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# How the Gothic Shaped the City / Urban Spaces?

# W jaki sposób gotyk kształtuje miasto / przestrzeń miejską?

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**Abstract.** Since its inception in the 18th century, the Gothic literary convention has served as a vehicle for expressing social fears, existential anxiety, and criticism of contemporary cultural changes. The genre, through the use of architectural symbolism, atmospheres of horror, and supernatural motifs, enabled authors to show the tension between rationality and irrationality, tradition and modernity. Importantly, Gothic did not remain confined within the framework of the Romantic era – on the contrary, it evolved, adapting to changing social and spatial realities. One of the most interesting manifestations of this evolution is the so-called urban Gothic, an urban variant of Gothic literature or convention. Within its framework, elements of classical Gothic – such as ruined castles, ghosts, labyrinths, and moral dualism of characters – are transferred to the setting of a modern city. The city, previously seen as a space of development, civilization, and progress, begins to appear in literature as a place of danger, chaos, and alienation. Thus, the urban space becomes the symbolic equivalent of a medieval castle: full of dark alleys, claustrophobic structures, and hidden secrets. The purpose of this article is to compare the relationship between the classical Gothic convention and its urban counterpart, with a particular focus on the transformation of motifs, themes, and space. Elements such as architecture, atmosphere, character typology, and themes of Gothic works are analysed to understand how urban Gothic transforms and actualizes the heritage of horror literature in a contemporary context. The article is based on an analysis of the literature on the subject and an interpretation of selected English-language works that represent

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both traditional and urban Gothic. Contemporary urban Gothic significantly transforms the traditional understanding of Gothic space. While classical Gothic fiction was primarily associated with isolated castles, monasteries, ruins, and remote landscapes, modern Gothic increasingly relocates fear into contemporary urban environments. The city becomes a space of alienation, surveillance, anonymity, fragmentation, and social anxiety. As a result, urban Gothic reflects not only aesthetic transformations within Gothic literature but also broader cultural fears connected with modernity, capitalism, technological development, and the crisis of identity in metropolitan life. This article argues that contemporary urban spaces have adopted many of the symbolic and psychological functions previously associated with medieval Gothic architecture. In urban Gothic narratives, the modern city replaces the castle as a labyrinthine and psychologically oppressive environment that embodies collective fears characteristic of contemporary society.

**Keywords:** Gothic; urban architecture; stylistic adaptation; spatial aesthetics; horror literature

**Abstrakt.** Od momentu swojego powstania w XVIII wieku gotycka konwencja literacka służyła jako nośnik społecznych lęków, egzystencjalnego niepokoju i krytyki współczesnych przemian kulturowych. Gatunek ten, poprzez wykorzystanie symboliki architektonicznej, atmosfery grozy i motywów nadprzyrodzonych, pozwalał autorom ukazywać napięcie między racjonalnością a irracjonalnością, tradycją a nowoczesnością. Co ważne, gotyk nie pozostał zamknięty w ramach epoki romantyzmu; wręcz przeciwnie, ewoluował, dostosowując się do zmieniających się realiów społecznych i przestrzennych. Jednym z najciekawszych przejawów tej ewolucji jest tzw. gotyk miejski, czyli miejska odmiana literatury czy konwencji gotyckiej. W jego ramach elementy klasycznego gotyku, takie jak zrujnowane zamki, duchy, labirynty i moralny dualizm postaci, zostają przeniesione w realia nowoczesnego miasta. Miasto, wcześniej postrzegane jako przestrzeń rozwoju, cywilizacji i postępu, zaczyna pojawiać się w literaturze jako miejsce niebezpieczeństwa, chaosu i wyobcowania. Przestrzeń miejska staje się zatem symbolicznym odpowiednikiem średniowiecznego zamku: jest pełna ciemnych zaułków, klaustrofobicznych budowli i ukrytych sekretów. Celem artykułu jest porównanie relacji między konwencją klasycznego gotyku a jej miejskim odpowiednikiem, ze szczególnym uwzględnieniem transformacji motywów, tematów i przestrzeni. Analizie poddano takie elementy jak architektura, atmosfera, typologia postaci i tematyka dzieł gotyckich, aby zrozumieć, w jaki sposób gotyk miejski przekształca i aktualizuje dziedzictwo literatury grozy we współczesnym kontekście. Artykuł opiera się na analizie literatury przedmiotu oraz interpretacji wybranych dzieł anglojęzycznych, reprezentujących gotyk zarówno tradycyjny, jak i miejski. Współczesny gotyk miejski znacząco przekształca tradycyjne rozumienie przestrzeni gotyckiej. Podczas gdy klasyczna fikcja gotycka kojarzona była przede wszystkim z odizolowanymi zamkami, klasztorami, ruinami i odległymi krajobrazami, współczesny gotyk coraz częściej przenosi strach do współczesnych środowisk miejskich. Miasto staje się przestrzenią alienacji, nadzoru, anonimowości, fragmentacji i lęku społecznego. W rezultacie gotyk miejski odzwierciedla nie tylko przemiany estetyczne zachodzące w literaturze gotyckiej, lecz także szersze lęki kulturowe związane z nowoczesnością, kapitalizmem, rozwojem technologicznym i kryzysem tożsamości w życiu metropolitalnym. W artykule autorka dowodzi, że współczesne przestrzenie miejskie przejęły wiele symbolicznych i psychologicznych funkcji, wcześniej kojarzonych ze średniowieczną architekturą gotycką. W narracjach gotyku miejskiego nowoczesne miasto zastępuje zamek, stając się labiryntowym i psychologicznie opresyjnym środowiskiem, ucieleśniającym zbiorowe lęki charakterystyczne dla współczesnego społeczeństwa.

**Słowa kluczowe:** gotyk; architektura miejska; adaptacja stylistyczna; estetyka przestrzenna; literatura grozy

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## TRADITIONAL GOTHIC CONVENTION

### 1. Origins of the term "Gothic"

Traditionally believed to date back to 1764, Gothic literature began to flourish together with Romantic poetry. Therefore, it is woven, as it were, into the latter, and it is not that easy to analyse both phenomena separately[1]. However, it is a Gothic novel that brought romance, the uncanny, and the bizarre to the literature of Western Europe (Freud 1919: 218)[2]. Allan Lloyd-Smith invoked Maurice Levy's observation that "the true period of Gothic, and its cultural, aesthetic, religious, and political background, was from about 1764 to 1824, the period of the first Gothic Revival and the culture of Gregorian England" (Lloyd-Smith 2004: 4). Interestingly, the year 1800 was also a starting point of the greatest number of Gothic novels being published (Miles 2002: 58). As Robert Miles indicates, the luxuriant flourishing of Gothic literature occurred between 1800 and 1890 and this could even be described as the Gothic "explosion" (ibidem: 41). This popularity was caused by an increasing demand for such tales due to transformations in society and a growing readership among the middle class (ibidem: 42). What is more, the fascination with Gothic in the 19th century had precisely to do with political changes, specifically the shift from feudal to commercial practices (Botting 2012: 13).

The success and popularity of Gothic literature was believed to be a result of its "fascination with a past of chivalry, violence, magical beings, and malevolent aristocrats" (ibidem). At that time, society was undergoing huge changes and transformations, which Gothic texts aptly illustrated. That being so, Gothic literature was a response to fears and anxieties related to social unrest, or the contemporary war threats (Hogle 2002: 4). Therefore, Gothic writings have always been strongly associated with social issues and the position of power (Punter 2012: 4).

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[1] The fact that the Gothic is an aspect of Romanticism has been a subject matter of insightful literary studies since Henry A. Beers's *History of English Romanticism in the Eighteenth Century* (1898). Furthermore, it is not easy to distinguish between the early Gothic works such as *The Castle of Otranto* by Horace Walpole or *Frankenstein* by Mary Shelley, which one may also consider a masterpiece of Romantic literature.

[2] Sigmund Freud (1919) defined "the uncanny" as anything that was not familiar or known. Therefore, it is a psychological experience of an event or individual being not simply mysterious, but rather terrifying in a way that feels oddly familiar. That being so, it is "undoubtedly related to what is frightening – to what arouses dread and horror; (…) the word is not always used in a clearly definable sense, so that it tends to coincide with what excites fear in general" (ibidem: 218).

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It is believed that the first Gothic novel, *The Castle of Otranto* (1764), was created by Horace Walpole, who himself was also the first to describe and define his novel as "Gothic" (Miles 2002: 41). When Walpole considered his work "Gothic," he was primarily referring to synonyms such as "mediaeval and barbarous; (…) the uncivilised 'other' of the urbane, civilised" (Williams 1995: 20). Walpole was one of the three great writers who established the Gothic framework, although each of them contributed to it in a slightly different way. Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* is set in a haunted, spooky castle – a feature which, together with a deposed noble heir and also ghostly, supernatural creations, has become a staple in Gothic texts (Botting 2012: 14). Other elements, such as "haunted houses and desolate ruins, family secrets and hereditary curses, persecuted heroines and evil villains, the oppression of tyranny and the spectacle of suffering," were also first identified in Walpole's work; that is why he is considered a predecessor of the Gothic novel (Goddu 2007: 64). Other important figures: Ann Radcliff, the author of *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, and Matthew Lewis, the author of *The Monk*, are also considered those who further mastered the Gothic novel. Subsequently, Charles Brockden Brown's works presented difficult issues of slavery by using a rich language that could describe an atmosphere of macabre and terror, thus trying to express the inexpressible. Indeed, the literature pioneered by Brown was also highly regarded by Edgar Allan Poe and Nathaniel Hawthorne, whose works, "The Fall of the House of Usher" or "The Black Cat," and *The Scarlet Letter* (1850), or *The House of the Seven Gables* (1851), respectively, are regarded as those that shaped the Gothic convention of their time. All these works are regarded as exemplary paragons of the Gothic convention. In Britain, authors such as Mary Shelley and her work *Frankenstein* (1818), as well as Ann Radcliffe with her *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794), not to mention again Horace Walpole, are also considered Gothic writers as they furthered Gothic literature.

## 2. What does "Gothic" mean?

Although the present article focuses mainly on Gothic fiction, it is crucial to elaborate on all influences that have shaped that literary convention up to modern times. Accordingly, "Gothic" as a term had its origins in the 12$^{th}$ century, mainly in the northwest France and England (Mighall 2007: 54). It is believed that Gothic presented "what the city (civilisation) banished or refused to acknowledge, except in the form of thrilling fictions" (ibidem: 54). Primarily, the term "Gothic" was closely connected to the architectural style that prevailed in Europe from the late 12$^{th}$ to 16$^{th}$ century, the period of the so-called High and Late Middle Ages (Fanthorpe 2009: 126). However, it is worth noting that in

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some areas it survived until the 17th and even 18th centuries. This information is one of the key elements for a more in-depth study, as it was from this type of architecture that the term "Gothic" came to be used in relation to other cultural and artistic fields, which are discussed below.

Initially, the term "Gothic" was associated with architecture and had pejorative overtones (Botting 2012: 13). It was used to refer to the Goths' barbaric invasion in 410 AD, their destruction of ancient buildings, and their alleged recreation in the "Gothic" style (Hogle 2002: 12). Thus, the term was intended not only to describe the creations of architecture, for instance, buildings, or temples, but also to indicate the character and "barbaric" German style (Smith 2023). Here, the adjective "barbarous" was a synonym of "Gothic". Those barbaric, Gothic features included flying buttresses, pointed arches, ribbed vaults, large stained-glass windows, gargoyles, and ornate stone decorations. In the 17th century, the term "Gothic" was connected with being "obsolete, old-fashioned, or outlandish" (Clery 2002: 21). Indeed, it is worth noting that Gothic sculpture played a significant role in Gothic architecture and also literature. Serving as decorative elements of buildings, these sculptures were intended to adorn the exteriors of cathedrals and other religious buildings. They were designed to be as realistic and vivid as possible in order to convey important issues, such as moral values, in a way that could be easily understood by illiterate people (Smith 2023). Unsurprisingly, those sculptures usually depicted fabulous, frightening, grotesque, or horrific monsters. Labyrinths on the floors placed in Gothic buildings were intended to play not only a decorative but also a functional and spiritual role, that is, to encourage a reflection on and a transformation of life (Ovenden 2009: 127). Furthermore, they were supposed to illustrate educational stories of human representatives who battle with evil.

Today, the term "Gothic" is usually understood in the context of the Gothic convention. The use of the term "Gothic" to describe a literary phenomenon that began in the late 18th century has little to do with the name of the people who originated it. This "Gothic" definition implies that it is a loose literary aesthetic, mainly a mood of dread or haunting when referring to the term itself. Since the late 18th century, Gothic has played a pivotal role in Western culture, especially as a form of fiction-making (Clery 2002: 22).

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## URBAN GOTHIC – A MODERN VERSION OF THE TRADITIONAL CONVENTION

### 1. Origins and representatives

The concept of (the) urban Gothic constitutes the key element in the context of the present article. This literary variant of the Gothic convention places an emphasis on the space, the location of phenomena, as well as the work's setting. The beginning of that phenomenon in literature was noticed already in the 18th century, when Thomas Jefferson discussed possible negative effects of the city on the individual (Rabitsch, Fuchs 2022: 8). With the increasing socio-economic development and urbanisation, people began to reflect on the significance of those processes and their impact on different spheres of life.

Then, with the 19th-century changes associated with both urbanisation and the individual's approach to urban spaces, these issues and dilemmas began to be portrayed by means of the tools provided by the Gothic convention. Having said that, the 19th-century expansion of urban society, together with advantages and disadvantages resulting from urbanisation, had its origins in Western Europe and the United States (Luck 2014: 126). However, representatives of early urban Gothic fiction referred rather to the negative effects of urbanisation, paying particular attention to overcrowding, disease, crime, misery, and suffering (ibidem). Some people, especially the rich ones, benefited financially from the city's thriving development, while most people, that is, the poor, could not flourish at all and remained poor (ibidem). Therefore, while the rich were getting richer, the poor were getting poorer. At that time, money was not invested in the development of cities; rather, it was used to support individual achievements (ibidem). This suggests an emphasis on personal success over collective urban projects, potentially leading to limited urban planning, inequality in resource allocation, and a greater emphasis on promoting individual talent or innovation. Investment in improving public and sanitary conditions was also neglected, with the result that the city of the 18th and 19th centuries was becoming a centre of poverty, disease, and crime (ibidem). A vast number of poverty districts called slums were also created for poor residents who were unable to provide better housing for themselves and their families (ibidem). In such conditions, divisions between people and conflicts caused by struggles for survival in a harsh environment became more frequent (ibidem). It was then that the publishing industry became interested in the changes taking place due to urbanisation (ibidem).

The popular press in particular wanted to capture the negative and frightening aspects of urban existence, and the use of language and imagery implying

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the metaphor of ruin and decay was helpful to this end (ibidem). Unsurprisingly, Gothic literature was useful in "describing horrible crimes, hidden depravities, and assaults on virtue" (ibidem). For example, images of city streets were presented as networks of winding paths leading straight to hell (ibidem). Consequently, American and British writers began to explore this new phenomenon of the mysterious city and adapt it to their respective settings (ibidem: 128). The result was a significant proliferation of works representing urban Gothic fiction (ibidem: 128–129).

Among the 19th-century artists, such as Charles Dickens, Robert Louis Stevenson, Oscar Wilde, and Bram Stoker, the most famous representative of this new trend was American writer George Lippard, also considered the forerunner of urban Gothic (ibidem: 129). Moreover, Lippard is also recognised as "an American progenitor of the so-called city-mystery form" (ibidem: 126). The success of Lippard's works was closely linked to the rapid development of the modern city at the time (ibidem). Lippard was able to capture the tumultuous urban environment of his time, particularly in Philadelphia. His prominent works are, for example, *The Quaker City; or, The Monks of Monk Hall* (1844), *Legends of Mexico* (1847), or *The Empire City* (1859). Lippard's works are admired for their characteristic elements, such as sensational and melodramatic tropes that serve to captivate readers' attention and emphasise the dramatic aspects of urban life, as well as social critique that addresses issues such as corruption, poverty, and injustice (ibidem). His atmospheric settings reflect the darker side of urban environments, portraying struggles of ordinary people against the bustling and chaotic backdrop of industrialization and urbanisation.

## 2. Setting and atmosphere

Urban Gothic fiction is closely connected to architectural structures. Architecture, on the other hand, is linked to the human psychological experience, and that fact is especially explored in Gothic literature (Warwick 2009: 251). According to Gustave Le Bon, it is not the wilderness that is the place of chaos and madness; quite the contrary, it is the urban space that makes man increasingly animalistic in their behaviour (Dryden 2003: 44). What is more, in urban Gothic fiction, the city is an uncanny place. Although it is constructed by people, it is often portrayed as alien to an individual (Warwick 2009: 251). Therefore, the city is simultaneously something canny and uncanny, something that is known and something that is out of control (Dryden 2003: 43).

The new urban Gothic fiction "opts for a contemporary setting within the modern metropolis" (Luck 2014: 125). The city is usually portrayed as a space

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with many hidden passages and dark corners and margins (ibidem: 131). Initially, popular locations for Gothic horror stories were those situated away from the urban centre and everyday urban life; that is, they were marginalised. Modern urban Gothic relocates the bizarre, outlandish, or horrifying to the city centre and makes these elements its inner core. They become visible to everyone because, although terror and macabre are not supposed to come to light, they erupt nonetheless. Thus, these dark and evil forces, having been marginalised, go underground and establish their temporary abode or nest there. From this point onwards, the Gothic became increasingly relegated to the underground. In terms of its external appearance, the buildings are dark, old, and gloomy, which seems to represent Gothic horror and unease (Mighall 2007: 54). Therefore, cities may serve as ideal architectural spaces haunted by the ghosts of the past (ibidem: 56).

In the early Gothic novel, the space of the castle was used as a metaphor for exploring one's inner self (Davison 2014: 118). In urban Gothic fiction, castles have been adapted to the form of busy urban labyrinths (Luck 2014: 127). The labyrinth is therefore a kind of "a physical manifestation of the double life that many metropolitan citizens [are] perceived to be leading" (Dryden 2003: 43). Therefore, modern urban Gothic converted those "metropolitan conditions and wove them into narratives that represent (…) a city of dreadful duality" (ibidem: 44). Moreover, the city, as a physical metaphor for the behaviour of its citizens, locates its places of horror not in the middle of nowhere, but in familiar or underground places (Mighall 2007: 57). Thus, what is underground, e.g. sewers, catacombs, or dungeons, become reflections and metaphors of what is on the surface (Dryden 2003: 44). It is also widely believed that both the city and its inhabitants are a reflection of each other, therefore "if the city was perceived as a labyrinthine hell, its population was seen to reflect that chaos" (ibidem). That being so, the discrepancies between classes and diversity between them are also portrayed within the city frame. Interestingly, fog in the city has a particular meaning as it ensures a proper atmosphere. It occupies a special place and is a tool that indicates unease in a given situation and ensures the effect of blurred boundaries (Mighall 2007: 56). Moreover, "the fog obscures, but also reveals, the true character of the city" (ibidem). On the other hand, it simultaneously covers up the unwanted (ibidem).

To show the vestiges of ancient times, in urban Gothic fiction the ruins of the new world are depicted by "ghost town syndrome" (Procházka 2014: 31). This syndrome is not seen as a natural or scientific object, but it seems to be both "real" and "illusory" (ibidem). Thus, the whole discourse on "ghost town syndrome" may be reduced to an examination of what is different, contrasting, or divergent (ibidem). The ghost town is an ideal tool for depicting the tragic

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consequences of human lusts and desires (ibidem: 32). Therefore, there is a link between the ruins of the city and the utopian efforts of people who wanted to create a perfect place for every human as a sign of unity. Those ruins are seen as proof of effortless attempts to create an ideal place that suits everyone, regardless of what differs and differentiates people. Moreover, the concept of ruins and remnants of past civilisations is of considerable importance here. Because of their spiritual aspect, such places, located in Europe or the East, have become an interesting tool in creating the background of the Gothic novel (ibidem: 29). Not only do they provide access to history, but they also create a strong emotional connection to what is recognised as a vestige of an ancient, powerful civilisation.

### 3. Urban sublime and metropolitan anxiety

An important concept in the interpretation of urban Gothic is the notion of the urban sublime. Traditionally, the sublime was associated with experiences of overwhelming vastness, terror, and fascination evoked by nature, monumental architecture, or uncontrollable forces. In the context of contemporary Gothic, however, the sublime is increasingly relocated into the modern city.

Urban spaces generate feelings similar to those associated with the classical sublime: disorientation, anxiety, helplessness, and awe. Massive architecture, endless streets, overcrowded environments, technological systems, and the scale of metropolitan life create a sense of psychological oppression characteristic of urban Gothic narratives. The modern city becomes both fascinating and threatening, simultaneously attracting and overwhelming the individual.

Urban Gothic, therefore, redefines the Gothic sublime by transforming the contemporary metropolis into a symbolic landscape of fear and instability. The city is no longer merely a setting for Gothic narratives but becomes an active force shaping the psychological experiences of individuals living within modern urban structures.

### 4. Themes

Emerging in the very first half of the 19$^{th}$-century, urban Gothic encompasses all contemporary worries, fears, and scepticism. As it has already been mentioned, Jefferson was leery of the concept of the city and urban space, claiming that the city could have a degenerative effect on the individual. Therefore, he extolled rural life and all the advantages associated with it (Luck 2014: 124). Furthermore, he was sceptical and fearful that "a predominantly urban society (…) would sap America's moral and spiritual vigour" (ibidem). Thus, from early

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on, some people were sceptical about urban life, although this sentiment was also accompanied by optimism linked to a positive description of the city as "an engine of progress or seat of enlightenment" (ibidem). That dualistic approach to the city is an early sign of the Gothic convention in its urban variant.

In urban Gothic fiction, "the dangers of an archaic past are transported into a more threatening contemporary time frame" (ibidem). The threats are no longer so distant and remote, but are an element that haunts the modern age (ibidem: 132). Therefore, this is yet another piece of evidence that in urban Gothic fiction, the past haunts the present and exerts a formidable influence on it. It is in urban Gothic fiction that the civilised meets the barbaric (Mighall 2007: 55). The convention represents what is on the surface and what is beneath it; one side is a reflection of the other, e.g., depravities of the upper classes seem to reflect the depravities of the lower classes (Luck 2014: 131). Gothic expresses the fear that civilisation is merely "a superficial veneer beneath which lurks an essential, enduring animal self" (Dryden 2003: 32). Moreover, all people's fears and concerns are most visible in the city due to a huge population there and also a feeling of being lost in the crowd. To quote Le Bon, who was engaged in a simplistic analysis of crowd psychology, a man is "isolated, he may be a cultivated individual; in a crowd, he is a barbarian – that is, a creature acting by instinct" (ibidem: 44). That indicates the fact that in a crowd one becomes anonymous and almost unseen as an individual, which favours improper or immoral behaviour toward other people. On the other hand, a person who is afraid might resort to all kinds of solutions, both good and evil. Here, the model of dual human nature is repeated once again. Urban Gothic frequently reflects anxieties connected with late capitalism and contemporary metropolitan life. The city is portrayed as a space dominated by consumerism, surveillance, social inequality, and emotional alienation. In this context, Gothic fear emerges not from supernatural monsters but from impersonal urban systems that reduce individuals to anonymous participants within large social and economic structures. This reinterpretation of Gothic conventions demonstrates how contemporary horror increasingly focuses on psychological and social instability rather than exclusively on the supernatural. Urban Gothic, therefore, becomes a cultural response to the uncertainties and tensions characteristic of modern urban existence.

Interestingly, researchers who have studied 19th-century literature agree to read it as a reflection of various pre-war anxieties or risks of reigniting conflicts over race, capitalism, and the rapid transformation regarding meaning and gender roles (Luck 2014: 125). They believe that the city often evokes terror because it is placed in proximity to what is not one's own and, therefore, not known (ibidem). Therefore, in urban Gothic fiction, the theme of alienation of

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the urban subject is most visible, even though civilization has been created by that subject. In this sense, alienation is accompanied by an inevitable move towards paranoia and the loss of one's own identity. Urban Gothic narratives draw attention to how huge the space of both the city and the buildings is in relation to the small size of an individual – hence the resulting dangers (ibidem: 132). Moreover, the ambiguity of the city's design is important because, despite its vastness, the city's architecture can be claustrophobic for an individual (ibidem).

It is also important to note that, despite the dynamic changes within the genre over the past 150 years, the concerns and anxieties that urban Gothic fiction addresses are still relevant to the modern reader (ibidem: 134). What is more, it also leads one to conclude that trying to cut oneself off from the past is impossible.

## CHARACTERISTIC ELEMENTS OF THE GOTHIC STORY

### 1. Setting and atmosphere

The setting of early Gothic fiction is extremely important. That is why, while enumerating the elements of the Gothic setting, Fred Botting (2012: 19) highlights "the wild landscapes, the ruined castles and abbeys, the dark, dank labyrinths, the marvellous, supernatural events, distant times and customs". As is clearly seen, the Gothic setting encompasses places such as labyrinths or old castles to put the reader in a state of historical uncertainty. Miles seems to be more precise in his discussion of the Gothic setting as he provides its "geographical features (the recess, ruins, the rock, Alps, black valley, black tower, haunted cavern); [as well as] architectural features (priory, castle, abbey, convent, nunnery, ancient house, cloister)" (Miles 2002: 41). Therefore, "Gothic" authors of the Gothic literature quite frequently "reached for an analogy with Gothic architecture, especially cathedrals, where the proliferation of forms nevertheless obeyed a certain hierarchy" (Clery 2002: 25). Regarding the setting of the Gothic novel, it would be true to say that there are some fixed elements of the Gothic setting that are always present in this genre, for instance, its location in "an antiquated or seemingly antiquated space" (Hogle 2002: 2). Those localisations may be, for example,

> (…) a castle, a foreign palace, an abbey, a vast prison, a subterranean crypt, a graveyard, a primaeval frontier or island, a large old house or theatre, an ageing city or urban underworld, a decaying storehouse, factory, laboratory, public building, or some new recreation of an older venue, such as an office with old filing cabinets, an overworked spaceship, or a computer memory. (ibidem)

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Those places seem to be outlandish, bizarre, and odd, and that is why they are so popular in Gothic fiction, as they introduce a peculiar, strange, or sophisticated atmosphere. Moreover, they constitute the core of hidden secrets from the past that may haunt the protagonists in different ways, that is, psychologically or physically (ibidem). Since Gothic fiction is designed to keep the reader in constant suspense or uncertainty, and to disturb the mental equilibrium, Jerrold E. Hogle introduces two terms to describe these emotional states. He states that Gothic terror "holds characters and readers mostly in anxious suspense about threats to life, safety, and sanity kept largely out of sight or in shadows or suggestions from a hidden past" (ibidem). On the other hand, Gothic horror "confronts the principal characters with the gross violence of physical or psychological dissolution, explicitly shattering the assumed norms (including the repressions) of everyday life with wildly shocking, and even revolting, consequences" (ibidem). Having said that, in the Gothic setting, castles are in a perpetual state of decay and are filled with winding corridors, secret chambers, and passageways where the creaking of hinges can be heard in the deafening silence (Clery 2002: 35). The setting and atmosphere of the Gothic novel thus created is perfectly illustrated by the covers of Walpole's novel *The Castle of Otranto*. Interestingly, the experiences and inner states of the protagonist of the Gothic novel are therefore represented by places or spaces that visualise what they may repress or suppress. If the protagonist represses something, it may haunt him/her until the moment of becoming aware of that fact or until their very decision to face the problem. Therefore, the inner battle of the protagonist is often presented in Gothic novels.

What is particularly significant in the context of Gothic space is the fact that architecture functions not merely as a background for events but as a symbolic extension of psychological and social fears. Gothic settings externalise anxieties that remain hidden within individuals and societies, transforming physical spaces into representations of repression, instability, and uncertainty. This symbolic relationship between architecture and fear later becomes even more visible in urban Gothic fiction, where the modern city itself assumes the role of a Gothic structure.

The cover of the first edition of Walpole's novel *The Castle of Otranto* (1764) presents a castle that is large and extensive in comparison to a man standing on the left side of this illustration. The castle looks not only overwhelming for an individual, but also it is set in a secluded place, or boondocks, far away from the centre. It is also surrounded by a massive wall or fence that is also a barricade, which may protect people from the castle and the castle from other people. This is where the reciprocal relationship comes into play. The cover indicates the idea of the uncanny, which is, once again, a recurring motif in the Gothic convention.

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The cover of the second edition of *The Castle of Otranto* (1790) also points to the Gothic architectural style, with its soaring and pointed buildings, arches, and high, slim towers. The interior of a building seems to be semi-bright. It is simultaneously bright and dark because the windows are both tall and narrow. Therefore, in this case, even the building exhibits dualistic features. In the very front of that illustration, one may perceive a crowd that consists of people from different social classes. There are also props of the knights, the presence of whom may indicate that a story comes from or is set in medieval times.

The illustration of the third edition of *The Castle of Otranto* (1796) features a castle in the background, which serves as the setting of this Gothic novel. In the foreground, a group of knights is situated. That cover also suggests that the story may be set in the Middle Ages. This is also a representative illustration of a Gothic story, as its plot covers places that may be seen as tempting and dangerous at the same time.

## 2. Characters

Gothic works abound in incidents when the other may manifest itself in the form of a "monster" or even a *doppelgänger*. However, in the context of Gothic literature, a monster also represents an image of deformity and irregularity. In other words, it is an entity that has crossed the boundaries of reason and morality, becoming a viciously improper character (Botting 2012: 204). Antonio Ballesteros González (2009: 119) defines *doppelgänger* as a "second self or alter ego, an archetype of otherness and narcissistic specularity indissolubly linked to the individual". Moreover, monsters are also used to visualise fears. Such characters are used to explore the themes of otherness and monstrosity by blurring the lines between what is human and what is non-human. That is why they challenge the natural order and evoke fear and fascination. The concept of *doppelgänger* recurs in Gothic literature, as it has its roots in an anthropological belief that one has an innate duality (ibidem). The aforementioned duality is nothing new in the human world, although it may be the case that man is not fully aware of its existence. An example of that duality is the fact that even in nature, there occur two different sexes within a race: female and male. The double is thought to be "a threat to the integrity of the self, and frequently evidence of a Gothic, supernatural force at large that brings with it death and destruction" (Dryden 2003: 38).

Another symptomatic character in Gothic literature is a vampire. The figure of the vampire is closely linked to the motif of blood, which is its nourishment, and that fact provides a source for further discussions of bloodlust, blood purity, or mixing of races. All the issues mentioned above find their outlet and are

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expressed in Gothic literature (Hughes 2009: 252). Fears that are suppressed may also appear in the form of a ghost. In other words, it may also be seen as the past that haunts the present. Moreover, "the inclusion of supernatural or fantastical beings (…) [is] justified as a means of stimulating the sensation of 'transport'" (Clery 2002: 27). There are also beings such as demons and witches or warlocks that often symbolise moral corruption, forbidden knowledge, and the subversion of natural order. In Lewis's *The Monk*, the character of Matilda, who is revealed to be a demon, represents the protagonist's descent into moral decay and ultimate damnation (Cardin 2007: 44). Thus, Gothic literature is also meant to play an awareness-raising role and to be a spark for change in life or alteration of one's way of thinking.

## 3. Themes

As it has been already indicated, Gothic deals with the themes of social unrest and problems that are at the heart of the time (Goddu 2007: 63). In the context of the American continent, Gothic has its roots in stories of slavery (ibidem). The problem of slavery, whether in physical or mental form, is a recurring motif in American Gothic literature of the 18th and 19th centuries (ibidem). Gothic literature allows for "disclos[ing] the ghostly origins of the nation as issuing from the oppressive social structure of slavery" (ibidem)[3]. That being said, American Gothic tales also seem to debunk the myth of equality and freedom in the structure of American society and social classes (ibidem: 64). This, in turn, creates an atmosphere of insecurity and fear because by being part of the system an individual also becomes dependent on the ruling authority, thus falling into mental slavery (ibidem: 67). If so, the boundaries become blurred because even "the master can be reduced to the level of a servant, a prisoner, or even a slave" (ibidem). Unsurprisingly, American Gothic "remains stubbornly entrenched within a discourse of racial demonisation" (ibidem: 71).

According to Botting (2012: 15), "Gothic functions as the mirror of eighteenth--century mores and values: a reconstruction of the past as the inverted, mirror image of the present, its darkness allows the reason and virtue of the present a brighter reflection". That being so, issues of colonialism, race, and slavery have found expression in Gothic literature, as only the Gothic allows writers to portray the unspeakable. The problem of slavery is extensively described within the genre of Southern Gothic, although that issue is not the subject of this article.

[3] Interestingly, the story "The Black Cat" (1843) by Allan Edgar Poe is believed to be an image of a terroristic and horrific domestic slavery.

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In addition, the fear of losing the conquered land makes the symbolic motif of the earth and the underworld even more present in American Gothic fiction (Mighall 2007: 58). It is America and the time of American colonialism that is the cradle of the rise of the Gothic (Lloyd-Smith 2004: 4). Paying attention to the American Gothic is particularly important as it is of no small importance when discussing approach of many contemporary writers to the social and cultural problems.

Gothic, then, is all about juxtaposing opposites and extremes. Gothic novels combine the opposite spheres, which include the coexistence of the good and evil, heroes and villains, dead and undead, the physical and spiritual. They also present the problem of inequality between male and female characters. Interestingly, as Hogle (2002: 10) claims, "social gender divisions have been designed to deny, even as they make us desire, this boundary-blurring source of ourselves that initially stems, the Gothic reveals, from the body of a woman".

Hogle also claims that "the longings and anxieties of modern Western civilization are brought out in the Gothic as in no other fictional medium" (ibidem: XV). It seems feasible to say, therefore, that Gothic literature serves as a unique vehicle for expressing the desires and fears specific to modern Western society. It also implies that Gothic literature, with its themes of mystery, darkness, and horror, resonates deeply with the concerns and uncertainties prevalent in the contemporary Western world. This could include anxieties about technology, societal changes, political upheavals, or existential questions about human nature. Moreover, Thomas Warton and Richard Hurd suggest that "the Gothic age, precisely because of its relative barbarity, was especially conducive to the free play of imagination and that what the modern era had gained in civility it had lost in poetic inspiration" (Clery 2002: 27). Warton and Hurd's statement points to an interesting perspective on the relationship between historical periods and artistic creativity. They argue that the "Gothic age," typically referring to the medieval period characterised by its architectural style, was relatively less civilised or refined compared to later eras. However, they also contend that this perceived "barbarity" of the Gothic age was actually beneficial for artistic imagination. They propose that the medieval era's less structured and more chaotic environment allowed for a freer exploration of ideas and creativity, particularly in the realm of poetry and literature.

In contrast, with society becoming more civilised and structured over time, there may have been a loss of the raw, untamed inspiration that characterised earlier periods. This viewpoint challenges the notion that progress always leads to greater artistic achievements, suggesting that certain qualities of earlier times, such as their alleged "barbarity," may have fostered unique and powerful artistic

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expressions. Additionally, the Gothic had other functions in literature besides showing a link between the present and the past. One of the most important aims concerns the exploration of connections between social anxieties and political and industrial revolutions. Therefore, Gothic novels also express threats associated with "an ideology haunted by the Protestant bourgeois desire to attain the power of the older orders that the middle class wants to dethrone" (Hogle 2002: 4). Therefore, Gothic fiction also exposes the constant rivalry and battle for power and domination.

The concept of family and its functioning constitute another very important theme in Gothic literature (Williams 1995: 22). The focus on relationships and connections between individuals, as well as the metaphorical transfer of these relationships to those between the individual and society, is crucial here. It has a huge significance as it undertakes serious problems that are of great importance in shaping one's inner personality. Moreover, since its inception, Gothic literature has always been preoccupied with the role and otherness of the female and female oppression (Hogle 2002: 10). It is also used to symbolise or disguise current female fears or prejudices (ibidem: 16). Hogle includes in the category of prejudices all the themes that are thought to be simultaneously evil and desirable, for instance, threats and longings for gender-crossing, homosexuality or bisexuality, racial mixture, class fluidity, or the child in the adult (ibidem: 12).

In the Gothic novel, the theme of searching for something lost may be considered a fixed element of the tale. Therefore, searching for a way out or for lost property is often discussed in Gothic literature. The search takes place during a journey or wandering. This, in turn, very often appears as an inner journey into the consciousness and soul of the protagonist. The protagonist very often has a decision to make that confronts him/her with their dual nature; therefore, they have to choose between good and evil. It seems reasonable to state that everybody, while seemingly good on the outside, can be a despicable, wicked person on the inside, and that is what Gothic literature discusses.

Another Gothic theme is connected with blurred boundaries. This standpoint is brilliantly summarised by Hogle, who advocates that "the Gothic is thus continuously about confrontations between the low and the high, even as the ideologies and ingredients of these change" (ibidem: 9). Therefore, the threads of life and death, ordinary and extraordinary, realistic and artificial, ancient and modern are those that become blurred (ibidem). Divisions are created to show, one by one, that the two spheres mentioned above are interconnected and intermingle, and that they do not exist without each other. Having said that, Gothic literature seems to allow the reader to face one's hidden fears during the

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journey of finding one's own identity (ibidem: 16–17). Here, two spaces – the good/moral and the evil/immoral/downworld – are intertwined.

What is crucial, however, is the fact that Gothic literature is obliged to "exhibit life in its true state, diversified only by accidents that daily happen in the world" (Clery 2002: 23), to preserve its educational function. Therefore, in a Gothic novel, it is not only the combination of the plausible and the implausible that is important; more significantly, the credibility of the characters' emotions is its essential element (ibidem: 25). Having said that, Gothic cannot be limited to architecture or literature; it encroaches upon various fields, thus being an interdisciplinary phenomenon and not just a short-hand term. Concurrently, it is very difficult to clearly classify the phenomenon, as it fluctuates between "serious" and "popular" literature with an ersatz of drama.

## CONCLUSIONS

Urban Gothic demonstrates that contemporary cities have become symbolic spaces through which modern societies express collective fears and anxieties. While classical Gothic literature relied on medieval ruins, castles, and isolated landscapes, contemporary Gothic increasingly situates horror within modern metropolitan environments shaped by anonymity, technological surveillance, social fragmentation, and psychological alienation.

The transformation of Gothic space reflects broader cultural changes connected with urbanisation and modernity. The city functions not only as a physical setting but also as a psychological and symbolic structure that influences individual identity and emotional experience. In this sense, urban Gothic reveals how contemporary urban life can generate feelings traditionally associated with Gothic fiction, including fear, instability, disorientation, and oppression.

Furthermore, the concept of the urban sublime demonstrates that the modern metropolis may evoke both fascination and terror simultaneously. Contemporary urban spaces overwhelm individuals through their scale, complexity, and social intensity, thereby transforming the city into a distinctly Gothic environment.

Ultimately, urban Gothic should be understood not merely as a literary convention but as an important cultural reflection on the condition of contemporary society and the psychological consequences of modern urban existence.

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