

THE ROAD TO BAKER STREET

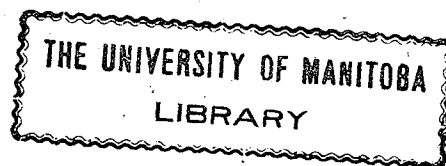
A STUDY OF THE GROWTH OF THE DETECTIVE ELEMENT IN ENGLISH FICTION

FROM

THE CASTLE OF OTRANTO TO 221-B BAKER STREET

by

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A thesis submitted for credit towards the degree of

Master of Arts

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1943

Sir Walter Scott,  
"The Monastery", Chapter XII.  
(with apologies)

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## PREFACE

From the outset, the problem of an adequate title for a thesis of this scope presented itself. The present title; "A Study of the Growth of the Detective Element in English Fiction from 'THE CASTLE OF OTRANTO' to '221-B. BAKER STREET'," has been chosen as the one most likely to convey at a glance the content of the work in question. The intention of the writer is to present, as far as is possible, the historical background in English literature of such present day "thrillers" as "The Roman Hat Mystery",<sup>1</sup> and "Murder in the Calais Coach".<sup>2</sup>

There have been stories of mystery and detection from the beginning of time; "And the Lord said unto Cain, 'where is Abel thy brother?' And he said, 'I know not. Am I my brother's keeper?'"<sup>3</sup> So began the first mystery story, and down through the ages so many authors have applied themselves to this type of literature that their numbers are legion.

With this in mind, the writer is forced to be quite dogmatic as far as the subject matter of this thesis is concerned. Despite the fact that the tale of terror enjoyed great vogue in Germany,<sup>4</sup> and the beginnings of

<sup>1</sup> "The Roman Hat Mystery" 1929, by Ellery Queen.

<sup>2</sup> "Murder in the Calais Coach" 1934, by Agatha Christie.

<sup>3</sup> Genesis; 5, 9.

<sup>4</sup> "Horrid Mysteries" by Marquis Grosse 1796, and the works of E.T.A. Hoffmann, were particularly popular.

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the modern detective novel are to be found in the "Memoirs" of Monsieur Vidocq,<sup>1</sup> and in the novels of Monsieur Gaboriou,<sup>2</sup> the present work undertakes to deal only with novels in the English language, principally to limit the extent of the survey, and also to avoid the use of translations and the attendant dangers of misconception. Horace Walpole's "Castle of Otranto" has been chosen as a convenient starting point, because it is the first Gothic novel of any importance in the English language. From there, the intention is to trace the history of Gothic Romance to its very end in the works of Charles Maturin, 1820; the belief being that these so called novels of terror aroused much the same emotions in the hearts of their readers as do the works of Sax Rohmer<sup>3</sup> or Edgar Wallace<sup>4</sup> in our own time.

Naturally enough, there could be no "detective" novels until there were detectives, so, with the advent of Sir Robert Peel's "Metropolitan Police Force"<sup>5</sup> in 1829, we may expect our first detective to appear in English

<sup>1</sup> Francois Eugene Vidocq (1775-1857). Chief of the detective department of the Paris police. The "Memoirs" were published in 1828 in his name but it is doubtful whether Vidocq wrote any of them.

<sup>2</sup> Emile Gaboriou (1833-1873). An extremely prolific French author. "L'Affaire Lerouge" 1866, ensured his fame. His detective was a Monsieur Lecoq.

<sup>3</sup> Sax Rohmer (1883- ) Creator of the Insidious Chinese, Doctor Fu Manchu.

<sup>4</sup> Edgar Wallace (1875-1932). Author of the celebrated play "The Ringer," and an extremely prolific mystery writer.

<sup>5</sup> Popularly known as "Peelers" or "Robbies".

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literature. Ten years later Monsieur Dupin stalks the scene, and the English detective novel is born.

Generally speaking, the Gothic Romances were the spawning ground of at least three types of modern "mystery" stories, all of which appeared in profusion soon after Gothicism was dead; ghost stories, mystery stories, and riddle literature. It is with the latter branch that we are immediately concerned. Riddle literature poses a problem for the reader, a problem which must be solved before the story is completed. If the riddle is a good one, as it should be, the average reader will be unable to solve it, so the author must present the solution either in his own person or through the medium of some character in the story. "Voilà!" the detective is born.

It is with some misgivings that the other two outgrowths of Gothic literature are passed by. Sheer weight of material is responsible for this. In the case of the detective story, it is possible to pick a fairly clear path through literature in following its development. Until 1890, first-rate writers in this field were few in numbers, while with ghost and mystery stories the opposite is true. From 1764 to the present day there have been thousands of excellent stories written in these two fields, most of them now lost for ever. To trace even a small portion of them would require years of research in some of the oldest libraries in the world, and any attempt at classification would be doomed to failure.

1

Edgar Allan Poe's detective in "The Murders in the Rue Morgue."

This thesis, then, will fall into two distinct sections, each with its own special introduction. The first section <sup>will</sup> ~~be~~ be known as "The Gothic Period", the second entitled "The Detective Story". The first section will contain a critical study of the six most important Gothic novels, all of which, with one unfortunate exception, <sup>1</sup> <sub>2</sub> are now almost completely forgotten. The second section will take up the history of the actual detective novel and trace its development from Monsieur Dupin to Sherlock Holmes. It is hoped that the whole will present the reader with an interesting background upon which to base his "conclusions" as he pits his wits against those of Hercule Poirot, Philo Vance, Father Brown or Ellery Queen.

J. M. C.

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- "The Castle of Otranto" 1764, by Horace Walpole.
- "The Old English Baron" 1777, by Clara Reeve.
- "The Mysteries of Udolpho" 1794, by Anne Radcliffe.
- "The Monk" 1795, by M. G. Lewis.
- "Frankenstein" 1818, by Mary Shelley.
- "Melmoth the Wanderer" 1820, by Charles Maturin.

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The exception is "Frankenstein." "Unfortunate" because of the misconception of Mrs. Shelley's moving story that has been presented and fostered by Hollywood.

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THE GOTHIC PERIOD

Preface

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**SECTION I**

**THE GOTHIC PERIOD**



## THE GOTHIC PERIOD

### INTRODUCTION

It has long been the fashion among writers and critics to regard the Gothic revival in English literature of the latter part of the eighteenth century as a reaction from the neo-classicism of the preceding period; a desire to escape from the neatly-penned couplets of Alexander Pope into the more romantic field of the mysterious and the imaginative. The truth of this none will deny; but it is not the whole truth, for Romanticism was not only a reaction from neo-classicism, it was also a logical outgrowth of the neo-classical period.

From this it will be surmised that Classicism did not reign supreme in the years between 1700 and 1770. Alongside of the intense classicism of the period there existed an element known as sentiment; an element which was to aid materially in the overthrow of neo-classicism and in the ascension of romanticism.

It cannot truthfully be said that all literature of this neo-classical period was essentially pure. Pope was the classical dictator of the age, and along with his may be mentioned the equally important names of Swift, Addison, and Johnson. But contemporary with these masters of classical prose and verse, were others of scarcely less import; Steele, Collins, Gray, Defoe, Richardson, Goldsmith, and Sterne. These men, with one notable exception, were "sentimentalists", some more than others, but each one in his own way contributed to the eventual rise of romanticism.

<sup>1</sup>

Defoe was a realist rather than a sentimentalist.

Steele, with his sentimental comedies and periodical essays in the "Tatler" and the "Spectator", was filling a need of the time. His public, both in the theatre and in the coffeehouses, was predominately middle class and they desired stories dealing with their everyday lives, yet capable of stirring their emotions to their very depths. This early theatrical work of Steele was soon to be surpassed by such masters as Goldsmith and Sheridan.

With Collins and Gray, sentiment invaded the poetic field. In language and style these men were still very much under the classical influence, but the sentimental content in their verse is too obvious to be overlooked, and to Gray especially goes added importance because of his intimate friendship with, and great influence on, the procreator in England of the Gothic novel of terror, Horace Walpole.

As we move into the field of the novel, the immense popularity<sup>1</sup> of Defoe's "Robinson Crusoe" bears mute testimony to the desire of the reading public for tales of adventure; while with Richardson, Goldsmith, and Sterne, we find an increasing emphasis on the emotions. Richardson's<sup>2</sup> novels throw light upon the secrets of conscience, the working of the passions, and the struggle of instincts. Nineteen years later, Goldsmith

<sup>1</sup> There were six editions in three years. "Robinson Crusoe" was published in 1719, by 1744 it had been translated into five languages.

<sup>2</sup> "Pamela" published 1740; "Clarissa" published 1747; "Sir Charles Grandison" published 1753.

renewed the inspiration of sentiment<sup>1</sup> and brought it nearer to the average human being, at the same time removing the Puritanical strain so common in Richardson. With Sterne the sentimental novel reached the extreme<sup>2</sup> limit of its principle. Here we have emotion purely for the sake of emotion.

However, from the above it must not be assumed that the age was becoming romantically or even sentimentally inclined. The date is 1760,<sup>3</sup> and Samuel Johnson is the acknowledged dean of literature, neo-classicism is still very much alive. Yet there is growing up a desire for emotional literature, a desire fostered by Richardson and Sterne, and unable to find emotional stimulus in the dry reasoning of the age of Johnson, both the writers and the reading public naturally turned to the past. As Louis Cazamian so aptly puts it:

The relics of the past were examined and explained, the cult of memory became a hallowed art. The Middle Ages lived again as a period of faith or picturesqueness, of simplicity, of pathos, of all that lacked in a century of rational lucidity, at the heart of which was growing the tedium and even the disgust of itself.<sup>4</sup>

It was but a short jump from "A Sentimental Journey" of Laurence Sterne to the early romantic "Castle of Otranto" of Horace Walpole.

<sup>1</sup> In "The Vicar of Wakefield" published 1766.

<sup>2</sup> "Tristram Shandy" 1760-1767; "A Sentimental Journey" 1768.

<sup>3</sup> The first volumes of "Tristram Shandy" were published in this year.

<sup>4</sup> A History of English Literature, Legouis and Cazamian, p. 912.

## CHAPTER I

### HORACE WALPOLE AND "THE CASTLE OF OTRANTO"

"I am going to build a little Gothic Castle at Strawberry Hill"<sup>1</sup>

The English novel of terror, it is generally conceded, originated with Horace Walpole's literary curiosity of 1764, "The Castle of Otranto." The story of how Walpole came to write this tale of mystery has been so often quoted it can scarcely be omitted here. He revealed the source himself in a letter to the Reverend William Cole:

Shall I even confess to you, what was the origin of this romance! I waked one morning in the beginning of last June, from a dream, of which, all I could recover was, that I had thought myself in an ancient castle, ... and that on the uppermost banister of a great staircase I saw a gigantic hand in armour.<sup>2</sup>

To any person familiar with the events of Walpole's life such a dream is not surprising. "A very natural dream for a head filled like mine with Gothic story,"<sup>3</sup> Walpole himself declared. A delicate youth, Horace Walpole had been unable and unwilling to indulge in the rough and tumble life of the eighteenth century Universities; and, together with his friend Thomas Gray, he had spent his leisure reading the plays of Dryden, and a great amount of romantic and pastoral poetry. Leaving Cambridge in 1739, Gray and Walpole took the Grand Tour, the latter remaining abroad until September of 1741.<sup>4</sup> In June of 1747, Walpole declared to Sir Horace Mann that he had purchased "a little newfarm at

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Horace Walpole in a letter to Sir Horace Mann, January 10, 1750. In Selected Letters of Horace Walpole (Everyman, 1926), p. 139.

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March 9, 1765. Ibid., p. 165.

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The two friends quarrelled in April of 1741 and separated, Walpole returning home alone. The exact cause of their sudden separation remains obscure.