

Gothic Literature

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This curriculum guide takes as its central focus four frequently studied texts of late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century gothic literature: Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto*, Matthew Lewis's *The Monk*, Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, and John Polidori's "The Vampyre." Students will discuss the origins of the gothic as a literary genre and proceed chronologically through the texts to discuss the development of the genre into the early nineteenth century. Students will use images from the Artstor Digital Library to develop their awareness of the recurring tropes of gothic fiction; to understand the relationship between gothic fiction and contemporary political struggles; to explore the often overlapping treatments of science, superstition, religion, and magic in gothic texts; and to interrogate the treatment of gender, sexuality, and social class in the genre.



JOHN DOWNMAN, THE GHOST OF CLYTEMNESTRA AWAKENING
THE FURIES, 1781.

Yale Center for British Art, Paul Mellon Collection

1. Introducing the Gothic

In this section, students will use images from the Artstor Digital Library to explore the difference between terror and horror and interrogate the gothic focus on intoxicants, altered states, and dream states. Students will also question the ways in which gothic artists depict the natural world, and consider the ways in which ideas about gender and sexuality are conveyed visually.

View the images in the Artstor Digital Library

2. Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto*

In this section, students will examine the origins of the gothic genre in Horace Walpole's seminal *The Castle of Otranto*. Images will provide students with historical background on Walpole as an author and develop their awareness of the political underpinnings of his work. They will also provide insight into the gothic's treatment of gender and social class.

[Go to image group A: Horace Walpole and his world](#)

[Go to image group B: women in the gothic](#)

[Go to image group C: gothic literature and social class](#)

3. Matthew Lewis's *The Monk*

In this unit, students will explore Matthew Lewis's *The Monk*, one of the most controversial novels of the later eighteenth century. Images in this section will acquaint students with the controversy surrounding the publication of *The Monk* and explore contemporary fears about the corruption of the female reader. Students will also learn about the impact of the French Revolution on gothic fiction of the later eighteenth century and examine allusions to the Revolution in Lewis's novel.

[Go to image group A: obscenity and the female reader](#)

[Go to image group B: the gothic and the French Revolution](#)

4. Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*

In this unit, images will provide students with biographical insight into Mary Shelley and her circle. Students will also reflect on Shelley's engagement with Milton's *Paradise Lost* and examine the relationship between science and religion in her novel. Finally, they will examine more recent adaptations of *Frankenstein* to interrogate the relationship between Shelley's novel and modern versions of her text.

[Go to image group A: Mary Shelley and her circle](#)

[Go to image group B: Milton, science, and religion](#)

[Go to image group C: modern Frankenstein image](#)

5. John Polidori's "The Vampyre"

In this unit, students will use images to examine the development of vampire imagery from Polidori's short story—the first vampire story in English literature—to the modern day. Images will also reflect the use of vampire imagery in nineteenth-century political propaganda, provide insight into Byron's influence on Polidori, and trace the development of Byron's reputation as the first modern celebrity.

[Go to image group A: vampire imagery](#)

[Go to image group B: Polidori and Lord Byron](#)