

Before Reading

Which countries and cities do you think of when you hear the word "Gothic"?

Do you think Italy is Gothic? Why or why not?

Skim the following story and divide it into sections. Justify your divisions, and give each one a title.

New York Times, 28 October 2011

A Gothic Tour of Italy*

Nina Burleigh

1	VISITORS to Italy tend to seek its sunny, Dionysian side — vino, pasta, opera, cinquecento art, George Clooney on a Vespa. But, like a chilly draft on a hot day, Italy's gothic angle offers intimations of darkness that make a moment on the piazza even more delicious. Tourists of today, like writers of the past, can find pleasure in the contrast between the beauty of the present and the proximity of
5	catacombs, ruins and sites of ancient suffering.
	The original gothic writers were much inspired by the duality in the bel paese. Edgar Allan Poe, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Horace Walpole, Ann Radcliffe and other masters of the romantic and horror genres set some of their most famous works in Italy.
10	For the gothic writers, different locations in Italy stimulated different aspects of the imagination. Venice seemed to hold special appeal for those wishing to mine pre-Freudian psychological terror ("The Assigination," by Poe, takes place near the Bridge of Sighs). Padua, an ancient university town 20 miles from Venice, served as the setting for one of Hawthorne's creepiest short works, "Rappaccini's Daughter," about a mad scientist who experiments with plant poisons and turns his beautiful daughter's lips into a literal kiss of death for her young student lover.
15	I decided to start my tour in Otranto, a white, seaside town on the Adriatic edge of Italy's boot heel, and the setting for what's regarded as the first gothic novel, "The Castle of Otranto" by Horace Walpole.
20	Otranto, I learned, is literally haunted by an old act of evil: a 15th-century massacre that Otrantans commemorate annually to this day. "Local history is filled with blood and darkness," an Otranto guide and historian told me as he led me into the Cathedral of Otranto. The cathedral is known for its complex mosaic floor, which depicts scenes from just about every human myth and legend known to the world circa A.D. 1100, including kabbalah's tree of life, Confucianism and Puss in Boots.
25	We entered on a cold, late-autumn morning and we were the only people inside. After admiring the beautiful floor, I was led to a truly gothic spectacle: along shelves on a wall off to the side were 800 human skulls — victims of invading Turks. The guide grimaced as he told how bits of the victims' preserved flesh are still stored in a locked drawer. Once a year in August they are removed and paraded through town streets.
30	"The Castle of Otranto" was a publishing phenomenon in 1764. Walpole's short tale describes the supernatural punishment of a usurping Italian feudal prince in a haunted castle packed with what we now consider standard fright stock — secret doors, gloomy tunnels, haunted suits of armor, portraits of

	<p>ancestors jumping out of their frames. At the time, though, these images were so fresh and shocking that Walpole's little book became an instant best seller in England.</p>
35	<p>Modern-day Otranto is a place of seductive pleasures, where a warm afternoon can be passed bathing in azure seas and eating Italian seafood accompanied by the local wine. I paid a few euros and toured the Castle of Otranto's white corridors alone, seeking signs of Walpole's ghosts. On the outside, it is a photogenic and perfectly preserved white fortress. But its defenses attest to the inhabitants' terror of the invader hundreds of years ago.</p>
40	<p>The trip west across the heel of Italy to Naples allows ample time to begin reading the works of a lesser-known gothic master, Ann Radcliffe. She was an Englishwoman who like Walpole was famous in her day for novels, many of which were set in Italy, that put seemingly supernatural forces of evil, often associated with Catholicism or small-time feudal tyrants, against innocent young women and their brave lovers.</p>
45	<p>Radcliffe's best-known novel, "The Italian," takes place in 18th-century Naples. Almost every page contains a castle keep, a shadowy ruin and creepy, robed stalkers from the religious orders. The plot is simple enough: a young nobleman of Naples falls in love with a girl of whom his mother strongly disapproves. The mother hires an evil monk to do away with her, but the monk discovers that the girl is actually his own daughter — the product of an illicit affair.</p>
50	<p>The novel opens with an Englishman surveying the Naples church of Santa Maria del Pianto, which Radcliffe wrote housed "the very ancient convent of the order of the Black Penitents." Contemporary visitors can test Radcliffe's gothic imagination against the lively reality of the busy city. The church of Santa Maria del Pianto is still there, but it's not on any tourist map. I discovered that the church still exists, but in what is now an organized-crime-infested suburb called Secondigliano. I crossed it off the to-do list, reluctantly.</p>
55	<p>The book's lovers, Vivaldi and Ellena, first see each other at the church of San Lorenzo Maggiore, which still stands in Naples's historic center — a yellow and gray hulk with an archaeological site underneath it. Across a busy medieval lane is a far spookier, skull-festooned church, built in the 17th century by a cult called the Souls of Purgatory, which dedicated itself to adopting the bones of the dead to pray over and rescue the souls associated with them from eternal oblivion. Presiding over this in the Church of Santa Maria delle Anime del Purgatorio is an actual crowned skull called "Lucia" and a sculptural masterpiece of a winged skull.</p>
60	<p>Most of the action in "The Italian" takes place at a ruined castle and monastery in the hills high above the city, where our hero and heroine get locked in dark rooms, are kidnapped and then sent to sadistic Inquisitional court. The Castel San'Elmo still towers over Naples, and its sides form a natural-looking cliff pocked with arches and gun holes and riddled with dark passageways and dungeons within.</p>
65	<p>San'Elmo's view of Naples, with its mint, ocher and rust roofs, church domes and sea, is spectacular. A few hundred yards downhill is the monastery of San Martino, a splendid, treasure-filled villa once inhabited by a small group of Carthusian monks who were expelled by Napoleon in 1804 and finally suppressed for good when Italy was unified in 1860. The monastery's secluded gardens, fragrant with orange trees, cypress and grape arbors, could have been the setting for the hero's run-ins with</p>
70	<p>Radcliffe's scheming monk. Both castle and monastery are accessible by a funicular that runs down to the historic center, which has lively shopping and fantastic restaurants and bars alongside medieval</p>

	creepiness.
75	<p>Don't miss the small Museo Capella Sansevero, with two anonymous skeletons whose entire circulatory systems are said to have been mysteriously mummified by a mad noble alchemist, and which resemble modernist wire sculptures of human figures. The Farnese collection of Roman marbles in the Naples National Archaeological Museum is also worth a visit. Some news kiosks will even provide a map of "Mysterious Naples" that includes spooky sites beyond even the English gothic imagination.</p>
80	<p>TRAVELING north from Naples toward Rome, the gothically inclined might want to pass the two-hour train ride reading a little novella by another obscure Victorian lady, Anne Crawford, author of the first vampire story in English. The pastoral vistas of the campagna have provided the setting for countless paintings and photographs commemorating Italy's Classical beauty, but carved into the rock beneath the fields is an extensive warren of catacombs that once held the remains of millions of pagan and then Christian dead.</p>
85	<p>Crawford set "A Mystery of the Campagna," published in 1887, in and above these tombs. Her female vampire, preceding Bram Stoker's Dracula by 10 years, is named Vespertilia, a tall and slender seductress, dressed in "something long and dark" out of which "a pair of white hands gleamed," says the narrator, a Frenchman who has lost his friend to her charms. She sleeps in the catacombs by day, and by night leads besotted Northern European gentlemen from the innocent frolics of their Grand Tours down the stairs, where "the darkness seemed to rise up and swallow them."</p>
90	<p>The catacombs are today a popular tourist site, fenced in and supervised by priests who lead groups of tourists down the yellow stone steps into the gloom, and, in a half-dozen languages, talk about the burial ground for the earliest Christians.</p>
95	<p>Rome is full of gothic locations, and for my trip I took along "The Marble Faun," by Nathaniel Hawthorne. It is a tale of three American artists working in Rome who meet and befriend a real-life satyr, who seems to have been the flesh-and-blood model for a marble statue in the Capitol. Visitors to the gloriously treasure-packed Capitoline Museums today will find many statues of the faun, associated with Dionysus, who represented the animal in man, simultaneously innocent, sexual and lawless. The faun's more threatening relative, the satyr, is overtly Luciferian, with horns and hooves. A large satyr of this type glares out from a cupboard in the Egyptian courtyard of the museum.</p>
100	<p>A bus ride or a leisurely stroll across Rome's historic center leads the traveler to another principal site in "The Marble Faun" — the creepily gorgeous Capuchin Catacombs, where the Hawthorne characters confronted an evil monk. Decorated in Baroque style with the white bones of 4,000 dead monks, the Capuchin Crypt near the luxurious Via Veneto is today a popular stop on any Rome tour. As macabre as it seems, it's also a sacred site. No cameras, no hats and no summery clothes are allowed.</p>
105	<p>The crypt is tiny and claustrophobic, and the bones' sickly sweet smell fills a dimly lighted passageway passing eight gated displays with arabesques of thousands of bones arranged by type — fingers, femurs, knuckles, skulls — in flowers, garlands, clocks or urns, attached to walls and ceiling. In the final room, the message posted on the floor near the roses left by worshipers, in five languages, reminds happy tourists to drink deeply from the cup of Italy's joys now, as the eternal shadow looms: "What you are</p>
110	<p>now we used to be. What we are now you will be."</p>

115	Back upstairs and on the streets of Rome, the pleasures of Italy are immediate and accessible, but also complex. Without the darkness, the country might be as bland as Sweden. Looking at Italy through the gothic lens deepens our appreciation of the pain, suffering and death that is, along with love, ease and light, also man's lot. The hellward pull of Thanatos on Italy's Eros, the artful dance between these archetypal opposites, is surely one of Italy's great enchantments.
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*This is a simplified abridged version of the article for exclusively non-profit classroom educational purposes. The original article may be found at

<http://travel.nytimes.com/2011/10/30/travel/a-gothic-tour-of-italy.html>

Questions for Comprehension

1. What is the 'duality in the bel paese' that the author of the article refers to?
2. According to the writer, what is the major characteristic of gothic stories set in the north?
3. What 15th century event does the writer mention?
4. How is this event remembered today?
5. What is 'The Castle of Otranto' about?
6. What details does the writer mention of contemporary Otranto?
7. What are common details in 'The Italian'?
8. Why does the writer mention Santa Maria del Pianto, San Lorenzo Maggiore and Castel San Elmo?
9. Why didn't the writer visit Santa Maria del Pianto?
10. Why does the writer mention Santa Maria delle Anime?
11. Describe the monastery of San Martino. Why does the writer mention it?
12. What can you see in the Capella Sansevero Museum?
13. What is modern Naples like?
14. What is the story 'The Mystery of Campagna' about?
15. What contrast does the writer find in Campagna?
16. What gothic associations does the writer find in Rome?
17. Describe the Capuchin Crypt.
18. What message does the Capuchin Crypt offer to visitors?

Structure

1. In which paragraphs does the writer set out the topic of her article?

2. Summarise the topic in one sentence.
3. How does the writer develop the topic?
4. Subdivide the article into sections. Explain your criteria for deciding each section.
5. Consider the final paragraph. Which other paragraph is it most similar to? How do the two relate?

Summing Up

What is the writer's purpose in writing this story?

What is the writer's overall message for her readers?