

THE RULES OF GOTHIC GRAMMAR (Draft 1)

The *Northanger Library Project* centres on formal studies of the Gothic genre (for some early results see Aguirre 2006a, García 2009, Sánchez 2009, Sánchez (ed.) 2009). The following pages build on the hypothesis that a set of structural and semantic conventions or ‘rules’ go into the composition of all Gothic narrative, provide a thematic basis for the genre, and constitute part of what may be called a ‘grammar’ of Gothic. Sixteen ‘rules’ of Gothic have been identified so far. The following presuppositions guide the postulation of the rules:

a) Gothic here is defined in historical terms, as a genre that began in 1764, reached an apex in the 1790s, and evolved into other kinds of horror literature around the 1820s. Whereas work is being conducted on assessment of the rules in Gothic fiction, no effort is made at this stage to confirm or disprove their applicability to later horror fiction.

b) The patterns of Gothic narrative are a modification of those found in folk- and fairytales, and the tools of folk narrative research are therefore relevant to the study of Gothic fiction (see Aguirre & Ardoy 2009, García Iglesias 2009).

c) Folklorist Vladimir Propp (1928) pointed out that action, not the characters’ intentions or motives, is the decisive criterion for assessing the structure of fairytales. The same assumption is made here as regards Gothic narrative structure.

d) Propp’s model assumes that the fairytale is composed of a limited number of main actions he calls ‘functions’. These, always following a predetermined order (some codified exceptions are recognized), occur in segments or ‘sequences’, and can reappear in other sequences. Each tale is shaped by one or more sequences of functions.

e) Propp distinguishes between two types of fairytale hero: the seeker who undertakes a quest, and the victimized hero who is kidnapped or driven out and on whom (and not on those who remain behind) the narrative centres. Both types exist in Gothic, but whereas the rules proposed below would seem to concern the first, it may be that separate rules remain to be isolated for the narrative of the second.

f) Anthropologists categorize rites of passage into three distinct types: pre-liminal rites or rites of separation, which disengage initiands from their customary world; liminal rites or rites of the margin, which subject them to various deprivations and tests; and post-liminal rites or rites of incorporation, which return them, albeit changed, to the ordinary world (Van Gennep 1909, Turner 1969). On the spatial model suggested by this categorization, see Aguirre 2006, Aguirre 2008. On liminality in literature, see Aguirre, Quance, Sutton 2000, Aguirre 2006b.

g) Taking rites of passage as a starting-point, mythographer Joseph Campbell outlines a pattern for the traditional heroic adventure which includes the following steps: the Call to Adventure, the crossing of the threshold, encounter with a Threshold Guardian, entrance into ‘the kingdom of the dark’, various tests and ordeals, obtention of the boon sought, return (often under pursuit, often helped from without), arrival in the familiar world, use of the boon for the benefit of the community. This model seems to be compatible with Propp’s and provides a further basis for the study of Gothic fiction, while significant modifications are nevertheless required.

h) Folklorist Max Lüthi points out that the fairytale explores not only the hero’s success but also failure; both possibilities are therefore actualized, albeit the second is congruently projected onto secondary characters. The claim here is that Gothic resorts to a modified version of this.

THE RULES

1. Gothic constructs a world consisting of two zones or dimensions. The one is the human cosmos, a domain of rationality and relative order. The other is the realm of the Numinous (whether or not supernatural), characterized by its incognoscibility.
2. Gothic plots build on a deed (whether physical, intellectual or moral) that opens up the human to the Other; a 'crossover' takes place whereby either characters enter the Numinous domain or else their ordinary world acquires numinous traits.
3. Gothic fiction applies a cause-effect pattern to the crossover and gives it a moral slant: regardless (just like fairytales) of characters' intentions, it presents the cause as a transgressive move into the Other, its effect as a corresponding move by the Other by way of retribution.
4. Our inability to grasp the Other makes it disorientating, hence terrifying; and not least among the terrors of the Numinous is the fact that we cannot quite tell it from our own world: it is part of and yet profoundly alien to the human realm. Inherently ambiguous, its position vis-a-vis us is best viewed as *liminal*; that we cannot determine its boundaries is congruent with the fact that the Gothic Other partakes of the nature of boundaries: it is a threshold area or a threshold quality.
5. Gothic characters, unlike fairytale heroes, are detained in the liminal stage, the victims of an incomplete or perverted passage.
6. The Gothic ghosts represent variations on the folklore figure of the Threshold Guardian.
7. (An expansion on 5.) As the liminal stage in the full round of the traditional hero's tale is lengthened in the Gothic tale, the passage risks never to be completed; and Gothic plots revolve around just such a contradiction—a dangerously drawn-out sojourn in a supposedly transitional stage. Delay is hence an essential strategy in this genre.
8. It is the fashion of Gothic fiction to centre upon the flawed type rather than upon the paradigmatic hero of traditional narrative. This creates equivocal, liminal figures—peripheral yet central, evil yet appealing, ineffectual yet burdened with the responsibility of heroes. One way to understand Gothic fiction is to say that it tells the 'other' story of the fairytale, the narrative of the failed hero.
9. The broken, the worthless, the deprived, the misshapen are to be counted among the natural adjuncts of threshold space. Gothic characters, objects, actions, environments are regularly flawed or diminished with respect to an often implicit yet always compelling standard, thereby denoting the liminality of the domain in which they exist.
10. Freedom of the will is another standard Gothic both heeds and undermines. Whether associated with the will of divine or infernal agents, with the crushing weight of the social order, or with the twisted motivations of the human mind,

Gothic posits an overarching power—both constraining and inimical, often identified with Providence, more often with Fate—which its failed heroes strive against but cannot overcome.

11. By means of a hidden-sequence arrangement (i.e., a key section of the story is only revealed late in the plot), Gothic destabilizes the characters' present and reveals it to be a deceptive lull in a long-enduring turmoil. Fate is in Gothic texts an entailment of narrative structure. False beginnings are the rule, for behind the most Once-upon-a-time-ish start there lurks some secret event (murder, curse, birth, etc.) that turns out to have conditioned the narrative from the outset. Both mystery and tragedy ensue from this construction.

12. A distinctive trait of the Sublime—its overpowering quality—characterizes the liminal regions in Gothic fiction: they draw in, imprison or, in a frequent metaphor of descent, engulf those who venture into or near them.

13. In that favourite Gothic metaphor of descent (itself indicative of another standard cherished and breached), the journey of transformation (the anthropologist's 'passage') acquires the lineaments of a moral, ontological, social (sometimes even physical) fall.

14. Resorting to hyperbole, intensity and deprivation, Gothic subverts another standard—this time of balance and moderation—prevalent in eighteenth-century diction, and dons a language of excess (and its opposite, lack) to depict a liminal domain and to foster the experience of the Sublime.

15. Gothic dwells on the liminality of the human condition, its potential for change—change not only on the moral plane but also (and increasingly so as the genre develops) psychologically—change which, in the 18th-century debate on cherished identity, is all too often seen as degrading or annihilating. Caught in the threshold region, Gothic characters are, if not destroyed, transformed. They acquire numinous features and may come to resemble such denizens of the limen—ghosts, monsters, demons—as exhibit a non-rational (compulsive, excessive, repetitive, mindless) behaviour.

16. One major theme that arises from the very forms of the Gothic genre is the exploration of the liminal experience, which often amounts to an exploration of the condition of the lost.

The 'rules' are conventions, the 'grammar' a study of the way they constitute units and patterns to shape the genre. Some of the rules can be accounted for in the light of Burke's theory of the Sublime; some bear witness to a fairytale connection; some, again, make sense as variations on cultural conceptualizations defined by anthropologists as *rites de passage*. A number of these rules may be associated with the experience of terror, others with suspense and/or the inevitable, yet others with a subversion of eighteenth-century standards. A rationale for these rules has been found in the concept of liminality, which allows us to unify an otherwise heterogeneous set of conventions. It would seem that Gothic exhibits a *liminal* grammar and that its forms can be accounted for by postulating the threshold as its key concept.

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