

# Behind closed doors

## Forbidden knowledge in Gothic literature

Forbidden knowledge is a key Gothic convention. **Victoria Leslie** unlocks its significance in *Northanger Abbey*, *Dracula* and 'The Bloody Chamber'

**W**hen it emerged in the late eighteenth century, the Gothic was not regarded as a particularly literary genre, and was widely seen as substandard literature. The novels of Ann Radcliffe and her contemporaries were considered 'sofa companions', not worthy of serious literary merit — a view consolidated for many male critics of the time by the fact that a number of the novelists were female. Nonetheless, the Gothic became remarkably popular and endures today because of the conventions that define it.

One of these conventions is the idea of transgression, the notion of breaking or crossing boundaries. In many Gothic texts this can take a literal, physical form, uncovering secret rooms or stepping into prohibited spaces. But such texts also explore the idea of crossing social and moral boundaries, so that a simple act of unlocking a door, or more importantly, discovering the forbidden knowledge hidden behind it, can have serious consequences.

### ***Northanger Abbey*: 'Horrid' books**

*Northanger Abbey* is a homage to the first wave of Gothic fiction, an affectionate parody that illuminates how dangerous reading the Gothic can be to young and impressionable minds. Austen explicitly refers to the texts she draws on when our heroine Catherine Morland receives a reading list of the seven most 'horrid' books. These novels serve to ignite her imagination so that when she is invited to stay at Northanger Abbey, home of General Tilney and his family, she immediately entertains hopes that it will prove to have 'some traditional legends, some awful memorials of an injured and ill-fated nun' attached to it.

Keanu Reeves in *Bram Stoker's Dracula* (1992)

AQA (B) Literature:  
'Elements of the Gothic'

Edexcel Literature:  
'Reflections in literary studies'

Edexcel Language and  
literature: 'Creating texts'

OCR Literature: 'Texts in time'

WJEC: 'Period and genre study'

Her fancies are fuelled by General Tilney's son Henry, who describes his home as 'undoubtedly haunted' and proceeds to tease Catherine that she will be 'lodged apart from the rest of the house' in a 'gloomy chamber'. He imagines that Catherine will wake in the middle of the night because of a 'violent storm' and notice a secret passage behind the tapestry, leading to a series of vaulted rooms, the last of which would contain a 'cabinet of ebony and gold'. Henry's discourse is littered with Gothic tropes, and his depiction of rooms leading to smaller rooms and finally to the cabinet, which his heroine would no doubt be compelled to unlock, signifies further steps away from the safety of the house. By drawing on these conventions he also reinforces traditional gender ideas that Catherine would be 'Unable of course to repress [her] curiosity' if confronted with such possibilities, foreshadowing events later in the text.

However, the reality of *Northanger* is very different from the fantasy. It isn't the haunted house Catherine expects, but is modern and comfortable. Still, Catherine cannot resist rummaging wherever her curiosity leads her, conforming to Henry's idea of a Gothic heroine. A locked chest initially takes her fancy, before a black cabinet, much like Henry's description, excites her curiosity. Yet upon opening it all she discovers is an inventory of linen.

Catherine entertains the notion that *Northanger's* secrets are housed in Henry's late mother's apartment. She believes that Henry's mother may actually be alive, imprisoned in these 'mysterious apartments' by Henry's tyrant father (like Charlotte Brontë's later madwoman in the attic). The story culminates with Catherine caught red-handed at the 'forbidden door' by Henry, who is disappointed that she could have drawn such far-fetched conclusions. After this episode Catherine is 'completely awakened' and Henry's low opinion of her is the punishment she incurs for her transgression. The knowledge she gains does not come from the pages of her Gothic texts, nor does she discover it locked within a physical space, but instead it is a moral awakening gained from the very act of looking.

### ***Dracula*: Once bitten...**

Supposedly, vampires cannot cross the threshold of a house without first being invited. In a reversal of this, Jonathan Harker pauses on the threshold of Dracula's castle despite being instructed to 'Enter freely and of your own will!' But Dracula's hospitality has limits, which he stipulates in no uncertain terms:

Bluebeard gives his wife the keys to the castle (Gustave Doré 1867)



'should you leave these rooms you will not by any chance go to sleep in any other part of the castle'. It is phrased as a warning for his guest's safety, but Harker's narrative, conveyed in first person through his journal entries, reveals that he is not Dracula's guest but a prisoner. Intent on escape, he ignores Dracula's warning and lingers in a part of the castle where he imagines women of old would have pined for their menfolk. He wakes to find three such women surrounding him. He admits they ignite a 'wicked, burning desire' and he finds the encounter both 'thrilling' and 'repulsive', though he spares a passing thought for his fiancée, Mina.

Stereotypical gender roles are reversed. Harker is passive, willingly receiving the attentions of Dracula's brides, who are portrayed as predators, intent on devouring him. Victorian readers may have been shocked to find women with such blatant sexual appetites expressed in such erotic language, but Stoker negates this through their otherness. In the context of habitual attitudes to female sexuality at the time, Dracula's brides can be seen to embody the 'new woman', a new kind of femininity that

emerged, championing female autonomy and sexual freedom. For readers, this idea was potentially more monstrous than that of vampires. Dracula arrives just in time to call his brides off, asserting his patriarchal dominance, though he appeases them by giving them 'a half-smothered child'. In a reversal of traditional, maternal expectations, the scene reaches its horrifying conclusion as the brides disappear with the child to consume it.

Harker is marked forever by this encounter, even after he escapes, becoming 'pale and weak-looking', and then forgetting it entirely due to a 'violent brain fever'. He is reluctant to possess this forbidden knowledge any longer and gives Mina his journal, asking that she 'share [his] ignorance'. Mina agrees not to open the book, but does so later when she fears for Harker's sanity. In fact, in Mina's hands the knowledge contained in the journal is put to good use. She transcribes the journal and delivers the information to Van Helsing who uses this insight to help destroy their enemy. Though Mina reads Harker's journal in a locked room, emphasising the illicit nature of the act, she does not face any recriminations for her curiosity. Indeed this hidden knowledge ultimately proves to be rewarding for all.

### 'The Bloody Chamber': ...Twice shy

'The Bloody Chamber' is a retelling of Bluebeard. The story centres on a young pianist, who leaves her mother and a life of poverty to marry a marquis. The text focuses a great deal on physical locations: the marquis lives in a castle, which is 'at home neither on the land nor the sea, a mysterious, amphibious place', an appropriately liminal space for Gothic possibilities. The narrator even views their union as a journey 'into the unguessable country of marriage', further emphasising her departure into the unknown. Her curiosity is initially sparked by the marquis' library with books entitled *The Key of Mysteries* and *The Secret of Pandora's Box*, and pornographic images such as 'Reproof of Curiosity', foreshadowing her own inevitable curiosity and punishment.

As in these stories, the narrator faces certain boundaries in an environment seemingly free of constraints. She is at liberty to explore the house and given keys to open all its many doors; the only physical space she is denied entry to is the marquis' 'den', a place where he can escape the 'yoke of marriage' and imagine himself 'wifeless'. A 'newborn curiosity' is aroused and like Austen's Catherine Morland she proceeds by pushing smaller limits first. She rummages through the marquis' desk and discovers mementos from his late wives, but this only serves to intrigue her more. Taking the 'forbidden key' she enters the marquis' secret room in a 'cold ecstasy to know the very worst'.

As with most parables about female curiosity, the narrator uncovers a secret that threatens her life. It is a torture room and she discovers the bodies of the marquis' murdered brides, their crime being the same curiosity that led her there, expounding the age-old myth that curiosity and temptation are feminine evils and that women should know their place. The narrator even accepts that there will be consequences — 'I must pay the price of my new knowledge', likening it to Pandora's box. But she absolves herself from all blame, saying that the marquis 'had given [her] the box, himself, knowing [she] must learn the secret'. The repetition of the modal verb of certainty 'must'

## Online archive



Relevant articles in past issues of THE ENGLISH REVIEW are listed below. Ask your teacher if your school subscribes to TheEnglishReviewOnline Archive. This is a selection of articles on Gothic literature.

- Bunten, P. (2010) 'Capturing the castle: the Gothic castle as myth, motif and metaphor', Vol. 20, No. 3
- Frost, R. (1997) 'Why doesn't the monster have a mate? Female representation in *Frankenstein*', Vol. 8, No. 1
- Frost, R. (2002) 'Bram Stoker's *Dracula* and the Victorian woman', Vol. 13, No. 1
- Frost, R. (2004) 'Rebel monsters, radical texts: *Frankenstein* and *Dracula*', Vol. 14, No. 4
- Hudson, J. (2001) 'Gothic, romance and satire in *Northanger Abbey*', Vol. 12, No. 1
- Onyett, L. (2013) 'Angela Carter: Gothic terrorist', Vol. 23, No. 3

implies that her actions were inevitable, the marquis counting on her curiosity to fulfil his own sadistic desires. He discovers her guilt with the very instrument that allowed her entry to the room — the bloodstained key. He marks her forehead with it, the blood it is caked in forming the shape of a heart, a reminder of the one she has lost.

The marquis plans to execute her for her transgression but rescue comes in the unlikely form of the narrator's mother. When you consider the title as a reference to the womb, this is particularly fitting. The room Carter refers to — the bloody chamber — isn't the marquis' room of death but a female place of life, drawing on the bond of unity between mother and child. The narrator survives her brief marriage, becoming a much more knowledgeable young woman. The text can be read not only as a sexual awakening but also as a self-awakening, as a strange rite of passage into womanhood.

### Out in the open

Temptation and curiosity often lead to acts of transgression and in all three texts seeking forbidden knowledge appears to have potentially disastrous consequences. Catherine Morland is shamed and belittled for her suspicions and Harker nearly dies, as does Carter's narrator. But in all three, breaking down barriers, especially in the pursuit of knowledge, can also be seen as positive. Catherine Morland needed to be awoken in order to learn the difference between fact and fiction. Without Harker's journal and the knowledge contained within it, *Dracula* may not have been destroyed. And if Carter's narrator hadn't opened the door, she would have spent her marriage in the dark.

Though ignorance tends to be bliss, it seems that it is always better to confront your fears than hide from them, no matter what is behind the door.

## Further reading



Norton, R. (2000) *Gothic Readings: The First Wave 1764–1840*. Leicester University Press.

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