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RESEARCH ARTICLE

WHEN THE CASTLE ACTS: LANDSCAPE AS AGENT, ECOCRITICAL AGENCY AND MORAL JUSTICE IN WALPOLE'S THE CASTLE OF OTRANTO (1764)

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Abstract

This paper provides an ecocritical reading of Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* (1764). It shows how non-human forces, architecture, objects, and natural phenomena act as active agents of justice. The castle and its surrounds have an impact on events without human intervention, from the huge helmet that kills Conrad to the moonlit pathways that lead Isabella and the spectacular collapse of walls and statues. Using concepts from ecocriticism and post-humanist theory, this analysis reveals how Gothic architecture, visual artifacts, and environmental elements serve as moral and causal agents, protecting the innocent and punishing wrongdoing. This study focuses on the aesthetics of decay, auditory and visual signals, and the materiality of objects. The essay focuses on Walpole's vision of a society in which nonhuman forces help to maintain moral order. By decentering human power, this reading reimagines Gothic justice and legacy, revealing an early kind of ecological conscience within Gothic fiction. Ultimately, this paper situates *The Castle of Otranto* (1764) within Eco-Gothic scholarship. It argues that Walpole's story anticipates later Gothic explorations of material and environmental agency. It also demonstrates how literature can portray ethical relationships among humans, objects, and the natural world.

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Introduction:-

The Castle of Otranto (1764) begins with an unusual event: a massive helmet falls from the sky and crushes Conrad, the Lord's only son, on his wedding day. The sound of metal clashes through the dark corridor as the helmet hangs precariously on the castle battlements, caught between destruction and the sky. Moonlight reflects off its cold surface, casting eerie shadows on the stones. In that moment, the castle feels alive, the walls seemingly holding their breath, as if waiting for justice. Even lifeless objects seem to have a purpose, warning the guilty and protecting the innocent in ways that people might not always notice. The novel, published in 1764 by Horace Walpole, is often regarded as the first real Gothic literature. This genre incorporates haunted castles and dismal weather, instilling terror and intrigue in the reader. However, at *Otranto*, the environment and buildings give more than simply a gothic backdrop. They take an active role in advancing the tale to its conclusion. From falling things and bleeding sculptures to moonlight directing an escape, Walpole depicts the weather and architecture as important characters in the story.

In recent years, literary ecocriticism has highlighted the moral and causal roles that non-human forces, landscapes, weather, and objects play in stories. This analysis turns the focus away from human-centered plots. It shows how the environment and material culture can influence events and deliver justice. In Walpole's castle, walls, helmets, and storms are not just scenery; they actively shape the story, enforcing moral order and responding to human wrongdoing. This paper argues that in *The Castle of Otranto* (1764) the castle, its objects, and the surrounding weather act as non-human agents of justice. They direct the plot and punish misdeeds independent of human intentions. Walpole presents these elements as active forces rather than static settings: the helmet creates terror, the portrait delivers moral warnings, and moonlit paths guide and protect characters. Even the sounds of the castle express ethical judgments. By emphasizing non-human agency, Walpole's story complicates traditional views on responsibility, suggesting that justice can arise from the material and natural world itself.

The Castle of Otranto has been studied from various angles. In Peter Lindfield's article, "Heraldry and the Architectural Imagination: John Carter's Visualization of The Castle of Otranto" (2016), foregrounds the crucial role of heraldry and architecture in shaping the Gothic imagination. Through a close examination of John Carter's designs, Lindfield contends that these visual and material elements do more than illustrate Walpole's narrative; they actively translate literary themes into tangible forms, bridging the gap between text and artifact. His analysis positions architecture and heraldic motifs as central to understanding the novel's symbolic language and the broader heritage of Gothic representation, thereby reinforcing the symbiotic relationship between literature and the visual arts. The novel's engagement with contemporary scientific and philosophical discourse is further explored by D. Edelman and colleagues in their chapter "'A Very Natural Dream'; or, The Castle of Otranto" (2021), included in *Embryology and the Rise of the Gothic Novel*. This study situates Walpole's work within the intellectual currents of the eighteenth century, particularly those concerning dreams, origins, and natural philosophy.

By drawing connections between embryological theories and Gothic narrative strategies, Edelman et al. demonstrate how the novel reflects anxieties about human development, corporeal instability, and the boundaries of the natural and supernatural. Their approach highlights *The Castle of Otranto* (1764) as a text deeply embedded in Enlightenment debates, revealing the genre's capacity to engage with scientific as well as literary creativity. Political and historical dimensions of Walpole's novel are brought to the fore in C. Lake et al.'s "Bloody Records: Manuscripts and Politics in *The Castle of Otranto*" (2013). This article, published in *Modern Philology*, examines the significance of manuscripts and textual records as instruments of power and legitimacy within the narrative. Lake and colleagues argue that the novel's preoccupation with documents and record-keeping serves as a commentary on eighteenth-century political discourse, positioning the Gothic not merely as escapist romance but as a form deeply invested in matters of cultural memory and contested authority. Their analysis broadens the interpretive scope of the novel, suggesting that its engagement with history and politics is as vital as its more fantastical elements.

The psychological and atmospheric strategies of Walpole's novel are deftly analyzed by Alexandra G. Speck in "Concealment and Darkness in Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto*" (2024). Speck explores how themes of secrecy and obscurity function both as narrative devices and as expressions of power dynamics and vulnerability. Her reading emphasizes the dual role of darkness, both literal and metaphorical, as a space for concealment, transformation, and moral ambiguity. By situating these motifs within the wider Gothic tradition, Speck demonstrates how Walpole's manipulation of hidden spaces and shadowy motives generates suspense and uncertainty, deepening the novel's psychological complexity. In Diana Pérez Edelman's chapter, also entitled "'A Very Natural Dream'; or, *The Castle of Otranto*" (2021), returns to the intersection of science and literature, focusing on the novel's use of embryological metaphors derived from Walpole's earlier poetry. Edelman contends that *The Castle of Otranto* not only grapples with the philosophical tensions between natural and supernatural, organic and mechanical, but also probes questions of identity and familial fertility.

Through the metaphor of the statue of Alfonso as epigenesis, Edelman underscores the novel's engagement with contemporary scientific debates, while also highlighting its foundational role in establishing the thematic and philosophical contours of Gothic fiction. In his 2021 article, "Natural versus Supernatural Agency in *The Castle of Otranto*," Damian Shaw explores how both supernatural and natural forces shape Walpole's novel. Rather than accepting the usual view that supernatural agents destroy the castle, Shaw argues that natural events actually cause the walls to collapse. He places this idea within ongoing debates about the novel's deeper meaning, proposing that if nature, rather than ghosts, delivers consequences, the story could be seen as more revolutionary and less tied to a conservative, patriarchal tradition. Shaw's analysis draws attention to the active role of the environment, showing how it heightens the novel's Gothic tension and reinforces its sense of moral order. In his article "Contested Pasts:

David Hume, Horace Walpole and the Emergence of Gothic Fiction” (Dent, 58), Jonathan Dent takes a close look at the historical and philosophical forces that shaped Walpole’s *The Castle of Otranto* (1764). Dent shows how Hume’s thinking about history and human nature influences the novel’s approach to lineage, legitimacy, and who gets to hold power. He argues that the birth of Gothic fiction is tied to big debates about what counts as historical truth and who has the authority to tell it. Dent’s work paints Walpole as a writer navigating the fine line between Enlightenment ideals and the wild energy of the Gothic, highlighting how philosophy, historical writing, and literary invention all come together to shape this early example of the genre. Anne Williams’ article, “Monstrous Pleasures: Horace Walpole, Opera, and the Conception of Gothic” (2012), explores how operatic and theatrical conventions shape *The Castle of Otranto* (1764). Williams argues that Walpole’s novel borrows the drama, spectacle, and heightened emotionality characteristic of opera, translating these elements into a literary context. By doing so, the novel creates a unique blend of pleasure and fear, engaging readers through performative intensity.

Williams’s analysis situates Gothic fiction within the broader artistic and cultural landscape of eighteenth-century performance, illuminating the genre’s deep connections to contemporary modes of entertainment and audience experience. Kevin I. Flotte’s 2015 thesis, “Cognitive Castles: Place and *The Castle of Otranto*” (University of New Orleans), offers a biocultural and cognitive reading of Walpole’s novel. Flotte contends that Gothic features such as tunnels and labyrinthine spaces deliberately subvert the evolved human strategies for making sense of place, thereby generating feelings of disorientation and anxiety. Through an interdisciplinary approach that draws on both evolutionary theory and cognitive science, Flotte reveals how Walpole’s manipulation of spatial perception intensifies Gothic horror, positioning the novel at the intersection of cognitive theory and Gothic literary tradition. Matthias Calderari’s thesis, “Beauty Sleeping in the Lap of Horror: The Importance of Nature in Gothic Fiction” (n.d., Academia.edu), provides an insightful exploration of nature’s pivotal role within Gothic novels, including *The Castle of Otranto* (1764).

Calderari argues that natural settings are not passive backgrounds but active agents that shape the novel’s atmosphere of suspense, horror, and the supernatural. By analyzing landscapes as dynamic and interactive elements, the study reveals how nature both influences and intensifies the tension experienced by characters. Calderari’s research underscores the lasting importance of environmental elements in creating the distinct affective power of Gothic fiction. The Gothic tradition, starting with Horace Walpole’s *The Castle of Otranto* (1764), has received considerable attention for its rich settings and architectural spaces. Scholars have often highlighted the castle’s role as a center of mood, fear, and symbolism. Aileen Lindfield argues that Gothic architecture acts as a “manifestation of the psyche.” Towers, battlements, and hidden corridors reflect the characters’ anxieties and desires (Lindfield, 2010, p. 45). Rosemary Frank also points out the “psychological resonance of the Gothic interior,” suggesting that the castle’s spaces mirror the turmoil of human emotions, from guilt to terror (Frank, 2015, p. 78). Across these studies, the focus is on representation rather than causation.

The castle conveys moral or emotional states, but it rarely acts independently within the story. Recent Eco-Gothic scholarship has started to examine the links between Gothic fiction and environmental thinking. It shows how landscapes, weather, and natural events contribute to atmosphere and themes. Critics like Scott Slovic and Douglas Howard note that Gothic tales often include forests, storms, and ruins, which heighten suspense and highlight human vulnerability (Slovic, 2012, 102; Howard, 2016, 57). Eco-Gothic studies present the non-human environment as morally and symbolically significant. However, much of this work remains interpretive instead of agentive. While storms terrify characters or forests isolate them, these elements are usually seen as metaphorical extensions of human experience, not as independent agents affecting the plot. This focus on symbolism appears in analyses of *The Castle of Otranto* (1764).

Traditional readings often depict the castle’s supernatural events, the falling helmet, secret passages, and groaning walls, as reflections of themes like divine punishment, hereditary sin, or moral order (Lindfield, 2010; Frank, 2015). While these interpretations recognize the Gothic interest in strange architecture, they do not consider the castle itself as an active participant in delivering justice. The walls, corridors, and objects are mainly described as mirrors, reflecting the consequences of human actions rather than intervening on their own. Even the Eco-Gothic commentators, when discussing the moral significance of landscapes or weather, usually treat these elements as backgrounds or narrative enhancements instead of as forces shaping outcomes independently (Slovic, 2012; Howard, 2016). The critical gap is clear: much of Gothic scholarship, whether traditional or eco-critical, overlooks the active role of non-human elements. The castle, objects, and natural forces in Walpole’s text do more than symbolize human psychology or moral order, they actively engage, protect the innocent, and punish the guilty. This paper aims to fill this gap by examining the castle and its surroundings as active participants, not just as passive settings.

These elements operate with a degree of autonomy that matches, and sometimes surpasses, human influence. By doing this, the study broadens the interpretive possibilities of Gothic fiction and places Walpole's work in both literary and ecocritical discussions. By emphasizing the interventionist roles of architecture, objects, and environmental phenomena, the analysis shows how Gothic settings can influence moral outcomes and bring about justice, reshaping our understanding of the genre's relationship with the non-human world. In *The Castle of Otranto's* beginning, Walpole presents the castle as an active force of justice when Conrad, the heir, is killed by a falling helmet. The narration describes this event clearly: the "helmet fell upon the son of the lord of the castle, and crushed him to atoms." (Walpole, 5). The verbs "fell" and "crushed" create a sense of immediacy and violence; they suggest a force acting on its own. Conrad's death does not result from human intention or mistake, but from an object within the castle that serves as an executor of fate. By portraying the helmet as a cause, Walpole shows that the environment can enforce moral order before any human characters take action.

This event sets the framework for the entire novel. From the beginning, the castle's objects act with independence; they observe, judge, and intervene. Conrad's death leads to human reactions, Manfred's panic and the household's mourning, but these responses come after the helmet's role. Walpole flips traditional narrative order: humans are subject to the environment rather than controlling it. The physical aspects of the castle are not just background; they play a part in the plot. The falling helmet illustrates that architecture and objects within it can become instruments of justice. Conrad's death is a clear example of material causation: a force that is not human preempts human actions and sets a pattern that recurs throughout the novel. By highlighting the helmet's violent autonomy, Walpole signals that Gothic spaces serve more than as symbols; they actively participate in enforcing morality. The castle becomes a place where fate is embedded in material forms. The opening scene builds suspense and moral tension; the audience sees that human power, even that of the ruling lord, is subordinate to larger, non-human forces.

This initial act of justice sets the stage for later interventions by architecture, objects, and nature. After this dramatic start, Walpole introduces the portrait of Alfonso, the grandfather, as a communication tool within the castle. The narrative notes the "portrait of the grandfather" (Walpole, 20) and describes its eerie presence. The portrait seems almost alive; its gaze conveys moral authority and offers warnings about Manfred's actions. Therefore, by bringing this visual artifact to life, Walpole turns material culture into a means for ethical teaching. The verbs and tone highlight the portrait's role. It is not a passive image but an active witness that sees, signals, and reinforces the memory of lineage and moral order. The grandfather's portrait provides ethical guidance on its own, warning characters of their wrongdoings and the consequences they face before any physical action takes place. This way, the castle's objects work alongside its architecture to convey moral order, establishing a pattern where the built environment and material culture help guide the living. The portrait's importance goes beyond symbolism. While traditional views often see visual artifacts as reflections of family history or moral decline, Walpole gives the portrait causal weight: its presence influences character behavior.

Manfred, faced with reminders of his grandfather's authority, feels subtly restricted, suggesting that the castle's objects do more than set the scene; they interact with human decisions. The visual culture of Otranto thus affects moral outcomes, reinforcing the novel's premise where non-human agents step in to uphold justice. Later, Isabella's escape shows the combined agency of the castle and natural elements. As she moves through the corridors, the narrative highlights the "passage for Isabella" and a "ray of clouded moonshine" that lights her way. Later, it notes, "A ray of moonshine... shone directly on the lock they sought." (Walpole, 13) The verbs "gleam" and "shone" imply intention, suggesting that natural light acts as a guiding force. The castle's passageways and the moonlight work together to protect Isabella, ensuring her safety and blocking Manfred's coercion. The interaction between architectural space and natural elements illustrates a broader idea: non-human forces act to protect innocence. The castle is designed to offer both hiding spots and guidance, while the moonlight steps in at crucial moments, revealing solutions to what seem like impossible challenges.

Together, they embody the novel's theme of ecological justice, with built and natural environments joining forces against human wrongdoing. This protective role reinforces the logic of the story: before any human action, non-human elements influence the outcomes of events. Isabella's safe journey shows that the castle and nature are not passive; they respond deliberately to moral situations. The interplay of light and architecture demonstrates that Gothic spaces can act ethically, preserving the innocent and guiding actions, a theme that reappears as the story builds toward more intense forms of justice. As the story unfolds, Walpole emphasizes the castle's non-human presence through partial glimpses, sounds, and symbolic imagery. The text mentions "foot and part of leg... as large as the helmet," suggesting a giant presence that extends the helmet's original role.

Likewise, the “sable plumes on the enchanted helmet” highlight the threatening potential of these objects. Visual clues prepare readers for action, creating a sense of living presence within the castle. Sound further amplifies this sense of life: “A deep and hollow groan,” “a clap of thunder,” and “an imperfect rustling sound” all embody the castle’s voice. First, we see partial images and symbolic objects; then we hear the castle groan, thunder, and rustle. These sounds suggest moral authority, reinforcing the idea that the environment watches human behavior. Additional skeletal imagery links the castle with death and memory, indicating that the walls themselves hold the consequences of past actions. The mix of visual and auditory elements creates a richly populated environment. Non-human forces communicate, prepare judgments, and influence character choices. By gradually revealing the castle’s responsiveness, Walpole structures the story so that human characters become more subject to environmental direction, leading to the material and explosive interventions in the final act.

The story’s climax brings all forms of non-human agency together in clear acts of material and ecological judgment. The statue of Alfonso “bled three drops of blood... from the nose,” indicating lineage and moral correction. The sudden appearance of the giant hand, “oh! the hand the giant! the hand!”, blends symbolic and physical threats. Sound events, “A clap of thunder... the earth rocked, and the clank of more than mortal armour”, show that the castle’s architecture and natural phenomena deliver justice through force. Finally, “A” confirming that the environment carries out the moral corrections initiated by earlier actions. These moments exemplify the causal power of the material world. Blood serves as a sign of life and correction; thunder and clanking act as mechanical forces; and falling walls impose ecological cleansing. Manfred’s power collapses under the combined force of the castle and nature. Walpole stages justice as a cooperative effort of stone, metal, and weather, showing that non-human forces can create ethical outcomes without relying on human will. This climax illustrates that Gothic architecture and nature not only signal moral authority but actively enforce it, fulfilling the promise set forth by the falling helmet and guiding the narrative logic from start to finish.

The five analytical sections show that *The Castle of Otranto* (1764) sees non-human forces as active players in moral and narrative outcomes. From the falling helmet to the dramatic collapse of walls and statues, objects, architecture, and natural events act independently, influencing events without human intention. The castle and its contents are not just backdrops; they have the power to affect outcomes, delivering justice, guiding the innocent, and punishing wrongdoers. This view challenges traditional interpretations of Walpole’s Gothic world, where agency is shared among humans, objects, and environments, questioning human-centered readings of the novel. From an ecocritical angle, *Otranto* reveals an early blend of material and ecological ethics. The castle’s design, along with moonlight and weather, creates moral outcomes that hint at an early ecofeminist perspective: non-human spaces protect the vulnerable and resist the violence from dominant human figures like Manfred. Additionally, the text showcases ruin aesthetics; fragments, plumes, crumbling walls, and ghostly sounds are not just beautiful but also serve a purpose, mediating justice and reinforcing the novel’s moral framework. Ruins and decay become active agents, showing that Gothic spaces can express temporal, moral, and material aspects all at once.

This ecocritical perspective changes how we view Gothic justice and lineage. Usually, Gothic punishment comes through human or supernatural agents, often reflecting divine or patriarchal control. In *Otranto*, however, lineage and moral correction come through objects, architectural designs, and environmental factors. By highlighting non-human agency, Walpole broadens the moral landscape of the Gothic, allowing justice to result from the interaction of human and non-human elements. This viewpoint paves the way for further studies of ecological and material agency in literature, encouraging comparisons between early Gothic texts and later eco-Gothic narratives that continue to challenge human authority. In *The Castle of Otranto* (1764), Walpole creates a world where castles, objects, and natural events act as agents of justice. From the scene where the helmet crushes Conrad to the dramatic collapse of walls and statues, the novel shows that moral outcomes depend on more than just human actions. Helmets fall, portraits warn, moonlight guides, and thunder establishes ethical order. Each element plays an active role in the story’s cause-and-effect.

This study reveals that the castle and its surroundings function as independent sources of action. They deliver punishment, protect the innocent, and correct lineage. By focusing on the roles of architecture, objects, and natural forces, Walpole anticipates ideas from posthumanism and ecocriticism. He presents a Gothic story where non-human agency is key to justice. The novel’s ruined aesthetics, ghostly sounds, and physical effects support this idea, showing that Gothic spaces are not just backdrops but actively contribute to ethical and narrative meaning. Revisiting Walpole in the context of Eco-Gothic studies, this analysis sheds light on the novel’s ecological creativity. Gothic architecture and natural forces influence ethical results, challenging human-centered and purely symbolic readings.

Future research could build on this by comparing Otranto to later Gothic novels. This could explore how non-human agency changes and interacts with themes of lineage, morality, and environmental ethics. Such comparisons would clarify how the Gothic highlights justice through the interaction of human and non-human forces.

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