A bit of gore? All of these? Let's find out!

The setting in the Gothic novel is of utmost importance, as it sets the atmosphere for the story. Often, the castle, manor or estate seems to take a life of its own as it plays tricks with the minds of its inhabitants. Possible elements of Gothic novels (that you may have already come across!) include ghosts, mysterious aristocrats who can change into bats, paintings that come alive and invite you to step in, walking statues, shadows that have a will of their own, or objects that move by themselves. Gothic fiction is distinguished from other forms of scary or supernatural stories, such as fairy tales, by the specific theme of the present being haunted by the past.[2] The setting typically includes physical reminders of the past, especially through ruined buildings which stand as proof of a previously thriving world which is decaying in the present. There may also be secret passages, underground labyrinths, and locked rooms that nobody may enter – or, if they do, they may never be heard of again.

There are several works written in the Gothic style in world literature. Each of them has similar and different aspects, and is distinguished from other novels by its unique and unrepeatable features. During the twentieth century almost all literary genres came back to prominence in different and alternative forms. The Gothic is no exception to this phenomenon as many a writer made an attempt at using this eighteenth-century genre once again, but adding to it some contemporary elements.

Consequently, an abundance of new techniques have been introduced to Gothic fiction to evoke the feeling of horror and terror among the more and more demanding readers of modern times. Still, some writers prefer to return to the traditional concept of the Gothic – as does Iris Murdoch in her novel. Murdoch's *The Unicorn*, apart from its use of more universal Gothic characteristics, such as dysfunctional family relationships or female oppression, features many elements typical of the Irish Gothic. The first is the setting, which plays a pivotal role in the novel. The writer sets the action in a remote place surrounded by fields, the sea, cliffs, and the immense area of bogs, which all together create a picture of a hostile landscape, which for Backus becomes anthropomorphised (Backus 1986: 150). [4]

*The Unicorn* (1963), Iris Murdoch's seventh novel is a pure Gothic Romance though often referred to as a Gothic Parody. Murdoch borrows from the gothic tradition in literature to create a world of mystery and enchantment, and her plot relies heavily on surprise, suspense, and fragmented revelations of past actions and their present consequences. The novel parodies her philosophical views regarding the sublime and the beautiful along with her preoccupations on the concept of good and God. This is a closed Gothic novel with its emphasis on form, myth and socio-religious philosophy rather than on the character. The need for spiritual aspirations and moral betterment contribute to the themes of the novel. All the key characteristics of Gothic fiction such as a fascination for the past, a liking for the strangely eccentric, the supernatural, the magical, and the sublime, sometimes subtly intermingled with the realistic, psychological insights, especially into sexuality, through (at best) fascinating and intricate characterization, or (at worst) stereotypical caricatures, representation and stimulation of fear, horror, the macabre and the sinister, within the context of a general focus on the emotional rather than the rational and plots within plots often multiple narrators, and other stylistic characteristics such as the use of 'tableaux' and overt symbolism are found in this novel. Apart from this romantic elements are also found in the novel. The novel begins with the arrival of Marian Taylor and with her the readers are also introduced in to a world ridden with mystery and gloom. From her ride to the railway station to the Gaze Castle an atmosphere of creepy uncertainty and isolation besets. Having come as a governess expecting to teach a bunch of children she is confronted with the weird situation of tutoring Mrs. Hannah Crean-Smith. Gaze Castle, the legend surrounding Mrs Crean-Smith, her imprisonment by her husband Mr Peter Crean-Smith on grounds of adultery and attempted murder on him of which this is the seventh year, the fairy tale treatment the story receives, the anticipated visit of Effingham Cooper and finally the return of Peter Crean -Smith after seven years - all these and more set the stage for the macabre and the enchanting events which are strewn across the novel. Most of the characters in the novel live in a kind of spell wound around the suffering of the imprisoned Hannah. This spell is expected to be

broken in the seventh year as seven is an important number in the fairy tales. Thus the novel thrives on the element of ancient prophecy which is found to be obscure and confusing.

According to the reviews in the internet “..The Unicorn’ felt like the literary equivalent of a ‘bottle episode’; a one-off creation, occupying its own strange and uniquely restricted universe. The pre-historic, almost out-of-time setting and sense of spatial dislocation contributed to that sensation. As did the Gothic fairytale feel of the story. There are often elements of the macabre in Murdoch’s work, but they are usually side-strokes, adding color to the canvas. In *The Unicorn*, even as far as the title, the uncanny takes center stage. In other works, characters fear spiritual depletion or the loss of truth”. [5]

In conclusion to the abovementioned, we can note that, while being the major writer and thinker, Iris Murdoch is turning the terrible phenomena that she noticed in reality into an object of psychological analysis, in the experience of human nature under study and, at the same time, into the condition and material of artistic experiment, often to illustrate philosophical formulas. The key «Gothic» motifs are actively borrowed, passing the significant transformation and acquiring a new philosophical, ethical and psychological content. While being ideological and plot-forming components of narration, the motifs are, on the one hand, evolving structural elements, and, on the other, they are connecting two distant literary epochs.

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