

JEFFREY ANDREW WEINSTOCK

## Introduction

### *The American Gothic*

In Leslie Fiedler's seminal study of American literature, *Love and Death in the American Novel*, first published in 1960, Fiedler makes bold claims for the significance of the Gothic<sup>1</sup> genre to American literature. He asserts, for example, that "It is the gothic form that has been most fruitful in the hands of our best writers" (28), that the tradition of American literature "is almost essentially a gothic one" (142), and that "Until the gothic had been discovered, the serious American novel could not begin; and as long as that novel lasts, the gothic cannot die" (143). Symptomatic of its historical moment, Fiedler's study limits itself almost exclusively to white male authors. His conclusion, however, is one that arguably could be extended much more broadly: "our greatest writers sought out gothic themes" (142). The American literary tradition, which for Fiedler more or less begins with Charles Brockden Brown at the turn of the eighteenth century and extends to Nabokov but that we could extend today to include Shirley Jackson, Toni Morrison, Joyce Carol Oates, Stephen King, Bret Easton Ellis, Gloria Naylor, Louise Erdrich, Anne Rice, Cormac McCarthy, Peter Straub, and many others, is at its core a Gothic one. An understanding of American culture and character, therefore, must include as part of its consideration the Gothic impulse as it manifests in both literary and popular culture.

While Fiedler's claims about the centrality of the Gothic form to American letters seem difficult, if not impossible, to dispute, they do introduce some curious problems. As developed first in literature starting in the eighteenth century and later in film and other narrative media, the Gothic is a genre that focuses on the past and immoderate, ungovernable passions. What correspondences then could a literary form emphasizing medieval history, ghosts in crumbling castles, emotional extremes, and a debased aristocracy possibly have in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries with a new country lacking an entrenched class structure and founded on the principles of Enlightenment rationalism, and why does it retain its hold over the American imagination today? The answers to these questions are

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complicated ones explored by the contributors to this volume in two ways: first, by taking issue with the premise that America ever was a place free from history, class relations, and, one might add, other forms of social antagonism including race, gender, and religion; and second, by showing the ways in which the Gothic goes beyond elaborating and redeploying a specific set of identifiable clichés (ghosts, castles, monsters, and so forth) as it gives shape to culturally specific anxieties and tabooed desires.

### Transgression and Power

The Gothic, as explained by Fred Botting, is an artistic form fascinated with transgression (see Botting 6–12). All cultures inevitably have boundaries – dividing lines between where different people may and may not go, and between what is acceptable and what is off-limits for those occupying different subject positions – and as soon as there are boundaries, there are anxieties and fantasies about crossing them. All communities, therefore, will have their own Gothic tales and traditions: narratives about the desires to and consequences of violating legal rules and transgressing social expectations. Such stories function in a dual capacity. On the one hand, they can act as tools for teaching and socialization – fairy tales frequently function in this capacity: wander off the path of virtue and risk getting lost in the dark woods and eaten up by the big bad wolf. On the other hand, such stories can also function as forms of vicarious liberation for readers and viewers as they follow along with protagonists who disregard established rules and expectations and venture into forbidden territory. The flirtation with the taboo is, of course, a large part of the appeal of the Gothic – we read breathlessly or hold our hands over our eyes while peeking through our fingers as the Gothic hero or heroine confronts the horrifying monster or uncovers the dark history of murder, incest, and/or usurpation on which the present order rests. We enjoy the *frisson* of that which is almost – but not quite – too horrible to be shown or described.

Another way to say that the Gothic takes as its focus transgression of cultural boundaries is to say that the central topic thematized by the Gothic is inevitably *power*: who is allowed to do what based upon their subject position within a particular society at a specific moment in time. This is implicit in Fiedler's thumbnail sketch of the late eighteenth-century Gothic novels of British author Ann Radcliffe:

Through a dream landscape, usually called by the name of some actual Italian place, a girl flees in terror and alone amid crumbling castles, antique dungeons, and ghosts who are never really ghosts. She nearly escapes her terrible

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persecutors, who seek her out of lust and greed, but is caught; escapes again and is caught; escapes once more and is caught . . . finally breaks free altogether and is married to the virtuous lover who has all along worked (and suffered equally with her) to save her. (127)

In Radcliffe's novels such as *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794) and *The Italian* (1797), virtuous young heroines are preyed upon by unscrupulous and lecherous aristocrats. While the plucky young female protagonists possess a certain capacity to resist the advances made upon them, they nevertheless find themselves in difficult positions as older, rich, white men within Italian patriarchal society are free to do as they like almost without restraint while they, as young women within that same society, are dependent for their sustenance on first fathers and then husbands. Part of the uniquely Gothic quality of these novels derives from the tenuous positions of their disempowered heroines who find themselves both literally imprisoned in castles and convents, and figuratively confined by social expectations that limit their autonomy and circumscribe their options.

What the example of Radcliffe makes clear is that, while the Gothic is always about inequities in distributions of power and contests for control, the specific permutations it takes depend on the configuration of the society that births it and which it reflects. Radcliffe's Gothic romances about disempowered young women attempting to defend their virtue against lascivious and scheming aristocrats find their footing, for example, in a Western cultural setting in which wealth and title permit men wide latitude of action and movement, and which operates according to a sexual "double standard" that allows – even celebrates – men who have many female lovers or "conquests" but that considers a woman's chastity as a primary virtue. As we will see, the American Gothic, reflecting the specific power dynamics of the United States and its difficult history of slavery and racial antagonism, draws much of its energy from anxieties over racial difference.

Before turning to the specific character of the American Gothic and its distinguishing features, however, it is useful to note that the contests for control at the core of the Gothic can be divided into two broad categories: the individual contending against impersonal forces directly, and the individual contending with a specific other or others (a human villain or monster) that itself is the symptom or reflection of larger impersonal forces. Impersonal forces against which Gothic protagonists must contend directly include weather, war, pandemics (zombie producing and otherwise), and, in some cases, God. To a certain extent, these forces can be considered as what literary and cultural theorist Timothy Morton calls "hyperobjects," things "massively distributed in time and space relative to humans" (Morton 1)

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with which we are entangled and which force upon us the awareness of our own insignificance. In Gothic tales in which protagonists contend with hyperobjects, basic survival rather than victory is generally the goal. This is often the case, for example, in American Naturalist works such as Jack London's "To Build a Fire" (1908), in which the unnamed protagonist contends with (and loses to) extreme cold, and in Frank Norris' "The Open Boat" (1897), in which four men in a small lifeboat try to survive on the open ocean. This is also the situation in the works of twentieth-century American horror author H. P. Lovecraft that seek to elicit what Lovecraft calls in his treatise on "weird fiction," *Supernatural Horror in Literature* (1927), "cosmic fear" (15) – dread evoked by the proposition that the universe is governed by powers and forces that dwarf the human capacity to comprehend, much less resist.

An important variant of the Gothic contest against impersonal forces is the theme of the divided self, in which protagonists are motivated by unconscious desires and irrational impulses. Within the American Gothic tradition, this strain is arguably introduced by late eighteenth-century Gothicism Charles Brockden Brown, notably in his 1799 novel *Edgar Huntly, Or, Memoirs of a Sleepwalker*, in which the eponymous protagonist turns out to be a stranger to himself – compelled by forces of which he is completely unaware, he performs various actions while asleep, the evidence of which then confuses and unnerves him while he is awake. This model of human psychology depicted by Brown in which individuals are acted upon by unconscious forces and in which irrational appetitive desires conflict with rational decision-making was then powerfully developed in antebellum American by Edgar Allan Poe. Not only are insanity and the mind divided against itself recurring themes in Poe's work, but in two separate texts, "The Black Cat" (1843) and "The Imp of the Perverse" (1845), Poe explicitly addresses what he refers to as "perverseness," the human propensity to desire to do things for the sole reason that we know we should not. Although unconscious action and irrational compulsion emerge from within, they create the impression that one is controlled by irresistible, impersonal external forces. Psychological Gothic narratives such as those developed by Brown and Poe in antebellum America and refined by later authors (Chuck Palahniuk's novel *Fight Club* [1996], for example, is a psychological Gothic tale updating Poe's "William Wilson" [1839]), therefore, can be considered as variants of the Gothic contest against overwhelming external powers.

In contrast to things like war, weather, and the unconscious – impersonal forces that act without intentionality and outside of systems of morality – to contend against specific others is, at least on the face of it, to confront comprehensible, if frequently immoral, antagonists. When Radcliffe's

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heroines, for example, seek to evade the snares of their insidious captors, they are most immediately up against specific villains. Similarly, when Mary Rowlandson in her 1682 captivity narrative, *The Sovereignty and Goodness of God*, details her experience of being held against her will, the antagonists are her captors, the Narragansett, Wampanoag, and Nashaway Indians of Massachusetts. In ‘*Salem’s Lot*’ (1975), Stephen King’s updating of Bram Stoker’s *Dracula* (1897), the antagonist is the monstrous vampire Barlow, while in the science fiction film *Alien* (Ridley Scott, 1979), a relocation of the Gothic castle into space, the specific other Warrant Officer Ripley (Sigourney Weaver) must defeat is the monstrous double-mouthed xenomorph. On the face of it, the scope of works such as these seems more circumscribed as the threat presented is specific and localized – such narratives are less immediately allegories of the fragility of human existence and more focused on literal confrontations between protagonist and antagonist. Put differently, there seems to be less of the sublime associated with a protagonist attempting to track down a serial killer as in 1991’s *The Silence of the Lambs* (Jonathan Demme, adapted from the 1988 novel by Thomas Harris) than with one man fighting for survival against the elements in the wilds of Montana and South Dakota as in the 2015 film *The Revenant* (Alejandro G. Iñárritu, adapted from the 2002 novel by Michael Punke).

It is important to note, however, that even in Gothic narratives in which protagonists contend against specific others, conflicts are inevitably structured by meshes of more diffuse impersonal forces. Radcliffe’s protagonist Emily in *The Mysteries of Udolpho* is held captive by the villainous Montoni but, as mentioned above, Montoni materializes broader cultural forces having to do with class and gender. Rowlandson is taken captive by Indians, but the context for her confinement was King Philip’s War – the violent response by New England Indian tribes in 1675–76 to the steady encroachment on their territory by white British colonists. Similarly, the context for Hugh Glass’ (Leonardo DiCaprio) tale of survival in *The Revenant* is white encroachment on Native American land, appropriation of their resources, and atrocities committed against them excused by racist ideology. Barlow is the monstrous vampire antagonist of King’s ‘*Salem’s Lot*’, but King – undercutting romanticized representations of the virtues of small-town life such as in Thornton Wilder’s famous play *Our Town* (1938) – makes clear through the shifting focus on different members of the town of Jerusalem’s Lot, Maine, that Barlow is in effect the materialization of the peevish and petty immorality already present in the town. And Warrant Officer Ripley must fight off the goo-dripping H. R. Giger-designed xenomorph in *Alien*, but the true villain of the film is capitalism, as reflected through “The Company,” the Weyland-Yutani corporation that desires a living alien specimen and

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considers the crew of the spaceship *Nostromo* expendable in this quest. In keeping with literary romanticism in general – of which the Gothic is arguably a subset (on the debate over this point, see Hume) – Gothic works almost inevitably shade toward being allegories of human insufficiency as protagonists confront specific manifestations of broader cultural forces. Just which forces are at play and the extent to which they are confronted directly or obscured are what will vary from text to text – which now brings us to the American Gothic tradition.

### Power and Prohibition: American Gothic Preoccupations

The basic underlying premise structuring this *Companion to the American Gothic* collection is that Gothic narratives give shape to culturally specific anxieties and tabooed desires, and that those anxieties and desires will always have to do with power and prohibition – what is forbidden to whom based on their subject positions within a particular social context. With this in mind, the American Gothic tradition arguably clusters around four interconnected primary loci, each with its particular boundaries: religion, geography, racial and sexual otherness, and rationality. While far from all-inclusive, anxieties and desires related to God, the devil, and the legacy of Puritanism; the frontier; racial otherness and sexual otherness; and the capacity of individuals to draw logical and accurate conclusions based on sensory data are structuring preoccupations of the American Gothic tradition (Figure 1).

As Faye Ringel (Chapter 1) discusses in her contribution to this volume, predating the development of the Gothic novel in the eighteenth century was the intensely Gothicized religious rhetoric of the North American Puritans, which offered striking portraits of apocalyptic end times, eternal damnation, and the snares that the devil lays for the unsuspecting and naïve. Puritan minister Michael Wigglesworth's bestselling poem *The Day of Doom or a Poetical Description of the Last Judgment* (1662), for example, offers the reader an extensive and lurid picture of the terror that awaits the unrepentant and unsaved on the day of the Last Judgment. Exemplifying the Gothic contest against overwhelming force, sinners stand no chance as "All kindreds wail: all hearts do fail: / Horror the world doth fill" (Wigglesworth 85–86). Jonathan Edwards' 1741 sermon, *Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God*, similarly has recourse to intensely Gothicized imagery in its representation of an omnipotent deity who detests sinners and dangles them over the flames of perdition "much as one holds a spider or some loathsome insect, over the fire" (Edwards). For his part, Minister Cotton Mather makes clear in his 1693 defense of his role in the Salem Witch Trials, *Wonders of the Invisible*

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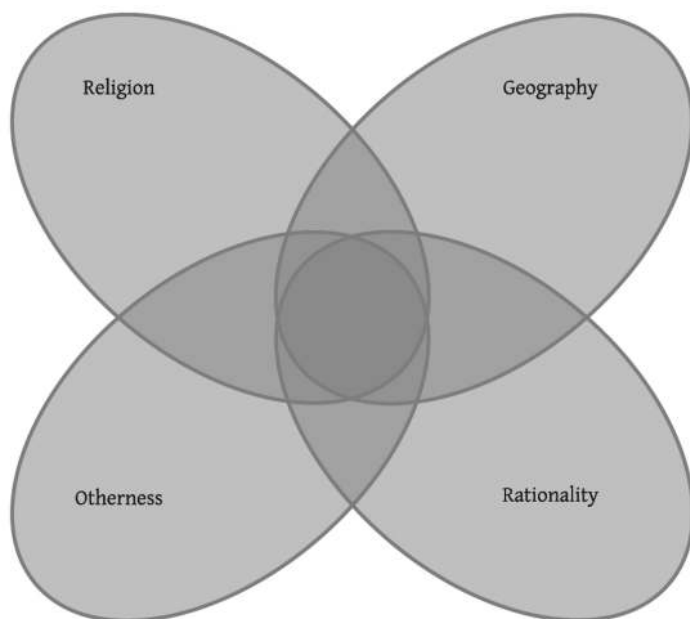


Figure 1 Characteristic American Gothic preoccupations

*World*, his belief that the Puritans are God's people settled in the devil's territories and that the devil, together with a "dreadful Knot of *Witches*," has worked to vex the New Englanders (Mather xiii). The successful 2015 film, *The Witch* (Robert Eggers), which focuses on accusations of witchcraft among seventeenth-century New England Puritans, shows that religious zealotry together with a fascination with the devil and witchcraft remain fertile veins to be mined by the American imagination.

Cotton Mather's description of New England as the "*Devils Territories*" (Mather xi) highlights the role of another central element of the American Gothic: American geography and particularly the role of the frontier. Addressed in this volume particularly by Elizabeth Jane Wall Hinds (Chapter 9), the American imagination arguably follows the contours of the country's topography, with an emphasis on the frontier as a liminal zone of contact between civilization and wilderness. "I just know I'm going to get lost in those woods again tonight" speaks the voice of murder victim Laura Palmer (Sheryl Lee) from beyond the grave on a cassette tape in episode 1 of David Lynch and Mark Frost's famous television series *Twin Peaks* (episode 1, "Traces to Nowhere," aired 12 April 1990); however, Gothic anxieties about getting lost in the woods – and encountering the supernatural creatures that live there – are anxieties that stretch back to the



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beginnings of European colonization of North America. Mather's reflections on the woods as the devil's territory is one taken to heart, for example, by Ichabod Crane in Washington Irving's famous "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow" (1820); in this classic American tale, superstitious Ichabod's favorite book is Mather's *History of New England Witchcraft* (presumably *Wonders of the Invisible World*) and, as he rides through the woods at night, he may or may not end up tangling with the ghostly Headless Horseman. Getting lost in the woods and meeting up with the devil is also both the anxiety and the desire of Nathaniel Hawthorne's Young Goodman Brown in the story of the same name (1835). Leaving the path of righteousness and dallying with the devil in a moral wilderness results in Brown's loss of innocence – from which he cannot recover. Unable to accept the human propensity to sin that is revealed to exist even in the best of us, Brown remains figuratively lost in the woods until his dying hour, which "was gloom" (Hawthorne 289). Stephen King updates "Young Goodman Brown" in his novel *Pet Sematary* (1983), in which the consequences of leaving one's faith behind and wandering in the woods are dire (see Magistrale). Getting lost in the woods and possibly encountering a witch is also the premise of Eduardo Sánchez and Daniel Myrick's *The Blair Witch Project* (1999; on the film, see Higley and Weinstock). The forest is where one walks with the devil, witches reside, and ghosts, demons, and other supernatural creatures roam. To go there is to leave civilization behind, to forsake faith and family, to flirt with danger, and to return changed – if one returns at all.

An important variant on the theme of the Gothicized American wilderness – particularly in the nineteenth century – is the sea tale. In works such as James Fenimore Cooper's *The Pilot: A Tale of the Sea* (1823), Edgar Allan Poe's *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym* (1838), Richard Henry Dana, Jr.'s *Two Years Before the Mast* (1840), and most especially the novels of Herman Melville, the ocean replaces the forest as a kind of wilderness that alienates individuals from civilization and licenses barbarity as the protagonists literally and figuratively attempt to navigate a safe course through dangerous and turbulent waters. Whether getting lost in the woods or going to sea, however, leaving civilization behind and traversing the frontier in the American Gothic imagination imperils one's safety by putting one at the mercy of powerful forces ranging from natural threats such as panthers and waterfalls and whales to supernatural monsters including witches and the devil.

Demonstrating, however, how quickly anxieties concerning geography get mixed up with fantasies of race and racial difference, "at the heart of the American Gothic wilderness," writes Alan Lloyd-Smith, "is the savage Indian" (44). In her captivity narrative, Mary Rowlandson represents the



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Indians as “hell hounds” in league with the devil (Rowlandson); Cotton Mather not only wrote an account of the Salem Witch Trials but, in *A Brief History of the Warr with the Indians in New-England* (1676), an account of King Philip’s war, he characterizes the Indians as Godless, treacherous enemies. In Charles Brockden Brown’s *Edgar Huntly*, “savages” are at war with civilized white settlers and Edgar, himself surprisingly adept at using a tomahawk as a weapon, dispatches several without a second thought. In James Fenimore Cooper’s *Leatherstocking Tales*, including *The Last of the Mohicans* (1826), Indians are divided into good and bad based on their attitude toward Anglos, but all are supernaturalized as spirits of the forest able to hunt and track with preternatural adroitness. “There may be a devilish Indian behind every tree,” thinks Goodman Brown to himself setting off on his unspecified “present evil purpose” in “Young Goodman Brown” – and then, making the connections between Indians, the forest, and the devil clear, he adds, “What if the devil himself should be at my very elbow!” (Hawthorne 277).

While the indigenous presence as forest spirits possibly in league with the devil remains present in later American Gothic works (see Bergland), the emphasis shifts in the nineteenth century and later to what Toni Morrison refers to in *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* as the Africanist presence in American history as Gothic works grapple with slavery, its legacy, and with deep-seated anxieties over racial mixing. Indeed, as suggested by several excellent studies on the American Gothic, including Teresa A. Goddu’s *Gothic America: Narrative, History, and Nation* and Justin Edwards’ *Gothic Passages: Racial Ambiguity and the American Gothic*, anxieties about race, white/black miscegenation, and the legacy of slavery may in fact function most immediately to differentiate the American Gothic from other Gothic traditions. Morrison attends to issues of race in relation to Poe’s *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym*, a novel that culminates in the discovery of a hither-to-unknown island populated by a tribe of black-skinned people who turn out to be “among the most barbarous, subtle, and bloodthirsty wretches that ever contaminated the face of the globe” (1150). As Ellen Weinauer develops in her contribution for this collection (Chapter 6), however, the issues of race, racism, and miscegenation are central Gothic elements not only of antebellum captivity and slave narratives and narratives explicitly addressing issues of race such as Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1852), but are at the heart of many of America’s greatest literary works, including William Faulkner’s *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936), Richard Wright’s *Native Son* (1940), Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man* (1947), and Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* (1987).

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In addition to issues of race and ethnicity, the American literary tradition has also used the Gothic mode as a means to reflect on anxiety, discrimination, and disempowerment related to other forms of social otherness including sexual difference, sexuality, and class. As addressed by Diane Hoeveler (Chapter 7) in her contribution to this volume, American women such as Edith Wharton, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Shirley Jackson, and Joyce Carol Oates have used the Gothic to explore the terrors of marriage, the demands of motherhood, and the forms of exclusion suffered by women within a patriarchal culture. Ardel Haefele-Thomas (Chapter 8) considers here how American authors and playwrights such as Truman Capote and Tony Kushner have made use of Gothic conventions to foreground and critique sexual norms and the kinds of violence and exclusion visited upon those who do not identify with those expectations. And, as several of the chapters here make clear, issues of race, sex, and sexuality are inextricably interconnected with class – to be disempowered is often also to be either deprived of access to capital and/or dependent on others for support.

Finally, as Allan Lloyd-Smith observes, a significant “pressure” (4) on the development of the American Gothic has been anxieties about popular democracy and the Enlightenment principles upon which the founding of the American Republic rested. Can people govern themselves and make rational decisions based on logical evaluation of empirical data? Or, asks the American Gothic, are they instead prone to religious mania, driven by superstition, easily manipulated by confidence men, and compelled by irrational impulses into betraying not only themselves but the vision of the Founding Fathers? The suspicion, if not the final answer, of the American Gothic is of course the latter as American Gothic works repeatedly thematize the ways in which not only are human senses fallible and decision-making compromised by irrational and unconscious impulses, but that the premise of “all men are created equal” enshrined in the American *Constitution* was undercut from the start by institutionalized racism and sexism. As discussed above, in relation to human psychology, Brown, for example, demonstrated in *Edgar Huntly* the ways in which human beings are driven by unconscious forces. Henry James’ *The Turn of the Screw* (1898) leaves unanswered the question of whether ghosts exist or whether the narrating governess is psychologically disturbed – a question reprised with certain twists in Shirley Jackson’s *The Haunting of Hill House* (1959) and Stephen King’s *The Shining* (1977). And questions about democracy in the “land of the free” are ones forcefully raised by American Gothic authors that highlight the inconsistency between vision and realization – between the rhetoric of liberty and the reality of slavery, sexism, bigotry, and discrimination of all stripes. In