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Dr. Seuss, Master Gothicist

By Dan Freeman

Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* and Bram Stoker's *Dracula* are two works in the Gothic tradition by which the merits of many others are judged. Together, they are relatively good examples of the various aspects of Gothicism. When compared to these works, Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* and Matthew Lewis' *The Monk* are also sufficient and valuable parts of the Gothic tradition. They exhibit many of the same qualities. They include all the trappings of the Gothic tradition. They have mystical attributes, include sexual debauchery, and have blood and gore. But others have done better. Others bring literary merit by exploring the human condition along with the other trappings of Gothicism. One such author is Dr. Seuss. When compared to the masterful Gothicism of Dr. Seuss, none of the aforementioned works holds much merit.

In the area of inciting fear, Dr. Seuss far surpasses anything Walpole puts forth. Walpole tries to incite fear with a giant leg and a statue with a nosebleed. This is about as frightening as the mobile that one would hang over the bassinet of a newborn infant. In contrast, Dr. Seuss has very frightful and terrifying creations in his writings. In *What was I Scared of?* he creates something that would frighten even the hardiest of souls, something truly evil. He creates a pair of pale green pants, enough of a fright in themselves. But he makes them three steps more evil and horrific. They have no owner but are animated and alive just the same. These pants proceed to chase our hero on a bike and even row a boat. This is easily horrifying enough to make even Dracula turn tail and run. His other hideously evil creations include the Glunk in *The Glunk That Got Thunk* and a sticky, terrifying substance in *Bartholomew and the Oobleck*. These are fundamentally more Gothic than anything Walpole and Lewis contributed to the genre.

Seuss also stylistically surpasses the works of Walpole and Lewis. Lewis breaks away to subplots that almost become parallel plots. Aristotle would not find them relevant or necessary. They confuse the main plot and lessen the impact of those things which make the novel terrifying. Seuss rarely has more than two or three characters. Let alone subplots. His works are "complete and of a certain magnitude." Aristotle would be proud. Seuss leaves no room for confusion, thus highlighting the aspects which make his work Gothic.

Stylistically, Seuss is among the ranks of those like Shakespeare, something that Walpole and Lewis could not boast about. Most of Shakespeare's writing was lyrical in style, which is the same with Dr. Seuss. Lewis included a few scraps of meager poetry in his work, but even then it was usually another writer's work. The poetry of Seuss makes his writing interesting and more enjoyable to read; it becomes a true work of art. Another way in which Seuss can be compared to Shakespeare is language which Shakespeare employed, language that has made a vast impact on modern English. Seuss has also made contributions to our language. When Shakespeare did not find a word that suited his purposes, he made one up. Seuss does likewise. In *The Glunk that Got Thunk*, not one stanza goes by without introducing one word that Seuss invented. Most of his new words are onomatopoeic, and some have entered common usage.

Seuss fits the Gothic tradition better in the reversal of his characters also. In most Gothic literature, the evil is eventually conquered by good. Walpole achieves this by having Manfred commit himself to a monastery after his reversal. However, Lewis misses the mark again. Ambrosio is conquered in the end, but not by good. He is conquered by evil incarnate, Lucifer. All of Seuss' evil is conquered by good. Bartholomew conquers the Oobleck, and the king loses his desire for superhuman power. The main character of *The Glunk that*
got Thunk gets help, and the Glunk gets "unthunk." The pale green pants become friends with the person they are haunting. Seuss’ habit of having good conquer evil follows the gothic tradition more closely than the others.

Dr. Seuss also far surpasses the other writers in his attention to human trials. Walpole addresses the troubles with the human desire for power above that which we can handle. This is good, but Seuss improves on this also. In *Bartholomew and the Ooblec*, the king wants power over the weather. He is tired of seeing the same thing come from the sky each time a season comes around. He is tired of sun in the summer, fog in the fall, snow in the winter, and rain in the spring. He takes power that is not his. But unlike Manfred in Walpole’s work, the king does not get this power by human means. He employs the magicians to get this power. This brings the supernatural into the writing, making it a more complete example of gothicism.

Seuss was also more aware of the human condition than Matthew Lewis. Lewis wrote against the corruptions and inconsistencies in the Roman Catholic Church. Although this was still relevant, it was hardly a new concept. People had been complaining about the church for centuries. Martin Luther stated his case and condemned the Roman Church in the early sixteenth century.

Lewis wrote against the corruptions and inconsistencies in the Roman Catholic Church. Although this was still relevant, it was hardly a new concept. People had been complaining about the church for centuries. Martin Luther stated his case and condemned the Roman Church in the early sixteenth century. Lewis didn’t write until late in the eighteenth century. His complaints about that section of humanity were almost three centuries old, which probably meant that his readers were probably as tired of that theme as Oregonians are of the Baghwan. Conversely, Seuss was ahead of his time on certain issues. He wrote *The Lorax*, a patently environmental piece, in 1971. This was years before the environmental movement swept the general public. In *The Glunk that got Thunk*, Seuss proposes that evil comes from the minds of man. The main character usually thought about warm, soft things. However, one night, she created a Glunk in her mind. This horrible, evil thing took control of her life. Her creation got out of her control. This is precisely the same concept for which Mary Shelley is praised as a socially aware novelist. Seuss’ work surpasses that of Walpole and Lewis and at least equals that of Shelley.

Dr. Seuss’ work is timeless. It will continue to speak to humanity for many years to come. It deals with problems that are human. They can never be eliminated. They can only be addressed. Dr. Seuss addresses these problems in a fundamental and simplistic way which can still be profoundly more Gothic than Lewis’ or Walpole’s work. He achieves a clear and straightforward explanation of problem and solution which speaks to humans at their most malleable state, childhood. This is why his work will remain timeless, and this proves that “all I really needed to know, I learned in kindergarten.”