

**Year 12 –  
English  
Literature –  
Transition Pack  
Name:**

**PART 1:**

**DRAMA**

## Read SparkNotes

### 1. Drama clips of Othello/Streetcar – Watch this online

#### Task 1: Othello - Context

One of Shakespeare's most famous tragedies, *Othello* is concerned with the themes of jealousy and possessiveness, gullibility and blind passion, and the dangers that can arise from a failure to see beyond the surface appearances. Contrasting *Hamlet*, *King Lear*, and *Macbeth*, which deal with the affairs of state and which echo with the universal human concerns, *Othello* is set in a quite private world and focuses on the passions and personal lives of its major figures, Othello and Desdemona.

*Othello* the play has often been described as a "tragedy of character". The plot of the play *Othello* is one of Shakespeare's most highly concentrated, tightly constructed tragedies, with no subplots and no humor to relieve the tension.

The main outline of the story of *Othello* relates to a novel, *The Moor of Venice*. The novel was written by a Sicilian novelist Giraldi Cinthio. As the date of the first performance of the drama goes to 1604, we can assume that it was written during the same year. To some extent, events and the roles of the characters have been modified. Many events shown in the novel have been omitted and others reformulated. New characters such as Brabantio, Roderigo, Montano and some others have been added to modulate the actions to incite interest in a new way. The plot has been designed in a better way. Iago has been presented responsible for Cassio's disgrace, and at the same time Iago's wife acts to assist her husband unknowingly forming the intricacy of the plot and also acts to resolve, the intrigue finally. Shakespeare's genius can be highly appreciated after critical evaluation of reformulation of the intensity and smooth flow of actions.

*Othello* is one of the most frequently enacted plays of Shakespeare, and its popularity is perhaps due to the universality of its theme: love and sexual jealousy, the conflict between love and hatred, and doubt and gullibility. The play exerts a 'relentless emotional grip' on its audience. Shakespeare has examined with great psychological complexity and depth the powerful feelings of love and hatred, jealousy and revenge. The intensity of the drama is heightened because all the minor characters and events are designed to highlight the protagonists and their actions. The play is so spellbinding because of the contradictions and tensions it contains: a black soldier marries the daughter of a white nobleman, an evil ensign corrupts a great soldier, and passionate love is turned to overwhelming jealousy. The play gives equal focus to the two main characters, Othello and Iago, in such a way that it becomes almost difficult to students and critics to determine who is primarily responsible for this great tragedy.

## Task 2: Aristotle Tragedy

Aristotle was one of the greatest philosophers of Ancient Greece. A philosopher looks for ideal forms, and tries to explain the nature of reality. The search for ideal forms led Aristotle to explore many subjects. His analysis of the ideal form of tragic plays became a guideline for later playwrights in Western civilization. For centuries, European playwrights like William Shakespeare tried to write plays that would match the ideals of Aristotle's model. Drama was not invented by Aristotle. In fact, he used examples from the works of famous Greek playwrights such as Sophocles to illustrate his main ideas. The Greeks believed that tragedy was the highest form of drama, and Aristotle's ideas about tragedy were based on this belief.

Aristotle's Definition of Tragedy. "A tragedy is the imitation of an action that is serious and also, as having magnitude, complete in itself; in appropriate and pleasurable language;... in a dramatic rather than narrative form; with incidents arousing pity and fear, wherewith to accomplish a catharsis of these emotions."

1. "the imitation of an action that is serious and also, as having magnitude, complete in itself;" This means that a good tragedy deals with one issue that is very "serious." You can't have a tragedy about something trivial like breaking a fingernail. "Magnitude" here means great importance. The issue has to be serious and very, very important. That's why a lot of tragedies deal with someone's death. "Complete in itself" means that the play must stick to the one issue; otherwise, the audience will get lost in the plot.
2. "in appropriate and pleasurable language:" Ancient Greek tragedy had a chorus whose role was to comment on the action of the play. The chorus sometimes sang their part. Aristotle said that the language should be easy to listen to. It should have rhythm and also good harmony for the lines that were sung.
3. "in a dramatic rather than narrative form;" To narrate a story is simply to tell the story, like telling a friend what happened over the weekend. In a play, the story must be dramatized or acted out.
4. "with incidents arousing pity and fear," In a tragedy, the events or episodes in the play should lead the audience to feel very sorry for the main character--the tragic hero. The audience should also feel afraid for the hero as he moves toward a destructive end.
5. "wherewith to accomplish a catharsis of these emotions." As the play moves along, the events should build up the emotions of pity and fear. A catharsis is a purging, or cleansing of the emotions--a release of tension. As the play moves along, the events should build up the emotions of pity and fear. A catharsis is a purging, or cleansing of the emotions--a release of tension.

### Task 3: Streetcar – Context

Tennessee Williams was born Thomas Lanier Williams III in Columbus, Mississippi, in 1911. His friends began calling him Tennessee in college, in honor of his Southern accent and his father's home state. Williams's father, C.C. Williams, was a traveling salesman and a heavy drinker. Williams's mother, Edwina, was a Mississippi clergyman's daughter prone to hysterical attacks. Until Williams was seven, he, his parents, his older sister, Rose, and his younger brother, Dakin, lived with Edwina's parents in Mississippi.

In 1918, the Williams family moved to St. Louis, marking the start of the family's deterioration. C.C.'s drinking increased, the family moved sixteen times in ten years, and the young Williams, always shy and fragile, was ostracized and taunted at school. During these years, he and Rose became extremely close. Edwina and Williams's maternal grandparents also offered the emotional support he required throughout his childhood. Williams loathed his father but grew to appreciate him somewhat after deciding in therapy as an adult that his father had given him his tough survival instinct.

After being bedridden for two years as a child due to severe illness, Williams grew into a withdrawn, effeminate adolescent whose chief solace was writing. At sixteen, Williams won a prize in a national competition that asked for essays answering the question "Can a good wife be a good sport?" His answer was published in *Smart Set* magazine. The following year, he published a horror story in a magazine called *Weird Tales*, and the year after that he entered the University of Missouri to study journalism. While in college, he wrote his first plays, which were influenced by members of the southern literary renaissance such as Robert Penn Warren, William Faulkner, Allen Tate, and Thomas Wolfe. Before Williams could receive his degree, however, his father forced him to withdraw from school. Outraged because Williams had failed a required ROTC program course, C.C. Williams made his son go to work at the same shoe company where he himself worked.

After three years at the shoe factory, Williams had a minor nervous breakdown. He then returned to college, this time at Washington University in St. Louis. While he was studying there, a St. Louis theater group produced two of his plays, *The Fugitive Kind* and *Candles to the Sun*. Further personal problems led Williams to drop out of Washington University and enroll in the University of Iowa. While he was in Iowa, Rose, who had begun suffering from mental illness later in life, underwent a prefrontal lobotomy (an intensive brain surgery). The event greatly upset Williams, and it left his sister institutionalized for the rest of her life. Despite this trauma, Williams finally managed to graduate in 1938.

In the years following his graduation, Williams lived a bohemian life, working menial jobs and wandering from city to city. He continued to work on drama, however, receiving a Rockefeller grant and studying playwriting at the New School in New York. His literary influences were evolving to include the playwright Anton Chekhov and Williams's lifelong hero, the poet Hart Crane. He officially changed his name to Tennessee Williams upon the publication of his short story "The Field of Blue Children" in 1939. During the early years of World War II, Williams worked in Hollywood as a scriptwriter and also prepared material for what would become *The Glass Menagerie*.

In 1944, *The Glass Menagerie* opened in New York and won the prestigious New York Drama Critics' Circle Award, catapulting Williams into the upper echelon of American playwrights. *A Streetcar Named Desire* premiered three years later at the Barrymore Theater in New York City. The play, set in contemporary times, describes the decline and fall of a fading Southern belle named [Blanche DuBois](#). *A Streetcar Named Desire* cemented Williams's reputation, garnering another Drama Critics' Circle Award and also a Pulitzer Prize. Williams went on to win another Drama Critics' Circle Award and Pulitzer for *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* in 1955.

Much of the pathos found in Williams's drama was mined from the playwright's own life. Alcoholism, depression, thwarted desire, loneliness, and insanity were all part of Williams's world. His experience as a known homosexual in an era unfriendly to homosexuality also informed his work. Williams's most memorable characters, many of them female, contain recognizable elements of their author, Edwina, and Rose. His vulgar, irresponsible male characters, such as [Stanley Kowalski](#), were likely modeled on Williams's own father and other males who tormented Williams during his childhood.

Williams's early plays also connected with the new American taste for realism that emerged following the Depression and World War II. The characters in *A Streetcar Named Desire* are trying to rebuild their lives in postwar America: Stanley and Mitch served in the military, while Blanche had affairs with young soldiers based near her home.

Williams set his plays in the South, but the compelling manner in which he rendered his themes made them universal, winning him an international audience and worldwide acclaim. However, most critics agree that the quality of Williams's work diminished as he grew older. He suffered a long period of depression following the death of his longtime partner, Frank Merlo, in 1963. His popularity during these years also declined due to changed interests in the theater world. During the radical 1960s and 1970s, nostalgia no longer drew crowds, and Williams's explorations of sexual mores came across as tired and old-fashioned.

Williams died in 1983 when he choked on a medicine-bottle cap in an alcohol-related incident at the Elysée Hotel in New York City. He was one month short of his seventy-second birthday. In his long career he wrote twenty-five full-length plays (five made into movies), five screenplays, over seventy one-act plays, hundreds of short stories, two novels, poetry, and a memoir. The mark he left on the tradition of realism in American drama is indelible.

**Task 4: Othello Summary**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Bp6LqSgukOU>

Watch the above summary of Othello

**Task 5: Scene Analysis**

<https://vimeo.com/123852519>

# PART 2:

# FRANKENSTEIN

## Task 1: Mary Shelley – Context

### Brief Biography of Mary Shelley

Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley was the daughter of the philosopher William Godwin and the writer Mary Wollstonecraft, who wrote "Vindication of the Rights of Woman" (1792). Shelley's mother died in childbirth and she was raised by her father. At age 18 Shelley ran off with Percy Bysshe Shelley, a leading British Romantic poet, who she married in 1816. The couple had a son, but after her husband died in a shipwreck in 1822, Mary Shelley fell into poverty. She continued to write fiction to support herself. *Frankenstein* (1818) was her first and by far her most successful work of fiction.

### Historical Context of *Frankenstein*

Most critics consider the Gothic genre a reaction to the "Age of Reason," a movement in 18th-century British and European art and politics that stressed the power of the human mind above all. Empowered by an unchecked faith in humanity, people set out to reshape society: The American and French Revolutions erupted, and the Industrial Revolution forced people into long grueling days in factories. The Gothic novelists aimed to represent the dark side that accompanied this age of apparent human progress. At a time when writers and thinkers had begun to believe in the "infinite perfectability of man," Gothic novelists portrayed human beings as woefully imperfect and at the mercy of far more powerful forces, such as nature and death.

### Other Books Related to *Frankenstein*

The Gothic novel flourished in English literature from the publication of Horace Walpole's [The Castle of Otranto](#), which established the genre in 1764, until about 1820. Gothic novels emphasized mystery and horror, and almost always contained dark forests, castles, the supernatural, trap doors, secret rooms, and other similar elements now familiar from "horror" movies. Yet while *Frankenstein* is one of the most famous novels in the Gothic genre, it was written at a time when the Gothic novel was slowly giving way to the literary movement of Romanticism, and the novel shares the Romantic emphasis on the "sublime" power of nature. In writing *Frankenstein*, Shelley also drew heavily on John Milton's seventeenth century [Paradise Lost](#), an epic poem that traces humankind's fall from grace. The epigraph of *Frankenstein* is a quotation from [Paradise Lost](#), in which Adam curses God for creating him, just as the monster curses Victor Frankenstein, his creator.

### Key Facts about *Frankenstein*

- Full Title: *Frankenstein, or, The Modern Prometheus*
- When Published: 1818
- Literary Period: Switzerland and London, England: 1816–1817
- Genre: Gothic novel
- Setting: Switzerland, France, England, Scotland, and the North Pole in the 18th century
- Climax: The Monster's murder of Elizabeth Lavenza on her wedding night to Victor
- Antagonist: The Monster
- Point of View: *Frankenstein* is told through a few layers of first person narratives. Walton is the primary narrator, who then recounts Victor's first-person narrative. In addition, Victor's narrative contains the monster's first person story as well as letters from other characters.

### Extra Credit for *Frankenstein*

A ghost story. On a stormy night in June of 1816, Mary Shelley, her husband, and a few other companions, including the Romantic poet Lord Byron, decided to try to write their own ghost stories, but Shelley couldn't come up with any ideas. A few nights later, she had a dream in which she envisioned "the pale student of unhallowed arts" kneeling beside his creation—the monster. She began writing the story that became *Frankenstein* the next morning.

The Tale of Two Frankenstein's. Shelley published the first edition of *Frankenstein* anonymously, perhaps due to her concern that such a grim and violent tale would not be well received by her audience if they knew her gender. She revised the novel and published it under her real name in 1831. Some key differences exist between the editions, namely that in the first edition, Elizabeth is Alphonse's niece and, therefore, Victor's cousin. (In the 1831 edition, the more popular version and the one used in this Outline, the Frankenstein's adopt Elizabeth from another family).



## Enlightenment - Context

The Enlightenment was a sprawling intellectual, philosophical, cultural, and social movement that spread through England, France, Germany, and other parts of Europe during the 1700s. Enabled by the Scientific Revolution, which had begun as early as 1500, the Enlightenment represented about as big of a departure as possible from the Middle Ages—the period in European history lasting from roughly the fifth century to the fifteenth.

The millennium of the Middle Ages had been marked by unwavering religious devotion and unfathomable cruelty. Rarely before or after did the Church have as much power as it did during those thousand years. With the Holy Roman Empire as a foundation, missions such as the Crusades and Inquisition were conducted in part to find and persecute heretics, often with torture and death. Although standard at the time, such harsh injustices would eventually offend and scare Europeans into change. Science, though encouraged in the late Middle Ages as a form of piety and appreciation of God's creation, was frequently regarded as heresy, and those who tried to explain miracles and other matters of faith faced harsh punishment. Society was highly hierarchical, with serfdom a widespread practice. There were no mandates regarding personal liberties or rights, and many Europeans feared religion—either at the hands of an unmerciful God or at the hands of the sometimes brutal Church itself.

The Scientific Revolution and the Enlightenment, however, opened a path for independent thought, and the fields of mathematics, astronomy, physics, politics, economics, philosophy, and medicine were drastically updated and expanded. The amount of new knowledge that emerged was staggering. Just as important was the enthusiasm with which people approached the Enlightenment: intellectual salons popped up in France, philosophical discussions were held, and the increasingly literate population read books and passed them around feverishly. The Enlightenment and all of the new knowledge thus permeated nearly every facet of civilized life. Not everyone participated, as many uneducated, rural citizens were unable to share in the Enlightenment during its course. But even their time would come, as the Enlightenment also prompted the beginning of the Industrial Revolution, which provided rural dwellers with jobs and new cities in which to live.

Whether considered from an intellectual, political, or social standpoint, the advancements of the Enlightenment transformed the Western world into an intelligent and self-aware civilization. Moreover, it directly inspired the creation of the world's first great democracy, the United States of America. The new freedoms and ideas sometimes led to abuses—in particular, the descent of the French Revolution from a positive, productive coup into tyranny and bedlam. In response to the violence of the French Revolution, some Europeans began to blame the Enlightenment's attacks on tradition and breakdown of norms for inducing the anarchy.

Indeed, it took time for people to overcome this opinion and appreciate the Enlightenment's beneficial effect on their daily lives. But concrete, productive changes did, in fact, appear, under guises as varied as the ideas that inspired them. The effects of Enlightenment thought soon permeated both European and American life, from improved women's rights to more efficient steam engines, from fairer judicial systems to increased educational opportunities, from revolutionary economic theories to a rich array of literature and music.

These ideas, works, and principles of the Enlightenment would continue to affect Europe and the rest of the Western world for decades and even centuries to come. Nearly every theory or fact that is held in modern science has a foundation in the Enlightenment; in fact, many remain just as they were established. Yet it is not simply the knowledge attained during the Enlightenment that makes the era so pivotal—it's also the era's groundbreaking and tenacious new approaches to investigation, reasoning, and problem solving that make it so important. Never before had people been so vocal about making a difference in the world; although some may have been persecuted for their new ideas, it nevertheless became indisputable that thought had the power to incite real change. Just like calculus or free trade, the very concept of freedom of expression had to come from somewhere, and it too had firm roots in the Enlightenment.

## The Philosophy the Romantics

Read the original article here: <https://www.bl.uk/romantics-and-victorians/articles/the-romantics>

Dr Stephanie Forward explains the key ideas and influences of Romanticism, and considers their place in the work of writers including Wordsworth, Blake, P B Shelley and Keats.

Today the word 'romantic' evokes images of love and sentimentality, but the term 'Romanticism' has a much wider meaning. It covers a range of developments in art, literature, music and philosophy, spanning the late 18th and early 19th centuries. The 'Romantics' would not have used the term themselves: the label was applied retrospectively, from around the middle of the 19th century.

In 1762 Jean-Jacques Rousseau declared in *The Social Contract*: 'Man is born free, and everywhere he is in chains.' During the Romantic period major transitions took place in society, as dissatisfied intellectuals and artists challenged the Establishment. In England, the Romantic poets were at the very heart of this movement. They were inspired by a desire for liberty, and they denounced the exploitation of the poor. There was an emphasis on the importance of the individual; a conviction that people should follow ideals rather than imposed conventions and rules. The Romantics renounced the rationalism and order associated with the preceding Enlightenment era, stressing the importance of expressing authentic personal feelings. They had a real sense of responsibility to their fellow men: they felt it was their duty to use their poetry to inform and inspire others, and to change society.

### Revolution

When reference is made to Romantic verse, the poets who generally spring to mind are [William Blake](#) (1757-1827), [William Wordsworth](#) (1770-1850), [Samuel Taylor Coleridge](#) (1772-1834), [George Gordon, 6th Lord Byron](#) (1788-1824), [Percy Bysshe Shelley](#) (1792-1822) and [John Keats](#) (1795-1821). These writers had an intuitive feeling that they were 'chosen' to guide others through the tempestuous period of change.

This was a time of physical confrontation; of violent rebellion in parts of Europe and the New World. Conscious of anarchy across the English Channel, the British government feared similar outbreaks. The early Romantic poets tended to be supporters of the French Revolution, hoping that it would bring about political change; however, the bloody Reign of Terror shocked them profoundly and affected their views. In his youth William Wordsworth was drawn to the Republican cause in France, until he gradually became disenchanted with the Revolutionaries.

### The imagination

The Romantics were *not* in agreement about everything they said and did: far from it! Nevertheless, certain key ideas dominated their writings. They genuinely thought that they were prophetic figures who could interpret reality. The Romantics highlighted the healing power of the imagination, because they truly believed that it could enable people to transcend their troubles and their circumstances. Their creative talents could illuminate and transform the world into a coherent vision, to regenerate mankind spiritually. In *A Defence of Poetry* (1821), Shelley elevated the status of poets: 'They measure the circumference and sound the depths of human nature with a comprehensive and all-penetrating spirit...'.<sup>[1]</sup> He declared that 'Poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world'. This might sound somewhat pretentious, but it serves to convey the faith the Romantics had in their poetry.

### The marginalised and oppressed

Wordsworth was concerned about the elitism of earlier poets, whose highbrow language and subject matter were neither readily accessible nor particularly relevant to ordinary people. He maintained that poetry should be democratic; that it should be composed in 'the language really spoken by men' (Preface to *Lyrical Ballads* [1802]). For this reason, he tried to give a voice to those who tended to be marginalised and oppressed by society: the rural poor; discharged soldiers; 'fallen' women; the insane; and children.

Blake was radical in his political views, frequently addressing social issues in his poems and expressing his concerns about the monarchy and the church. His poem 'London' draws attention to the suffering of chimney-sweepers, soldiers and prostitutes.

## Children, nature and the sublime

For the world to be regenerated, the Romantics said that it was necessary to start all over again with a childlike perspective. They believed that children were special because they were innocent and uncorrupted, enjoying a precious affinity with nature. Romantic verse was suffused with reverence for the natural world. In Coleridge's 'Frost at Midnight' (1798) the poet hailed nature as the 'Great universal Teacher!' Recalling his unhappy times at Christ's Hospital School in London, he explained his aspirations for his son, Hartley, who would have the freedom to enjoy his childhood and appreciate his surroundings. The Romantics were inspired by the environment, and encouraged people to venture into new territories – both literally and metaphorically. In their writings they made the world seem a place with infinite, unlimited potential.

## Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *A Walking Tour of Cumbria*

A key idea in Romantic poetry is the concept of the sublime. This term conveys the feelings people experience when they see awesome landscapes, or find themselves in extreme situations which elicit both fear and admiration. For example, Shelley described his reaction to stunning, overwhelming scenery in the poem 'Mont Blanc' (1816).

## The second-generation Romantics

Blake, Wordsworth and Coleridge were first-generation Romantics, writing against a backdrop of war. Wordsworth, however, became increasingly conservative in his outlook: indeed, second-generation Romantics, such as Byron, Shelley and Keats, felt that he had 'sold out' to the Establishment. In the suppressed Dedication to [Don Juan](#) (1819-1824) Byron criticised the Poet Laureate, Robert Southey, and the other 'Lakers', Wordsworth and Coleridge (all three lived in the Lake District). Byron also vented his spleen on the English Foreign Secretary, Viscount Castlereagh, denouncing him as an 'intellectual eunuch', a 'bungler' and a 'tinkering slavemaker' (stanzas 11 and 14). Although the Romantics stressed the importance of the individual, they also advocated a commitment to mankind. Byron became actively involved in the struggles for Italian nationalism and the liberation of Greece from Ottoman rule.

Notorious for his sexual exploits, and dogged by debt and scandal, Byron quitted Britain in 1816. Lady Caroline Lamb famously declared that he was 'Mad, bad and dangerous to know.' Similar accusations were pointed at Shelley. Nicknamed 'Mad Shelley' at Eton, he was sent down from Oxford for advocating atheism. He antagonised the Establishment further by his criticism of the monarchy, and by his immoral lifestyle.

## Female poets

Female poets also contributed to the Romantic movement, but their strategies tended to be more subtle and less controversial. Although Dorothy Wordsworth (1771-1855) was modest about her writing abilities, she produced poems of her own; and her journals and travel narratives certainly provided inspiration for her brother. Women were generally limited in their prospects, and many found themselves confined to the domestic sphere; nevertheless, they did manage to express or intimate their concerns. For example, Mary Alcock (c. 1742-1798) penned 'The Chimney Sweeper's Complaint'. In 'The Birth-Day', Mary Robinson (1758-1800) highlighted the enormous discrepancy between life for the rich and the poor. Gender issues were foregrounded in 'Indian Woman's Death Song' by Felicia Hemans (1793-1835).

## The Gothic

Reaction against the Enlightenment was reflected in the rise of the Gothic novel. The most popular and well-paid 18th-century novelist, Ann Radcliffe (1764–1823), specialised in 'the hobgoblin-romance'. Her fiction held particular appeal for frustrated middle-class women who experienced a vicarious frisson of excitement when they read about heroines venturing into awe-inspiring landscapes. She was dubbed 'Mother Radcliffe' by Keats, because she had such an influence on Romantic poets. The Gothic genre contributed to Coleridge's *Christabel* (1816) and Keats's 'La Belle Dame Sans Merci' (1819). [Mary Shelley](#) (1797-1851) blended realist, Gothic and Romantic elements to produce her masterpiece [Frankenstein](#) (1818), in which a number of Romantic aspects can be identified. She quotes from Coleridge's Romantic poem [The Rime of the Ancient Mariner](#). In the third chapter Frankenstein refers to his scientific endeavours being driven by his imagination. The book raises worrying questions about the possibility of 'regenerating' mankind; but at several points the world of nature provides inspiration and solace.

## The Byronic hero

Romanticism set a trend for some literary stereotypes. Byron's [Childe Harold](#) (1812-1818) described the wanderings of a young man, disillusioned with his empty way of life. The melancholy, dark, brooding, rebellious 'Byronic hero', a solitary wanderer, seemed to represent a generation, and the image lingered. The figure became a kind of role model for youngsters: men regarded him as 'cool' and women found him enticing! Byron died young, in 1824, after contracting a fever. This added to the 'appeal'. Subsequently a number of complex and intriguing heroes appeared in novels: for example, Heathcliff in [Emily Brontë's Wuthering Heights](#) and Edward Rochester in [Charlotte Brontë's Jane Eyre](#) (both published in 1847).

## Contraries

Romanticism offered a new way of looking at the world, prioritising imagination above reason. There was, however, a tension at times in the writings, as the poets tried to face up to life's seeming contradictions. Blake published [Songs of Innocence and of Experience, Shewing the Two Contrary States of the Human Soul](#) (1794). Here we find two different perspectives on religion in 'The Lamb' and 'The Tyger'. The simple vocabulary and form of 'The Lamb' suggest that God is the beneficent, loving Good Shepherd. In stark contrast, the creator depicted in 'The Tyger' is a powerful blacksmith figure. The speaker is stunned by the exotic, frightening animal, posing the rhetorical question: 'Did he who made the Lamb make thee?' In *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (1790-1793) Blake asserted: 'Without contraries is no progression' (stanza 8).

Wordsworth's 'Tintern Abbey' (1798) juxtaposed moments of celebration and optimism with lamentation and regret. Keats thought in terms of an opposition between the imagination and the intellect. In a letter to his brothers, in December 1817, he explained what he meant by the term 'Negative Capability': 'that is when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason' (22 December). Keats suggested that it is impossible for us to find answers to the eternal questions we all have about human existence. Instead, our feelings and imaginations enable us to recognise Beauty, and it is Beauty that helps us through life's bleak moments. Life involves a delicate balance between times of pleasure and pain. The individual has to learn to accept both aspects: "Beauty is truth, truth beauty," – that is all/Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know' ('Ode on a Grecian Urn' [1819]).

The premature deaths of Byron, Shelley and Keats contributed to their mystique. As time passed they attained iconic status, inspiring others to make their voices heard. The Romantic poets continue to exert a powerful influence on popular culture. Generations have been inspired by their promotion of self-expression, emotional intensity, personal freedom and social concern.

## Gothic motifs

What does it mean to say a text is Gothic? Professor John Bowen considers some of the best-known Gothic novels of the late 18th and 19th centuries, exploring the features they have in common, including marginal places, transitional time periods and the use of fear and manipulation.

Gothic is a literary genre, and a characteristically modern one. The word 'genre' comes from the Latin 'genus' which means 'kind'. So to ask what genre a text belongs to is to ask what *kind* of text it is. A genre isn't like a box in which a group of texts all neatly fit and can be safely classified; there is no essence or a single element that belongs to all Gothics. It is more like a *family* of texts or stories. All members of a family don't look the same and they don't necessarily have a single trait in common, but they do have overlapping characteristics, motifs and traits. The genre of Gothic is a particularly strange and perverse family of texts which themselves are full of strange families, irrigated with scenes of rape and incest, and surrounded by marginal, uncertain and illegitimate members. It is never quite clear what is or is not a legitimate member of the now huge Gothic family, made up not just of novels, poems and stories but of films, music, videogames, opera, comics and fashion, all belonging – and not quite belonging – together. But they do have some important traits in common.

## Strange places

It is usual for characters in Gothic fiction to find themselves in a strange place; somewhere other, different, mysterious. It is often threatening or violent, sometimes sexually enticing, often a prison. In Bram Stoker's 1897 *Dracula*, for example, Jonathan Harker, a young lawyer's clerk, suddenly finds himself trapped within Castle Dracula. That scene occurs in Central Europe, but often in classic Gothic fiction – in the novels of Ann Radcliffe for example – it takes place in distant, marginal, mysterious southern Europe; and it could just as easily be somewhere like Satis House in [Great Expectations](#), a decaying mansion just down the road.

## Clashing time periods

Just as places are often mysterious, lost, dark or secret in Gothic fiction, so too are its characteristic *times*. Gothics often take place at moments of transition (between the medieval period and the Renaissance, for example) or bring together radically different times. There is a strong opposition (but also a mysterious affinity) in the Gothic between the very modern and the ancient or archaic, as everything that characters and readers think that they've safely left behind comes back with a vengeance.

## Melmoth the Wanderer

Sigmund Freud wrote a celebrated essay on 'The Uncanny' (1919), which he defined as 'that class of the frightening which leads back to what is known of old and long familiar' [\[1\]](#) Gothic novels are full of such uncanny effects – simultaneously frightening, unfamiliar and yet also strangely familiar. A past that should be over and done with suddenly erupts within the present and deranges it. This is one reason why Gothic loves modern technology almost as much as it does ghosts. A ghost is something from the past that is out of its proper time or place and which brings with it a demand, a curse or a plea. Ghosts, like gothics, disrupt our sense of what is present and what is past, what is ancient and what is modern, which is why a novel like *Dracula* is as full of the modern technology of its period – typewriters, shorthand, recording machines – as it is of vampires, destruction and death.

## Power and constraint

The Gothic world is fascinated by violent differences in power, and its stories are full of constraint, entrapment and forced actions. Scenes of extreme threat and isolation – either physical or psychological – are always happening or about to happen. A young woman in danger, such as the orphan Emily St Aubert in Ann Radcliffe's *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794) or Lucy Westenra in *Dracula*, is often at the centre of Gothic fiction. Against such vulnerable women are set the great criminals or transgressors, such as the villainous Montoni in *The Mysteries of Udolpho* or Count Dracula. Cursed, obscene or satanic, they seem able to break norms, laws and taboos at will. Sexual difference is thus at the heart of the Gothic, and its plots are often driven by the exploration of questions of sexual desire, pleasure, power and pain. It has a freedom that much realistic fiction does not, to speak about the erotic, particularly illegitimate or transgressive sexuality, and is full of same-sex desire, perversion, obsession, voyeurism and sexual violence. At times, as in Matthew Lewis's *The Monk* (1796), Gothic can come close to pornography.

## Terror versus horror

Why do readers take such pleasure in Gothic's descriptions of frightening and horrible events, and might there be something wrong or immoral in doing so? The pioneering gothic novelist Ann Radcliffe was particularly troubled by these questions and in trying to answer them, made an important distinction between 'terror' and 'horror'. Terror, which she thought characterised her own work, could be morally uplifting. It does not show horrific things explicitly but only suggests them. This, she thinks, 'expands the soul' of the readers of her works and helps them to be more alert to the possibility of things beyond their everyday life and understanding. Horror, by contrast, Radcliffe argues, 'freezes and nearly annihilates' the senses of its readers because it shows atrocious things too explicitly.<sup>[2]</sup> This is morally dangerous and produces the wrong kind of excitement in the reader. Whereas there might be the fear or suggestion of the possibility of sexual assault or rape, for example, in a Radcliffe novel, there is explicit description of such scenes in *The Monk*. Terror, which can be morally good, characterises the former; horror, which is morally bad, the latter. Terror for Radcliffe is concerned with the psychological experience of being full of fear and dread and thus of recognising human limits; horror by contrast focuses on the horrific object or event itself, with essentially damaging or limiting consequences for the reader's state of mind.

## A world of doubt

Gothic is thus a world of doubt, particularly doubt about the supernatural and the spiritual. It seeks to create in our minds the possibility that there may be things beyond human power, reason and knowledge. But that possibility is constantly accompanied by uncertainty. In Radcliffe's work, even the most terrifying things turn out to have rational, non-supernatural explanations; by contrast, in Lewis's *The Monk*, Satan himself appears. The uncertainty that goes with Gothic is very characteristic of a world in which orthodox religious belief is waning; there is both an exaggerated interest in the supernatural and the constant possibility that even very astonishing things will turn out to be explicable. This intellectual doubt is constantly accompanied by the most powerful affects or emotions that the writer can invoke. The 18th-century philosopher and politician Edmund Burke in his 1757 *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* made a vital distinction between the *beautiful* and the *sublime* which has shaped much modern thinking about art. Beauty, for Burke, is characterised by order, harmony and proportion. Sublime experiences, by contrast – the kind we get for example from being on a high mountain in a great storm – are excessive ones, in which we encounter the mighty, the terrible and the awesome. Gothic, it is clear, is intended to give us the experience of the sublime, to shock us out of the limits of our everyday lives with the possibility of things beyond reason and explanation, in the shape of awesome and terrifying characters, and inexplicable and profound events.

Original article for the above can be found here: <https://www.bl.uk/romantics-and-victorians/articles/gothic-motifs>

## The Gothic:

Watch the video here: <https://www.bl.uk/romantics-and-victorians/videos/the-gothic>

Answer the follow questions in full sentences:

1. Who is Horace Walpole and how does his house link to ideas of the Gothic?
2. How is the Gothic fascinated by the idea of 'strange places'?
3. How does the question of 'power' define the Gothic?
4. How does Gothic literature approach taboo topics?
5. What is the 'uncanny'?
6. How does the Gothic link to ideas of the 'Sublime'?
7. Why are Gothic novels more likely to be written at times of great social and political upheaval?
8. Is the supernatural always present in Gothic literature? Why?