

RJ: The Basics

SO, WHERE ARE WE GOING?

Let's face it, a good story is like anything else in life – when you find something you like, you want more. When it comes to dark literature, though, things can get murky in a hurry, so it pays to know some of the basics. I'm no literary scholar, but this should help you get started.

Let's get you geared up and on your way.

FIRST, A QUICK REVIEW OF WHERE WE'VE BEEN

Graveyard Poets: Considered a precursor to gothic horror literature, these 18th century poets were obsessed with death, mortality, and the cool patch of earth where we rest for eternity. Not merely dark, what seems to set this group apart is that they use death to get you thinking – about death – so you appreciate life and all that. Examples include Thomas Gray, Robert Blair, Thomas Parnell, and William Blake among many.



Gothic Horror: It all began with *The Castle of Otranto*, by Horace Walpole in 1764. At the heart of the Gothic novel is the setting, say an old castle, or the ruins of a forgotten monastery. Within those haunted halls there are secrets, lost knowledge, and possibly romance, or the smoking embers of tortured love. Edgar Allan Poe, Bram Stoker, Mary Shelly, Ann Radcliffe, Robert Louis Stevenson, Oscar Wilde – you get the gist – these are the stories that continue to recycle in myriad forms today.

American Gothic: This is used to describe uniquely American stories. They have all the classic elements of gothic horror, but instead of a ruined castle, they take place in the untamed frontier wilderness, or deep in the old-growth forest. The lost knowledge isn't tied to Catholicism or Christianity, but maybe the ancient wisdom of the Native Americans.

Serialized Horror: While Edgar Allen Poe was famously drunk and broke, publishers tried to tap into the growing number of literate people with spare change in their pockets. The *Penny Dreadfuls* of 19th century England are great examples of how this new market for horror was exploited. These stories had a

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Gothic pulse and had a sensationalized quality that might feel familiar (assuming you've read a comic book).

The 20th Century: With the advent of the motion picture, horror found an even wider audience. What started as theatre on screen has become...well, you know. H.P. Lovecraft, M.R. James, Richard Matheson, not to mention Shirley Jackson, Dean Koontz, Stephen King. So much to explore.

OTHER DARK AND CREEPY TERMS YOU'LL WANT TO KNOW

Dark Fantasy: This is a kinder and gentler form of horror. You'll find all the usual suspects (witches, vampires, demons, etc.) but they won't be as inclined to do things in such grisly, graphic detail.

Paranormal: This includes time travel, romance, and contemporary ghost stories, but also those with strong sci-fi elements like future worlds, parallel universes, and aliens.

Supernatural: Same cast of characters as dark fantasy, but more emphasis on demons – all powerful super demons who are going to destroy our entire existence. With lots of blood and violence and nastiness.

Splatterpunk: Speaking of blood. Blood, blood, everywhere blood. Hack 'em up, move 'em out, rawhide!

Steampunk: Victorian sci-fi.

CUT DEEPER HERE

If you want to dig a little deeper and really start to ponder the nature of fear; wax philosophical about the origins of monsters, myths and magick; get schooled on the history of horror films; or just get more ideas for your next read or Netflix binge, here are some resources I have actually read myself and highly recommend:

A History of Horror, by Wheeler Winston Dixon

Haunted: On ghosts, witches, vampires, zombies, and other monsters of the natural and supernatural worlds, by Leo Braudy

Horror of the 20th Century: An Illustrated History, by Robert E. Weinberg

Unutterable Horror: A History of Supernatural Fiction, by S.T. Joshi

I also have many editions of the Tales of Mystery & The Supernatural published by Wordsworth Editions. They have great introductions to help you understand the author or genre you are about to digest, and they are great, inexpensive little paperbacks that you can buy to keep on a shelf – like, even after the digital dark age is in full swing, you'll be jamming to the *Ghost Stories of Edith Wharton*, and all your friends will be like, 'Oh, TV doesn't exist anymore, can I come over tonight?' but you'll have to read it out loud, because they hate to read and had their entire digital collection on Audible. Losers.

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