



A COMPANION TO
A AMERICAN
GOTHIC

EDITED BY
CHARLES L. CROW

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to American Gothic

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This book is dedicated to Allan Lloyd-Smith (1945–2010)

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Preface

Gothic American literature offers essential insights into the history and culture of the United States. This statement would not have been understood or accepted a few decades ago.

As late as the 1950s, the Gothic was regarded as a minor European tradition concerned with gloomy mansions and imperiled maidens and having little relevance in America. The achievements of Hawthorne, Melville, and Poe were accepted, and Faulkner sometimes was called a writer of Southern Gothic, but the larger pattern of American Gothic, and the usefulness of the category, was not generally recognized. I qualify the statement only because a few earlier scholars, notably Harry Levin in *The Power of Blackness: Hawthorne, Poe, Melville* (1958), provided ideas that anticipate the direction of current scholarship.

In the 1960s, a period of great change in literary studies, as in many aspects of our culture, the definition of the Gothic was radically revised, and broadened, both in the United States and in Europe. While a full account of the theory of the Gothic will be found in Jerrold Hogle's chapter, the first in this volume, we should note Leslie Fiedler's *Love and Death in the American Novel* (1960) as a paradigm shifter in American Studies. Fiedler's work made irrelevant the earlier critical conversation about the contending romance and novel traditions in American literature, and defined a single broad tradition of American Gothic comprising the culture's dark, repressed, and oppositional elements, running back at least to Charles Brockden Brown. All subsequent discussions of American Gothic were shaped by this insight.

At the end of the 1960s, discussion of British and European Gothic was reenergized by Robert Hume's PMLA essay "Gothic Versus Romantic" and the debate it provoked. Through the 1970s and 1980s, a number of works on American Gothic appeared, in many instances extending Fiedler's ideas. *Uncanny American Fiction: Medusa's Face*

(1989) by Allan Lloyd-Smith (then known as Allan Gardner Smith), a British scholar of American culture, illustrates the merging of Gothic theory with the ideas of Derrida and Lacan in this period.

A defining moment in contemporary Gothic Studies was the foundation of the International Gothic Association (IGA) in 1991, with Allan Lloyd-Smith as its first president. The scholars attending the first IGA meeting at the University of East Anglia, its second, at Stirling, Scotland, in 1995, and subsequent biennial meetings, provided a cadre who developed Gothic courses and even degree programs in Britain, the United States, Canada, and indeed around the world. They, and their students, the second generation of IGA scholars, are well represented in this collection of essays.

Today Gothic Studies is well established in the academy. Several British universities offer MA degrees in the field, and one of the contributors to this volume, William Hughes, holds the title of Professor of Gothic Studies. The respected journal *Gothic Studies*, which was born at the Stirling IGA conference, can be found in university libraries globally and provides a juried forum for research. Major university presses publish significant new books every year, as the bibliographies of the following chapters attest. Courses in American Gothic, specifically, scarce heard of a few decades ago, are now taught in university English Departments and American Studies programs throughout the United States and in many other countries.

Thus, to return to the assertion of our opening sentence, our growing understanding of the Gothic has begun to reshape the larger disciplines of American Studies and American literature. Far from being a footnote to our literary tradition, the Gothic is now seen as essential to understanding our literature, and indeed our national project. The dominant, sanctioned history of the United States has been a narrative of social, economic, and technological progress. This narrative also asserts the doctrine of American exceptionalism, the belief that the country's essential innocence and its destiny place it above the constraints and judgments of other nations and of history. In contrast to this triumphant story, the Gothic is a counter-narrative, an alternative vision, recording fear, failure, despair, nightmare, crime, disease, and madness. The Gothic is that which is left out, what is excluded, by what W.D. Howells unfortunately once described as the smiling aspects of life that are more typically American. The Gothic thus is the natural medium for expression of our great national failures and crimes, such as the enslavement of Africans and the displacement and destruction of indigenous peoples. The Gothic is also a vehicle for stories of the oppression of women, and indeed for all groups forced to the margins of power by a patriarchal culture. The development of Gothic Studies has paralleled, and contributed to, the feminist movement and the field of women's studies, and the rediscovery of significant women authors of the nineteenth century. The Gothic also represented homosexuality obliquely in repressive times, and now directly engages gay culture. Gothic literature is the place where the nightmares of small and private

lives have found expression. Indeed, only by studying American Gothic, a literature often of hysterical extremes, violence, obscurity, and the surreal, can one reach a balanced and rational understanding of American culture from colonial times to our present postmodern age.

About the Book

This volume presents the arena of American Gothic Studies as it is today. Its forty-two chapters were written by thirty-eight scholars, who come from the United States and eight other countries. In this group are some who attended that historic meeting at the University of East Anglia in 1991, as well as young academics representing a third generation of Gothic scholars. The essays range, in the chronology of their subjects, from American Indian mythology to contemporary television, vampire movies, and Gothic digital games, and illustrate a variety of critical approaches.

The chapters are grouped in seven parts. The first, "Theorizing American Gothic," introduces key Gothic tropes. It surveys the technical approaches that have been used in the study of American Gothic, and also demonstrates the application of theory to several texts and problems. David Punter's far-ranging chapter illustrates the premise of the Gothic as exploration of national guilt and trauma – a notion that several later chapters will reference. Martin Procházka takes the most enduring of Gothic tropes, the ruin (which was most often, in Europe, a castle or mansion), and shows its persistence and mutations in America. Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock's survey of monsters and the monstrous is relevant to a multitude of Gothic narratives. Sherry R. Truffin's chapter on "Gothic Metafiction" applies contemporary theory to two disturbing contemporary texts. All of the chapters in Part I might be seen as useful preparation for the chapters to follow.

Readers may observe a useful debate about the "Origins of American Gothic" in Part II. The critical inquiry about Gothic origins has pushed deeper and deeper into the colonial past. Certainly American Gothic long has been linked to the core issue of race, which is central to American culture in the way that class is in Britain. Chapters in this section by Teresa A. Goddu and Matthew Wynn Sivils explore the importance of the escaped slave narrative and the Indian captivity as foundations of American Gothic. Benjamin F. Fisher argues that the conventions of European Gothic were first introduced to America in the popular drama of the eighteenth century, even before the experiments of Charles Brockden Brown in fiction. Brown, the first American Gothic novelist, and founder of several enduring Gothic traditions in fiction, is the subject of a chapter by Carol Margaret Davison; George Lippard, Brown's fellow Philadelphian, author of the long-forgotten masterpiece *The Quaker City; or, The Monks of Monk Hall*, is discussed by Chad Luck.

Part III contains essays on the classic period of American Gothic, the nineteenth century, and the legacy of its writers and texts into the twentieth century and the present. Faye Ringel's essay on New England explores the tradition of that region back to the time of the Puritans and forward to H.P. Lovecraft, Shirley Jackson, and Stephen King, each of whom receives an individual chapter in Part V. Professor Ringel also introduces the important subject of Female Gothic, which, in the United States, largely originated in New England and began to be rediscovered and properly evaluated only in the late twentieth century. The debate between "Dark Romantics" and the Transcendentalists, which defined American Gothic for this age, and which is essential to understanding Poe, Hawthorne, and Melville, is the subject of a chapter by Ted Billy.

Poe's mighty shadow is the subject of two chapters. Sherry R. Truffin compares Poe's *doppelgänger* story "William Wilson" with a late twentieth-century example of "schoolhouse Gothic," Donna Tartt's *The Secret History*. William Moss demonstrates Poe's influence upon the tradition of Southern Gothic, down to William Faulkner and Walker Percy. Andrew Smith's chapter on "Henry James's Ghosts" ventures into the labyrinths of the writer called "The Master" by his admirers, author of *The Turn of the Screw*, the single most discussed work of American literature. Lynette Carpenter's "A Sisterhood of Sleuths" traces the evolution of a Gothic convention into a popular American literary form. Agnieszka Soltysik Monnet's chapter pairs the cold ironic master of the weird tale, Ambrose Bierce, with Richard Matheson, whose *I Am Legend* began the modern revival of the vampire story – a subject that will be revisited in Part V.

Part IV, "American Gothic and Race," returns to the crucial issue introduced in Part I. Michelle Burnham's question – "Is There an Indigenous Gothic?" – is answered not only by a survey of significant contemporary American Indian writers, but also, surprisingly, with the suggestion that Gothic issues were present in indigenous oral traditions before the European invasion. One of the finest of American authors, long neglected, is the subject of Justin D. Edwards's "Gothic Transgressions: Charles W. Chesnutt, Conjure, and the Law." Andrew Hock Soon Ng analyzes the use of Gothic tropes by Asian American writers. The racial issues discussed by these chapters will be present, explicitly or implicitly, in many of those that follow.

Part V, "Gothic Modern and Postmodern," contains essays on several significant authors of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries: H.P. Lovecraft (Faye Ringel), Flannery O'Connor (Chad Rohman), Shirley Jackson (Dara Downey), Joyce Carol Oates (Gavin Cologne-Brookes), Sylvia Plath (Kathleen L. Nichols), Stephen King (Tony Magistrale and Steven Bruhm), Nobel laureate Toni Morrison (Marsha L. Wester), William Gibson, the founder of cyberpunk science fiction (John Whatley), and Cormac McCarthy (Ronja Vieth). Lynda Barry's *Cruddy* – an "illustrated" novel, a form midway between print and graphic novels – is the subject of a chapter by Ellen E. Berry. This chapter, like Professor Whatley's, anticipates the new media chapters of Part VI.

Several chapters in Part V extend issues introduced earlier, such as the legacy of slavery and the traditions of New England and the South. The migration of the Gothic from the traditional sites of wilderness, haunted mansions, and ruins into modern American suburbia is the subject of Bernice M. Murphy's chapter. Our discussion of vampires, begun in Chapter 17, continues here in chapters by William Hughes and Gina Wisker, as well as in the chapters on King and Plath, and in Arthur Redding's chapter, "Apocalyptic Gothic." Both Redding's chapter and Whatley's on William Gibson find that American Gothic haunts the future as well as the past.

The sections thus far have discussed print media, with the exception of the indigenuous fables discussed by Michelle Burnham (Chapter 18) and theater (Fisher, Chapter 8), written primarily for performance rather than reading. Part VI, "Gothic in Other Media," takes us into forms not often studied in literature courses but which have found, and continue to reach, audiences in the millions. Richard J. Hand's chapter on audio drama takes us back to the golden age of radio, when shows such as *The Shadow* and *Inner Sanctum* deliciously frightened thousands of listeners every week, and demonstrated that the theater of the mind created by sound is one of the most effective of Gothic media – one that is still practiced in the Internet age. David Fine's chapter on "Film Noir and the Gothic" explores a tradition of Gothic in the movies, which may be the dominant narrative medium of the twentieth century. Carol Margaret Davison's "The American Dream/The American Nightmare: American Gothic on the Small Screen" defines the considerable Gothic achievement of television series such as *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and *True Blood*, and reminds us that television, like film, is a medium that is more important even than print in the current Goth culture to the popularity of the vampire legend in its several permutations. The last chapter in this section, Tanya Krzywinska's "Digital Games and the American Gothic: Investigating Gothic Game Grammar," is an introduction to a medium of infinite imaginative potential and a huge current audience, one that can only grow as the human mind and artificial intelligence continue to interact.

Part VII, "American Gothic and World Gothic," outlines an issue suggested earlier in this introduction. American Gothic, in a global world market of ideas and culture, has many interactions with the imaginations of other lands. Andrew Hock Soon Ng's opening chapter in this section shows the influence of American Gothic authors, especially Poe and Faulkner, on writers in East and Southeast Asia. Antonio Alcalá González examines the use of Gothic tropes from the literature of the United States in the fiction of the great Mexican writer Carlos Fuentes. And Carol Siegel discusses American responses to contemporary Scandinavian Gothicism, such as the Swedish vampire movie *Let the Right One In*.

The forty-two chapters of this collection, then, illustrate both the rich variety of American Gothic and the diversity of critical lenses through which it may be viewed. As these chapters reveal, the Gothic is present in American culture from the beginning, born of the same interaction of Enlightenment and Romantic

ideals that produced the new nation, tangled in its roots, and continuing to the present as a record of our fears and traumas. The development of Gothic Studies in the United States represents a growth of self-awareness and an encounter with the repressed and excluded; it is a conversation that is necessary and must continue.

Acknowledgments

Figure 6.1 Cover illustration from the *Narrative of James Williams, who was for several years a driver on a cotton plantation in Alabama*. Rare Books, MS-E444.W743, University of Tennessee Libraries, Knoxville, Special Collections. Reproduced by permission of the University of Tennessee Library.

Figure 41.1 Drawing of Chac Mool. Reproduced by permission of the artist, Fanny Gutiérrez Guzmán.

Part I
Theorizing American Gothic

The Progress of Theory and the Study of the American Gothic

Jerrold E. Hogle

The very fact of this volume indicates acceptance of what Leslie Fiedler was the first to argue thoroughly in 1960: that American fiction is quite frequently, if not always, “a gothic fiction,” a “literature of darkness and the grotesque in a land of light and affirmation” (Fiedler 1966: 29). Before Fiedler’s *Love and Death in the American Novel*, however, except here and there, the Gothic strain in American writing has rarely been deemed worthy of attention in the academic study of literature in the United States. Most acknowledgments of it prior to Fiedler have regarded American Gothic writings and films as both anomalous in their nature and “low culture” in their aesthetic status, even when the focus has been Edgar Allan Poe. After all, for most nineteenth-century critics, despite sophisticated novels by Charles Brockden Brown from Philadelphia that confess their adaptation of the European Gothic as early as the 1790s (see Brown 1988: 3–4), “Gothic was an inferior genre incapable of high seriousness and appealing only to readers of questionable tastes” (Frank 1990: x). That judgment was intensified from the 1920s on by the rise in academia of what came to be called the “New Criticism,” which also included the promulgation of New Critical literary theory and the teaching of most earlier theories as insufficiently “literary.” For this movement, the analysis of texts should concentrate on the symbolic interplay of every work’s verbal images and stylistic features with each other. It therefore distinguishes certain texts as the ones deserving of study, as “high culture,” because they are either artistically “organic” according to the theories of Samuel Taylor Coleridge and his progeny or verbally tight in their intricacy and manipulations of generic norms within

the more recent criteria of T.S. Eliot. Gothic fictions have remained unworthy of attention until the 1960s because they have never fit into such molds. Since England's Horace Walpole defined the "Gothic Story" in his second edition of *The Castle of Otranto* (1765) as a "blend" of "two kinds of romance," the aristocratic, Catholic, and supernatural "ancient" and the middle-class, largely Protestant, and more realistic "modern" (Walpole 1996: 9) – an *in-organicism* echoed by Hawthorne in his 1851 Preface to *The House of the Seven Gables* (1962: 15–17) – the Gothic has become established as anti-New Critical in its flagrant mixture of different genres and ideologies, an arouser of the fears instigated by visible conflicts between retrogressive and progressive views of the world. Moreover, the New Critics' casting of Gothic into "low culture" has been reinforced by what we now regard as "Old" Historicism and its frequent connection with the History of Ideas. These approaches, devoted to the deep-seated "Spirit of the Age" (or unified period mentality) made prominent by French historicism in the late nineteenth century, see literary texts as windows through which readers can grasp pervasive worldviews that provide a culture with an underlying coherence during the era of each work, even when ideational constructs (such as the "Great Chain of Being") have lasted from one period into another. Since the Gothic, by its anomalous nature, points up the disunities in the ideologies it is pulled between at any given time, this set of stances is just as inclined to undervalue it as the New Criticism is. The exiling of the Gothic from centrality in American literature thus becomes firmly established in the highly influential book that combines New Criticism, the History of Ideas, and some Old Historicism: *American Renaissance* (1941) by F.O. Matthiessen, which even extols Coleridge and T.S. Eliot as inspirations for its "technique" (xvii). There – and hence in many other studies of American literature – the Gothic, along with Poe, is relegated to manifesting a "mechanical horror" (231) that, if occasionally employed by Hawthorne, is overcome in the 1840s–1850s by the "tendency of American idealism to see a spiritual significance in every natural fact" (243).

It has taken the resurgence of some earlier theoretical schemes undervalued by New Criticism and the rise of quite new theories of what should be the focus of literary interpretation to bring the Gothic to the fore as an unsettling but pervasive mode of expression throughout the history of American culture. To be sure, the New Critical–Old Historicist–History of Ideas alliance has occasionally interpreted the American Gothic within its combination of criteria. *The Power of Blackness* (1958) by Harry Levin, which takes its title from Melville's 1850 phrase for Hawthorne's most distinctive revelation for American literature (Levin 1958: 26), counters Matthiessen by asserting that "the affinity between the American psyche and the Gothic Romance" (20) is rooted Old Historically in a "union of opposites" basic to "the American outlook" (xi) in which there are "hesitations between tradition and modernity" (241) because the "New World" (4) is haunted by Old-World Original Sins, among them the "institution of slavery" (34). This account even brings Brockden Brown and Poe back into equality with Hawthorne and Melville by showing how they all manifest this conflicted mentality through a "literary iconology" of recast older archetypes (x). Levin thus combines New Critical and History of Ideas assumptions by invoking a