**Daphne du Maurier and the Gothic tradition**

**Greg Buzwell traces Daphne du Maurier’s use of Gothic themes, motifs and imagery, and shows how she was influenced both by earlier writers and by her deep connection with Cornwall.**

**Introduction**

Gothic fiction possesses a remarkable ability to reinvent itself. The sublime landscapes and imperilled maidens of Ann Radcliffe’s [*The Mysteries of Udolpho*](https://www.bl.uk/collection-items/the-mysteries-of-udolpho)(1794), for example, seemingly bear no relation to the city streets and macabre body transformations of [Robert Louis Stevenson](http://www.bl.uk/people/robert-louis-stevenson)’s [*Strange Case of Doctor Jekyll and Mr Hyde*](http://www.bl.uk/works/the-strange-case-of-dr-jekyll-and-mr-hyde)(1886) or to Henry James’s psychological ghost story *The Turn of the Screw* (1898), and yet all three tales are, undeniably, Gothic. Regardless of their entirely different storylines and settings all three share the traditional Gothic qualities of a disturbing atmosphere, a carefully described landscape and setting, a sense of the uncanny and the impression that events are out of kilter with the rational world.

During the 20th century, [Daphne du Maurier](https://www.bl.uk/people/daphne-du-maurier) (1907–1989) used these traditional Gothic motifs to spectacular effect. On the surface, novels such as *Jamaica Inn* (1936), [*Rebecca*](https://www.bl.uk/works/rebecca) (1938) and *My Cousin Rachel* (1951) may appear as little more than beautifully written, dark romances and yet, when you look deeper, the books are extraordinarily inventive in the way they use Gothic imagery. Similarly, many of du Maurier’s short stories, such as ‘The Birds’ (1952), ‘The Apple Tree’ (1952) and ‘Don’t Look Now’ (1971), take traditional Gothic themes and add new twists. On one level ‘The Apple Tree’ can be read as the story of a woman haunting her husband from beyond the grave but, on another, it can be viewed as a chilling meditation upon mental disintegration. In some respects Daphne du Maurier was a victim of her own success. Her prose was so smooth, and her stories so packed with incident, that her gifts as a storyteller often overshadowed the more serious aspects of her work. It is only when you look beyond the surface polish of her stories that you begin to notice her brilliant and eclectic use of Gothic imagery.

**Gothic as a strand throughout Daphne du Maurier’s work**

Throughout her career, Daphne du Maurier had a magpie-like ability to borrow themes and motifs from other authors and give them a new life. The early short story ‘The Doll’, for example, written when du Maurier was 20, but not published for another 10 years, is presented to the reader as a found manuscript – a motif in Gothic fiction that runs all the way back to the very first Gothic novel, Horace Walpole’s [*The Castle of Otranto*](https://www.bl.uk/collection-items/gothic-novel-the-castle-of-otranto-by-horace-walpole-with-a-watercolour-drawing) (1764). The story revolves around a macabre life-sized male automaton that fulfils the sexual needs of a beautiful woman with whom the story’s narrator is in love. The tale is shrouded in macabre mystery. The origin of the doll is never explained, nor is its ultimate fate – both doll and heroine simply disappear at the end of the story. Presenting a sustained nightmarish meditation on jealousy, lust and madness, the tale stands in terrifying isolation, divorced from the rational world. The story’s atmosphere resembles the work of Edgar Allan Poe, in particular those tales such as [‘The Oval Portrait’](https://www.bl.uk/collection-items/poes-tales-of-mystery-and-imagination-illustrated-by-arthur-rackham) and ‘Morella’ in which obsession dominates and all other considerations are pushed to the periphery.

The opening scenes of *Jamaica Inn* (1936), meanwhile, mirror the beginning of Bram Stoker’s novel [*Dracula*](http://www.bl.uk/collection-items/first-edition-of-dracula) (1897). Mary Yellan finds herself in a coach being driven at ‘breakneck speed’ through a bleak landscape by a coachman ‘muffled in a greatcoat to his ears’ towards a location, Jamaica Inn, about which the locals refuse to talk (ch. 1). Change ‘Mary Yellan’ for ‘Jonathan Harker’ and ‘Jamaica Inn’ for ‘Castle Dracula’, and the opening pages of du Maurier’s novel and Stoker’s appear very similar. Further into the novel, Jamaica Inn itself, set on the windswept moors, resembles both [Wuthering Heights](http://www.bl.uk/works/wuthering-heights), from [Emily Brontë](http://www.bl.uk/people/emily-bronte)’s novel, and Thornfield Hall from [Charlotte Brontë](http://www.bl.uk/people/charlotte-bronte)’s [*Jane Eyre*](http://www.bl.uk/works/jane-eyre) (1847). Daphne du Maurier was always keen to draw parallels between her beloved Cornwall and the Yorkshire moors where the Brontës set much of their work. Indeed, in her book *Vanishing Cornwall* (1967), du Maurier was at pains to point out that ‘Charlotte, Emily, Anne and Branwell Brontë had a Cornish mother whom they barely remembered, and a Cornish aunt to instruct them in their most formative years’, the inference being that during their upbringing the children would have looked out upon the Yorkshire moors while listening to their aunt recounting tales of Cornish myths and legends learnt during her own childhood in West Penwith (ch. 12). Landscape and imagination, myth and folklore lay at the heart not only of the Brontës’s Gothic fiction but also at the heart of Daphne du Maurier’s own.

Going back even further into [Gothic’s literary heritage](http://www.bl.uk/romantics-and-victorians/themes/the-gothic), Daphne du Maurier’s work also contains echoes of Ann Radcliffe, whose novel *The Mysteries of Udolpho* came to epitomise the first golden age of Gothic literature. In Radcliffe’s work the seemingly supernatural is nearly always revealed to have a rational explanation. Du Maurier’s work exhibits similar characteristics. In *Rebecca*, for example, the sinister character of Mrs Danvers is just that – a character, not a malevolent ghost; while Rebecca herself, who dominates the book without ever making a single living appearance, is a ghost only in the sense that she haunts the imaginations of the living protagonists. This psychological element contains echoes of Henry James’s novella *The Turn of the Screw*, where the ghosts that seemingly haunt two children under the charge of their governess possibly only exist within the mind of the governess herself. The governess in James’s tale is never named, something which adds to the opaqueness and mystery of the tale. Similarly, the narrator of *Rebecca*, the second Mrs De Winter, is also never named, something which casts her far into the shadow of the first Mrs De Winter, the charismatic and beautiful never-seen but always-present Rebecca, whose name dominates the novel and the lives of the characters within.

Even towards the end of her career, du Maurier was borrowing from Gothic’s rich heritage and adding imaginative new twists. The House on the Strand (1969), a novel in which a sinister potion enables the central character to escape the constraints of his dreary married life by travelling back through time, echoes another sinister potion, one that had allowed Dr Jekyll to escape the claustrophobic restrictions of polite society by freeing his dark side, the brutal Edward Hyde. Parallels between earlier Gothic fiction and du Maurier’s work are numerous. Her genius as a writer of Gothic fiction lay in her ability to build upon what had gone before and cast it in a new light.

**Cornish Gothic**

In just the same way as Thomas Hardy is forever associated with Wessex, and Charles Dickens with London, so Daphne du Maurier is forever associated with Cornwall. Cornwall gave du Maurier the freedom to write. Her decision to move to Cornwall, taken when she was only 22, removed her from the distractions of London life, and from the often overpowering influence of her famous family (her father was the actor Gerald du Maurier, while her mother was the actress Muriel Beaumont). The Cornish countryside, with its rugged coastline, desolate moors, ancient stone circles and rich folklore is imbued with romance, freedom, mystery and danger – a perfect setting for Gothic novels. Being so distant from London, Cornwall also had a certain freedom from the strictures of government. During the 18th and early 19th centuries in particular, this freedom, combined with the extreme poverty many of the inhabitants endured, made Cornwall an ideal location for smugglers to carry out their illegal trade. When you also consider the frequency with which ships foundered on the Cornish coast it is little wonder that tales of wrecking and smuggling grew ever larger in the popular imagination.

The use of Cornwall as a Gothic location features in several of du Maurier’s stories, but *Jamaica Inn* in particular highlights the way in which the Cornish landscape becomes a character in its own right. In the novel the landscape on and around Bodmin Moor serves to represent two very different types of freedom. For Joss Merlyn, Mary Yellan’s uncle-in-law and the landlord of Jamaica Inn, the moor’s isolation represents the freedom to disregard the law; the freedom to wreck ships and murder their crews and passengers for financial gain; the freedom to ignore the rules. For Mary Yellan, however, the moors represent a different sort of freedom, the chance to escape the claustrophobic evil of Jamaica Inn itself. Throughout the novel Mary Yellan finds herself in that most typical of situations for a Gothic heroine – being held prisoner in a gloomy building full of dark shadows, menaced by a man who is physically much stronger than she is. For Mary the idea of freedom was embodied in the moors themselves – ‘where was their final boundary she could not tell’, she observes at one point (ch. 4). Just as with Ann Radcliffe and the Brontës before her, Daphne du Maurier uses landscape not only for dramatic effect but also as a means of reflecting the personalities of the characters who find their lives so dominated and constrained by the geographical features surrounding them.

**The double**

The doppelgänger, or double, has a long history in Gothic fiction. James Hogg’s novel [*The Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner*](https://www.bl.uk/collection-items/james-hogg-the-private-memoirs-and-confessions-of-a-justified-sinner) (1824), Edgar Allan Poe’s ‘William Wilson’ (1839) and Robert Louis Stevenson’s *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*(1886) all play with the theme of a man haunted by his double. Although during the 20th century the double rather fell out of favour in Gothic fiction, Daphne du Maurier employed the idea to brilliant effect in several of her books. In *The Scapegoat*(1957) a decent but slightly dull Englishman, John, finds himself leading the life of his exact double, Jean, a charismatic but disreputable French aristocrat. Throughout the book, although John and Jean are clearly separate people, there is a sense that they somehow represent two sides of the same man – the repressed Englishman, who suddenly finds himself living in a large chateau with a beautiful wife and a mistress, and the charismatic Frenchman who longs, for reasons of his own, to escape the very same people and lead a much quieter life. The introvert and the extravert become two sides of the same coin, each struggling for dominance and supremacy. In a letter to Maureen Baker-Munton, dated 4 July 1957, du Maurier wrote:

We [Daphne and her husband, Frederick ‘Boy’ Browning] are both doubles. So is everyone. Every one of us has his, or her, dark side. Which is to overcome the other? This is the purpose of the book [*The Scapegoat*]. And it ends, as you know, with the problem unsolved, except that the suggestion there, when I finished it, was that the two sides of the man’s nature had to fuse together to give birth to a third, well balanced. Know Thyself.

The double also emerges in *Jamaica Inn*. Mary Yellan’s uncle-in-law Joss Merlyn is contrasted with his brother Jem. While the former is brutal and violent the latter, although similarly powerful and untamed, has heroic characteristics that render him a latter-day Heathcliff as opposed to a common villain. Jem in turn, with his rugged masculinity, is contrasted with the androgynous vicar Francis Davey, whose seemingly reassuring presence masks violent tendencies. Jem’s honesty about his strengths and faults is doubled with Davey’s seemingly respectable but actually duplicitous nature.

Perhaps the most inventive use of the double in du Maurier’s fiction, however, comes in the short story ‘Don’t Look Now’ (1971). The story, set in Venice, evokes the precariousness of reality and the uncertainties lying behind what we perceive to be true. A couple, John and Laura, take a trip to Venice in an attempt to return to normal life following the tragic death of their daughter, Christine. While in Venice the couple meet elderly twin sisters, one of whom claims to have second sight. The latter’s attempts to warn the couple that they are in danger have little impact on John but, as the story progresses, another form of Gothic doubling emerges in the figure of a little girl whom John sees frequently in apparent peril. At the conclusion to the story the little girl is revealed to be a murderous dwarf, a grotesque and aged figure dressed as a child. Innocence is doubled with evil, youth with age and the desire to save someone’s life with walking towards one’s own death. Venice itself also exhibits a double character – sunny and full of cheerful tourists by day but a maze of dark canals and sinister dead ends by night.

Daphne du Maurier’s fascination with the double even played a part in her own life. As a child du Maurier often wished she was a boy. In part this was because boys at that time had greater freedoms and opportunities than girls, but with du Maurier the desire went further. She even invented a male alter ego for herself, named Eric Avon, along with a colourful past for him in which he had been to Rugby. Eric Avon was adventurous and fearless, qualities that Daphne du Maurier had in abundance but which she was never fully allowed to express because of her gender. As a writer, du Maurier was able to explore this masculine side of her nature vicariously through her fiction. Many of her most famous books, including *My Cousin Rachel*, *The Scapegoat* and *The House on the Strand* have male narrators. Even the very early tale ‘The Doll’ is told from a male perspective, the narrator finding himself rejected by the woman he loves in favour of a mechanical doll – something which, inevitably, has devastating implications for his own identity. The more you look into du Maurier’s work, the more wheels within wheels you begin to see, and the darker the imagery becomes. It is only when you look beyond her narrative brilliance that you begin to see the haunting darkness and complexity of her work.

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