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Introduction: the Gothic
in western culture

Gothic fiction is hardly “Gothic” at all. It is an entirely post-medieval and even post-Renaissance phenomenon. Even though several long-standing literary forms combined in its initial renderings – from ancient prose and verse romances to Shakespearean tragedy *and* comedy – the first published work to call itself “A Gothic Story” was a counterfeit medieval tale published long after the Middle Ages: Horace Walpole’s *The Castle of Otranto*, printed under a pseudonym in England in 1764 and reissued in 1765 in a second edition with a new preface which openly advocated a “blend [of] the two kinds of romance, the ancient and the modern,” the former “all imagination and improbability” and the latter governed by the “rules of probability” connected with “common life” (p. 9). The vogue that Walpole began was imitated only sporadically over the next few decades, both in prose fiction and theatrical drama. But it exploded in the 1790s (the decade Walpole died) throughout the British Isles, on the continent of Europe, and briefly in the new United States, particularly for a female readership, so much so that it remained a popular, if controversial, literary mode throughout what we still call the Romantic period in European literature (the 1790s through the early 1830s), now especially well known as the era of Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* (1818).

This highly unstable genre then scattered its ingredients into various modes, among them aspects of the more realistic Victorian novel.¹ Yet it also reasserted itself across the nineteenth century in flamboyant plays and scattered operas, short stories or fantastic tales for magazines and newspapers, “sensation” novels for women and the literate working class, portions of poetry or painting, and substantial resurgences of full-fledged Gothic novels – all of which were satirized for their excesses, as they had also been in Romantic times, now that the Gothic mode had become relatively familiar.² Like the 1790s, the 1890s, still known today as the *fin de siècle*, then saw a concentrated resurgence of Gothic fiction, particularly in prose narrative, highlighted by such now-classic “Gothics” as Oscar Wilde’s *The Picture*

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of *Dorian Gray* (1890–91), Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s “The Yellow Wallpaper” (1892), Bram Stoker’s original *Dracula* (1897), and Henry James’s serialized novella *The Turn of the Screw* (1898). The 1900s finally saw the Gothic expand across the widest range in its history, into films, myriad ghost stories, a vast strand of women’s romance novels, television shows and series, romantic and satirical musical (as well as nonmusical) plays, and computerized games and music videos, not to mention ongoing attempts at serious fiction with many Gothic elements. The late twentieth century has even seen a burgeoning in the academic *study* of Gothic fiction at college and university levels and in publications connected to them. There is now no question that the Gothic, particularly in prose or verse narrative, theatre, and film – all of which we here encompass in the phrase “Gothic fiction” – has become a long-lasting and major, albeit widely variable, symbolic realm in modern and even postmodern western culture, however archaic the Gothic label may make it seem.

Our objectives here are to explain the reasons for the persistence of the Gothic across modern history and how and why so many changes and variations have occurred in this curious mode over 250 years. One difficulty in doing so, of course, is how pliable and malleable this type of fiction-making has proven to be, stemming as it does from an uneasy conflation of genres, styles, and conflicted cultural concerns from its outset. Nevertheless, given how relatively constant some of its features are, we can specify some general parameters by which fictions can be identified as primarily or substantially Gothic.³ Though not always as obviously as in *The Castle of Otranto* or *Dracula*, a Gothic tale usually takes place (at least some of the time) in an antiquated or seemingly antiquated space – be it a castle, a foreign palace, an abbey, a vast prison, a subterranean crypt, a graveyard, a primeval frontier or island, a large old house or theatre, an aging city or urban underworld, a decaying storehouse, factory, laboratory, public building, or some new recreation of an older venue, such as an office with old filing cabinets, an overworked spaceship, or a computer memory. Within this space, or a combination of such spaces, are hidden some secrets from the past (sometimes the recent past) that haunt the characters, psychologically, physically, or otherwise at the main time of the story.

These hauntings can take many forms, but they frequently assume the features of ghosts, specters, or monsters (mixing features from different realms of being, often life and death) that rise from within the antiquated space, or sometimes invade it from alien realms, to manifest unresolved crimes or conflicts that can no longer be successfully buried from view. It is at this level that Gothic fictions generally play with and oscillate between the earthly laws of conventional reality and the possibilities of the supernatural – at

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least somewhat as Walpole urged such stories to do – often siding with one of these over the other in the end, but usually raising the possibility that the boundaries between these may have been crossed, at least psychologically but also physically or both. This oscillation can range across a continuum between what have come to be called the “terror Gothic” on the one hand and the “horror Gothic” on the other.⁴ The first of these holds characters and readers mostly in anxious suspense about threats to life, safety, and sanity kept largely out of sight or in shadows or suggestions from a hidden past, while the latter confronts the principal characters with the gross violence of physical or psychological dissolution, explicitly shattering the assumed norms (including the repressions) of everyday life with wildly shocking, and even revolting, consequences.

The readership or audience of all such Gothics began as and remains mostly middle-class and Anglo, though more kinds of audiences (postcolonial, African-American, American Indian, and Latin American, for example) have been drawn in over the years. Given that fact, Gothic fictions since Walpole have most often been about aspiring but middling, or sometimes upper middle-class, white people caught between the attractions or terrors of a past once controlled by overweening aristocrats or priests (or figures with such aspirations) and forces of change that would reject such a past yet still remain held by aspects of it (including desires for aristocratic or superhuman powers). This tug-of-war affects central characters and readers alike, frequently drawing them toward what is initially “unconscious” in at least two different senses. It can force them, first, to confront what is psychologically buried in individuals or groups, including their fears of the mental unconscious itself and the desires from the past now buried in that forgotten location. After all, several features of the Gothic, especially as practiced in the mid-nineteenth century by Edgar Allan Poe in America and the *romans frénétiques* (or “frenetic novels”) in France,⁵ eventually became a basis for Sigmund Freud’s *fin de siècle* sense of the unconscious as a deep repository of very old, infantile, and repressed memories or impulses, the archaic underworld of the self.

At the same time, the conflicted positions of central Gothic characters can reveal them as haunted by a second “unconscious” of deep-seated social and historical dilemmas, often of many types at once, that become more fearsome the more characters and readers attempt to cover them up or reconcile them symbolically without resolving them fundamentally. The title character in the original *Frankenstein*, for example, finds that his sexless fabrication of an artificial creature, ultimately his “monster,” from pieces of bodies in graveyards and charnel houses confronts him with two kinds of unconscious: his own preconscious dreams of reembracing, even as he

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recoils from the body of his dead mother (his psychic unconscious; Shelley, *Frankenstein*, p. 85), and the choices simmering at the subliminal levels of his culture (in his *political* unconscious) between the attractions of old alchemy and modern biochemistry, strictly biological and emergent mechanical reproduction, the centrality and marginality of women, and middle-class scientific aims set against the rise of a “monstrous” urban working class upon which bourgeois aspiration is increasingly dependent.⁶ It is no wonder that the late twentieth-century effulgence in teaching and writing about Gothic fictions has been dominated either by psychoanalytic readings of such creations or by Marxist, new historicist, or cultural studies assessments that find many class-based, ideological, and even technological conflicts of particular historical times underlying the spectral or monstrous manifestations in Gothic works from several different eras. As this book will often show, therefore, the longevity and power of Gothic fiction unquestionably stem from the way it helps us address and disguise some of the most important desires, quandaries, and sources of anxiety, from the most internal and mental to the widely social and cultural, throughout the history of western culture since the eighteenth century.

In general, these deep fears and longings in western readers that the Gothic both symbolizes and disguises in “romantic” and exaggerated forms have been ones that so *contradict* each other, and in such intermingled ways, that only extreme fictions of this kind can seem to resolve them or even confront them. As E. J. Clery and Robert Miles recall in this volume, the early Gothic (or really fake *neo*-Gothic) for Walpole and his most immediate successors sees its characters and readers as torn between the enticing call of aristocratic wealth and sensuous Catholic splendor, beckoning back toward the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, on the one hand, and a desire to overthrow these past orders of authority in favor of a quasi-equality associated with the rising middle-class ideology of the self as self-made, on the other – but an ideology haunted by the Protestant bourgeois desire to *attain* the power of the older orders that the middle class wants to dethrone. Such a paradoxical state of longing in much of the post-Renaissance western psyche fears retribution from all the extremes it tries to encompass, especially from remnants of those very old heights of dominance which the middle class now strives to grasp and displace at the same time. As a result, in the words of Leslie Fiedler,

the guilt which underlies [much early, Romantic, and even American] gothic and motivates its plots is the guilt of the revolutionary haunted by the (paternal) past which he has been trying to destroy; and the fear that possesses the gothic and motivates its tone is the fear that in destroying the old ego-ideals of Church

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and State, the West has opened a way for the inruption of darkness: for [cultural and individual] insanity and the [consequent] disintegration of the self.
 (Fiedler, "Invention of the American Gothic," p. 129)

Here is why, Fiedler and others have shown, the features of the Anglo-European-American Gothic have helped to prefigure and shape Freud's notion of Oedipal conflict in the middle-class family. In some way the Gothic is usually about some "son" both wanting to kill and striving to be the "father" and thus feeling fearful and guilty about what he most desires, all of which applies as well to Gothic *heroines* who seek both to appease and to free themselves from the excesses of male and patriarchal dominance in Sophia Lee's *The Recess* (1783–85), Ann Radcliffe's romances of the 1790s, Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847), and many "female Gothics" thereafter.⁷ Beneath this tangle of contradictions, moreover, is the deeper lingering fear for readers of the Gothic that Fiedler recognizes: the terror or possible horror that the ruination of older powers will haunt us all, not just with our desires for them, but with the fact that what "grounds" them, and now their usurpers, is really a deathly chaos. Beneath his quest to manufacture life, after all, Victor Frankenstein confronts a desire to reunite with his dead mother and somehow engender artificial life from her and his biological decay. Through the Gothic, we remind ourselves, albeit in disguise, that something like a return to the confusion and loss of identity in being half-inside and half-outside the mother, and thus neither entirely dead nor clearly alive, may await us behind any old foundation, paternal or otherwise, on which we try, by breaking it up, to build a brave new world (see Kahane, "Gothic Mirror" and Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*).

This pattern of hyperbolically verbalizing contradictory fears and desires over a possible "base" of chaos and death, and in a blatantly fictional style, remains a consistent element in the Gothic even as the terms and features of this combination change with the transformations of western society in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. By the time of *Frankenstein*, the many dilemmas for its hero stem from alterations in the anatomical, electrical, and chemical sciences *and* the acceleration of an industrial revolution that may lead to the greater mechanization of life *and* the concomitant rise of a homeless urban working class displaced from the land by the creations of the bourgeois economy *and* the concern that an expanding British Empire may bring Anglos face to face with the very racial others (like the multicolored creature) that are supposed to be kept distant from "us" even while we depend on them economically (see Malchow, *Gothic Images*, pp. 9–40). Even so, the intermixed transitions of this era, where each cultural position seems capable of blurring into its opposite *and* some others besides, become embodied

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in, even scapegoated on, the half-alive/half-dead, half-organic/half-artificial, and obscurely desirable/obviously repellant specter/creature. He/it locates and focuses our longings and fears as though they are *and are not* ours, allowing them to be visible as part of our present fearfully threatening us and yet making them either a relic of the decaying past or perhaps the avatar of a mechanistic or racially other future. Such a Gothic construction, altered from Walpole's but not leaving his oversized and stalking ghosts behind altogether, conflates the major changes in modes of cultural production by 1818 *and* the contradictory hopes and fears that these arouse in white middle-class readers while permitting that same audience either to face or to avoid these multiple implications, all in a fiction as sewn together from different types of previous writing as the creature is fabricated from different portions and classes of older bodies (see Hogle, "*Frankenstein*").

The Gothic has lasted as it has because its symbolic mechanisms, particularly its haunting and frightening specters, have permitted us to cast many anomalies in our modern conditions, even as these change, over onto antiquated or at least haunted spaces and highly anomalous creatures. This way our contradictions can be confronted by, yet removed from us into, the seemingly unreal, the alien, the ancient, and the grotesque. Some Gothic tales, such as *Frankenstein* or *Dracula*, have a lasting resonance of this kind, so much so that we keep telling them over and over again with different elements but certain constant features. Such recastings help us both deal with newly ascendant cultural and psychological contradictions and still provide us with a recurring method for shaping and obscuring our fears and forbidden desires.

The Gothic, in other words, provides the best-known examples of those strange and ghostly figures that Freud saw as examples of "the Uncanny" (or *Unheimlich*) in his 1919 essay of that name. For him what is quintessentially "uncanny," as he reveals most by analyzing a German Gothic tale, "The Sandman" (1817) by E. T. A. Hoffman, is the deeply and internally familiar (the most infantile of our desires or fears) as it reappears to us in seemingly external, repellant, and *unfamiliar* forms. What is most familiar to Freud, to be sure, are strictly psychological or visceral drives from our earliest existence, such as sheer repetition-compulsions and the castration anxiety born of desiring the mother and thus risking the wrath of the father (which some Gothic tales do indeed include). But the devices he isolates for rendering the symbolic disguises of such drives in fiction can also be employed, as *Frankenstein* has revealed, for configuring quite familiar and basic social contradictions engulfing middle-class individuals who must nevertheless define themselves in relation to these anomalies, often using creatures or similarly *othered* beings to incarnate such mixed and irresolvable foundations of being.

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Since Freud and partly in line with his kind of psychoanalysis, the French theorist and therapist Julia Kristeva has gone on more recently in her book *Powers of Horror* (1980) to see the return of the repressed familiar in “the uncanny” as based on a more fundamental human impulse that also helps us to define the cultural, as well as psychological, impulses most basic to the Gothic. Kristeva argues for ghosts or grotesques, so explicitly created to embody contradictions, as instances of what she calls the “abject” and products of “abjection,” which she derives from the literal meanings of *ab-ject*: “throwing off” and “being thrown under.” What we “throw off,” she suggests, is all that is “in-between . . . ambiguous . . . composite” in our beings, the fundamental inconsistencies that prevent us from declaring a coherent and independent identity to ourselves and others (p. 4). The most primordial version of this “in-between” is the multiplicity we viscerally remember from the moment of birth, at which we were both inside and outside of the mother and thus both alive and not yet in existence (in that sense *dead*). It is this “immemorial violence” that lies at the base of our beings and is one basis of the primal chaos calling us back, yet it is that morass from which we always feel we must “become separated in order to be” a definable person (p. 10).

Whatever threatens us with anything like this betwixt-and-between, even dead-and-alive, condition, Kristeva concludes, is what we throw off or “abject” into defamiliarized manifestations, which we henceforth fear and desire because they both threaten to reengulf us and promise to return us to our primal origins. Those othered figures reveal this deeply familiar foundation while “throwing it under” the cover of an outcast monster more vaguely archaic and filled with contradictions than supposedly normal human beings, as in the cadaverous creature of *Frankenstein*, the aristocratic vampire in *Dracula*, or the shrunk and gnarled other-self-in-the-self of Robert Louis Stevenson’s *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1886; see Hogle, “The Struggle”). By these means all that is abjected is thrown under in another fashion: cast off into a figure or figures criminalized or condemned by people in authority and thus subjected to (again, thrown under) their gaze and the patterns of social normalcy they enforce. The process of *abjection*, then, is as thoroughly social and cultural as it is personal. It encourages middle-class people in the west, as we see in many of the lead characters in Gothic fictions, to deal with the tangled contradictions fundamental to their existence by throwing them off onto ghostly or monstrous counterparts that then seem “uncanny” in their unfamiliar familiarity while also conveying overtones of the archaic and the alien in their grotesque mixture of elements viewed as incompatible by established standards of normality. The Gothic is the form of western fiction-making, from novels to films to videos (witness Michael Jackson’s

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Thriller of 1982), where such symbolic “abjection” most frequently occurs precisely because its highly mixed form allows both the pursuit of sanctioned “identities” and a simultaneously fearful and attractive confrontation with the “thrown off” anomalies that are actually basic to the construction of a western middle-class self.

One reason the Gothic as a form symbolizes this process of abjection so well is its cross-generic status from the start and its resulting combination of “high culture” and “low culture” throughout its varied history. When Walpole proposed blending “two kinds of romance,” he was referring in part to his own cross between medieval chivalric romances and neoclassic tragedies oriented toward the old aristocracy, on the one hand, and the newly ascendant bourgeois novel (or so it was later called) directed in its comic elements and probabilities of common existence toward the increasingly dominant middle classes, on the other. His choice of the Gothic label for this uneasy marriage, while not widely adopted as rapidly as some have supposed, was therefore a marketing device designed to fix a generic position for an interplay of what was widely thought to be high cultural writing (epic, verse romance, tragedy) with what many still regarded as low by comparison (servant-based comedy, superstitious folklore, middle-class prose fiction). The most immediate result was a tortured mixture in Walpole’s text and those of his earliest imitators, such as Clara Reeve in *The Old English Baron* (1777–78), whereby characters – and thus readers – were torn between “traditional signs of identity . . . based on social rank and blood lines” and the refashioning of themselves, as well as fiction, to suit “the vagaries of exchange value . . . associated with capitalist-class imperatives and the growing strength of the market economy” (Henderson, “‘An Embarrassing Subject,’” p. 226).

By 1797, when Samuel Taylor Coleridge reviewed Matthew Lewis’s *The Monk* (1796), for many the archetype of the horror Gothic then and since, “the multitude of the manufacturers” of the “horrible and the preternatural” for the broad “public taste” by this time – clearly an attack on the “lowness” of romances targeted at the widest popular market – has become associated with both an oxymoronic, class-mixing style (“phrases the most trite and colloquial” applied to exalted subjects requiring “sternness and solemnity of diction”) and a “level[ing]” of “all events . . . into one common mass” where events from different spheres of existence “become almost equally probable” (Coleridge in Clery and Miles, *Gothic Documents*, pp. 185–87). The Gothic has thus become the subject of intense debate, which continues today, over its blurring of metaphysical, natural, religious, class,

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economic, marketing, generic, stylistic, and moral lines. This debate has had great influence, as Michael Gamer, Jeffrey Cox, Misha Kavka, and Steven Bruhm show in this book, over how counter-Gothic as well as admittedly Gothic writers, dramatists, or filmmakers have incorporated or altered the most established features of the Walpolean and Radcliffean romance over the last 200 years. In the meantime the Gothic has also come to deal, as one of its principal subjects, with how the middle class dissociates from itself, and then fears, the extremes of what surrounds it: the very high or the decadently aristocratic and the very low or the animalistic, working-class, underfinanced, sexually deviant, childish, or carnivalesque, all sides of which have been abjected at once into figures ranging from Lewis's monk Ambrosio and Radcliffe's class-climbing villains to the title character in C. R. Maturin's *Melmoth the Wanderer* (1820), Stevenson's Mr. Hyde, Wilde's Dorian Gray, Stoker's Count Dracula, and the carnival-magician "Opera Ghost" hidden in the depths of a palace of high culture in Gaston Leroux's original *Le Fantôme de l'Opéra* (1910; see Wolf, *Essential Phantom of the Opera*). Still classified for many as betwixt and between "serious" and "popular" literature and drama, the Gothic is thus continuously about confrontations between the low and the high, even as the ideologies and ingredients of these change. It is about its own blurring of different levels of discourse while it is also concerned with the interpenetration of other opposed conditions – including life/death, natural/supernatural, ancient/modern, realistic/artificial, and unconscious/conscious – along with the abjection of these crossings into haunting and supposedly deviant "others" that therefore attract and terrify middle-class characters and readers.

Concurrently, too, as feminist critics of this mode have seen for decades now, the Gothic has long confronted the cultural problem of gender distinctions, including what they mean for western structures of power and how boundaries between the genders might be questioned to undermine or reorient those structures. Even as early as *The Castle of Otranto* – and certainly in Walpole's Gothic play *The Mysterious Mother* (composed in 1768 but never staged before the author died) – women are the figures most fearfully trapped between contradictory pressures and impulses. It is *Otranto*'s Isabella who first finds herself in what has since become the most classic Gothic circumstance: caught in "a labyrinth of darkness" full of "cloisters" underground and anxiously hesitant about what course to take there, fearing the pursuit of a domineering and lascivious patriarch who wants to use her womb as a repository for seed that may help him preserve his property and wealth, on the one hand, yet worried that, fleeing in an opposite direction, she is still "within reach of somebody [male], she knew not whom," on the other

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(p. 28). From the start, then, the oppression and “othering” of the female seen from her point of view has been a principal Gothic subject, even to the point of depicting her reduced to an object of exchange or the merest tool of child-bearing between men (see Sedgwick, *Between Men*). Hence it is hardly surprising that the Gothic attained its first great effulgence in the hands of Ann Radcliffe, the most popular English woman novelist of the 1790s. Female readership was increasing by leaps and bounds in the middle classes from the 1760s on, so she and her many imitators had great encouragement to develop the primal Gothic scene of a woman confined and turn it into a journey of women coming into some power and property by their own and other feminine agency, albeit within a still-antiquated and male-dominated world full of terrors for every female.

Even more striking, though, is the frequent goal of that journey in the Gothic, even for Walpole: the recovery of a lost or hidden maternal origin by both women and men. In this motif a patriarchal lineage and house turns out to be explicitly dependent on and rooted in the unpredictable possibilities of a forgotten, but finally uncovered, womanhood (see Walpole, *Castle of Otranto*, pp. 114–15, and Radcliffe, *Mysteries of Udolpho*, pp. 638–49). The confinement of woman by patriarchy in a great deal of Gothic, we ultimately find, is based fundamentally on an attempt to repress, as well as a quest to uncover, a potentially “unruly female principle” (Williams, *Art of Darkness*, p. 86) that antiquated patriarchal enclosures have been designed to contain and even bury, as in Poe’s “The Fall of the House of Usher” (1839). The Gothic often shows its readers that the anomalous foundations they seek to abject have become culturally associated with the otherness of femininity, a *maternal* multiplicity basic to us all (see Kahane, “Gothic Mirror”). Social gender divisions have been designed to deny, even as they make us desire, this boundary-blurring source of ourselves that initially stems, the Gothic reveals, from the body of a woman. Here is the reason, a key factor in the history of the Gothic, why Kristeva can link horrifying abjection with our throwing off of the memory that we have archaically been both inside and outside the mother whom we now fear and desire at the same time. The Gothic is quite consistently about the connection of abject monster figures to the primal and engulfing morass of the maternal; Victor Frankenstein not only seeks his mother’s dissolving body through the construction of his male monster, but shows his greatest fear and commits his strongest act of repression by feverishly destroying the female creature that his first creation has asked him to make (Shelley, *Frankenstein*, pp. 163–64). It is woman whom he has avoided most in his onanistic creation because it is the ultimate uncontrollability of the life-giving female that most crystallizes all of his many fears and abjections.