

Brandon Sanderson's *Mistborn* as American Neo-Gothic Fantasy*

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One of the most popular literary genres since the mid-20th century through modern times is fantasy fiction and its various subgenres, in particular, high fantasy. Saying that much of the boom in fantasy fiction has been attributed to J.R.R. Tolkien would by no means be an overstatement: he is famous for such novels as *The Hobbit*, *The Lord of the Rings*, *The Silmarillion* and is often referred to as the “father of fantasy.” Tolkien’s heritage and influence are undeniable (e.g. imaginary universes which bear semblance to our own world, books starting with elaborate maps on the very first pages, magical systems and imaginary creatures unique to each of these worlds). For several decades fantasy fiction was overwhelmed with books that resembled *The Lord of the Rings* not just in their setting and character development, but also in their overall tone and pace of the story (i.e. *Inheritance Cycle* by Christopher Paolini, *The Wheel of Time* by Robert Jordan, even *The Song of Ice and Fire* series by George R. R. Martin). What makes these novels unique, even today, is the language used to meticulously describe every detail. Tolkien’s novels are atmospheric and filled with thorough descriptions of the characters and environments they find themselves in. To many readers, who have been introduced to the world of fantasy fiction through Tolkien’s books, these are key elements for constructing a fantasy universe. This may be one of the reasons why fantasy novels tend to be very long, sometimes even exceeding 1000 pages per book.

Nevertheless, despite Tolkien’s subtle and faint, yet persistent influence, high fantasy fiction has evolved in a multitude of new directions ever since. 21st century fantasy novels tend to borrow some crucial details from gothic literature such as thorough descriptions of grotesque scenes, the presence and fear of death, unexpected turn of events, dark atmosphere, half-ravaged cities and abandoned villages, etc. Some of the major modern fantasy authors who clearly bare Tolkien’s influences are Joe Abercrombie and Patrick Rothfuss. Abercrombie has a very grotesque, monstrous and unforgiving world, uncensored language, cynical characters, and most importantly sublime politics, while Rothfuss created a magical yet rational world where science exists and

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which reminds one of the mediaeval ballads and stories about the ‘fair folk’ – faeries, and again, politics.

Fantasy novels are amongst some of the best-selling books and yet there are only a few literary theories and studies conducted to this day. It goes without saying that major authors such as J.R.R. Tolkien and C.S. Lewis have undergone thorough and rigorous analysis over the past several decades. However, contemporary authors of fantasy fiction have not had the opportunity to be explored by literary analysts quite yet.

In this case study I will discuss Brandon Sanderson’s *Mistborn* trilogy. The author himself admits having deliberately employed the use of gothic elements in his novels when it came to world-building, architecture, in particular. Borrowing heavily from “the gothic” Sanderson managed to create worlds filled with despair and horror.

Before commencing the study, it should be made clear that the borders of both gothic and fantasy as literary genre are very vague and cannot be defined without difficulty. However, unlike the literary genre, gothic architecture is easily definable. I would like to refer to the categorization of *Gothic architecture* and *Gothic Revival* in Britannica Encyclopaedia:

Gothic architecture, architectural style in Europe that lasted from the mid-12th century to the 16th century, particularly a style of masonry building characterized by cavernous spaces with the expanse of walls broken up by overlaid tracery.

Gothic Revival, architectural style that drew its inspiration from medieval architecture and competed with the Neoclassical revivals in the United States and Great Britain. Only isolated examples of the style are to be found on the Continent. (Britannica.com)

Having clear definitions of Gothic architecture makes it easier to implore such elements in writing, which is what we observe in Sanderson’s *Mistborn* trilogy. As we will discuss further ahead in this paper, Sanderson has used pieces of American Neo-Gothic architecture as sources of inspiration in his trilogy. American Neo-Gothic can be considered as Gothic fantasy of our days, making Sanderson’s novels its realisation in literary form.

While gothic and fantasy are undeniably interrelated, there are some key differences in the components from which these genres consist of: the conditions and the position of the “supernatural” vary greatly eventually turning into “fantastic.” As Tzvetan Todorov states in his *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre*:

The fantastic requires the fulfilment of three conditions. First, the text must oblige the reader to consider the world of the characters as a world of living persons and to hesitate between a natural or supernatural explanation of the events described. Second, this hesitation may also be experienced by a character; thus the reader's role is so to speak entrusted to a character, and at the same time the hesitation is represented, it becomes one of the themes of the work — in the case of naive reading, the actual reader identifies himself with the character. Third, the reader must adopt a certain attitude with regard to the text: he will reject allegorical as well as “poetic” interpretations. (33)

Fantasy and gothic are deeply related and *seep* into one another even after considering the obvious differences that are present in both genres. Nonetheless, while “fantastic” is a key element for a gothic novel (ghosts, hearing voices, moving portraits, etc.), fantasy fiction is not always required to be gothic. It is, however, the mediaeval setting of most fantasy novels that makes them seem gothic. Some of the characteristics that can be attributed to both gothic and fantastic novels are the presence of suspense and internal focalisation. These two are interconnected and help to emphasise the role of each other in a novel.

Sanderson's *Mistborn* can serve as testament to this theory. Fantasy is a very flexible genre; it can absorb other genres, it can melt into another genre, or ultimately it can blend with another genre. This gives fantasy authors a myriad of possibilities in their world-building. Of course, while there are many aspects which overlap with Gothic Revival novels, essentially, these terms cannot be used to identify with one another. While both of these genres have their specific features, their boundaries can become fluid which allows inter-penetration to take place.

Throughout the books the reader cannot help but identify themselves with the heroes of *Mistborn*. The reader is driven to fear for them, cheer for them, and experience their adventures with them. However, this is done in the safety of our homes, and thus we can enjoy the feelings of fear without being exposed to the accompanying danger. This once again brings us back to the *sublime*. According to Edmund Burke “when danger and pain press too nearly, they are incapable of giving any delight,” but on the other hand “at certain distances, and with certain modifications ... they are delightful” (40).

The best way to describe these books is that they take place in fantasy universes reminiscent of mediaeval gothic cultures thanks to architectural designs, dark atmosphere, presence of despair, fear and terror, and of course, the supernatural.

I would like to introduce the author of *Mistborn* novels. Brandon Sanderson is an American author who started publishing in mid 2000s. He is famous for his vast Cosmere universe where most of his fantasy novels take place. Sanderson is also well known in the fantasy community as the author who finished Robert Jordan's *The Wheel of Time* series after his untimely passing. Despite Sanderson churning out books on a yearly basis, he also finds time to teach a "Creative Writing" course at his Alma Mater Brigham Young University.

With a cursory view many Gothic elements can be perceived throughout Sanderson's *Mistborn* trilogy. While this world can be seen as analogous to the 18th-century Europe, it is a dystopian universe set on the imaginary world of *Scadrial*. In this world ash continuously falls from the sky during the day while at night supernatural and mysterious mists cover everything. The nobility treats the *skaa* (working class populace) in an intolerable manner bordering on slavery. The Emperor, referred to as "the Lord Ruler," has established a reign of tyranny. In the shadow of this oppression exist people with supernatural powers known as "Mistborn" who attempt to thwart the Lord Ruler's tyranny and establish peace and equality between the nobility and the *skaa*.

The events of the *Mistborn* trilogy take place in the fictional world of *Scadrial*, primarily in the capital city of the empire, Luthadel. While this world is not very advanced industrially, the setting, the description of the city, its architecture, and constantly falling ash are reminiscent of industrial-era France. The following quotations allows us to examine a rough description of the city:

In Kelsier's opinion, the city of Luthadel—seat of the Lord Ruler—was a gloomy sight. Most of the buildings had been built from stone blocks, with tile roofs for the wealthy, and simple, peaked wooden roofs for the rest. The structures were packed closely together, making them seem squat despite the fact that they were generally three stories high.

The tenements and shops were uniform in appearance; this was not a place to draw attention to oneself. Unless, of course, you were a member of the high nobility.

Interspersed throughout the city were a dozen or so monolithic keeps. Intricate, with rows of spearlike spires or deep archways, these were the homes of the high nobility. In fact, they were the mark of a high noble family: Any family who could afford to build a keep and maintain a high-profile presence in Luthadel was considered to be a Great House.

Most of the open ground in the city was around these keeps. The patches of space amid the tenements were like clearings in a forest, the keeps themselves like solitary

mounts rising above the rest of the landscape. Black mountains. Like the rest of the city, the keeps were stained by countless years of ashfalls.

Every structure in Luthadel—virtually every structure Kelsier had ever seen—had been blackened to some degree. Even the city wall, upon which Kelsier now stood, was blackened by a patina of soot. Structures were generally darkest at the top, where the ash gathered, but rainwaters and evening condensations had carried the stains over ledges and down walls. Like paint running down a canvas, the darkness seemed to creep down the sides of buildings in an uneven gradient. The streets, of course, were completely black...

Kelsier turned away from them, looking up into the distance, toward the city center, where the Lord Ruler's palace loomed like some kind of massive, multi-spined insect. Kredik Shaw, the Hill of a Thousand Spires. The palace was several times the size of any nobleman's keep, and was by far the largest building in the city (Sanderson, *The Final Empire* 49).

The castle towering all over the city of Luthadel is an excellent example of sublime presented through “magnitude in building” as put by Edmund Burke:

A true artist should put a generous deceit on the spectators, and effect the noblest designs by easy methods ... No work of art can be great, but as it deceives; to be otherwise is the prerogative of nature only. (76)

As the novel progresses, the reader experiences more detailed descriptions of the buildings, especially the Keeps of the Great Houses. Incidentally the author himself admits that the buildings and the setting of the cities in his trilogy are of Gothic origin. Some of these are even based on actual gothic cathedrals (Sanderson, B., *Annotation Mistborn 3 Chapter Twenty-Seven*).

According to Sanderson, Keep Venture is based on the National Cathedral in Washington D.C.:

The keep was majestic—that much was visible simply from the architecture. While it maintained a defensive wall around the grounds, the keep itself was more an artistic construction than a fortification. Sturdy buttressings arched out from the sides, allowing for intricate windows and delicate spires. Brilliant stained-glass windows stretched high along the sides of the rectangular building, and they shone with light from within, giving the surrounding mists a variegated glow (Sanderson, *The Final Empire* 113).

Another detailed description of a keep is presented to the readers in book 3 *The Hero of Ages*, and this time the author draws parallels with the LDS Salt Lake Temple (Sanderson, B., *Annotation Mistborn 3 Chapter Twenty-Seven*). While both the aforementioned cathedrals are products of Gothic revival, they definitely carry the medieval spirit in their architecture. They display a mix of Gothic architectural styles which can clearly be identified in pointed arches, flying buttresses, a variety of vaulted ceilings, stained-glass windows and carved decorations in stone. Sanderson also offers his readers a closer look at the description of Keep Venture from the interior:

The Venture main hall was a grand and imposing sight. Four or five daunting stories high, the hall was several times as long as it was wide. Enormous, rectangular stained-glass windows ran in rows along the hall, and the strange, powerful lights outside shone on them directly, throwing a cascade of colors across the room. Massive, ornate stone pillars were set into the walls, running between the windows. Just before the pillars met the floor, the wall fell away, indenting and creating a single-story gallery beneath the windows themselves. Dozens of white-clothed tables sat in this area, shadowed behind the pillars and beneath the overhang. In the distance, at the far end of the hallway, Vin could make out a low balcony set into the wall, and this held a smaller group of tables.

The pillars in the hall weren't just normal columns, they were carved masterpieces. Wide banners hung from the ceiling just above the windows, and the arching, lofty ceiling was crisscrossed by structural buttressings and dotted with capstones. Somehow she knew each of those capstones was intricately carved, despite the fact that they were too far away to be seen from below. (Sanderson, *The Final Empire* 239)

According to Sanderson, illuminating the stained-glass windows was one of his main goals after filling his world with Gothic cathedrals (Sanderson, *Annotation Mistborn Chapter Twelve Part One*). The author manages to artfully and cleverly create cities which are soaked in the gothic vibes. We can draw parallels with the gothic atmosphere presented by Nick Groom in his *The Gothic: A Very Short Introduction*:

Decoration was not confined to the masonry and woodwork. Interiors were richly ornamented: canopies were painted and structural features were picked out in red. This architecture drew on the human scale of reliquaries, and canopies, stained glass, and statuary enclosed space within the building, creating private, sanctified niches filled with coloured light. (20)

Groom then goes on to elaborate on the omnipresence of death and the morbid funerary art which would eventually result in the association of fear and the supernatural with gothic (22-23).

Sanderson is very detailed with his descriptions which serve as the sources for worldbuilding. The cities in Sanderson's books are being constructed like puzzles, with bits and pieces of information being presented to the reader throughout the chapters.

While architectural details are probably the most evident and explicit representations of gothic in Sanderson's *Mistborn* trilogy, it does not end there. It is not uncommon for fantasy authors to inhabit their worlds with creatures from their own imagination. In Sanderson's case those are creatures called "mistwraiths," "kandra" and "koloss." According to Marilyn Butler these are the kind of images that "project an evil and disturbing environment, and though no specific moral need be pointed concerning the corruption of the present order or the desirability of rejecting authority, the subliminal frame of reference is felt to be a breakdown of control, both in the psyche and in the state" (157). I will concentrate on discussing mistwraiths in this paper for the sake of conciseness.

The mistwraiths remind the reader of lost souls or even ghosts due to their grotesque and amorphous appearance, and kandra, since they are closely related. In the beginning it is important to take a look at the description of mistwraiths:

What she saw caused her to shiver—fascinated, revolted, and more than a little disturbed. The creature had smoky, translucent skin, and Vin could see its bones. It had dozens upon dozens of limbs, and each one looked as if it had come from a different animal. There were human hands, bovine hooves, canine haunches, and others she couldn't identify.

The mismatched limbs let the creature walk—though it was more of a shamble. It crawled along slowly, moving like an awkward centipede. Many of the limbs, in fact, didn't even look functional—they jutted from the creature's flesh in a twisted, unnatural fashion.

Its body was bulbous and elongated. It wasn't just a blob, though . . . there was a strange logic to its form. It had a distinct skeletal structure, and—squinting through tin-enhanced eyes—she thought she could make out translucent muscles and sinew wrapping the bones. The creature flexed odd jumbles of muscles as it moved, and appeared to have a dozen different rib cages. Along the main body, arms and legs hung at unnerving angles.

And heads—she counted six. Despite the translucent skin, she could make out a horse head sitting beside that of a deer. Another head turned toward her, and she could see its human skull. The head sat atop a long spinal cord attached to some kind of animal torso, which was in turn attached to a jumble of strange bones. (Sanderson, *Final Empire* 172)

Mistwraiths are introduced to the reader from the very beginning of the novels. However, it is made clear that many *skaa* consider them to be folktales, which serve as yet another reason to justify the *skaa*'s fear of the nightly mists. Sanderson also discusses the folkloric imagination of the *skaa* regarding mistwraiths. As is seen in the “Prologue” of *The Final Empire*, the *skaa* believe that the mistwraiths would evaporate in sunlight. They also assume that the mistwraiths have the ability of impersonating people (*Final Empire* 35). It should be noted that this does hold some truth, since kandra, who are master impersonators, are the evolved form of mistwraiths.

Mistwraiths are ponderous nocturnal scavengers. Their amorphous physical appearance can be revolting, terrifying, fascinating and disturbing. Their skin is translucent which allows their bones to be seen. Along the main body, dozens of arms and legs hang at unnerving angles, each appearing as if it came from a different animal. The result is a bulbous and elongated creature that has an odd logic to its form. They can possess human heads, deer antlers, bovine hooves, canine haunches and many other skeletal structures they may have encountered. The mismatched limbs cause it to stumble and lurch around, moving slowly like an unbalanced centipede. Of course, these creatures, though harmless to the living, spread terror and fear in their hearts, and as noted by Kelsier “most *skaa* fear and curse mistwraiths, but go their entire lives without actually seeing one” (*Final Empire* 174).

Nick Groom discusses similar concepts in *The Gothic* linking the basis of gothic literature with the imagery “of imprisonment and incarceration, rape and torture, revenge and retribution; of dismembered body parts, walking corpses and spirits; of annihilation and extinction” (35).

As previously discussed above, mistwraiths spread fear and terror, despite the reality that they are arguably the most harmless creatures in Scadrial's universe. Here again, it seems fitting to reference Edmund Burke, according to whom ugliness is a sublime idea, only if its “united with such qualities as excite and strong terror” (118).

Nick Groom discusses that American Gothic “addresses in literature primarily race and slavery” (112). It is important to note, that American Gothic, unlike its predecessor in Europe, has a

completely different history of development: America did not have the historical routes and architecture that birthed European Gothic. The determination of American Gothic poses some difficulties, and thus hesitation can be observed regarding the issue. Furthermore, American Gothic is often lumped together with melodrama and romance. In the aftermath of this reluctance and the desire of further alienating it from European Gothic (Groom 112). Likewise, as Marc Amfreville notes in his essay “American Gothic”:

English gothic writing had hitherto fiction that either conveyed its readers away from reality into a distant world of the terror-inducing supernatural, or presented them with apparently ghastly and spectral events, explained away before the end as mere trappings (134).

Both Groom and Amfreville agree that for Americans, as a newborn nation it was essential to develop literary tropes that would allow them to be distinguished from British literature even if the language of the writers of both countries was English. According to Groom American Gothic has its roots in Puritan theology, seventeenth-century theories of constitutional freedoms, and European folklore and literature (112).

Brandon Sanderson appears to follow both of these traditions. He has managed to address the issues of both race and slavery in his *Mistborn* series, used tropes often observed in English Gothic, i.e. architecture, folklore, fear and terror. *Mistborn* is an undeveloped world, which is dark because of the constantly falling ash and ever-present mist, it is filled with fantastic creatures of gothic nature. The architecture plays a key part in the development of the novels. Sanderson presents his cities in meticulous details as the story progresses, thus bringing it all together like a puzzle. With the observation of the above-mentioned, it becomes clear that Sanderson was able to come up with his *Mistborn* only because he is an author of 21st century: European Gothic, Gothic Revival, American neo-Gothic architecture, and lastly fantasy fiction in the form it came to be after Tolkien. Without meeting all of these conditions, it is safe to say that *Mistborn* would not exist.

It is also thanks to the conjunction of the afore-mentioned conditions that the protagonist of Sanderson’s *Mistborn* series is Vin, a female character. While in modern day and age we often encounter novels with female leads, this is still a rare occurrence for fantasy fiction (the tradition might find its roots in Tolkien and Lewis – while these two authors feature strong female characters in their works, the protagonists are usually male). The reader is introduced to an enslaved and

brainwashed population which eventually is able to break the constraints of its times, rebel and create a new better world. The novels also have quite a great amount of political bickering and debate. The social and economic state across Scadrial, particularly its capital Luthadel are described in scrupulous details.

Brandon Sanderson managed to combine different styles and tropes from various literary periods and genres. He has come up with strong and unique characters, whose development is not rushed or too slow, whose pain and suffering are real enough to be able to recreate the sensations of sublime. Science, politics and economy are all mixed together in *Mistborn*, and eventually blend into each other. *Mistborn* is able to give its readers everything one would expect from both fantasy and gothic novels – romance and tragedy, occult and magic, supernatural powers and mystical creatures. *Mistborn* is born as the epitome of American neo-Gothic and its amalgamation with fantasy fiction.

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