From terror to horror: gothic prose through Horace Walpole’s The Castle of Otranto and Thomas Disch’s The Priest

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This study examines the notions of terror and horror in Horace Walpole's The Castle of Otranto and Thomas Disch's The Priest: A Gothic Romance; two works which belong to two different centuries, in order to investigate whether there has been a shift from terror to horror over time through analysing the two works critically. Gothic fiction draws its elements from social anxieties, therefore, social changes affect Gothic narratives and the devices that are used to excite the desired feelings. Hence, this study delves into the narratives in order to examine the presence of both notions as well as how both are expressed. Its main theoretical framework is based on Ann Radcliffe’s distinction between the two notions as well as the notion of the sublime. It aims to further explore the difference between terror and horror and to delineate the elements of fear that range from getting lost in dark labyrinths to anti-Catholicism and lascivious behaviour. This study finds that the focus shifts to horror and explicit depiction of horrid events with a faint presence of terror which serves to build up anticipation to elevate the mind and experience the sublime. It concludes that the focus shifts slightly towards horror while preserving terror as a means of apprehension which, with the right events, may lead to horror.

Dive deep into Horace Walpole's The Castle of Otranto with extended analysis, commentary, and discussion. The Castle of Otranto is a 1764 gothic horror novel written by the 4th Earl of Oxford, Horace Walpole. It is considered the first gothic story ever written, and as such, it influenced various poems, novels, plays, and many other literary works that came after its publication. The novel tells the story of Manfred, the evil lord of Otranto, who decides to marry his late son's fiancee, the kind princess Isabella, in order to secure the continuation of his bloodline in the face of a dangerous and mysterious curse. Download The Castle of Otranto Study Guide. Subscribe Now. When Horace Walpole published his novel The Castle of Otranto in 1764, he inaugurated a genre which would subsequently come to be recognized as Gothic fiction. Walpole's novel established a range of literary conventions which would later be identified as characteristic of the modern romance. This genre of novel was extremely popular in England during the late 18th and early 19th centuries. The reappearance of past events, usually through supernatural occurrences, would become an integral part of subsequent Gothic novels. The eponymous castle of Walpole's novel plays a central role as it functions as the major backdrop for the action. Some critics have even asserted that the castle, as opposed to any of the actual characters, is the novel's main protagonist. Manfred, Prince of Otranto, had one son and one daughter: the latter, a most beautiful virgin, aged eighteen, was called Matilda. Conrad, the son, was three years younger, a homely youth, sickly, and of no promising disposition; yet he was the darling of his father, who never showed any symptoms of affection to Matilda. The company were struck with terror and amazement. The Princess Hippolita, without knowing what was the matter, but anxious for her son, swooned away. The horror of the spectacle, the ignorance of all around how this misfortune had happened, and above all, the tremendous phenomenon before him, took away the Prince’s speech. Yet his silence lasted longer than even grief could occasion. Horace Walpole, suffering hand-cramps over his manuscript, is the 47-year-old younger son of an Earl. He is also a Member of Parliament, and England’s first scholarly historian of art. Walpole has spent almost 20 years elaborating an old house at Twickenham in London, which started out as “little more than a cottage” and now stands forth as a Disneyesque hybrid of castle and wedding-cake. At this point in life, his neo-Gothic obsession bursts out in prose. The heirs of Otranto will be legion. The novelty of Otranto was literary surrealism. And in its essentially dreamlike narrative, multiple significances lay embedded. On one level, of course, it is pure melodrama. But consider also a psychological interpretation.