
Writing Makes It Real: Conveying the Essentials of Gothic Fiction to a Varied Student Audience

by Bonnie W. Epstein

The setting: an old, brick building with a tall, stately clock tower from which bells peal periodically. Darkness pervades the room I enter and makes only shadows of the slumped and eerily silent bodies seated before me. My sweaty and tentative fingers grope for the light switch; suddenly the bodies snap to attention as light floods the classroom. Gothic Fiction is about to begin.

I spy 24 bodies before me, embracing 12 different majors and as many different reasons for having chosen this course. Twelve of them are here to fulfill the “L” perspective; 4 are here to fulfill their 200-level Women’s Studies requirement, and 8 of them are English majors taking the course as a general elective because they have an interest in the literature. My task as their professor will be to meet the needs of each student. This is not going to be easy. How will I convey to them the basic, but often complex, concepts inherent in Gothic fiction? Is there a common denominator for these students?

Yes. WRITING.

Let’s find out what’s on their minds. A freewrite about what Romantic or Gothic Fiction is to them. Sophisticated students of literature respond with some great initial concepts: castles, entrapment, landscape, dark side of the self. Others, less savvy, expect to read Barbara Cartland’s stuff. With Fabio on the

cover. Yikes. Nevertheless, they are communicating their ideas, level of understanding and expectations to me and to each other. Writing provides the common starting point.

Initially we spend some time learning background material from lectures in order that they might finish reading their first novel, *Castle of Otranto*. Now we are ready to discuss the novel, so can we find a means for focus? Yes. WRITING. We brainstorm, based on our learning so far: what is Gothic about this novel? Next, we record questions we still have after reading. The list we make on the board, of the identified themes and concepts, plus the remaining questions, establishes the framework for our discussion. Only one Fabio-like entry appears on this list. Other items include: family secrets, hidden identities, helpless females, dark heroes, and the concept of enthrallment. Everyone feels invested in the process; everyone has contributed to it. Writing provides the connection.

The next step is to reinforce these sometimes elusive concepts. How can we embed in our heads, for example, the interest some contemporary feminists have in the Gothic as a female genre, one which through its conventions registers the confinement of women? How can we capture the use of landscape to reflect the dark side of self? How can we demonstrate our own enthrallment with this genre? Is there a way? Yes. WRITING. We can write our own introductions to a Gothic novel, using what we've learned about the importance of setting, the introduction of characters and the creation of conflict. We agree to let each person decide whether to work independently or as a member of a group. For more tentative students, the group work becomes a haven in which they can test their understanding of these concepts. For the

English writing major, the solo performance becomes a juicy challenge. We report back at the end of the period so all can hear what works are being born: we listen as eerie settings unfold, some medieval, some contemporary; we hear about abused and entrapped women, horses, attics, turrets, dark heroes and orphans. We have a tangible, demonstrated understanding of the major Gothic concepts and themes.

We continue to work periodically in class on these introductions, as time permits, combining new concepts and reflecting a growing ease with this genre as we read and analyze assigned course readings. Meanwhile, the writing focus intensifies as the major requirement in the course--the literary essay--takes center stage. This writing assignment, which includes a lengthy list of suggested topics, allows the students exceptional flexibility to work in their areas of interest. If a student is particularly enchanted with the Victorians' love of ghost stories, she can pick two from our text and compare and contrast their Gothic overtones and influences. Or students can develop their own topics, as one did: he chose to analyze the Gothic elements in the contemporary animated novel, *The Crow*, set in gang-infested L.A.

Beyond these writing tasks, each student keeps a journal of thoughts and reflections about the literature and time period. Again, writing provides students with this opportunity to establish regular reading habits*, to reinforce understanding of these concepts and readings, and to explore, occasionally for the first time, a personal response to literature. As a result, we see a marketing major writing this in his journal:

Audiences of present times are drawn to this [Gothic fiction and film] because it portrays what

we can't understand. Our imagination is forced upon us in order to satisfy our instinctual need for explanations and answers. We question our beliefs and we pity those we never thought had the right to be pitied and this excites our senses and makes us desperate for more.

Writing provides this connection.

The final writing assignment for this course, the final exam, embodies all that the students have learned about Gothic Fiction and requires their best writing effort. Students choose one of three topics I distribute to them on a sheet. They go home and think about which writing topic most appeals to them. In the next class, we divide into three groups by topic selection. Amazingly, we have an equal amount of interest in each topic. The groups spend the class period discussing their topics, sharing insights with each other, and jotting down ideas. They can gather information, make notes, and think all they care to about this topic, but they must wait until the final exam period to write their final essay. Some students will write in response to a topic that asks them to imagine being the editor of the *Literary Review* with the task of writing about the themes and concerns of the Gothic literary tradition as reflected in four of the novels we've read in class; others will imagine themselves invited to an international women's conference where they will present papers on Gothic literature: its main characteristics, the role of women writers and characters in the Gothic tradition, and its enduring fascination for people today. By allowing focus groups to discuss the topics during class time, students from all majors and backgrounds can contribute to and benefit from the knowledge and insights of others, thus reducing anxiety for those who may feel less well pre-

pared for such an undertaking. This final writing assignment allows each student to review, synthesize and order their information and to display their knowledge in a well-written essay. Again, writing provides the connection.

And so we all survived Gothic Fiction, even those students who at first thought we were acting out in real life the concepts of entrapment. In fact, many found this literary experience exhilarating. How so? Written self-assessments completed near the end of the course revealed feelings such as these, written by an Outdoor Recreation major:

At the beginning of this course I was clueless and now I radiate with this [Gothic] stuff. It penetrates me so that I cannot separate clearly what I know from what I am. . . . Frankenstein has meaning in many ways--some too gut-churning to verbalize. I learned effectively how to suck the essence of this novel just like a vampire does to the human. It's a symbiotic relationship. I have taken from the literature that has given. Now I must give . . .

Such responses evolved throughout a semester of learning. In the end, course evaluations bore out what you might suspect: the greatest learning and the most enjoyment occurred through writing. Each student, regardless of major or reason for being in the class, invested in the course content because it became real to them, and they felt that their needs had been met. Writing provided the means.

*Student evaluations have repeatedly identified the required journal writing as incentive for doing assigned reading and doing it on time.