Definition: **goth** from *The Hutchinson Unabridged Encyclopedia with Atlas and Weather Guide*

Member of a youth movement characterized in fashion by black, dramatic clothing and black-and-white make-up, and in music by portentous, swirling synthesizer riffs and angst-ridden lyrics. Goth began in the north of England in the late 1970s. Goth bands include the Sisters of Mercy, Siouxsie and the Banshees, and the Cure.

Summary Article: **Goth Subculture**

From *Encyclopedia of Social Deviance*

Subcultures, according to the criminologist Albert Cohen, are made up of individuals who came together to resolve social status problems by developing new values, based on shared characteristics. To be part of the subculture, one must first be labeled as such and must be excluded from dominant society (e.g., an outcast). Those within the subculture then rely more and more on each other for social interaction and validation of their way of life and shared beliefs. Paul Hodkinson argues that a subculture should include four criteria: identity, commitment, autonomy, and consistent distinctiveness. These four criteria are not definitive elements of subcultures but are contributing factors and, when taken together, assist in determining what should be considered a subculture. Based on these characteristics, Goth should be considered a type of subculture rather than a more fleeting youth movement concerning fashion, style, and music. With Goth, there is a sense of shared identity and music, adherence to identifiable styles, preferences, consumption practices, production of subculture-specific magazines and blogs (e.g., *Gothic Beauty Magazine*), participation in specialist events and social scenes (i.e., Goth clubs, Gothic Weekends, World Goth Day), and use of Goth slang (e.g., *babybat*, *mundanes*). All these reflect various social interaction and ways to validate the lifestyle and shared beliefs of the subculture. Goth subculture has been around for more than 30 years and can be found in almost every part of the world, sustaining itself much longer than similar subcultures arising around the same time, while also continuing to evolve.

However, Goth subculture remains elusive and still largely an underground movement/culture, where those involved prefer to avoid publicity. Despite mainstream culture attempting to appropriate bits and pieces of Goth fashion and style (e.g., fashion designers incorporating Goth elements into clothing lines), Goth characters in popular TV and films and/or “Goth-friendly” TV/movies (e.g., Abby Scuito on NCIS, *The Matrix* [1999], *Lost Girl* [2012]), the mainstream has not seriously capitalized on Goth. Goth continues to be, and most likely will remain, a marginal subculture composed of outsiders alienated by the status quo, intentionally nonconformist, misunderstood, considered evil or violent, and prejudiced against and sometimes even abused.

**History**

Goth subculture emerged in the United Kingdom near the end of the 1970s as an offshoot of the punk rock subculture. Punk subculture arose from rebellious and defiant fans of punk rock music becoming popular during the 1970s. During the end of that decade, there emerged new bands—Bauhaus, Joy Division, The Cure, and Siouxsie and the Banshees—on the punk rock scene, originally deemed “post-punk,” who had a darker edge to their music, complemented with a sense of mystery and eeriness. These new bands wore theatrical costumes and makeup complementing their new sound. The release
of the song “Bela Lugosi's Dead” by Bauhaus in 1979 is most often referred to as the origin of Goth subculture. By 1981, Goth rock was its own subgenre of post-punk, and followers of these bands coalesced into a visible movement. In 1982, the Batcave, a nightclub in London, opened and soon became a prominent fixture within the subculture, serving as venue for these new bands to play and a meeting place for their fans (i.e., Goths). It remains unknown who named this post-punk music (and its followers) Goth/Gothic, but many attribute the use of the label to the British music press to describe these emerging bands based on their spooky makeup and attire. It has also been attributed to an interview given by the manager of Joy Division who described the band's sound as “Goth dance music.” Either way, the term Goth stuck and has been used since to refer not only to the musical genre but also to the subculture that evolved and those within it. In the United States, Goth emerged around the same time from the punk rock scene in California, but independent of the British movement. Many consider the height of Goth music and subculture to have occurred in the 1980s, and though the music and subculture survived, many who experienced Goth during this time believe that Goth is dead because it has changed and evolved since its beginnings.

During the 1990s, within the United States and Germany, there was a rise of major record rock and metal bands that “looked” Goth, were marketed as Goth, and appropriated Goth style, such as Marilyn Manson and Slipknot. Yet despite being sold as “Goth,” the music produced was not Goth and not considered (then or now) Goth by those within the subculture. These bands gained in popularity with teens, and the public began to associate this mainstream music as Goth. Soon the distinction between who and what is Goth blurred, and the public assumed anyone wearing black and with dyed hair as Goth, even though the person might not be part of the subculture.

Visibility of Goths and those within the subculture became ubiquitous in America by the 1990s with teenagers and young adults. Yet the tragedy at Columbine High School at Columbine, Colorado, resulted in misinformation circulated about the subculture, and for the general public, the term Goth became synonymous with abnormality, dangerousness, violence, and evil. On April 20, 1999, Dylan Klebold and Eric Harris shot and killed 13 of their fellow students and wounded 23 others at Columbine High School, and in the course of reporting the massacre, the media quickly identified both boys as Goths, members of the “Goth looking” Trench Coat Mafia (TCM). These reports occurred because Klebold and Harris had both worn black trench coats when they started shooting, and other students reported that both were part of the TCM, or Goths. However, Klebold and Harris wore black trench coats for their functionality for hiding and carrying weapons and ammo inside and because they looked “cool,” not because either of these boys associated with the TCM or Goth culture. The label of “Goth” was erroneously applied to the shooters, and this resulted in a misguided association of Goth subculture with violence. As a result of these stories and descriptions, a backlash against the Goth subculture and rise of anti-Goth sentiments occurred. A misconception grew that all Goths were violent or that all teenagers who looked “Goth” or associated with the subculture were psychopaths determined to execute the next “Columbine.” National polls taken after the tragedy implied that the public identified Goth culture, along with violent movies and video games, as factors that contributed to the shootings, even though the shooters themselves were not included in the list, according to Dave Cullen. Additionally, an article in the U.K. newspaper the Guardian blamed Goth (but not violent video games, movies) for the shootings. Many adults (parents, teachers, and counselors) deemed Goth dangerous to youth and started campaigns to suppress anything faintly associated with it.

After these reports and the subsequent backlash, the popularity of Goth waned and also of those who
self-identified as Goth even if they were still part of the subculture or looked Goth. Many who would have identified as Goth prior to Columbine rejected this label afterward to escape the associated label of “violent,” even though true Goths are not violent or have anything to do with violence. Five months after Columbine, investigators stated that the shooters were not involved in Goth subculture and actually abhorred Goth music, though many of the myths that were sparked after Columbine (e.g., Goths are violent) remain pervasive in the United States. Although Columbine is one of the most notable incidents of misinformation surrounding the Goth subculture resulting in prejudice and apprehension, it is not the only incident of this type. Often high-profile crimes such as Columbine are falsely associated with perpetrators who are reported to be Goth and part of the subculture, although in fact they are not and never were.

Defining Goth Subculture

Defining Goth subculture confounds not only those outside wanting to understand it but also those identifying as Goth; often it is easier to define what is not Goth. Goth subculture is not a religion, a cult, or a fleeting youth movement; all of those within it are not Satanists, suicidal, fans of Marilyn Manson, or depressed or only wear black (though some within the subculture may adhere to one or all of these stereotypes). There is, however, consensus that the subculture involves associated tastes in aesthetics, style/fashion, and music, all expressing a unique state of mind, and the main components that define it are the music (i.e., true Goth music), the fashion (i.e., looking the part), and having a “gothic personality” (i.e., individualism, interest in the so-called darker things, creativity). The specific aesthetics, style/fashions, and music that define Goth, though, are regularly debated within the subculture, since there are several “types” of Goths with differing styles and tastes in music. According to Nancy Kilpatrick, even to Goths, it remains unknown what the entirety of Goth subculture and being Goth is about, though the most accurate way to define Goth is as a state of mind. Goth state of mind includes being attracted to things that are dark and melancholy; striving to stand out and be different (but not necessarily wanting attention); having an appreciation for horror and beauty; being creative, individualistic, inquisitive, and philosophical in nature; and having an interest in the unknown, macabre, and/or the paranormal. Goth subculture encompasses a diversity of people, not necessarily all alike or all agreeing on what being Goth involves. There appears to be agreement, though, that Goth includes embracing those things that the mainstream rejects or fears; having fascination and obsession with morbid, shocking, and grim subjects; combining romance and tragedy; and having a dark sensibility that is also combined with a sense of humor.

Within the subculture, there remains debate surrounding what being Goth entails and sometimes a “Gothier than thou” attitude permeates, where Goths attempt to “out-Goth” each other. There is sometimes an elitism with Goths who tend to judge and classify others (both in and out of the subculture) based on a set of mutually agreed-on standards (e.g., dressing Goth, listening to Goth music). Some within the subculture espouse a pervasive attitude that many who may “look Goth” are not true Goths or real Goths and only poseurs or wannabes, dressing “Goth” to shock others (e.g., parents). There is also insecurity among some Goths who doubt their own authenticity as real Goths, likely due to the continuing debate surrounding “What is Goth?” and the “Gothier than thou” attitudes.

Despite a reputation for tolerance and diversity, some within the subculture describe viewing other “Goths” skeptically, and as wannabes until their “Gothiness” (i.e., their commitment to the subculture) has been proven. Those new to the subculture are often referred to by other Goths as babybats (a term that can mean one is new to the subculture or as a derogatory term for those only dressing Goth
for shock value and not belonging to the subculture). There is a division between those who identify as Goth and those who only “look” Goth who are thought to be familiar with only the superficial parts of the subculture (i.e., dressing in black), but not considered part of it. These “superficial goths” are often referred to by Goths in the subculture by derogatory terms such as mallgoths, spookykids, or Mansonites (i.e., followers of Marilyn Manson); emos (this can also refer to its own subculture, which also originated from punk rock, but different in style, music, and personality); alterateens, or weekenders.

Disagreement continues concerning what constitutes a real Goth. Some argue that a real Goth is one who has the “gothic personality” and outwardly displays this through fashion. Others argue that a real Goths not only have to look the part with a “wardrobe of darkness” (i.e., outwardly displaying their “gothic personality”) but also have to listen to real Goth music such as Bauhaus, Joy Division, and similar underground bands (not the mainstream “gothy” bands/music). Since Goth arose as a music-based subculture, these Goths argue that the music is really what defines it, and if someone does not listen to (at least some) Goth music, he or she is not a real Goth. Yet even Goths fail to reach a consensus on which musicians are considered really Goth. The obvious artists (e.g., Bauhaus) are usually mentioned, but after that Goth music and artists become debatable, even though most artists considered Goth reject this label.

Many argue that the subculture is one of both style and music. Goth fashion (and the mind-set with it) makes the subculture unique and separate from mainstream culture, while the music creates a community. As such, both the style and the music are integral parts of what it means to be Goth and define the Goth subculture. Yet according to Jillian Venters, a popular writer on Goth culture, there is no checklist to determine what makes a real Goth. Several within the subculture espouse a view that one should not feel insecure about one’s Goth identity, and a real Goth is anyone who is interested in the subculture; wants to learn more about it; enjoys real Goth music (but also listens to other styles, including hip-hop); has an interest in alternative, dark, or Goth fashion/style; and wants to be Goth, despite what anyone else thinks.

According to the fantasy and horror novelist Nancy Kilpatrick, it remains difficult to define Goth due to the elusiveness and secrecy of those within the subculture. Although the fashion, style, and music of Goth are visible, though often misunderstood by the mainstream, Goths tend not to speak to outsiders about their lifestyle (though they often debate and discuss aspects of the subculture with other Goths). It is a misconception that Goths dress the way they do to attract attention (though this may be true for some). Goths choose to dress in unconventional ways not for the inevitable attention but to affirm their outsider status, express individuality, display involvement with the subculture, outwardly show the Goth mind-set, separate themselves from the mainstream, express creativity, and because they like doing so. The attention is not looked for but grudgingly accepted by the majority of Goths.

**Style and Fashion**

Goth style incorporates elements of punk and glam rock and draws inspiration from the Victorian and medieval eras, rave culture, and BDSM (i.e., bondage and discipline and sadomasochistic fetishism), and other styles to create a variety of Goth looks (i.e., Steampunk Goth, Lolita Goth, Cybergoth, Victorian Goth, etc.). Though there are many styles that look similar to Goth (e.g., emo), only certain aesthetics should be considered and identified as authentically Goth. The most obvious and common is the consistent preference for and prevalence of the color black, save for a few exceptions (e.g., “ice
Goths” who generally wear all white, or mostly white with a few black accents). Many Goths wear a preponderance of black or dark clothing, dye their hair black (or other shades), wear black eyeliner, and paint their nails black or other dark shades, and even use the color for household decoration.

Despite the misconception that all Goths look alike, there are many subsets and subsubsets of fashion and style within the subculture. Even though the most common and a unifying theme is a preference for black, wearing black clothes does not automatically create a Goth. When Goth originally branched off from punk rock, the style associated with it was a darker, edgier version of punk fashion and included fishnets, leather jackets, some bondage gear (e.g., padlocked collars, polyvinyl chloride clothing), and lots of black. Tradgoths or eldergoths (i.e., those who were around at the beginning of the Goth subculture, or those who value the beginnings of the subculture) can still be found who dress in this way.

Other styles within the subculture range from perkygoth (i.e., wearing brighter colors with black, displaying a playfulness with the somber) to corpgoths (i.e., those who are still in the subculture and want to “look the part” but dress down enough for employment in mainstream society), and the cybergoth (i.e., combining traditional goth style with raver fashion, including neon/fluorescent colors and glow sticks). The most common styles seen are the romantigoth, which can be done in an understated way or very elaborately (e.g., wearing bustles, corsets, muffs, and parasols). This style is said to emphasize the theatricality of being Goth and is inspired by styles from the 18th and 19th centuries. Yet there is an emphasis placed on creating uniquely tailored outfits to an individual’s specific tastes, and individual Goths create their own distinctive fashion by mixing and matching from various styles.

Both male and female Goths often wear fashions considered feminine (e.g., frilly shirts, lace, skirts, fishnet tights, and mesh tops). Goth fashion tends to be androgynous, obscuring traditional gender markers and defying conventional gender guidelines. Certain styles of makeup and fashion with both males and females, common during the advent of Goth, continue to remain popular. These include thick, dark or black eye liner, makeup emphasizing feminized facial features, pale or white foundation, and dark lipstick (though the use of black lipstick is debated).

Certain fabrics are preferred, such as velvet and lace, but clothing of other fabrics is worn, as long as the piece of clothing is still “Goth.” Accessories may include several pieces of jewelry, necklaces, earrings, and bracelets, usually silver and emphasizing occult, pagan, or other religious imagery (e.g., pentagrams), or hats (usually inspired by the Victorian era). Many Goths have body modifications such as tongue, lip, eyebrow, or nose piercings and/or tattoo(s). Finishing the look, Goths often are seen wearing Doc Marten boots or other heavy boots (usually also black).

Music

Goth music encompasses many different genres of music, including darkwave, deathrock, industrial, ethereal, and neoclassical, among others. Being outside the mainstream, indie, or underground is a defining feature of Goth music. Goth music is seldom played on the radio, not seen on music TV channels (e.g., MTV) or featured as part of music award shows (e.g., Grammy awards). The artists are most often not represented by major or commercially successful labels (e.g., Sony Music) and usually release/record their music themselves or through independent record labels.

Goth music, though encompassing various forms, is often described by those outside the subculture as characteristically dark, somber, and depressing. Yet those within the subculture, who regularly listen to and enjoy Goth music, use adjectives such as mystery, otherworldly, beauty, horror, madness, and
passion and express that it balances both the positive and the negative and the light and the dark, accentuating the state of mind of the subculture itself.

See also: Conformity; Fetishes; Individualism; Labeling Approach; Marginality; Moral Panics; Outsiders; Punk Subculture; Stigma and Stigma Management

Further Readings


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