Gothic Possibilities

Norman N. Holland and Leona F. Sherman

The most immediate question in the psychology of literature is also the subtlest. The reader who stands before a paperback rack and does not know what he will enjoy, and the writer who wonders what phrase will work with that imagined reader, face the same problem as the psychologist of literary response. Each person's reading is different, yet there is enough recurrence among readings to make us think some lawfulness is at work. What, then, is the relation between the singularity and the regularity of literary response? How, for example, has a genre like the gothic maintained its popularity for two centuries? Why are the overwhelming majority of those who read gothic women?

Why indeed are there genres at all? The detective story, the Bildungsroman, science fiction, the regional novel, porn: we define these genres by their accidents—science, genitals, youth, cops—but these are the mere Stoff of fiction. One cannot explain the extraordinary popularity of a genre, both as something to read and as something to write, by such superficials. Or can one?

The formula for the modern gothic, set by Daphne du Maurier's Rebecca, is, in the words of Emma Mai Ewing, "a story told by the heroine, often working as a governess or companion [hence in a nurturing role] in a brooding castle or mansion. She is alternately attracted and repelled by the rakishly handsome man who plays the villain until almost the last page—and who then comes to her rescue."¹ The central image (in commercial terms, the illustration on the cover) shows "a fleeing girl in a flowing gown and a background structure—a castle, bamboo hut, Chas. Addams house, igloo—with a single light in the window." The image of woman-plus-habitation and the plot of mysterious sexual and supernatural threats in an atmosphere of dynastic mysteries within the habitation has changed little since the eighteenth century. Horace Walpole invented, so to speak, the gothic house in The Castle of Otranto (1764), and Ann Radcliffe brought all the elements of the genre together in The Mysteries of Udolpho (1791). To be sure, the modern Byronic lover combines the separated hero and villain of the eighteenth century, but that is about the only change.

Now, how simple it would be if we could say that the combination of castle, maiden-in-distress, family secrets, and seductive rake dictates response and so guarantees the gothic effect! Alas, the effect is not at all universal. Castles do not convey terror the way bottles pour wine. Fiction is not the cause but the means by which writers create and readers re-create an experience. Novels do not have emotions—people do.

They do, moreover, according to principles which can be stated in considerable detail. Observations of real readers reading (at the Center where we both
have worked) have led to the conclusion that each human being re-creates an experience from a fiction in terms of his or her particular style, character, or, to use the precise term, identity.

Identity we define as a way of grasping the mixture of sameness and difference which makes up a human life. We understand sameness in a person by seeing it persist through change, as when we say something like, "That's so like Ralph!" Conversely, we understand change by seeing it against what has not changed: "That's not like Geoffrey at all!" One way of formalizing this interplay of sameness and difference—there may be others, but our Center has found this the most useful—is to think of identity as a theme embodying sameness plus variations embodying change. In this way, an identity theme becomes analogous to the theme one finds in a piece of music or literature. Such a theme is an attempt to state formally the constant core we recognize informally in sentences like, "Wordsworth is the kind of person who . . . ." This constant core we call, adapting ideas of Heinz Lichtenstein, an identity theme. It is our attempt to state what some individual brings to every new experience, the grammatical and actual "I" that we perceive as the subject of all the changes in that person. It is the theme against which we can understand new actions as variations playing a persistent theme in a new form. Reading and interpreting literature are such re-creations.

Within that one general principle, that reading re-creates the reader's identity, we can distinguish four modalities. A reader—but "reader," of course, is not quite accurate, since we sometimes hear literature or see it performed. We can take the -ent of "agent," and speak of a literent, that is, someone who is actively responding to a literary work through any sensory mode. One can derive, in the same way, novelent or dramatent or, a term media people have begun to use, mediants. A literent brings to a literary work, just as to any external experience, a characteristic set of expectations, typically pairs of hopes and fears. We want the text to be the kind of world we know how to deal with. Therefore, as literents, we try to match from the literary work our characteristic strategies for achieving pleasure in the world and avoiding unpleasure. We bring to bear our whole system of defenses and adaptations, including all our skills, symbols, and values—the shorthand for all this is simply "defense." We shape and change the text until, to the degree we need that certainty, it is the kind of setting in which we can gratify our wishes and defeat our fears.

By matching defense and expectation, literents can invest the work (as they have defensively shaped it) with characteristic clusters of wishes—fantasies. Finally, using the same adaptive strategies, they can transform those fantasies into the kind of significance they characteristically find meaningful—intellectual, social, moral, or aesthetic. A literent "makes sense" of the text, thus confirming the whole transaction.

In short, we match inner defenses and expectations to outer realities in order to project fantasies into them and then transform those fantasies into significance. Defense, expectation, fantasy, transformation, or, for short, DEFT. This model comes from the clinical experience of psychoanalysis, but it has a larger significance as well. The idea of expectations places the literary work in time, in the ongoing sequence of our wishes and fears, while our transformation of the
work toward significance attaches it to themes that transcend the immediate concerns of the moment. Fantasies are what we project from within onto the outer world. Defenses define what we let into ourselves from that outer world.

Thus, although DEFT is only the latest evolvement of Freud's early discoveries about dreams, jokes, and symptoms, it enables us to locate reading along two of the great axes of human experience: the line of time and the boundary between self and other. At that intersection, each literent transacts the literary work for himself or herself. Response is lawful but completely individual.²

Can we extend these principles for understanding one individual's response to principles for understanding many? For example, responses to the gothic show one striking regularity. The New York Times of 18 June 1973 headed a feature article, "Gothic Novels for Women Prove Bonanza for Publishers." One publisher complained that his "stable of writers" could not satisfy the female market's demand for "gothics." Another, Simon and Schuster, had doubled its sales of such "women's fiction." In all, gothics accounted for more than five percent of total paperback sales in the U.S.A.—$1.4 million profit. The New York Times Book Review headed its 11 May 1975 round-up, "Gothic Mania," and reported that American paperback publishers in 1974 had issued about twenty-three million copies of 175 gothic titles by more than 100 authors. The spring of 1975 saw fifty new titles. The writers are almost all women. One or two men write gothics, but they write under women's names. Similarly, although there are a few male readers, the overwhelming majority are women, mostly in their thirties and forties.

Why this extraordinarily long-lived popularity for a not-very-great literary form? And why is it preponderantly popular, both in the reading and the writing, with women? The gothic and all such genres lead to the fundamental problem of literary causality. Each literent creates a uniquely individual experience from these gothic materials. Yet gothic novels offer the material for certain kinds of experience and not others. Each novelent has the human freedom to ignore the text, critics, common sense, and everything else in making a gothic experience. Yet psychological laws say each literent creates an experience within his own identity or character. There are also regularities (but not laws) beyond the individual's psychology: gothic novels appeal strongly to some novelents (women of a certain age and society) and scarcely at all to others (adolescent boys of whatever culture).

In any popular genre, however, the principle must be the same: what many literents want to create dovetails with the possibilities the genre offers.³ To understand how these novels make the gothic experience possible, then, to discover gothic possibilities, requires a double inquiry: into texts and into literents. That is why we decided to explore our own re-creations of the gothic.

We can begin with the formula, maiden-plus-habitation, and the prototypical habitation in it, the castle. An older psychoanalytic criticism would have assumed a one-to-one equation: the castle symbolizes the body. Unfortunately, this kind of easy isomorphism does not stand up under experimental testing or even close introspection. Rather, each of us resymbolizes reality in our own terms.⁴ A gothic novel combines the heroine's fantasies about the castle with
her fears that her body will be violated. The novel thus makes it possible for literents to interpret body by means of castle and castle by means of body, but it does not force us to do so nor does it fix the terms in which the two of us will do it.

Instead, the castle admits a variety of our projections. In particular, because it presents villains and dangers in an archaic language and *mise-en-scène*, it fits childish perceptions of adult threats. The castle is a nighttime house—it admits all we can imagine into it of the dark, frightening, and unknown. If, like Udolpho, it also has midnight revelry, violence, battles, confusing noises and disturbances, it can express our childhood fears at the strange sounds of “struggle” between our parents in the night and the sexual violence children often imagine as a result. At the same time, the gothic novel usually says that the castle contains some family secret, so that the castle can also become the core for fantasies based on a childish desire that adulthood be an exactly defined secret one can discover and possess.

SHERMAN: When I think of a castle, I think of a house of heroic proportions, linked with dynastic histories, wars, and mysteries. I think of kings, queens, knights, and other heroes or villains of folklore who may have lived there. I find, in short, that I associate the castle not only with an idealized past epoch of social history (a nostalgia for romance, chivalry, Christian goodness, and divine order) but with my own personal history of fantasies and fears. Perhaps it is the great size of the castle in relation to the heroine that reminds me of my childhood perception of adults and that permits me to project so readily my long-repressed fantasies that I will be a hero(ine) uniquely destined and renowned. I can easily associate the gothic hero(ine)’s hopes and fortunes with my own illusions of parental magnitude and personal grandeur and, in particular, with my own version of what Freud called the “family romance,” the belief in my own secret greatness based on my descent from glorious and noble (and secret) parents, my ostensible father and mother being but the humble keepers of this illustrious foundling, me, Leona Sherman.

HOLLAND, SHERMAN: The castle delineates a physical space which will accept many different projections of unconscious material. de Sade makes this receptive function of the castle quite terrifyingly explicit: its chief attribute is an isolation in which the heroine is completely controlled by someone else while separated from those she loves. The castle threatens shame, agony, annihilation—and desire. From the torture chambers of, say, the monastery in *Justine*, we can create a magic realm, beyond all normative associations and experience, where the best anodyne one can hope for is catatonia. Given such an arena for sexual and sadistic games, we are free to use de Sade’s satanic imaginings to structure our own wildest wishes and fears about loss and helplessness.

Poe, too, makes this receptive function of the habitation explicit, but in a different way: in “The Fall of the House of Usher,” he uses the inset poem, “The Haunted Palace,” to equate the house with the head. A palace stood “in the monarch Thought’s dominion,” with “Banners yellow, glorious, golden/On its roof.” Wanderers “Through two luminous windows saw/Spirits move musically,” while “all with pearl and ruby glowing/Was the fair palace door,” and through it comes “Echoes” who sing “The wit and wisdom of their king.”
But after being assaulted by some unnamed horror, the windows are "red-litten," and through the door a throng rushes out like a river to laugh, but smile no more. Then, Poe's hero takes the place of the house, to be threatened with sensory penetration and madness.

The more usual gothic defines its heroine's anxieties as fears of nothingness, vulnerability, and, above all, of sexual penetration. Here, clearly, the projections of men and women differ.

SHERMAN: For a woman in a sexist society, imagining being penetrated (an experience of being "filled") can be a pleasure but also a threat. Because my society demands my nonidentity, ego pain and social pleasure (and ego pleasure and social pain) combine to form the masochistic, schizophrenic feelings (yes, of pleasure) I get from gothic.

HOLLAND: For me, both identifying with a female and imagining being penetrated call into question my male identity. Both raise the threat posed by the castle and the gothic machinery to a pitch where I no longer wish them relevant to me, the male me, and I sense myself relegating gothic to an alienating category, "women's fiction." Perhaps this is why I am acutely aware of another property of the castle—its flinty hardness. I want those stones to be inert, neither hurt nor hurting, whatever threats and penetrations go on between villain and victim. They cannot be penetrated, and if not they, then not I.

SHERMAN: For me, the primary motivating fear in gothic is of nothingness or nonseparation. Thus the ambivalent importance of the castle in relation to the heroine: in the castle, you can have the merging and the otherness, along with the threat of annihilation. There life exists on the boundary. Holland's and my responses highlight both aspects of this issue and locate an axis of fear and desire common to both our experiences. For me the nothingness and the vulnerability are crucial; they make the sexuality so threatening. Traditionally, for women, nonseparateness and dependency have been real issues. Confronting them brings selfhood into question and feels dangerous, while successfully confirming one's feminine identity feels exciting and pleasurable.

HOLLAND, SHERMAN: Thus, the castle admits a variety of relationships between itself and the novel and between itself and the characters of the novel. It becomes all the possibilities of a parent or a body. It can threaten, resist, love, or confine, but in all these actions, it stands as a total environment in one-to-one relation with the victim, like the all-powerful mother of earliest childhood. The castle becomes the entire world of possible relationships for its prisoner. The two of us feel in it a recapitulation of that earliest stage in human development when the boundaries between inner and outer, me and not-me, are still not sharply drawn, and self cannot distinguish itself from the mother who is the outside world. It is a "potential space" in the term of D. W. Winnicott, a space between: "The potential space between baby and mother, between child and family, between individual and society or the world, depends on experience which leads to trust. . . . It is here that the individual experiences creative living. . . . By contrast, exploitation of this area leads to a pathological condition in which the individual is cluttered up with persecutory elements of which he has no means of ridding himself." Like the gothic heroine.
Because the castle presents a markedly untrustworthy Other that encompasses the entire not-me, physical escape becomes the only way of meeting its threats. From this logic comes the paradigmatic pattern of the gothic: persecution followed by flight, flight being the outward turn from threatened sexual penetration or intrusive parental care. "I will not let the castle force itself into me—I will put myself outside it." The gothic thus offers for our re-creation a dialectic in its geometry, both that of the castle and the exterior landscape which is the escape from the castle. Radcliffe's description of Udolpho is typical: "The towers were united by a curtain, pierced and embattled also, below which appeared the pointed arch of an huge portcullis, surmounting the gates: from these, the walls of the ramparts extended to other towers, overlooking the precipice, whose shattered outline, appearing on a gleam, that lingered in the west, told of the ravages of war—Beyond these all was lost in the obscurity of evening." 6

HOLLAND: The passage offers me a trail to follow back and forth and up and down: from the towers down to the arch, up the walls to the towers, down and out from them to a precipice, out and beyond to "obscurity." Given such a perceptual trail, I find I can play it like a piece of music, moving my feelings up and down, in and out of, these vectors and dimensions. "United," "below which," "surmounting," "from these," "overlooking," "told of," "Beyond these"—everything seems to me related. In these words animating an intimate landscape, I get an almost paranoid feeling of a world linked and united against me, "embattled," "huge," "shattered," "ravages." Thus, I can use all this geometry of relationship to structure my own projections, working into it such basic psychic issues as the boundary between the me and not-me, between outer and inner, or such themes as the dependency of my comfort in physical space on a feeling of repose and security in inner space. In gothic, I can structure my feelings by means of both the outer landscape provided for escape and the inner landscape of the castle with its threats of or flights from penetration.

HOLLAND, SHERMAN: We return to the castle—one always does, after all. Like our first homes in real life, it is under the sway of parental figures, and thus, in another way, the castle allows the two of us to re-create the trust and dependency of childhood. It offers a parental environment, the castle itself as a parent (as above), but also the parents-in-the-castle. They come in sharply different flavors. Udolpho will have the evil Montoni and Mme. Cheron, and Otranto the menacing Manfred, but poised against them the generous Hippolita and the noble (but, alas, dead) Alfonso or the "good father," St. Aubert. In other words, the older characters offer a reader a moral polarity. We two invest them with negative feelings toward our parents (or positive ones for the idealized versions). The good are very good and the bad are very bad (or mysterious), and this dualism is defined in a child's morality: who is good and who is bad depends on how they treat the child-heroine. They recapitulate the all-powerful evil tyrant and the "wicked stepmother" of fairy tales. Further, the very fact they are so sharply and easily distinguished gratifies deep and early wishes for a life that is clear and simple. Gothic measures out its complexities in discrete issues.
Typically, the bad father-figure will have sexual designs on the heroine; often the bad mother-figure will aid him. As in the child's world, sex is "bad." In the same way, a castle like Udolpho shares both the good motherly qualities of a shelter and the threatening sexuality of its proprietor. Yet, to the extent one fuses with the castle as the child in earliest infancy feels inseparable from its mother, its ambiguity poses a deep ontological threat: if I and the mother on whom I depend for nurture and life itself are both agents of aggression, sexuality, and (perhaps therefore deserved) punishment, then I call my very existence into question by my own sexual desires. At the same time, the gothic plot stresses the difference between the sexes and introduces a variety of occasions for sexual desire. Thus, it enables the two of us to lose identity one way, by fusing with the parents (or castle) as in earliest childhood, but to assert it in another, sexually. In effect, a literent can make his or her sexual identity (based on difference from the other) the defense against the loss of one's deeper, human identity (based on separateness from the other). And this special pattern may be another reason gothic appeals so differently to the sexes.

In gothic, it is the male villain who usually represents sexual desire. As Leslie Fiedler has suggested, the villain makes available to literents the dark, asocial world of fantasy, dream, and the unconscious, a subversive attack on the bourgeois values embodied in the heroine. He seems, compared to her, more mythic and timeless, a creature of all the ages. If he does not physically penetrate the heroine, he has (like Montoni in Udolpho) eye contact—piercing and controlling glances. He thus may express what she dare not, her sexual desires, perhaps even sadomasochistic desires, in the gothic paradigm of young heroine and middle-aged, sexual villain. At the same time, because she fears him and suffers from his machinations, she gives us the possibility of using fear to justify wish and wish to provoke fear. She pays in anxiety for whatever guilt-ridden sexual or parricidal wishes she expresses for her readers toward this "bad father."

The good female thus plays very much the opposite role from the bad male. The villain is more ancient and alien, while she tends to be an idealized contemporary portrait. Probably the respectable woman novelist identified more consciously with her than with any other characters. Nevertheless, the heroine can play a double part. She can assume an active, questing, intruding role, as she tries to find out the secret of the castle, at the same time that she plays the passive, inceptive victim.

SHERMAN: I feel "truthful" and socialized woman come together in this longing to have both the active, penetrating role usually taken by males in our society (and in the gothic novel) and the traditional receptivity assigned to my sex. As I follow, say, Emily in The Mysteries of Udolpho, her intrusive, aggressive mode elicits threats of violence, rape, and murder. I can feel relief—my guilts prevailing—as Emily does not achieve a mature realization of active, female sexuality; but finally I am distinctly unhappy with the even more restricted, passive attitude toward her sexual role with which she finds safety in the nonsexuality, really, of romance and La Vallée. I feel in the duality of her position the tension between the solutions I seek as an adult woman and the solutions I once accepted from society in childhood.
Finally, for heroines like Emily, the basic role is resistance. In the fictional as in the real world of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, a young woman had to resist objectionable marriages, seduction, jealousy, and rape. Men dominated their world with these tactics. Women had few means with which to defend themselves, and defeat meant ruin. Gothic novels enabled literents, especially women, to experience these conditions in the gothic castle at the hands of gothic mothers, fathers, and lovers (and, of course, gothick meant "barbarous, rude, savage"). The genre's romance and its conventional ending in marriage allowed a woman to use romantic love as a defense against the male, sexual forces that menaced her at the same time that she could enjoy those forces (either as actor or victim) in fantasy. The woman could be—and not be—passive and resistant during the body of the novel. Then the ending provided her a way to arrive at the right psychological solution for that society and that time.

HOLLAND, SHERMAN: Thus, no matter what wishes its literent might indulge in the beginning and middle, the genre proves deeply conservative in the end. To the two of us, other people or objects never seem in gothic to be quite other. Rather, they are intimately connected to, part of, dependent upon, and controlled by the heroine or the parent-figures around her. Such nonseparateness characterizes childhood generally and in particular the earliest relationship of child to mother before one is aware of self or time. To us, this style also accounts for the pervasive "status quo" feeling we have in reading gothic. Characters and events repeat from one generation to the next, enabling the reader to deny changes in time. The supernatural provides a rationale for doom and determinism. Inherited riches mean the characters never work, never, that is, construct distinctive identities for themselves apart from parental inheritance.

The gothic novel itself is a set piece, unchanged in two hundred years, much like its dominant image, the gothic castle, cathedral, or abbey which stands aloof from ordinary human life and change. It says in its own way, victims endure. It imitates death, too: cold, still, silent, overwhelmingly oppressive. The literent who enjoys the genre and image can identify with the aggressor, Montoni, or the inquisitive Emily, yield to the destroyer, and again find a simplifying peace in social conservatism.

Until that familiar resolution in marriage, however, the gothic reveals in unfamiliarity: the topos of the mysterious family secret. Again, the genre offers us opposites, the known and the unknown, and again, the castle provides a symbol for them. As the gothic convention par excellence, its very structure exemplifies the stout, external form, yet it conceals some hidden secret, knowledge of which will ultimately prove more important than the strength of stone and iron. The secret allows us to project into the castle the deepest mysteries of life, its origins, continuance, and destiny.

SHERMAN: Whenever I think of an object of mystery and concealment, I find myself harking back to the ultimate mystery, the maternal body with its related secrets of birth and sexuality. Again, I re-create in the gothic a mingling of my very early relationship with my mother, mother as environment, with
my present sense of her as a sexual, procreating being. Then I use the mysteries and concealments of gothic the same way. It is as though my mother and I were probing here and there in this house or castle or head or body. I know she knows but she won't tell me. I know I know, but I doubt because she won't tell me. She says one thing, but I see another on her face. I feel we can't really talk about what we know, because she would be calling her whole past life into question and endangering her present. She thinks the concealment necessary for my survival, and finally, she loves me and wants to protect me above all. The mysteries are the issues of sex and birth and death and, too, the necessity of concealing them.

HOLLAND: In many ways, the element of mystery seems the point at which writers find the limits of the genre. *Northanger Abbey* is not a gallery of delicious mystery, but a burlesque of gothic. The mysterious manuscript found by Catherine Morland hides no grim secrets, only laundry bills and expense accounts. Radcliffe's "explained supernatural" makes it easy for us—sometimes too easy—to relax from the tense quest for the secret into the conventional ending of romance. In effect, rationality is the "counter-gothic." The absence or removal of mystery, if slow, provides the stock happy resolution; if fast, parody. Thus, Poe's use of rational explanation, so important in shoring up his own precarious character structure, makes it possible for us to balance off and limit the horror of his various burlyings alive. De Sade, on the other hand, becomes the "ultra-gothic." He goes beyond the suspense and mystery to carry out those terrible mysterious urges in full view of the literent.

Finally, then, mystery defines the mystery with which we began: the potential of the gothic, given what we know about the complex way in which appeal begins with literents before literature. A genre such as the gothic creates certain possibilities, but whether or not those possibilities or others become actual experiences depends upon the individual literent, his or her identity, literary acumen, and immediate motivation.

HOLLAND, SHERMAN: Thus, although we are a man and a woman looking at a "feminine" genre, we cannot assume that our responses are representative of male and female literents generally. Having taken in gothic materials in certain gender-related ways, we can guess that other men and women might similarly divide—but we can only know they do when different individuals in fact respond differently.

In looking at the gothic through our own reactions, we two are articulating the "potential space" between the gothic novel and its literent as we actualize it. In its plot, the novel permits the two of us to hover between radical exploration and a familiar, conservative ending. In its characters, it permits us to enter the interplay between an asocial, timeless, penetrating villain and a contemporary, "correct," and resistant virgin. The structure of the novel permits us to perceive the other characters, besides the virgin-heroine, as mother- and father-figures, sharply divided into good and bad, with the bad including the mysterious and the sexual. Finally, the gothic gives us a central image: the maiden inside and outside the habitation, that recurring castle. It may be:
A maternal space  
or  A hardness  
—nurturing  
—and/or sexual  
—expressed in a geometrical  

dialectic  
An idealized past  
or  The reader’s present  
—big in size  
—a family romance  
An inside  
—a secret  
—to be penetrated  
or  —a hardness  
—enclosing  
or  —to be escaped  

In all these possibilities, it seems to us, inside and outside form the essential tension. The castle does not simply “stand for” the body of the heroine (as a psychoanalytic critic might have said in 1915). Nevertheless, just as a child of either sex might interpret its psychosocial surroundings by means of the inner and outer space of its own body, so the gothic novel provides a polarizing of inside and outside with which an adult woman, particularly in a sexist society, might symbolize a common psychosocial experience: an invaded life within her mind, her body, her home, bounded by a social structure that marks off economic and political life as “outside.”

SHERMAN: As I see it, escapist fiction, especially gothic, makes sense for women in their thirties and forties. Romance has been the only arena available to women in my culture for the projection of fantasies of personal glory. Women have largely defined themselves and their aspirations through a love relationship with a man. If that be the ultimate experience, other forms of escapist fiction simply do not offer what gothic does, for gothic allows one to complicate that fantasy of personal glory by fear and violence. It allows anger, ambivalence, and resistance in the very realizing of the fantasy.

HOLLAND: Our colleague Claire Kahane made an interesting suggestion: that gothic creates, both in the labyrinthine castle and the interactive landscape, an inner, relational space. There, woman, not man, wins, despite—or precisely because of—being in the position of a victim. Finally, it is Emily who controls this novel.

SHERMAN: There’s power in resistance—passive aggression—and that’s another resource gothic offers. It says receiving, sexually and otherwise, can be a power position as well.

HOLLAND, SHERMAN: This is what we mean by “gothic possibilities.” Udolpho does not “cause” a gothic experience. It does, however, make the resources for such an experience available to those novelents whose identities can create gothic and who have social, political, gender-linked, or characteristic reasons for wanting it. The “text” itself embodies no more than the possibility of a certain kind of relationship between its words and its literents.

Thus, to talk about “the appeal” of gothic leads to an insoluble problem: the prediction of human choices. Literary critics, however, would like to be able to say that a certain text causes a certain reaction, with all the comfortable
simplifications of a stimulus-response model. No one, however, has been able to locate anything "in" a gothic novel or, for that matter, *Hamlet* or any other masterpiece that causes any predictable pattern of favorable or unfavorable reading. There simply is no way we can get from the possibilities offered by a gothic to the relations novelents actually establish with the novel, although we can go the other way, to discover the possibilities in the text from the actualities of responses. Starting from the text, however, we can apparently say no more than that a certain text makes a certain response possible or unlikely or difficult. Yet that amounts to more than one might think.

**The Shape of Appeal**

HOLLAND: With my characteristically geometric imagination, I can visualize the relationship of literent to text as combining two movements. The first runs from the literent to the text: he trusts the text, bestowing or investing a part of himself in it. In order to do so, he must have been able to establish his characteristic defenses by means of the text (as in the DEFT principles of reading). The second movement feeds back from text to literent. It involves more of a turn or pivot, whereby the literent shapes his relation to the work as a whole by means of his sequential experience of the work in time. The first, frontal relation is the more familiar, and it fits some of our traditional ideas of appeal.

First, the more the materials of gothic admit the projection of universal psychological issues, the more people are likely to so project. This is not quite the same as saying that materials general in themselves ("birth, and copulation, and death," to use the Eliotic phrase) will arouse general interest. To be sure, initiations, marriages, and ceremonies about death would not occur generally among humans if they did not provide symbolisms for expressing general human concerns. Many other things, however, that are not themselves universal, admit the projection of universal themes in literature.

Castles are not universal, yet the two of us have been able to find in them: a body, a head, a mind, unchanging hardness, undifferentiated parents, parents differentiated into hard father and yielding mother, or sexual father and idealized mother. Above all, we have found in the castle mother—mother as nurturer, as sexual being, as body, as harboring a secret, as an indifferent hardness, and so on. The castle has an immense structure of—possibility. It is not an old-fashioned "Freudian symbol." Rather, the novel makes it possible for each of us to relate to the castle in our own style, using and not using various items of plot, character, and language. This way, projection is one "possibility" of gothic, and indeed, of all fiction and all reality. To the extent we actualize it, we might translate it into an aesthetic judgment of intensity.

Second, to the extent ambivalence pervades all human feeling, literary works achieve part of their success by permitting us to work out both the wishing and the fearing of a given event.

SHERMAN: In the gothic, I feel much of this dual potentiality comes from the symbolization of sexuality, overtly feared but covertly wished. Similarly,
one may wish to solve the mystery yet fear what will be revealed. If the
Rochester, the villainous, sexual, older man, turns out to be a rescuer, the
female novelent can find two ways of submitting to him, one permitted, one
taboo. Further, her fear of the villain may assuage any guilt for hidden sexual
wishes toward this potential lover, who may in turn bring out her feelings
toward a father. Similarly, one might find in the gothic two versions of mother:
a nurturing mother who should be trusted and a sexual mother who should
not. In literents' pairings of wish and fear, we may be seeing the psychological
sense of the aesthetician's "unity in diversity."

HOLLAND, SHERMAN: It is particularly important that the language of
literature have this potential for admitting ambivalent impulses. The two of us,
for example, find we can endow the passage we quoted from Udolphe with a
whole series of contrasts and tensions between up and down, out and back, or
near and far. Like the "pure form" of music, they provide a structure on which
to work out one's feelings. By contrast, the inversions of Poe's poetry, which
might have provided a linguistic tension to readers in the last century, seem flat
and stale to us in this one. The openness of language to people's ambivalences
we might translate as the familiar aesthetic criterion, complexity.

All such projections into details are possible only because the two of us have
matched defenses in more general ways. We brought to the gothic the charac-
teristic balance of wish and defense each of us carries about all the time. We
approach the world with expectations like, "They will take something away."
"They will come nearer." "I will gain something." We cope with such feelings
by seeking a giver, distancing ourselves, looking for reassurance, and the like.
When we encounter a new situation by opening a gothic novel, we understand
it at first in the most general of terms: "book," "novel," "popular," "gothic."
We generate expectations from our general balance of defense and fantasy and
test the new novel against them: "pleasing terror," "bland language," "sus-
pense," "penetration," "women's writing," or other expressions that mix wish
and fear.

A novelent proceeds to make the book more precise as he reads—this
heroine in this particular castle with these particular terrors and adjectives—but
shaping it by his characteristic defenses. He overlooks some things but invests
others with details from personal experience. Ideally this process will come, not
to an exact match—that would seem dull—but to a feeling of accord sufficient
to sustain a sense of trust. We need to feel that the novel will do the kinds of
things for us it is appropriate for this novel to do. As we achieve this trust, we
"match" defenses and expectations by means of the novel.

HOLLAND: As a gothic's literent has established trust, he projects into the
novel his particular, private fantasies about penetration, the suspect hero,
corridors, rooms, beds, and so on. He can transform those fantasies toward
meaningfulness, using the plot, characters, setting, and language (as he has
taken the novel in) and all his cognitive and literary skills. The process has the
same shape as the creation of a dream: my day-residues (analogous to textual
details) drop down and assimilate my deeper wishes which rise to conscious-
ness in secondary and rational elaboration.

The interaction between text and novelent begins in personal expectations
about books, novels, genres, or heroes and heroines. It ends in a general feeling of significance. In between, I think, the relationship narrows like an hourglass to precise points of matching particular details taken from the text to particular expectations generated by the literent, both sets of details being shaped and selected through the literent’s system of defenses.

It is in the neck of that hourglass that the second, turning movement becomes crucial, for this feedback from the text is necessary to sustain that original cognitive and emotional matching. A novelent uses his response to the events “inside” the novel to fuel his response to the novel from outside it, and vice versa. I compose the villain’s wish to penetrate the heroine from my own wish to penetrate the mystery of the book or castle, and vice versa. From each I derive feelings with which to create the other: the more suspense I feel in the reading transaction, the more threatening the villain can become. So with the topos of the mysterious secret. Out of Emily’s wish to find the truth about the world in which she is caught, I shape my own wish to find how the story comes out.

Conversely, I can shape from my ambivalent feelings about the penetration in the novel an ambivalence toward my penetration of the novel. I want to penetrate its mysteries, yes, but I do not want to be penetrated by the book—I do not want to relax and let this kind of book happen to me like other novels. In the same way, my ambivalent absorption in the book, my feeling that Udolpho creates a stereotyped and artificial reality with which I am nevertheless involved to the exclusion of the real world, can let me imagine an ambivalent wish to escape in the plot. From my own mixed feelings toward the novel, I generate the heroine’s mixture of eagerness to get out of danger and hesitation to enter the unknown outside. Out of Mrs. Radcliffe’s failure to provide enough human aggression for me in the character of Emily, I supply it: why doesn’t she face up to Montoni? Out of the aggression I have supplied to the sequence of events, I shape my dissatisfaction with the novel: why doesn’t it give me a firm resistance to Montoni?

In having this second movement, this pivot, in response my reading the novel at large resembles my interpreting the sentence in little. That is, as the psycholinguists following Chomsky have shown, we interpret sentences by some kind of transformation from deep to surface structure. We also, however, interpret sentences from left to right. And somehow—no one quite knows how—these two directions, left-to-right and deep-to-surface, interact.⁹

This pivotal use of the sequence of events in the novel also corresponds to the way we identify with a character. The word identify, however, does not do justice to the precision of the transaction. We make for ourselves drives and defenses out of a character ostensibly “there” in the text and so shape a relationship between the text and ourselves. The making is the relating.¹⁰

It is all like sailing a boat: I shape from the relation to wind and wave “out there” a direction I define “in here,” but achieve in the outward interaction of boat, wind, and water, which in turn changes the original relation to wind and water. Neither boat, wind, water, nor sailor can be understood in isolation. My sailing is not “in here” nor “out there”—it is the relationship between the two. It is the turning and heading between “in here” and “out there.”
A psychoanalytic approach shows we interpret fiction as a whole the same way. The left-to-right, “out there” sequence of events in a novel provides resources with which we can build a relation to the total novel which embraces the book in another movement of mind from deeper to higher levels and back again. Critics would like this model to predict literary responses, but as is true in the social sciences generally, one cannot predict human behavior, except by arbitrarily limiting it through questionnaires or elections that permit only one or a few choices. Such limits cannot possibly reach the fineness with which we recreate the novel as a whole or as an action in time. What this left-to-right and lower-to-higher model of our relation to a text does let us do is understand responses after they occur.

SHERMAN: Thus, I use the mysteries of gothic to articulate feelings about my mother, a nurturing environment now become also a woman with a sexuality I must treat as her secret. The mysteries are the issues of sex and birth and death and, too, the necessity of knowledge and concealment in a tension between known truths and feelings within and conventions and lies required from without. The castle with its family secret is the embodiment of this, the gothic denial.

HOLLAND: I find in my ambivalence toward the spatial and cognitive penetrations of gothic a reason why I dismiss these novels as “women’s fiction” (and the very term reveals a deep issue for me, Is “it” there or fictional?).

HOLLAND, SHERMAN: In other words, we discover how gothic possibilities have become gothic actualities, but only after and because we have made them actual. We can understand the relation between the text and us through a general psychoanalytic principle. We re-create the text to make it an expression of our own personal style or identity, matching defenses and expectations to the text so as to project fantasies into it and transform them and it toward significance.

Within that DEFTing we shape two movements, the second a feedback to sustain the first. In the first, we compare our expectations and defenses with the text and invest it with fantasy and meaning: we move from self as a whole to text as a whole. This one-to-one movement relates to such traditional categories of aesthetic judgment as intensity (if we think solely of projection) or unity-in-complexity (if we think of the balance of dualities like wish and fear, sex and aggression, or drive and defense).

In the other movement, we feed a sequence of events in our ongoing relation with the text back into ourselves so as to shape that first, total relation between text and self. It is in that turning toward ourselves that we most exactly match our personal defenses and expectations with those we derive from the resources of the text. We use our detailed expectations about what is going to happen in the text and the way we deal with what then happens to shape the further expectations and defenses we bring to the text as a whole.

In the movement from each of us as a whole toward the text as a whole, we are relatively flexible, particularly as regards fantasy and transformation. The pivotal movement is far more chancy, quite subject to the vagaries of mood and the variables of identity. It is, however, this matching between the left-to-right
events in the text and the deeper-to-higher transformations of the literent that is pivotal—in both senses of the word.

HOLLAND: I bring to The Mysteries of Udolpho positive and negative expectations about novels, literary language, the eighteenth century, gothics, or "women's fiction." Then, as I read, I find I cannot shape from this heroine, this villain, this castle, or these descriptions satisfying structures (defenses) to cope with the theme or fantasy of penetration that I find intriguing but doubly threatening.

SHERMAN: I, however, find the same literary materials express for me a sexist society's thwarting of woman's quest for self-knowledge and authenticity. The castle situation provides a model for my suppressed feelings about dependency and separateness, the trust I feel toward my mother coupled with the frustration and even terror I also feel, knowing that what I know must be suppressed at the expense of my own sense of self. In what sexual attraction I share between heroine and villain, I confront my own participation in a masochistic mythology that equates sexuality with brutality. The pursuit in the castle allows me both to be open to these issues and to resist them. I find myself re-creating from gothic my ambivalence toward a femaleness which is my mother in me: nurturing and sexuality, mother and woman and child, conflicted between her and me and therefore in me as me.

HOLLAND, SHERMAN: Since our maleness and femaleness are so important in our respective responses, it could be that we are demonstrating prototypically male and female responses, but we will never know by simply assuming we are. One cannot learn about actual responses except by studying actual responses. We cannot learn about them by starting with the text, for texts do not determine responses—it would be closer to the truth to say experiences determine texts. For the same reason we can learn nothing about the actual popularity of gothics from imagined readers, be they Holland and Sherman writ large, the "implicit reader" of Wolfgang Iser or Harald Weinrich, the "informed reader" of Stanley Fish, or even the "superreader" of Michael Riffaterre.

We can, however, learn how unique experiences combine to make the gender-linked "appeal" of gothics by considering the ways we and others convert gothic possibilities into human actualities—in other words, by listening (with the proverbial third ear) to the authentic experiences of real people.

CENTER FOR THE PSYCHOLOGICAL STUDY OF THE ARTS STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK, BUFFALO

NOTES

2 Norman N. Holland's Poems in Persons (New York, 1973) and 5 Readers Reading (New Haven and London, 1975) fully develop these principles and the evidence on which they are based. Shorter statements appear in his "'English' and Identities," The CEA

David Bleich, in "Robert Frost and Cultural Popularity," The Sphinx, 38 (1975), 21-40, explores this principle, but the logic of the paper seems doubtful. "Over one hundred associative responses" treat "Stopping By Woods" as a decision to renounce death, but on the strength of one person's responses, Bleich claims "that the poem evokes various kinds of love fantasies which the death-interpretation overlays."


Murray M. Schwartz, "Where is Literature?," College English, 36 (1975), 756-65, who applies Winnicott's developmental concept to the literary transaction.
