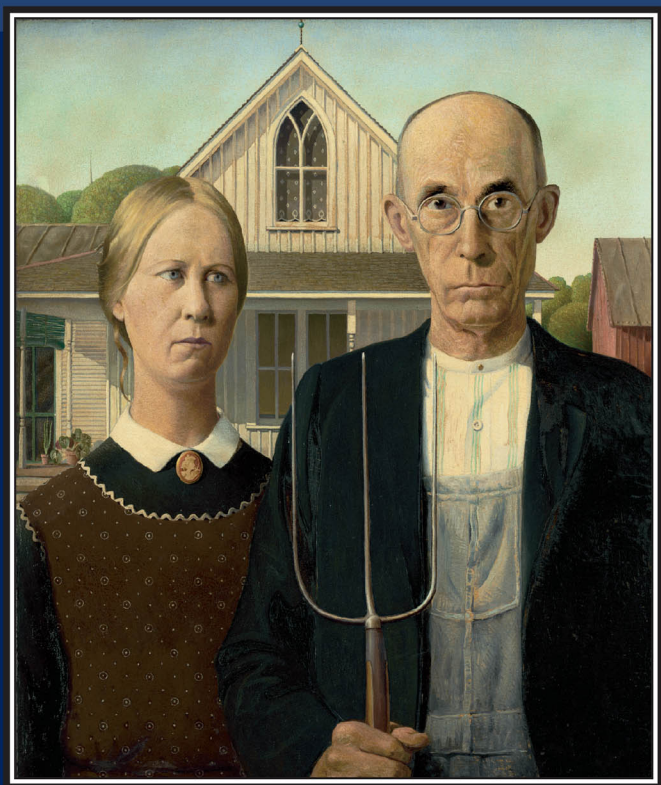


The Poetics and Politics of the American Gothic

*Gender and Slavery in Nineteenth-Century
American Literature*

Agnieszka Soltysik Monnet



THE POETICS AND POLITICS
OF THE AMERICAN GOTHIC

For Mathias and Johana

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Gender and Slavery in Nineteenth-Century
American Literature

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Agnieszka Soltysik Monnet, July 25, 2009

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Introduction

Once upon a time the words “American” and “Gothic” seemed so unrelated that putting them together created unpredictable ripples of irony. This was the case in 1930 when Grant Wood chose to call his famous painting of a man and woman standing in front of a house in Iowa “*American Gothic*.” In fact, the incongruity of the term was the whole point of using it. Since at the time “American Gothic” existed only as a designation for a nineteenth-century architectural fad, the most obvious gothic element of the painting was the pointed-arch window.¹ The visual contrast between the seemingly pretentious window (evoking European ecclesiastic architecture and ancient castles) and the modest two-story house around it produced an ironic effect. Another layer of irony was generated by the general idea of medieval European architecture transplanted into the heartland of rural Iowa. Still more ironies emerged from the debates that quickly arose around the image. In fact, by choosing this deliberately incongruous title for his portrait of two American “types,” Wood launched the term “American Gothic” on a new career.

Currently, the term “American Gothic” no longer seems either like an oxymoron or a deliberate provocation. Instead, American Gothic now appears on university course listings and is the subject of doctoral dissertations. Several anthologies appeared in the 1990s, including Joyce Carol Oates’ *American Gothic Tales* and Charles Crow’s *American Gothic: 1787–1916*, as did a number of book-length studies and an introduction for undergraduates written by Alan Lloyd-Smith in 2004.² Most critics agree that the gothic has been an important presence in American fiction beginning with Charles Brockden Brown, that it thrived in the nineteenth century, and continues to exert a powerful influence on American culture. Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* (1986), William Gaddis’s *Carpenter’s Gothic* (1985), and the popular works of Stephen King and Ann Rice are often cited as examples of how the gothic permeates American literature at every level, including high-, middle-, and low-brow fiction.

Although the gothic has become a respectable fixture of the academic and literary landscape, I would like to return it for a moment to its scandalous origins. Recalling that “scandal” comes from the Greek *skandalon*, meaning a trap, snare,

¹ Also known as Carpenter’s Gothic, the American Gothic began as a revival of English Gothic architecture in the design of mid-nineteenth-century American churches and spread to non-ecclesiastic buildings and houses by the late nineteenth century.

² These include Louis Gross’s *Redefining the American Gothic: From Wieland to The Day of the Dead* (Ann Arbor, MI: UMI, 1989), Teresa A. Goddu’s *Gothic America: Narrative, History, and Nation* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987), Robert K. Martin and Eric Savoy’s *American Gothic: New Interventions in a National Narrative* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1998), and Allan-Lloyd Smith’s *American Gothic Fiction: An Introduction* (New York: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2004).

or stumbling block, we could say that gothic fiction is scandalous not only because it deals with transgression (such as murder, forced confinement, physical violation and psychological torture) but also because it makes the possibility of knowing and judging transgression itself into a stumbling block by questioning the terms that define wrong-doing as such. I intend to make this aspect of the gothic—ethical rather than aesthetic—the focus of this book.

Much has been written on the emotional aspects of the gothic, most of it taking at face value the assumption that the gothic is meant to provoke fear, horror, or dread in the reader.³ For example, Philip Cole writes that “Gothic literature has a tradition of bringing fear into people’s minds and has been closely studied by academics seeking insights into our predilection for terrifying or horrific experiences” (*The Myth of Evil* 96). Similarly, Donna Heiland claims that “gothic novels are above all about the creation of fear—fear in the characters represented, fear in the reader—and they accomplish this through their engagement with the aesthetics of the sublime or some variant of it” (*Gothic & Gender* 5). Going even further, Valdine Clemens argues that “reading Gothic fiction is an atavistic experience,” stimulating “fight or flight” responses by evoking “intense creature-terror” (*The Return of the Repressed* 2–3).

This book intends to challenge this critical commonplace. Although the *characters* may experience fear in the stories, the intention (and power) of the literary gothic to frighten real readers has been greatly overestimated. What has received relatively less attention is the way the gothic also provides a complex intellectual and ethical reading experience.⁴ It is almost a meta-fiction, frequently

³ The widespread assumption that gothic fiction produces fear in readers is reflected moreover in the frequency with which the word “fear” appears in titles of gothic criticism, e.g., *Patterns of Fear in the Gothic Novel, 1790–1830* (Ann Blaisdell Tracy, 1980) *In the Circles of Fear and Desire: A Study of Gothic Fantasy* (William Patrick Day, 1985), *Landscape of Fear: Stephen King’s American Gothic* (Tony Magistrale, 1988), *The Shape of Fear: Horror and Fin de Siècle Culture of Decadence* (Susan J. Navarette, 1998), *The Thrill of Fear: 250 Years of Scary Entertainment* (Walter Kendrick), *Images of Fear: How Horror Stories Helped Shape Modern Culture* (Martin Tropp, 1999), *Le soupçon gothique: l’intériorisation de la peur en Occident* (Valérie de Courville Nicol, 2004). Many titles also use the word “terror” instead of fear: *The Delights of Terror* (Terry Heller, 1987), *The Literature of Terror* (David Punter, 1980), *Frontier Gothic: Terror and Wonder at the Frontier in American Literature* (David Mogen, Scott Sanders, and Joane B. Karpinski, 1993).

⁴ Of course, the epistemological aspects of the gothic have always been evident to readers and critics (hence its critical association with notions of the sublime and the uncanny), but these were often eclipsed by a preference for psychological (and specifically psychoanalytic) readings. Yet, in recent years, critics have returned to issues of knowledge and judgment. For example, Peter K. Garrett’s *Gothic Reflections Narrative: Force in Nineteenth-Century Fiction* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2003) examines, as I do, the way the gothic pits alternative narratives against one another, and David Punter’s *Gothic Pathologies: The Text, the Body and the Law* (London: Macmillan, 1998), though applying psychoanalysis, focuses on the way the gothic explores the limits of the law. Yet, in contrast to my own argument, Punter tends to invoke a discourse of “terror” when discussing the reader’s experience: a terror that “return[s] you to the body, the animal” (11).

breaking the illusion of realism in order to explore the limits of narrative and stylistic possibilities. Instead of being serious and scary, gothic fiction is often surprisingly playful, experimental, self-consciously artificial, even funny.⁵ It flaunts its generic affiliations and flirts with self-parody. It invites readers to adopt a critical distance from its fictional world even as it lures them inside that world with promises of shocking, titillating, fascinating naughtiness. The gothic is a sister aesthetic of camp (the two modes emerging side by side in the mid-eighteenth century), and like camp, it knows how to be serious, silly, and sophisticated all at once.

The gothic is also deeply and inevitably ethical, preoccupied as it is with ghosts, monsters, murders, and bizarre circumstances that raise troubling questions about cultural norms and complacencies. Angela Carter has suggested that “provoking unease” is the “singular *moral function*” of the gothic (my emphasis; *Fireworks* 122). “Unease” is a curious mental condition, both cognitive and emotional at once, and not at all the same thing as fear. Although it can be related to what Tzvetan Todorov called the “hesitation” produced by the Fantastic, the unease that Carter describes possesses a moral or ethical dimension that Todorov’s more epistemological definition of the Fantastic does not (*The Fantastic* 41).⁶ This book is concerned with the ethical and political functions of the specific kind of unease created by the gothic.

Historical Overview

The English literary gothic first emerged in the mid-eighteenth century as an ambivalent reassessment of the medieval past and a nativist answer to the hegemony of French-influenced neo-classical aesthetics.⁷ Two years after Richard

⁵ In *Gothic and the Comic Turn* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2005), Avril Horner and Sue Zlosnik suggest that all gothic writing has a comic element and that it should be considered as a spectrum with “at one end, horror writing containing moments of hysteria or relief and, on the other, works in which there are clear signals that nothing is to be taken seriously,” p. 4.

⁶ This is not to claim that literature defined as fantasy cannot do ethical or moral work, since it clearly can and does (one need only to think of science fiction), but to point out that this ethical dimension is not part of Todorov’s original definition of the Fantastic but a feature that has been raised by other critics and writers. My point here is to underscore the importance of criticism to the constitution of genres as coherent entities, as opposed to the notion that genres are immanent and objective.

⁷ The term “Gothic” had begun to be used by art historians in the seventeenth century in order to distinguish the more classical style of earlier medieval architecture (dubbed “Romanesque” in the early nineteenth century) from the more embellished later style featuring gargoyles and pointed arches. Antecedents of the English literary gothic can also be found in the revenge tragedies of the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, which combine black humor, compelling ethical dilemmas, and over-the-top gory spectacle, elements that continue to characterize gothic aesthetics. The following studies focus specifically on the origins of the literary gothic: Michael Gamer, *Romanticism and the Gothic: Genre, Reception, and Canon Formation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000); James Watt, *Contesting the Gothic: Fiction, Genre and Cultural Conflict* (Cambridge:

Hurd's influential "Letters on Chivalry and Romance" (1762) strenuously defended "Gothick Romance" against the "ridicule and contempt" of modern readers, amateur historian and writer Horace Walpole published *The Castle of Otranto* (1764) as a found-text, purportedly a medieval manuscript. Well-received in this form, the book caused a bit of a scandal when it turned out to be a fake. In the preface to the second edition a year later (with the added subtitle "*A Gothic Story*"), Walpole confesses that the story is actually his own literary experiment. What he does not say explicitly but many of his readers would have understood is that the novel was meant to serve as a companion-piece or prop to his hobby of posing as a kind of gothic dandy. Since 1749 Walpole had been constructing a mock-medieval castle and cultivating a signature style he called "gloomth."⁸ Feeding into and on the contemporaneous fashion for Graveyard poetry and ruins, Walpole's campy gothic style became a popular aesthetic and literary trend, peaking in its recognizably Walpole-derived form in the 1790s.

Since then, the gothic has become an extraordinarily adaptable and diverse international phenomenon. Most major European literatures produced rich local variations of the gothic during the nineteenth century, while in the twentieth century, writers from postcolonial settings have turned out to be the most spirited innovators of gothic rhetoric and topoi.⁹ These have proven adaptable to diverse

Cambridge University Press, 1999); David Porter, "From Chinese to Goth: Walpole and the Gothic Repudiation of Chinoiserie," *Eighteenth-Century Life* 23.1 (February 1999): 46–58; Maggie Kilgour, *The Rise of the Gothic Novel* (London: Routledge, 1995); E.J. Clery, *The Rise of Supernatural Fiction, 1762–1800* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995); Allan Lloyd Smith and Victor Sage, *Gothick Origins and Innovations* (Amsterdam & Atlanta, GA: Rodopi, 1994); and Robert Miles, *Gothic Writing 1750–1820: A Genealogy* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1993).

⁸ See Walter Kendrick, *The Thrill of Fear: 250 Years of Scary Entertainment* (New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1991), p. 41, and David McKinney, *The Imprints of Gloomth. 1765–1830* (Charlottesville, VA: Alderman Library, 1988).

⁹ As Marshall Brown argues in *The Gothic Text* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2005), the gothic was a "common enterprise developed by an international community of writers" during the Romantic decades in Europe (1). Studies of European gothic fiction in the nineteenth century include Avril Horner's edited collection, *European Gothic: A Spirited Exchange 1760–1960* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2002), Terry Hale's "French and German Gothic: the beginnings," *The Cambridge Companion to Gothic Fiction*, ed. Jerrold Hogle (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), David Punter's "Scottish and Irish Gothic" in the same collection, Joan Kessler's introduction to *Demons of the Night: Tales of the Fantastic, Madness and the Supernatural from Nineteenth-Century France* (Chicago, IL, & London: University of Chicago Press, 1995), and Mark Simpson's *The Russian Gothic Novel and Its British Antecedents* (Columbus, OH: Slavica Publishers, Inc., 1983). For the centrality of the gothic to twentieth-century postcolonial writers, see Andrew Smith and William Hughes' *Empire and the Gothic: The Politics of Genre* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), Elizabeth Paravisini-Gebert's "Colonial and Postcolonial Gothic: the Caribbean," in Hogle, *Cambridge Companion*, and David Punter's *Postcolonial Imaginings: Fictions of a New World Order* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2000).

historical and regional specificities while retaining a set of recognizable figures and concerns: the influence of the past on the present, the limitations of human knowledge, the ambiguities of retribution and revenge, and the dangers of powerful institutions and totalizing systems of thought.

Gothic criticism first emerged in the 1920s and 30s and focused on identifying, contextualizing, and legitimating the English Gothic novel as a counter-current to the perceived rationalism of the Enlightenment. Edith Birkhead's *The Tale of Terror* (1921) and Eino Railo's *The Haunted Castle* (1927) are typical of these early historical and thematic studies, which also tended to focus on the settings (e.g., castles and dungeons) and psychological effects (e.g., "terror") of the British Gothic.¹⁰ An important debate emerged in the 1930s, which cast Gothic criticism and literature in diametrically opposed political camps. In 1936, André Breton claimed Horace Walpole as a precursor to the surrealists and praised the gothicists' use of dream and fantasy to plumb the "secret depths of history" inaccessible to reason (Baldick and Mighall 212). In effect, Breton's essay claimed the gothic for revolutionary modernism. Two years later, the eccentric bibliophile Montague Summers published *The Gothic Quest*, which explicitly challenged Breton's argument by insisting that the gothic was "an aristocrat of literature" and that many of its early writers were far more conservative than revolutionary (Summers 397). Summers pointed out, for example, that Walpole was the aristocratic son of a Prime Minister, Matthew "Monk" Lewis was a slave-holding plantation owner, Charles Maturin was a declared opponent of William Godwin, and Ann Radcliffe was the soul of respectable middle-class sensibility. The debate about whether gothic literature was essentially conservative or progressive has continued throughout the twentieth century.¹¹ American critic Leslie Fiedler

¹⁰ See Chris Baldick and Robert Mighall's "Gothic Criticism," *A Companion to the Gothic*, ed. David Punter (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2000) for a complete summary of early gothic criticism.

¹¹ Political evaluations of the British gothic have fluctuated considerably, but the current consensus about both British and American Gothic fiction is that it tends to the progressive rather than conservative side of the political spectrum. The most notable exception is Rosemary Jackson, who compares the gothic unfavorably to the Fantastic in *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion* (New York: Methuen, 1981). Her argument depends largely on the premise that the Fantastic is subversive because of its lack of realism, while the gothic purportedly reinforces "bourgeois ideology" through narrative closure and realism (122). Jackson's argument is flawed by an excessively narrow description of the gothic and a simplistic view of realism as inherently conservative and unrealistic texts as inherently "subversive." Equally over-determined by theoretical presuppositions, Stephen Bernstein's argument that the eighteenth-century gothic reinforced bourgeois family and economic values and was complicit with new internalized forms of political surveillance is an indictment of gothic literature as a form of social control ("Form and Ideology in the Gothic Novel," *Essays in Literature* 18 [Fall 1991]: 151–165). More recently, James Watt has argued that "nearly all the romances which actually called themselves 'Gothic' were unambiguously conservative" because they valorized patriotism and the "restoration of property to legitimate heirs" (*Contesting the Gothic: Fiction, Genre and Cultural Conflict, 1764–1832* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999], p. 64). Watt's argument is

famously re-launched it in the 1960s by arguing that while the British gothic was revolutionary because it identified evil with the super-ego, the American gothic was “conservative at its deepest level of implication, whatever the intent of its authors” because it “identified evil with the id” (*Love and Death* 160–161). The current understanding of the American Gothic has completely reversed this view of its political meaning.

However, with a few notable exceptions, the word “gothic” scarcely figured in American literary scholarship until the 1980s. Literature departments in the first postwar decades were dominated by Richard Chase’s so-called “Romance Thesis,” the main point of which was to insist that American literature was very different from the British. Accordingly, American fiction was supposedly characterized by the “romance” genre, while the British was characterized by realism. In this context, even if a critic accepted that there was a “dark” strain of American writing, he would not have called it “gothic” because, first of all, this term was too closely linked to British literature, and second, it sounded too much like the airport novels for women which happened to also be called “gothic romances” in the 50s and 60s. In short, the word “gothic” had both British and female connotations that made it unappealing to American scholars as a label for American literature.¹² Although Irving Malin wrote a study called *New American Gothic* in 1962, the terms “American” and “Gothic” remain distinctly unrelated in his book. Malin’s homophobic and judgmental survey of contemporary American fiction finds that it is peopled by homosexuals and perverts and other “freaks,” hence the word “gothic,” but this gothicism is not itself American in any way. The literature is American because it is written in America, but the sexual misfits that it has produced in no way reflect on the history or meaning of American society. Finally, Malin’s use of the term “New American Gothic” is purely sexual and psychological, whereas what best characterizes contemporary understandings of the term are its historical and political dimensions and capacity to reflect on what Malcolm X called “the American nightmare.”

It was in the wake of the Civil Rights movement and the Vietnam War that the linkage of the terms “American” and “Gothic” permanently took on new hybrid meanings. These two complex historical events raised troubling questions about the systemic injustice, violence, and racism of American foreign policy and domestic politics. The massacre at My Lai, for example, when it came to light in 1969, prompted profound public soul-searching about the war and the way

problematic because his criteria for judgment are based entirely on plot (thus, restoration of property to “legitimate heirs” means a conservative text that endorses the status quo) and therefore very schematic. In any case, these critical assessments are exceptions to the prevailing consensus that the gothic helps expose rather than conceal cultural and ideological conflicts.

¹² For a more developed discussion of the history of the term “American Gothic” in American literary studies, see my essay, “The uses of the American Gothic: The politics of a critical term in post-war American literary criticism,” *Comparative American Studies* 3.1 (2005): 111–122.

in which it had switched from protecting to brutalizing the Vietnamese civilian population. Similarly, television images of protesters tear-gassed and beaten by riot police in Chicago during the Democratic convention in 1968 undermined the complacency with which Americans regarded their own political system. Finally, the Kent State shootings brought the Vietnam War home and linked repression abroad to violence by the state against its own population in a new way. Partly as a result of these and other political events, including a wave of Native American and Chicano activism, the 1976 bicentennial celebrations became an occasion for counter-voices to raise troubling questions about the victims of two hundred years of American history.

Robert Bloch's 1974 novel *American Gothic* is symptomatic of this historical turn. Whereas his earlier work *Psycho* (1959) was an exploration of the sexual and gender disorders that fascinated Americans in the 1950s, where the past was figured entirely in personal psychosexual terms, *American Gothic* is characterized by a politicized and critical historicism. The novel is set in 1893 against the backdrop of the Chicago World's Columbian Exposition, an event intended to celebrate 400 years of American history since Columbus's arrival in the New World. As Robert Rydell has demonstrated, this world fair was an elaborate staging of American imperialist ideologies of social progress and racial superiority.¹³ With its White Palace and zoo-like ethnic exhibits, the fair was American self-complacency incarnate. Since the Chicago riots of 1968 at the Democratic Convention had not yet faded from readers' memories, the choice of this city and this historical moment was clearly meant as an ironic reflection on American narratives of progress and enlightenment. Bloch's novel is a modern variation on the Bluebeard story, with a handsome murderer posing as a physician in order to kill a series of young women who fall in love with him. He also opens a hotel to accommodate visitors to the fair and kills and robs them. The novel links his appetite for women to his appetite for money, and links both to a pathological acquisitiveness that invites readers to reflect on its connection to American imperialism and entrepreneurial greed.

In short, the novel's historical setting and self-conscious generic affiliations (the con-man builds a gothic "castle," replete with secret passages and deadly trapdoors, with his femicidal revenue) represent a new use of the term "American Gothic." No longer referring to an architectural style or handful of lonely misfits, "American Gothic" had come to signal the essential gothicness of America itself. The fundamentally historical meaning of this new sense of the term is apparent from the closing words of the "Postmortem," a coda to the novel in which Bloch explains that it is based on a true story. After reviewing some of the particulars of the real murderer's crimes, Bloch writes:

But all this, of course, was long ago and far away. Mass murderers, gas chambers and secret burials and coldblooded slaughter for profit belong to the dim and distant past. Today we live in more enlightened times. Don't we?

¹³ Robert Rydell, *All the World's a Fair: Visions of Empire at American International Expositions, 1876–1916* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1987), pp. 38–71.