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From Mary Shelley to Stephen King: the transformation of gothic fiction in English literature

Від Мері Шеллі до Стівена Кінга: трансформація готичної фантастики в англomовній літературі

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Abstract


The article is dedicated to studying the evolution of the Gothic novel in English-language literature from the 18th century to the modern stage of development through the lens of genre transformations and stylistic modifications. The purpose of the article is to study the peculiarities of the Gothic novel genre in English-language literature through the prism of genre transformations, the dialectic of tradition and innovation. The research was conducted on the basis of the complex application of the method of analysis and synthesis, comparative-typological, biographical, historical-genetic methods and the method of generalization. By conducting a typological comparison of the early Gothic novel, represented in the works of Horace Walpole, Mary Shelley, Ann Radcliffe, and the later Gothic novels of Oscar Wilde, Bram Stoker, and Stephen


Анотація


Стаття присвячена дослідженню еволюції готичного роману в англomовній літературі від XVIII століття до сучасного етапу розвитку крізь призму жанрових трансформацій та стилістичних модифікацій. Метою статті є дослідження особливостей жанру готичного роману в англomовній літературі крізь призму жанрових трансформацій, діалектику традицій і новаторства. Дослідження проведено на основі комплексного застосування методу аналізу і синтезу, порівняльно-типологічного, біографічного, історико-генетичного методів і методу узагальнення. Провівши типологічне порівняння раннього готичного роману, представленого у творчості Горація Волпола, Мері Шеллі, Енн Редкліфф, та пізнього готичного роману Оскара Уайльда, Брема Стокера та Стівена Кінга, було виявлено, що


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King, it was found that the peculiarity of mature Gothic novels compared to early ones is authorial subjectivity, vivid imagery, and picturesque quality, which eventually evolves into a fascination with supernatural phenomena and horrors. The figurative and symbolic system of the Gothic novel also evolves, as demons and the deceased are replaced by the innocent image of a child or woman, erasing the gender boundaries of the villain hero as the primary catalyst of the plot.

Keywords: genre transformation, gothic novel, modern Neo-Gothic novel, postmodern aesthetics, Romanticism.

особливістю зрілого готичного роману порівняно з раннім є авторська суб'єктивність, яскрава образність та мальовничість, яка з часом переростає у захоплення надприродними явищами та жахами. Образно-символічна система готичного роману також еволюціонує: на зміну демонам і померлим приходить невинний образ дитини чи жінки, стираються гендерні межі героя-лиходія як основного каталізатора сюжету.

Ключові слова: жанрова трансформація, готичний роман, модерний неоготичний роман, постмодерна естетика, романтизм.

Introduction

The emergence of such a novelistic modification as the Gothic novel can be regarded as a kind of literary response to the crisis of rational systems based on the principles of "pure reason," which eventually failed. This led to the decline of Enlightenment ideas, a reorientation towards national values, and a particular interest in folkloric mysticism. The Gothic novel, therefore, is genetically linked to folklore (fantastic tales, myths), medieval chivalric romance, and Christian doctrine (sacred Christian symbols).

The Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English (2022) defines the concept of "Gothic" in two contexts – as an architectural style and as a genre of literature or film: "1) the Gothic style of building was common in Western Europe between the 12th and 16th centuries and included tall pointed arches and windows and tall pillars; 2) a Gothic story, film etc is about frightening things that happen in mysterious old buildings and lonely places, in a style that was popular in the early 19th century". It is worth noting that Gothic literature is not limited to the epic, i.e., prose genres, but also spread to drama and cinema. However, the object of our study is the Gothic novel, whose evolutionary changes help to better understand the typology of the British novel as a great epic form, to explore the potential and modifications of the genre, the evolution of the main character's image, the chronotope, and the poetics of the genre.

The article aims to study the features of the Gothic novel genre in English-language literature through the lens of genre transformations and the dialectic of tradition and innovation and to trace the main trends of this epic genre.

The study of the evolution of the genre is a relevant and promising topic in modern literary studies, because such problems allow to track trends in literature, to establish the nature of the interaction of different language codes and images. Modern linguistic studies focus on the research of semiotic, linguistic-cognitive, narratological, reflective and communicative-pragmatic levels of the fiction text. The article will consider the essence of the concepts of "Gothic novel" and "Neo-Gothic novel," outline the traditions and development trends of this novel in English-language literature, study the transformation of the Gothic hero's image, its connection with the previous romantic tradition in English literature, and the genre changes in the setting, time, and space of the action. The article also visualizes a comparative-typological comparison of the Gothic and Neo-Gothic hero.

Literature Review

Literary studies still have no clear definition of the term "Gothic". On one hand, it is endowed with existential shades, while on the other, it is associated with the realm of the fantastic, mystical, and unreal. English encyclopaedias (The New Encyclopaedia Britannica, 1995; Punter & Byron, 2004) interpret Gothic as imperfect knowledge characteristic of barbarians.

Ukrainian researcher Denysiuk (2006) equates the Gothic novel with the horror novel. However, in defining this concept, he limits himself to the specificity of the setting (medieval castle, abandoned house), the typology of the Gothic hero (aristocratic criminal and young girl-heroine), and the presence of specific motifs (revenge, the mystery of the protagonist's origin, the triumph of good over evil). Most scholars consider the dominance of existential horror as a specific feature of Gothic and classify it into sentimental,

historical, and Gothic fears (Summers, 2011). Literary critic Cavallaro (2002) created a kind of mental map of Gothic, highlighting geographical, ideological (medieval darkness - Protestantism, paganism - Christianity, feudalism - capitalism), psychological (grotesque, melancholy, subconscious, psychosis), stylistic (grotesque, absurd comedy, dreams, hyperbole), and physical connotations of Gothic. In contrast, Gamer (2004) interprets Gothic not as an epic genre but considers it an aesthetic opposite to classicism.

Ukrainian scholars have also contributed significantly to studying the English-language Gothic novel. For instance, Ukrainian researcher Nikolova (2010), studying the features of the chronotope in the Gothic prose of Charles Dickens, observed a trend of parallel development of Gothic and psychological spaces. In her opinion, "the Gothic tradition in the works of Charles Dickens serves only an auxiliary function and is not an end in itself, but its role and significance should not be underestimated." Literary critic Matvienko (2000) explored Gothic traditions in 19th-century English literature. Muntian (2014) described the tradition of Gothic prose and Gothic elements in 19th-century poetry. Her scientific conclusions boil down to the fact that Gothic attributes in 19th-century novels become merely a backdrop for more complex philosophical problems, and eventually, in the 20th century, the Gothic novel lost its dominant position altogether. Researcher Yefymenko (2004) investigated the reflections of imagery in the English-language Gothic novel. Her observation is quite pertinent: "An important aspect of Gothic poetics is its multi-level kinship with myth as a specific way of concentrating the world view, which is built according to a certain, stable model and constitutes a certain type of consciousness, a type of understanding of reality that finds expression in the characteristic way of organising the world view, in a certain ideology, imagery, and themes." Trofymenko (2023) considers Ukrainian Gothic prose in the context of European Gothic prose and concludes that there are standard genetic-typological genre features, explaining them as "a process of migration of plots, motifs, and their variants."

Indian researcher Laxmi Rawat Chauhan (2018) studied the influence of the British Gothic novel on the formation of this genre in Indian national literature. The process of inter-literary interaction was influenced by the British colonisation of India, as well as the intercultural flow of literary concepts and cultural norms. Notably, this epic genre is still prevalent in Indian literature. Scholars Mohd Adrees & A.K. Paliwal (2023) attribute the emergence of the British Gothic novel to the industrialisation of society and the way of life of the country's inhabitants, thus linking this genre to extra-literary factors. In their opinion, Gothic literature was filled with taboo themes such as madness and unnatural human power, and "Victorian" England played an essential role in the creation of Gothic literature.

As the literature review shows, the question of the evolution of the Gothic novel genre is still under-researched, which determines the relevance of our article.

Research Methods

The aim and research tasks set in the article necessitated a comprehensive combination of the following scientific methods:

- The method of analysis and the method of synthesis – when conducting a critical review of scientific literature, clarifying the essence of the concepts "Gothic novel", "Neo-Gothic novel", and "horror novel";
- The typological method, which was used to distinguish the genre of the Gothic novel among other epic genres of fiction, to describe the specific features of this type of novel;
- The comparative-typological method, which allows highlighting similar, partially similar, and specific features of the Gothic and Neo-Gothic novel, comparing the genre-stylistic features of Gothic novels in English-language literature of different periods, and forming typological features of the Gothic and Neo-Gothic hero;
- The historical-genetic method – to establish the cultural-historical preconditions for the emergence and development of the Gothic novel in English literature, the interaction of Gothic novel aesthetics with the aesthetics of Romanticism and Enlightenment ideas of that time;
- The biographical method – to study the author's worldview orientations that influenced the choice of the Gothic type of novel form;
- The method of generalisation – to form scientific-theoretical conclusions about genre modifications and the main trends in the development of the Gothic novel.

In addition to the methods described above, the article employed a phenomenological approach to studying literary phenomena related to the ontological categories of life and death, self and other, which dominate the Gothic interpretation of the world

Results

Cultural and historical factors influence the history of the emergence of the Gothic novel in English-language literature. At the end of the 12th and beginning of the 13th centuries, due to the expansion of the British Empire, the English language, and thus English-language literature, spread throughout the world, significantly altering the tradition of the Gothic novel. The popularisation of this type of novel was also influenced by the development of cinema, particularly horror films, whose scripts were often based on Gothic novels (Bloom, 2020).

The term "Gothic novel" originally comes from Gothic architecture – the primary setting for such works. Indeed, old Gothic castles became the setting for literary action, attracting a vast number of readers, making the Gothic novel highly readable not only in contemporary England but also throughout continental Europe. Literary critics consider Walpole Horace (1986) to be the author of the first Gothic novel, specifically his work "The Castle of Otranto". Although the novel contains horror elements, it is based on a family drama. Some researchers consider this novel to be more experimental than Gothic. Its experimental nature is also indicated by the author's anonymous publication, attempting to minimise the unexpected reaction from readers. However, his mythologisation of the Crusades provided a solid foundation for the further evolution of the Gothic novel in the works of Ann Ward Radcliffe ("Italian" (1797), "The Mysteries of Udolpho" (1794)), and Lewis ("The Monk" (1796)) (Ward Radcliffe, 2008; 2009)

Lewis's novel "The Monk" (1796) was written during the peak of the Gothic novel's popularity, which contributed to its enormous success. The novel centers on the theme of the protagonist's downfall and transformation into a villain, which is one of the critical transformations of the main character. The Gothic attributes in this novel include the church setting, which is associated with the Middle Ages. As Muntian (2014) notes, "Against the background of undeniably Gothic attributes, black magic, Satanism, etc., the Gothic novel 'The Monk' raises somewhat non-Gothic issues, particularly sexual violence, incest, and the poetics of dreams." Ann Ward Radcliffe's novel "The Italian" (1797) can be seen as a response to "The Monk". A new trend emerged in her works: various mysteries receive thorough scientific explanations, meaning that the supernatural gives way to the scientifically justified. The characters in her novels no longer fear demons or ancestral curses but are much more afraid of human creations (Ward Radcliffe, 2008).

In 1818, the English writer Wollstonecraft (1996) published the novel "Frankenstein, or the Modern Prometheus". Since there are still ongoing debates around Horace Walpole's novel regarding the purity of its genre, i.e., whether to consider it a purely Gothic novel or merely an experimental novel with elements of Gothic, there have never been such discussions around Mary Shelley's novel, as by all genre criteria it belongs to the Gothic novels of the 13th century. Therefore, most literary critics begin the tradition of the English-language Gothic novel precisely with the name of Mary Shelley. The novel above of the writer reveals the peculiarities of the life path of Victor Frankenstein, a scientist-chemist who considers scientific discoveries to be the purpose of his life – he wants to create an animated essence from inanimate substance. Frankenstein, assuming the role of God, creates a living being from various parts of corpses, which eventually starts to avenge its creator. Initially, the chemist's experiment aimed to revive dead matter to conquer death. However, the animated parts of the corpses begin to live their own lives and become uncontrollable. Seeing that his creation turned out to be monstrous and terrible, the scientist renounces it and leaves the city where he lived and worked. The nameless creature, who hates people for its appearance, soon begins to pursue its creator. As we can see, the novel also contains elements of science fiction, and psychological, philosophical, and scientific-physiological issues form the thematic core of this novel. Thanks to cinema, Mary Shelley's Gothic novel began to live a life of its own, as there have been over thirty attempts to adapt the novel to the screen with different directorial interpretations. In the second half of the 20th century, the character of Frankenstein, with little connection to the original novel, transformed into a farcical figure in comics and parodies, where the mythological image was significantly distorted. Analysing the genre-stylistic features of Mary Shelley's novel, we can assert that her novel significantly transcended the bounds of Gothic, being influenced by English Romanticism and the Enlightenment novel.

The figure of Frankenstein is also immersed in Greek mythology, as evidenced by the novel's subtitle "The Modern Prometheus". The ancient titan is an ideal mythological hero who wanted to free humanity from

suffering, taught people to cure diseases, and gave them fire, for which the gods severely punished him. Frankenstein's feat also aimed to help humanity, but his scientific achievements remain underestimated and cause harm to himself and all humanity. Thus, the writer debates the Enlightenment idea of the omnipotence and godlikeness of man, with the absolute faith of the Enlightenment thinkers in the power of universal reason. Therefore, in Mary Shelley's novel, the creature created by the scientist-chemist declares: "Remember that I am thy creature; I ought to be thy Adam; but I am rather the fallen angel, whom thou drivest from joy for no misdeed. Everywhere, I see bliss, from which I alone am irrevocably excluded. I was benevolent and good – misery made me a fiend" (Wollstonecraft, 1996).

In her novel, the writer blurs the lines between the beautiful and the ugly, as even the monstrous creation of man acquires beauty features: "A mummy again endued with animation could not be so hideous as that wretch. I had gazed on him while unfinished; he was ugly then; but when those muscles and joints were rendered capable of motion, it became something that even Dante could not have conceived" (Wollstonecraft, 1996).

We can unequivocally assert that Mary Shelley lays the foundations of the genre canon. Firstly, the writer introduces three narrators into the novel (Victor Frankenstein, Robert Walton, and Frankenstein's creation – the demon). Secondly, the author uses the plot tactic of "mirrored transformation", representing the images of two scientists – Victor Frankenstein and Robert Walton, united by the desire to penetrate the mysteries of the unknown. In this novel, through the characters above, we observe the confrontation between tradition and innovation (by tradition, we mean the aesthetics of Romanticism, embodied in the novel by the sailor Walton, who is typologically close to the romantic hero of Byron and Scott, while the innovation of the novel is represented by the typical Gothic character Frankenstein, who is interested in the determinism of life and death, the mysteries of the human body).

The story of the creator and his creation, initiated by Mary Shelley, continued in the Gothic novel by Stevenson & Spencer (1980), "Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde" (1886). This is a story about an ingenious doctor who is willing to do anything for a successful experiment, even risk his own life: "I knew well that I risked death; for any drug that so potently controlled and shook the very Fortress of identity, might be the least scruple of an overdose or at least an opportunity in the moment of exhibition, utterly blot out that immaterial tabernacle which I looked to it to change" (Stevenson & Spencer, 1980). In this novel, fear transforms from primal to incomprehensible; it becomes psychological fear, which requires explanation and investigation. The characters realise that the demons are inside each of them, so there is no need to look for external threats.

At the end of the 19th century, the Gothic novel transforms into the time of action. The immersion in the past, inherent in the early Gothic novel, transforms into a scientific investigation of contemporary problems. We observe such a temporal transformation in Oscar Wilde's novel "The Picture of Dorian Gray" (1890) and Bram Stoker's novel "Dracula" (1897). Thus, scientific achievements and knowledge become the basis for explaining the extraordinary, meaning that science, not fantasy, determines events. Readers of Stoker's novel are primarily attracted by the theme of vampirism, which has a deep metaphorical and philosophical meaning. The myth of the vampire reconciles man with death. Using the biographical method, we can assert that the origins of Stoker's worldview projected in his novel "Dracula" should be sought in his childhood, filled with the fears and superstitions of the Irish Protestant middle class to which his family belonged. The main idea of this novel was the necessity to protect human progress and civilisation from the forces of evil. Thus, Stoker created his mythical image of Eastern Europe. In "The Picture of Dorian Gray," chemistry destroys the dead body. At the same time, in "Dracula", the main characters, a doctor and a psychologist, already rely on the latest scientific achievements rather than the superstitions of ancient legends.

Simultaneously with the temporal transformation, the tonal and intonational transformation of the Gothic novel occurs. For instance, in the works of the aforementioned Oscar Wilde, Gothic acquires features of grotesque and satire. In "The Canterville Ghost" (1906), the family of an American millionaire, despite various warnings from the surroundings, buys an old British castle, where creaks and groans are heard every night. However, the ghosts only evoke laughter and sympathy from the family members, and the mother asks to oil the chains so they do not creak, thus turning everything into a comic key. This became the first step towards entering the Gothic novel into the postmodern era, where Gothic merged with grotesque, parody, fantasy, and psychology. The main thematic centres of the Gothic novel become descriptions of degradation, the destruction of the world, and the self-destruction of the personality. The Gothic novel of this period is called Neo-Gothic or New Gothic. The Neo-Gothic novel acquires such genre features as

enclosure, the depiction of the world's cruelty, parody, the motif of pursuit and psychological interaction between the victim and the tyrant, and the motif of a deceptive sense of security leading to catastrophe. The figurative-symbolic system of the Gothic novel also undergoes evolution. The innocent image of a child replaces demons and the deceased.

The work of one of the most famous representatives of American mass culture, Stephen King, continues the tradition of the English-language Gothic novel, transforming it into Neo-Gothic. Almost every one of his novels contains elements of Gothic. However, to trace the genre's evolution, we have selected the novel "Misery" (1987), which most closely adheres to the canons of the Neo-Gothic novel. The plot revolves around the relationship between two main characters – famous writer Paul Sheldon and his mentally unstable fan Annie Wilkes. This novel combines postmodernism's mosaic nature with mass culture's syncretism. The artistic time is built on asymmetry and non-linearity, and the genre syncretism is based on including diaries and manuscripts in the text. The Gothic villain in this novel has a female face: Paul learns about Annie's crimes by reading her scrapbook "Memory Lane". The novel is interwoven with allusions to the works of both fictional and real authors, giving the text intertextuality and allusiveness typical of postmodern aesthetics. The hero, Paul Sheldon, finds a specific pattern in Annie's actions and even tries to find a rational explanation for her behaviour. Thus, King (1987) delves into psychology, including the psychology of artistic creativity. Annie's appearance in King's novel fully corresponds to the Gothic novel tradition, where the anti-hero (in our case, the anti-heroine) appears out of nowhere and bursts into the life of a creative individual, changing it forever. Her appearance is accompanied by darkness and spatial disorientation, setting the narrative's tone. As in the classic Gothic novel, Paul finds himself in a closed room, with the wind howling and snow falling outside the window, creating an effect of being cut off from the world by the rampaging elements. Annie's image also embodies the concept of postmodern sensitivity as a specific form of world perception inherent in the postmodern philosophy of a chaotic world. In the early Gothic novel, we are used to associating the image of the villain with a male character, whereas King offers us a postmodern interpretation of gender relations and transfers the image of the villain to a female character (King, 1987).

Comparing the images of the main characters in the Gothic and Neo-Gothic novels, we can summarise the concepts of the main characters, thus tracing the evolution of the main character's image in such epic forms.

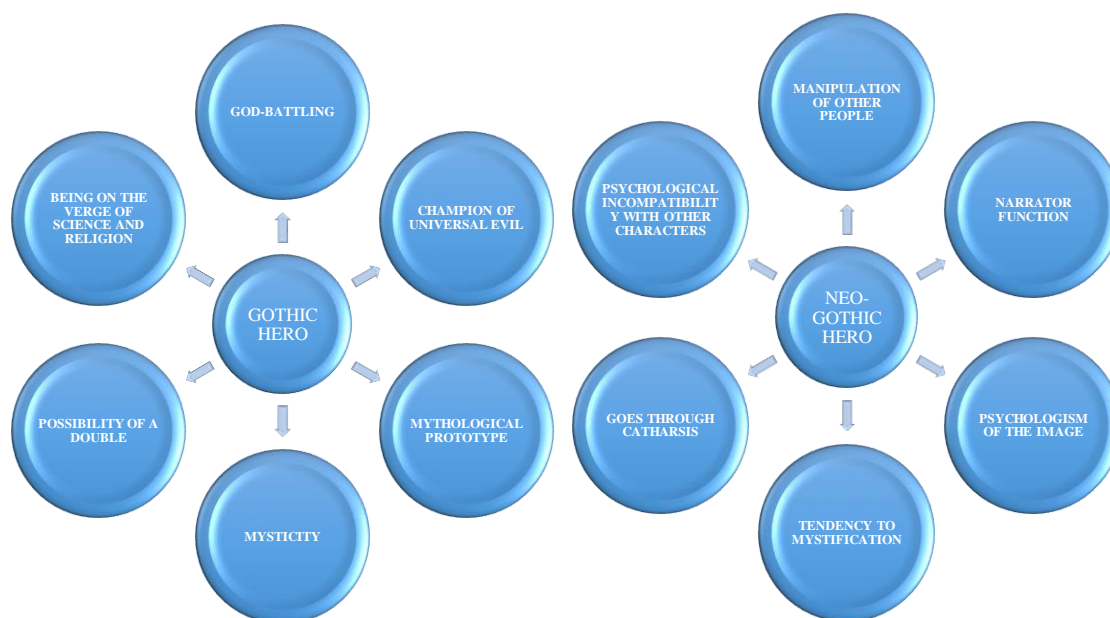


Figure 1. Comparison of Gothic and Neo-Gothic Novel Concepts of the Protagonist's Image.

In the architecture of Gothic and Neo-Gothic novels, the poetics of space and time play a decisive role. We have come to the following conclusions by comparing the chronotopes of Gothic and Neo-Gothic novels. If the Gothic novel is characterised by the topos of an enclosed space (castle, cathedral, abbey), a cursed place, and within this space, there is a clash of two opposing worlds – the real and the mystical. For the Neo-Gothic novel, this topos expands to the level of the universe. In the Gothic novel, time is mainly linear, with only occasional refractions of temporal projections.

In contrast, in the Neo-Gothic novel, we observe the cyclicity of time projected onto the cyclicity of the plot (the search for balance between antagonistic worlds). The Gothic chronotope is mainly scenic, while in the Neo-Gothic novel, we observe three types of space: scenic, narrative, and psychological. Psychological space is the arena of passions and feelings that rage in the main character's soul. The Gothic projection of the "man-world" is reflected through the poetics of time and space, the struggle between the sacred and the mundane. The features of the transformation of the place, time, and space of action in the Gothic and Neo-Gothic novels are further presented in the form of a comparative table:

Table 1.
Typology of Chronotope in the Gothic and Neo-Gothic Novels

Gothic novel	Neo-Gothic novel
Place of action	
Topos of a confined space, a cursed place	The whole universe
Time of action	
Linear time	Cyclical time, projected on the cyclicity of the plot
Spaces of action	
Stage space	Three-dimensional space (stage, narrative and psychic)

The evolution of the Gothic novel in English-language literature can be presented through the following main stages of the development of genre and style modifications of the genre.

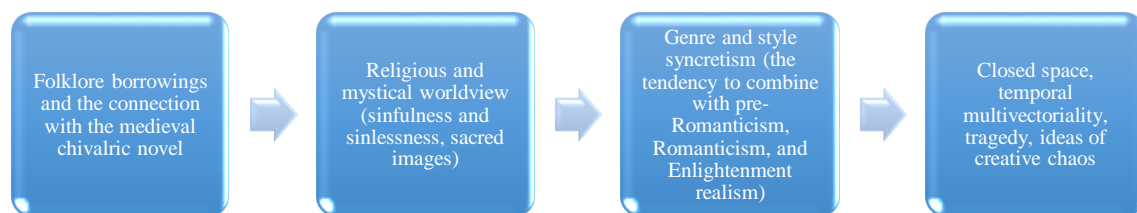


Figure 2. Evolution of the Gothic novel in English literature.

Discussion

Researcher Denysiuk (2007) uses the terms "Gothic novel", "frenetic genre", and "romantic frenzy", which, in our opinion, only develops the phenomenon of term synonymy. However, we fully agree with the researcher that "the concentration of nightmares and horrors in works of romantic frenzy is mostly not an end in itself, but a function of deepening the depicted conflict between good and evil, and the works of this modification of the Gothic novel – the novel of mysteries and horrors – acquire a shade of parable" (Denysiuk, 2007). We confirm that most Gothic novels have a parabolic structure.

We agree with researcher Prithwiraj Mukherjee (2024) that not all Stephen King's novels can be considered Neo-Gothic. Most of his horror novels contain Gothic elements, such as haunted houses, supernatural beings, and psychological terror in his stories. Most of his novels belong to the horror genre, which is a broader concept and includes Gothic literature.

Given the above, we propose to classify Neo-Gothic English-language novels into two subgroups:

- 1) Neoclassical novels that combine postmodern aesthetics while remaining based on classic Gothic. This group includes Joanne Harris's "Sleep, Pale Sister." (2005). Based on the main character's story, artist Henry Chester, his criminal past and criminal present intersect, featuring doppelgänger plot elements and the ghost of a girl demanding retribution, metamorphosis, and soul migration.
- 2) The second group of Neo-Gothic novels has two layers of artistic reality: visible and invisible.

Characteristic Gothic plot elements and a figurative-symbolic system are used in the visible layer. In the invisible layer, the ideology of postmodern aesthetics dominates, which recognises no rules or canons, does not believe in a higher intelligence, and contrasts the high purpose of humanity with its animal nature. A vivid example of the second type of Neo-Gothic novel is William Golding's "Lord of the Flies" (1954).

This novel, of course, contains canonical elements of the genre: an enclosed space (the island where the boys find themselves), the motif of a safe place (a paradise island that turns into hell, taking three innocent souls), the image of the beast as an otherworldly force that poses the main threat, is the source of cruelty and evil, an unexpected denouement, and the transformation of "good – evil" (the source of evil and cruelty is not external but within the person, moreover, the child). This category of novels also includes Stephen King's horror and Neo-Gothic novels.

Conclusions

The feature of mature Gothic novels compared to early Gothic novels is the author's subjectivism, vivid imagery, and pictorial quality, which eventually grows into a fascination with supernatural phenomena and horrors. A common genre feature of early and late Gothic novels is the special attention to the setting, characterised by enclosed space, neglect, the intertwining of unusual space with unusual time, and ominous landscapes. This kind of setting symbolises the clash of the natural and fantastical worlds. Thus, the polarisation of the two worlds in the Gothic novel is one of the canonical features of the genre. Additionally, an essential feature of the Gothic novel is the interrupted temporal organisation. In most Gothic novels, the present intersects with the past. This past usually lives within the walls of ancient castles and abbeys and creates a tragic backdrop (stories of crimes often determine subsequent events). However, in the Neo-Gothic novel, the organisation of time and space becomes cyclical and projects onto the cyclicity of the plot.

Future research perspectives include studying the poetics of the Gothic novel genre in a typological comparison of works from the early and late periods, as well as a comparative comparison of Gothic novels in English-language literature with Gothic novels in European national literature, including the tradition of the Gothic novel in Ukrainian literature, represented by the names of Ivan Franko ("Petrii and Dovbushchuky"), Khoma Kupriienko ("The Unkind Omen"), Petro Kulish ("The Fiery Serpent"), the prose of Valeriy Shevchuk, and Halyna Pahutiak.

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