A Glossary of Literary Gothic Terms

**Ancestral Curse**
Evil, misfortune, or harm that comes as a response to or retribution for deeds or misdeeds committed against or by one's ancestor(s). A slight variation of this convention is the "burden of the past," which, like the ancestral curse, concerns misfortunes and evil befalling one as a result of another's past actions. However, this particular form is not necessarily restricted to one character and his or her descendants, and usually the actions which have caused the present character's ill fate occur closer to the present than in the case of the ancestral curse. Such an example exists in Henry James' *The Turn of the Screw*, when the two children are "possessed" by the evil spirits of the dead maid and caretaker.
Of course, characters in a gothic story can also be haunted by their *own* burdens of the past

**Anti-Catholicism**
In this fiction Catholicism comes to be associated with forces of horrid repression, greedy corruption, and mysterious persecution, wrapped in the cloaks of a superstition that prevents scrutiny of authority.

**Body-Snatching** (grave-robbing)
Body-snatching is the act of stealing corpses from graves, tombs or morgues.  This act was quite prominent during the period of time wherein corpses were unavailable for dissection and scientific study (early 18th century to middle 19th century).  Body-snatching came to represent a particularly horrid instance of sacrilege, an invasion of religious space by an aggressive and often commercially motivated science.

The most famous example of a Gothic story which involves the theft of a corpse in order to bring it back to some form of life is *Frankenstein*:

**Cemetery**
A cemetery defines a place which is used for the burial of the dead.  This term *koimeterion* (*"* place of rest") was primarily applied by early Christians to the Roman catacombs--a subterranean labyrinth of galleries with recesses for tombs orignally used by the city's Jewish population--and became widely used within the 15th century.  Cemeteries are widely used in Gothic Literature Catacombs (underground burial place) are especially evocative Gothic spaces because they enable the living to enter below ground a dark labyrinth resonating with the presences and mysteries of the dead.

**Claustrophobia**
An abnormal dread of being confined in a close or narrow space. Often attributed to actual physical imprisonment or entrapment, claustrophobia can also figure more generally as an indicator of the victim's sense of helplessness or horrified mental awareness of being enmeshed in some dark, inscrutable destiny. If one were to formulate a poetics of space for the gothic experience, claustrophobia would comprise a key element of that definition.
Sometimes, this sense seems to afflict the narrator and reader

**Gothic Counterfeit**
A playful fakery of authenticity. Eg The Da Vinci Codepresents itselves as a recovery and presentation of an ancient text.  Such "counterfeit" framing narratives frequently complicate the point of view and "authenticity" of gothic stories.

**Devil**
The Devil, as portrayed in Judaism and Christianity, stands as a spirit of incarnate evil who rules over a dark kingdom.  This spirit stands in constant opposition to God and human beings. The actual term ‘Devil' comes from the Latin term diabolus which is an adjective meaning slanderous.  In many areas of Jewish thought, Satan is linked with the idea of evil impulses, i.e. the Devil made me do it.  Sometimes, the Devil's visitation is arbitrary and he selects a good or innocent person as his victim, we witness a dark, pessimistic moral universe, in which an expansive sense of evil randomly blights the human world.  If, on the other hand, the victim deserves demonic punishment, his appearance signals a more traditional and Christian moral universe, in which sinners receive their due punishment.

***Doppelgänger***
*Dopplegänger* comes from German; literally translated, it means “doublegoer.” A *dopplegänger* is often the ghostly counterpart of a living person. It can also mean a double, alter ego, or even another person who has the same name.  In analyzing the *dopplegänger* as a psychic projection caused by unresolved anxieties, Otto Rank described the double as possessing traits both complementary and antithetical to the character involved. Example: In *Psycho*, by Robert Bloch, Norman Bates becomes so distraught after killing his mother in a jealous rage that he gradually takes on her personality. She becomes his alter ego, and by the end of the novel has taken over his mind completely.  Other famed doubles in Gothic lore include Jekyll/Hyde, Victor Frankenstein/his monster.

**Dreaming / Nightmares**
Dreams invoke strong emotions within the dreamer, such as ecstasy, joy and terror. Dreams dredge up these deep emotions and premonitions that reflect tellingly upon the dreamer, what one might conceal during waking hours but what emerges in sleep to haunt and arouse the dreamer.  It is most likely due to this heightened emotional state that dreams are used so often within Gothic Literature.  For by invoking dream states within their characters, authors are able to illustrate emotions on a more unmediated and, oftentimes, terrifying level.  Dreams reveal to the reader what the character is often too afraid to realize about himself or herself.  Dreaming also has an ancient relation with the act of foretelling wherein the future is glimpsed in the dream state.

Freud believed that a unique mental process is used within dreams that is rarely activated during the waking hours.  He defined this state as the "primary process" and theorized that this state was marked by a more primitive thought process ruled by the emotions.  This theory helps explain widespread occurrence of dreams in Gothic Literature as a state during which characters express their deepest emotions of horror and terror.
Perhaps the most famous Gothic example occurs in Shelley's *Frankenstein.*
Within Stephen King's novel *Bag of Bones, a*n author named of Mike Noonan is plagued with dreams.  These dreams involve the death of his wife as well as frightening visions of the summer home that he now inhabits full time.  They are also interspersed with nightmares, acts of sleepwalking, and glimpses of the future.  Eventually, through the recurrence of these dreams, Noonan is able to discover the events surrounding the death of his wife as well as a dark fact concerning his summer home that was secreted by the entire town.  Finally, Noonan's glimpses of the future within the dreams enable him to save the life of an innocent child from an avenging spiritual curse.

**Entrapment & Imprisonment:**
A favorite horror device of the Gothic finds a person confined or trapped, such as being shackled to a floor or hidden away in some dark cell or cloister.  This sense of there being *no way out* contributes to the claustrophobic psychology of Gothic space.

**The Explained Supernatural**
Bearing close similarities to what Todorov will later term the "uncanny," the explained supernatural is a genre of the Gothic in which the laws of everyday reality remain intact and permit an explanation or even dismissal of allegedly supernatural phenomena.

**Possession**
The popularity of belief in demonic possession seems to have originated within Christian Theology during the Middle Ages.  During this time, Christians lived in fear concerning the war being waged between God and the Devil over every mortal soul.  Hence, this fear of possession seemed to culminate into an act that could be viewed by the mortal eye.  This act is defined as the forced possession of a mortal body by the Devil or one of his demons. There are two types of possession and either can be voluntary or involuntary.  Voluntary possession seems to involve a willing exchange in the form of some compact between evil spirit and mortal, often involving wealth, power or goods; involuntary possession occurs when the devil randomly selects an unwitting host.  The two types of possession consist of the transference of the Devil or demon directly into the mortal body or the sending of the Devil or demon into the body by a third party, usually a mortal dabbler in the dark arts.  Following the act, the possessed is said to show many symptoms including abnormal strength, personality changes, fits, convulsions, bodily odors resembling sulfur, lewd and lasviscious actions, the ability to levitate, the ability to speak in tongues or the ability to foretell future events.

**Exorcism**
Exorcism is the religiously based act of forcing the Devil or a demon from the body of a possessed person.  This act is usually performed by a religious figure, such as a priest or shaman, and involves the performing of rituals.

**The Female Gothic**
One of the earliest forms of Gothic literature, the Female Gothic often aims to socialize and educate its female readers and is usually morally conservative.   Yet the Female Gothic can also express criticism of patriarchal, male-dominated structures and serve as an expression of female independence. This form is often centered on gender differences and oppression.  Female Gothic works usually include a female protagonist who is pursued and persecuted by a villainous patriarchal figure in unfamiliar settings and terrifying landscape.  While achieving a considerable degree of terror and chills, the Female Gothic usually shuns the more overt and graphic scenes of violence and sexual perversion. For example, Christina Rosetti’s ("Goblin Market").

**Pursuit of the Heroine**
The pursuit of a virtuous and idealistic (and usually poetically inclined) young woman by a villain, normally portrayed as a wicked, older but still potent aristocrat. While in many early Gothic novels such a chase occurs across a Mediterranean forest and/or through a subterranean labyrinth, the pursuit of the heroine is by no means limited to these settings. This pursuit represents a threat to the young lady's ideals and morals (usually meaning her virginity), to which the heroine responds in the early works with a passive courage in the face of danger; later gothic heroines progressively become more active and occasionally effective in their attempts to escape this pursuit and indict patriarchy.

**The Pursued Protagonist**
Refers to the idea of a pursuing force that relentlessly acts in a severely negative manner on a character.  This persecution often implies the notion of some sort of a curse or other form of terminal and utterly unavoidable damnation
A classic contemporary example is Stefan in the Vampire Diaries who is *both*compelled and pursued by a greater force that causes him "to wander the earth in a state of permanent exile, persecuting others.

**Grotesque**
This term originated from oddly shaped ornaments found within Roman dwellings, or grottoes, during the first century.  From a literary standpoint, this term implies a mutation of the characters, plants and/or animals.  This mutation transforms the normal features and/or behaviors into extremes that are meant to be frightening and/or disturbingly comic -

**The Haunted Castle or House**
A dwelling that is inhabited by or visited regularly by a ghost or other supposedly supernatural being. Some other novels that re-tool this durable gothic convention include the haunted house in *The Amityville Horror* by Jay Anson and and *Psycho* by Robert Bloch.
--

**Incubus**
The incubus is characterized as a male demon who forces himself sexually upon mortal women as they sleep.  This type of coupling is theorized to result in the subsequent births of demons, witches, sorcerers or children with noted deformities.  Legend attends that the incubus and his female counterpart, the succubus, were angels fallen from Heaven. The belief in incubi was very strong during the Middle Ages and stories of such attacks were common.
Example: In the movie *Village of the Dammed* eight women within the town are pregnant through malign means that occurred during the sleep.

**Inquisition**
The Inquisition was a permanent institution in the Catholic Church charged with the eradication of heresies.  The judge, or inquisitor, could bring suit against anyone. The accused had to testify against himself and did not have the right to face and question his accuser; torture became a frequent means of soliciting testimony from the accused. In its dealings with converted Moslems and Jews and also illuminists, the Spanish Inquisition with its notorious *autos-da-fé,* represents a particularly dark chapter in the history of the Inquisition.

**Masochism**
The word “masochism” is derived from Chevalier Leopold von Sacher-Masoch, an Austrian writer. Masochism is a psychosexual perversion where one person gains erotic pleasure by having pain inflicted on them. A looser definition is used to describe the behavior of a person who actively seeks out pain and/or humiliation.

**Mist**
A grouping of water particles due to a change in atmosphere.  This convention in Gothic Literature is often used to obscure objects by reducing visibility or to prelude the insertion of a terrifying person or thing.

**Mystery**
A term derived from the Latin word *mysterium* which is a term used to express the overwhelming awe and sense of unknowable mystery felt by those to whom some aspect of God or of divine being is revealed. Mystery is an event or situation that appears to overwhelm understanding.  Its province is the unnatural, unmentioned, and unseen.

**Necromancy**
Necromancy is the black art of communicating with the dead.  This is usually done to obtain information about the future, but can also be used for other purposes, such as getting the dead to perform deeds of which humans are not capable.  The conjurer often stood in a circle, such as a pentagram, in order to protect himself from the dead spirit, yet he was often overpowered by the spirit.
In these works, Faust not only speaks with the devil in order to strike a deal but necromantically invokes various dead, famous figures from the past for his amusement and edification.

**Revenant**

The return of the dead to terrorize or to settle some score with the living.

**Revenge**
Within Gothic Literature, revenge is notably prominent and can be enacted by or upon mortals as well as spirits.  Revenge can take many forms, such as harm to body, harm to loved ones, and harm to family.  The most Gothic version of revenge in Gothic Literature is the idea that it can be a guiding force in the revenance of the dead.

<http://personal.georgiasouthern.edu/~dougt/goth.html>