

Allen Lloyd-Smith, American Gothic
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Chapter One

What Is American Gothic?

It is frequently assumed that Gothic fiction began as a lurid offshoot from a dominant tradition of largely realist and morally respectable fiction. Gothic's representations of extreme circumstances of terror, oppression and persecution, darkness and obscurity of setting, and innocence betrayed are considered to begin with Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* (1764), and to reach a crescendo in Ann Radcliffe's *Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794) and Matthew G. "Monk" Lewis's *The Monk* (1796). But genre-defining works such as these also retrospectively redefine their precursors, making it apparent that Gothic elements can also be seen even in the earlier works that began the English novel tradition: Samuel Richardson's epistolary tales of seduction and betrayal, *Pamela* (1740) and *Clarissa* (1747-1748), Defoe's *Moll Flanders* (1722); and even long before them in the romance tradition, or in Thomas Nashe's picaresque *The Unfortunate Traveller* (1594); along with parts of Shakespeare's plays and much Jacobean tragedy.

Similarly it has been assumed that early American writing should be considered an offshoot of the "Great Tradition," as F. R. Leavis called it, a "subaltern" we might now say, in post-colonialist terms, and largely imitative if eccentric version of the dominant culture. It is true that an imitative strain can be found in, for example, Charles Brockden Brown's novels, *Wieland* (1798), *Arthur Mervyn* (1799), or *Ormond* (1799). American writers were effectively still a part of the British culture, working in an English language domain and exposed, both intellectually and in terms of their market place, to British models. But on closer examination it is evident that their models were highly specific: Brown's principal model was William Godwin, author of *Caleb Williams* (1794) and also of *Political Justice*

(1796). Brown in turn influenced the British writers, among them, reciprocally, Godwin himself, and his daughter Mary Shelley, author of *Frankenstein* (1818). From the earliest period of American Gothicism—and some critics have seen almost the whole of American writing as a Gothic literature¹—differences in American circumstances led American Gothicism in other directions: less toward Walpole and Radcliffe, perhaps, more toward Godwin and James Hogg's *Confessions of a Justified Sinner* (1824); or, in Poe's case, the extravagant sensationalism of *Blackwood's Edinburgh Monthly Magazine*.² Rather than a simple matter of imitation and adaptation, substituting the wilderness and the city for the subterranean rooms and corridors of the monastery, or the remote house for the castle, dark and dangerous woods for the bandit infested mountains of Italy, certain unique cultural pressures led Americans to the Gothic as an expression of their very different conditions.

Among these American pressures were the frontier experience, with its inherent solitude and potential violence; the Puritan inheritance; fear of European subversion and anxieties about popular democracy which was then a new experiment; the relative absence of developed "society"; and very significantly, racial issues concerning both slavery and the Native Americans. That these circumstances invited and even required a Gothic style is shown by the inclusion of "Gothic" elements within such clearly non-Gothic texts as James Fenimore Cooper's *The Spy* (1821), or *The Prairie* (1827). Such texts are not so much working to *adapt* the Gothic mode; instead the Gothic emerges from the conditions they seek to describe.

Strict interpreters of the Gothic as a genre would perhaps agree with Maurice Lévy's insistence that the true period of Gothic, and its cultural, aesthetic, religious, and political background, was from about 1764 to 1824, the period of the first Gothic Revival, and the culture of Georgian England.³ Lévy acknowledges however that the term has now become of much broader application and popular understanding, and has been used to describe texts ranging from *Wuthering Heights* (1847) to William Gibson's *Neuromancer* or *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. "Gothic," for Lévy, "conjures up images of female innocence engaged in labyrinthine pursuits and threatened by monarchical or baronial lubricity—in scenes which only Salvador

Rosa could have delineated" (2). There is truth in that description, but it is also not hard to see how Gothic might also describe, say, the situation of a runaway slave pursued by dogs, or the black man encountered by St. John de Crevecoeur during his afternoon stroll to lunch at a plantation: a man suspended in a cage from a tree, without water, and assailed by insects and the birds who have pecked out his eyes.⁴ After all, William Godwin's *Caleb Williams*, one of the originary Gothic texts, details the persecution throughout the land of a servant who has learned of his master's crimes. Most readers would now also think "Gothic" an appropriate description of Anne Rice's *Interview with the Vampire* or Poppy Z. Brite's *Lost Souls*.

Hallmarks of the Gothic include a pushing toward extremes and excess, and that, of course, implies an investigation of limits. In exploring extremes, whether of cruelty, rapacity and fear, or passion and sexual degradation, the Gothic tends to reinforce, if only in a novel's final pages, culturally prescribed doctrines of morality and propriety. The sensationalism of this at first almost universally deployed yet extremely popular form of writing allowed for a vicarious experience of forbidden excess, with punishment and retribution offered in the eventual return to psychic normality. The Gothic deals in transgressions and negativity, perhaps in reaction against the optimistic rationalism of its founding era, which allowed for a rethinking of the prohibitions and sanctions that had previously seemed divinely ordained but now appeared to be simply social agreements in the interest of progress and civic stability. Free-thinking characters appear frequently in the Gothic, and they are generally up to no good, disbelieving in the significance of virginity, for example (while obsessively eager to deflower those who maintain it), and proclaiming their own superiority and inherent freedom as rational beings above the shibboleths of convention and religious faith. Their prey are innocents who put their trust in the benevolence and right thinking of others, and it is not difficult to see in these contrasts that the Gothic is in essence a reactionary form, like the detective novel, one that explores chaos and wrongdoing in a movement toward the ultimate restitution of order and convention. As with the detective novel, the form allows the thrill of readerly experience of transgression within a safe and moralizing pattern of

closure. Because of the ongoing confrontation between these opposing forces, the Gothic situates itself in areas of liminality, of transition, at first staged literally in liminal spaces and between opposing individuals, but subsequently appearing more and more as divisions between opposing aspects within the self. Extreme polarities of lightness and darkness, black and white ascriptions of evil and virtue (and, in the American case, of racial assumptions and identifications), both outside and sometimes within the self, are focused upon in this attention to the liminal.

Among the extremes and taboos that the Gothic explores are religious profanities, demonism, occultism, necromancy, and incest. This can be interpreted as a dark side of Enlightenment free-thinking or the persistence of an increasingly excluded occultist tradition in western culture, one which paradoxically insisted on an acknowledgment of the continuing existence of magic, religious, and demonic forces within a more and more secular society.⁵ Much of the apparent supernaturalism in the Gothic is ultimately explained away, as in the "explained supernaturalism" of Radcliffe's romances, but on the other hand, much is not. Here science plays a paradoxical role, explaining the previously inexplicable, but also pointing to new and sometimes sinister capacities bordering on the miraculous. The mad scientist and the ill-advised experiment play major roles in Gothic fictions. Science might be seen as pushing rationalism toward its limits, but in the Gothic it was often shown to include connections to occultist pre-scientific doctrines, as in Mary Shelley's account of the university education of her Dr. Frankenstein. In this and other respects the Gothic merges with supernaturalism and the fantastic, drawing on folktales and histories of the grotesque monstrosity supposed to result from any meddling with Nature. Cogent distinctions have been made between the supernatural or marvelous, the fantastic, and the uncanny,⁶ all of which appear in Gothic texts but change over time, so that by the later nineteenth century the uncanny is seen as increasingly dominant when the Gothic probes deeper into psychological areas, as in Henry James's celebrated ghost story, *The Turn of the Screw* (1898).

Gothic interest in extreme states and actions can also be seen to correlate with widespread social anxieties and fears. Significant among these are fears having to do with the suppressions of past

traumas and guilt, anxieties concerning class and gender, fear of revolution, worries about the developing powers of science; an increasing suspicion that empire and colonial experience might bring home an unwanted legacy (a suspicion related to xenophobia but also involving a fear of colonial otherness and practices such as Voodoo); post-Darwinian suggestions of possible regression or atavism; and displaced versions of the dread occasioned by syphilis, or much later, by AIDS.

Among the most striking features of the Gothic genre is the style of its architectural settings. In early Gothic these were often medievalist, involving ancient stone buildings with elaborate, "Gothic" arches, buttresses, passageways, and crypts. This was to become the *mise en scene* of Gothicism, replete with trappings of hidden doorways and secret chambers, incomprehensible labyrinths, speaking portraits, and trapdoors. In some respects this was an aspect of the new pleasure in lost "pastness" that intrigued Romantics, an aesthetic appreciation of a previously scorned inheritance. An element no doubt was also distaste for the changes brought by increasing commerce and industrialism that inspired nostalgia for the supposedly simpler and more pleasing structures of the past. But it was also an expression of fear of those structures and the oppressive society they suggested, as the drawings of Piranesi so powerfully indicate. Endless prisons filled with balconies and buttresses that confuse perspective loom over primitive instruments of torture in these studies. Piranesi also serves well to illustrate the *atmosphère* of the Gothic, a *chiaroscuro* of shadows and indeterminate illumination inducing a sense of futility, despair, and the loss of hope among brutal realities of cruel and conscienceless power. The impression is awful, but also sublime.

Landscapes in the Gothic similarly dwell on the exposed, inhuman and pitiless nature of mountains, crags, and wastelands. In time these tropes of atmosphere, architecture, and landscape became as much metaphorical as actual, so that a simple house, a room or cellar, could become a Gothic setting, and the mere use of darkness or barrenness could call up the Gothic mood. We could dismiss these trappings as trivial stage machinery, as many critics have in preferring the deeper psychological implications of Gothic novels and stories, or we might, with recent critic Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick,

refocus attention on the nature of Gothic *surfaces*, to see what can be read from them.⁷ But from an early stage such features can be read as a kind of proto-expressionism, articulating in settings the emotional states within the narrative, as we see in the writing of Edgar Allan Poe.

Ann Radcliffe stressed the importance of *terror* as opposed to *horror*, a distinction that is often blurred in other Gothic works such as M. G. Lewis's *The Monk*, but which nevertheless does offer some useful ways to talk about the emotional affect that is privileged here. In Gothic the terror of what might happen, or might be happening, is largely foregrounded over the visceral horror of the event. But both are frequently present at once in an interplay not unlike the interplay between reason and emotion, unreason and passion. These states are both opposed and related to one another, often in the mind of a protagonist who hovers indecisively between them; and in parallel, in the narrative itself which veers from rational explanation to emotion and intuition. The terror may be unreasonable, but, as we shall see, for example, in Melville's "Benito Cereno" (1856), the more terrible explanation is often the truth, and the horror cannot be averted.

Behind the states of fear and horror, and driving through the issue of reasonable and rational explanations, loom the outlines of real horrors. In early Gothic this was sometimes the reality of the oppression of women, or children, in a patriarchy that denied them rights. In American Gothic, while this remained a major theme, the trauma and guilt of race and slavery, or fear of what was then called miscegenation, also emerges, along with the settlers' terror of the Indians and the wilderness, and later perhaps some suppressed recognition of Native American genocide. One of the great strengths of the Gothic is its ability to articulate the voice of the "other" within its fancy-dress disguise of stylized contestations. A woman murdered and walled-up in a cellar, her body discovered through the howling of a buried cat, might be read as a voicing of silenced domestic atrocity, and also as connected obliquely with slavery motifs, whether or not that was in fact Poe's explicit "intention" in his story "The Black Cat."⁸ In the British novels of the early Gothic the feudal antagonists arguably embody in some respects an emergent middle class anxiety about the previously dominant and still

powerful aristocracy, while the religious tyrants of monastery, convent, and inquisition suggest a Protestant distrust and fear of Catholicism. Scenes of disruption, mob action, and even possibly such creatures as Frankenstein's creation may be representative of a fear of the burgeoning working class and a risk of class revolution. While this also holds true to an extent in American Gothic, it is possible to trace certain other social, political, and class fears, such as the fear and distaste generated against specific immigrant groups: the Irish in the mid-nineteenth century, southern and eastern Europeans and Asians later in the century, or against homosexuality in the twentieth century. As David Punter puts it in *The Literature of Terror*, "the middle class displaces the violence of present social structures, conjures them up again as past, and promptly falls under their spell." But the relationship of Gothic to cultural and historical realities is like that of dream, clearly somehow "about" certain fantasies and anxieties, less than coherent in its expression of them.

Notes

1. Leslie Fiedler, for example, in *Love and Death in the American Novel* (1960) says that American literature was from the first "a gothic fiction, non-realistic and negative, sadist and melodramatic." (New York: Delta, 1966) p. 29.
2. When it began in 1817 it was called the *Edinburgh Monthly Magazine*, later *Blackwood's*.
3. Maurice Lévy, "Gothic and the Critical Idiom," in *Gothick: Origins and Innovations*, Allan Lloyd-Smith and Victor Sage, eds. (Amsterdam: Editions Rodopi, 1994) pp. 4, 8.
4. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur, *Letters From an American Farmer*, 1782.
5. On the occultist tradition, see John Senior, *The Way Down and Out: Occultism in Symbolist Literature* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1959).
6. See Tzvetan Todorov, *The Fantastic* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1975).
7. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *The Persistence of Gothic Conventions* (New York: Methuen, 1986).
8. See Leslie Ginsberg, "Slavery and the Gothic Horror of Poe's 'The Black Cat,'" in *American Gothic: New Interventions in a National Narrative*, Robert Martin and Eric Savoy, eds. (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1998).