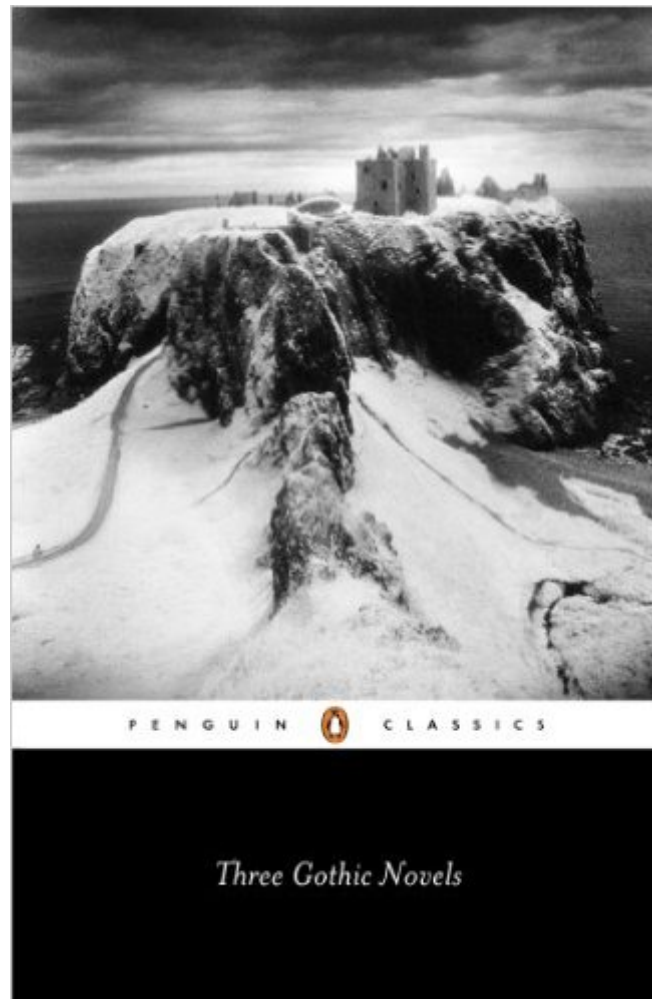


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Three Gothic Novels: The Castle Of Otranto; Vathek; Frankenstein



Synopsis

Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto*, Beckford's *Vathek*, and Shelley's *Frankenstein* The Gothic novel, which flourished from about 1765 until 1825, revels in the horrible and the supernatural, in suspense and exotic settings. This volume, with its erudite introduction by Mario Praz, presents three of the most celebrated Gothic novels: *The Castle of Otranto*, published pseudonymously in 1765, is one of the first of the genre and the most truly Gothic of the three. *Vathek* (1786), an oriental tale by an eccentric millionaire, exotically combines Gothic romanticism with the vivacity of *The Arabian Nights* and is a narrative tour de force. The story of *Frankenstein* (1818) and the monster he created is as spine-chilling today as it ever was; as in all Gothic novels, horror is the keynote. For more than seventy years, Penguin has been the leading publisher of classic literature in the English-speaking world. With more than 1,700 titles, Penguin Classics represents a global bookshelf of the best works throughout history and across genres and disciplines. Readers trust the series to provide authoritative texts enhanced by introductions and notes by distinguished scholars and contemporary authors, as well as up-to-date translations by award-winning translators.

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Customer Reviews

I was new to the Gothic genre when I first encountered this Dover publication some years ago. At that time I considered the plot for *The Castle of Otranto* (1764) by Horace Walpole to be farfetched, almost ludicrous. The mystical Oriental tale, *Vathek* (1782), by William Beckford seemed endless. Only the short story titled *The Vampyre* (1819, by John Polidori) met my expectations. My opinion today is quite different. I have gradually become familiar with Gothic literature, and I now appreciate

just how innovative these three stories were, and to how great an extent these tales influenced later writers. I give four stars to this collection. The eighteenth century was clearly a period of philosophical and scientific progress. And yet, many readers were immediately intrigued and entertained by the supernatural, bizarre elements in *The Castle of Otranto*. Hundreds of authors subsequently imitated Walpole's Gothic style. Although many of these later stories had little literary merit, the Gothic novel remained immensely popular for the following century. Today, it is true that the supernatural aspects in *The Castle of Otranto* may be overworked, the dialogue is often stilted, and the plot relies too much on coincidences. Nonetheless, *The Castle of Otranto* remains quite entertaining and suspenseful. The lengthy introduction by Sir Walter Scott (included in the 1811 edition) illustrates the remarkable impact of "this new species of literary composition". William Beckford's *Vathek* is so original that it hardly fits even the Gothic genre. Beckford, a noted scholar of early Arabian literature, provided more than fifty pages of explanatory end notes. For some reason he first published *Vathek* in French. Later it was translated and published in English without his approval. I still find *Vathek* to be overly long, but this time I was intrigued with its mystical Arabian Nights motif, its chilling characters, and its vivid portrayal of evil. In an introduction to *The Vampyre* the author John Polidori claimed (possibly to increase sales) that Lord Byron had created the plot at the same literary soiree in Geneva in which Mary Shelley produced *Frankenstein*. Lord Byron disputed Polidori's claim and produced his own notes from that famous gathering. Regardless, *The Vampyre* is a fascinating short story. E. F. Bleiler edited this collection and provided a lengthy, interesting introduction to three authors that were instrumental in developing the Gothic novel.

This is a fabulous collection representing the beginning of Gothic fiction. *Otranto* is the very first such work, and is a perfect illustration of the basic themes and plotlines predominant in Gothic. Although not the most polished work of fiction, it's often so bad it's funny, and definitely worth reading. The other stories are much more professional, albeit a bit drier reading. I'm especially fond of *Vathek*, as it more clearly represents fear fiction as it was to become. Dr. Polidori's piece is particularly interesting as he was a physician and present at the famous ghost-story-telling session(s) of Byron and the Shelley couple. On the whole, this collection is the ideal glimpse into the genre at its rudimentary level.

This volume is an excellent introduction to four works of the Gothic mindset, which hit England at the end of the 1700s and lasted on into the early Romantic period, all the way up to the late decadence of the 1890s, winding up in Robert Louis Stevenson's *THE STRANGE CASE OF DR.*

JEKYLL AND MR. HYDE (1886), Oscar Wilde's THE PICTURE OF DORIAN GRAY (1891), and Bram Stoker's DRACULA (1897). These are four of the earliest of this Gothic genre. The volume includes Horace Walpole's THE CASTLE OF OTRANTO (Christmas Eve, 1764); William Beckford's Vathek (1786); John Polidori's VAMPYRE (1819); and a Vampire Fragment by Lord Byron (1819), "which was published at the end of MAZEPPA in 1819." The list of Gothic NOVELS (rather than stories) in chronological order which make the grade are: Horace Walpole's CASTLE OF OTRANTO (1764), Clara Reeve's THE CHAMPION OF VIRTUE (1777), William Beckford's Vathek (1786), Ann Radcliffe's THE MYSTERIES OF UDOLPHO (1794), Matthew Gregory Lewis's THE MONK (1795), Mary Shelley's FRANKENSTEIN (1818), John Polidori's VAMPYRE (1819), Charles R. Maturin's MELMOTH THE WANDERER (1820). There are excellent introductions to each of the writers and their works at the beginning of the book. In speaking of THE CASTLE OF OTRANTO, Bleiler says: "This novel has been called one of the half-dozen historically most important novels in English. The founder of a school of fiction, the so-called Gothic novel, it served as the direct model for an enormous quantity of novels written up through the first quarter of the 19th century.... It was probably the most important source for enthusiasm for the Middle Ages that suddenly swept Europe in the later 18th century, and many of the trappings of the early 19th century Romantic movement have been traced to it. It embodied the spirit of an age." There is included a series of impressive "Notes" to the novel Vathek: An Arabian Tale. The novel begins in an interesting fashion: "Vathek, ninth caliph of the race of the Abbassides, was the son of Motassem, and the grandson of Haroun al Raschid. From an early accession to the throne, and the talents he possessed to adorn it, his subjects were induced to expect that his reign would be long and happy. His figure was pleasing and majestic: but when he was angry, one of his eyes became so terrible, that no person could bear to behold it; and the wretch upon whom it was fixed instantly fell backward, and sometimes expired. For fear, however, of depopulating his dominions and making his palace desolate, he but rarely gave way to his anger." And here is a sample bite from John Polidori's VAMPYRE: "There was no colour upon her cheek, not even upon her lip; yet there was a stillness about her face that seemed almost as attaching as the life that once dwelt there: -- upon her neck and breast was blood, and upon her throat were the marks of teeth having opened the vein: -- to this the men pointed, crying, simultaneously struck with horror, "A Vampyre! a Vampyre!"

The books are very good, of course. There is a problem with the formatting on Kindle. You will have to search for chapters 9-21 of Frankenstein. It is right after the end of Vathek instead of after chapter 8 like it should be.

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