

Horace Walpole, *The Castle of Otranto*

The Castle of Otranto was published in 1765 by Horace Walpole (1717-1797), son of one of England's most influential 18th prime ministers, Sir Robert Walpole. With its supernatural apparitions, its ominous prophecies, and its complicated underground passages, this novel introduced a new genre, the Gothic novel. For the first time readers were delighted with a tale of horrors.



The Castle of Otranto was born of a dream that came to haunt Walpole's sleep one night in June 1764. The next day, all that Walpole could remember of the dream was that "I had thought myself in an ancient castle... and that on the uppermost bannister of a great staircase I saw a gigantic hand in armour".

In the preface to *The Castle of Otranto*, Walpole claims he is the translator of an old Italian manuscript dating back to two hundred years before and states some of the main features of Gothic novels. The following is an excerpt from the Preface of *The Castle of Otranto*.

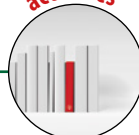
Miracles, visions, necromancy¹, dreams, and other preternatural events are exploded now even from romances. That was not the case when the author wrote; much less when the story itself is supposed to have happened. Belief in every kind of prodigy was so established in those dark ages, that an author would not be faithful to the manners of the times who should omit all mention of them. He is not bound² to believe them himself, but he must represent his actors as believing them.

If this air of the miraculous is excused, the reader will find nothing else unworthy of his perusal³. Allow the possibility of the facts, and all the actors comport themselves as persons would do in their situation. There is no bombast⁴, no similes, flowers, digressions, or unnecessary descriptions. Everything tends directly to the catastrophe. Never is the reader's attention relaxed. The rules of the drama are almost observed throughout the conduct of the piece. The characters are well drawn, and still better maintained. Terror, the author's principal engine, prevents the story from ever languishing⁵, and it is so often contrasted by pity, that the mind is kept up in a constant vicissitude of interesting passions.

Glossary

1 black magic – 2 obliged – 3 the act of carefully viewing or examining – 4 writing that sounds important or impressive but is not sincere – 5 becoming feeble and weak

activities



↓ TEXT COMPREHENSION

Answer the following questions.

- 1 What did people believe in the dark ages when the story is set?
- 2 What is the style of this novel like?
- 3 What is the main engine of the story?
- 4 Why is the mind kept up in a "constant vicissitude" of passions?