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Part I

# Theorizing American Gothic

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# The Progress of Theory and the Study of the American Gothic

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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

Jungian sense of primal images in the collective Western mind that gain new significance from their transportation into American textual forms, a mode of analysis that had just been solidified in Northrop Frye's *Anatomy of Criticism* (1957). As late as the early 1970s, moreover, G.R. Thompson rehabilitates Poe by equally New Critical and History of Ideas standards. He close-reads Poe's Gothic tales by revealing how they combine European and American features, yet makes these texts as organically and artistically ironic as a T.S. Eliot "objective correlative" (Thompson 1973: 17). They render in dense verbal form the "philosophical consciousness of Poe himself," as per the History of Ideas, in ways that manifest his transformation of tired Gothic conventions into Americanizations of the earlier "Romantic Ironists" of England and Germany (12–13). Yet here, ultimately, the Gothic is a set of devalued ingredients, not really essential to American writing at Poe's time, that Poe rescues from deserved obscurity by reinvesting them with a Romantic Irony apparently not as connected to the Gothic as it actually was in the Europe of the early nineteenth century. The Gothic cannot really be seen as intimately bound up with American self-fashioning until it is fully shown to be that central, first by theoretical stances that have harkened back to assumptions deemphasized by the New Criticism and Old Historicism, and then by newly transformative kinds of theory, some of them building on the older ones, about what most underlies literature and culture, of which American Gothic works have turned out to be supremely revealing indicators. I now want to trace how this theoretical turn has played itself out over several stages from 1960 through the present day by highlighting the bedrock assumptions and key articulations of them over time, counting on my readers to probe more deeply into each approach after perusing this overview of the most influential developments in theory and criticism for the study of the American Gothic.

The major transition by Fiedler in 1960, after all, is made possible, as he admits, by renewed interest in psychoanalysis and Marxism, theoretical modes that have since been used extensively and effectively in interpretations of the Gothic in many forms. Psychoanalytic theory looks back chiefly, of course, to Sigmund Freud's writings on the unconscious and how its repressed irrational impulses sublimates themselves in dreams and other symbolic performances. It can even be argued that his constructions of the levels of mind, from the most submerged and archaic to those governed by conscious reality-principles of the present moment, are actually prefigured by the sepulchral depths, the risings from them, and the "realistic" daylight resistances to them in Gothic fictions, which partly explain why psychoanalysis has revealingly interpreted Gothic tales from times before and after Freud's own. As Fiedler notes, the increasing influence of Freudian thinking since the 1890s, even among those who question some of it, has therefore led to momentary claims before 1960 about underlying drives of the primal and irrational in the American Gothic: in *Studies in Classic American Literature* (1923) by D.H. Lawrence; *Supernatural Horror in Literature* (1927) by H.P. Lovecraft, himself an American author of "Gothics" reminiscent of Poe's; and the 1934 essay by Edmund Wilson on the Freudian basis of Henry James's *The Turn of the Screw* (1898) followed by Wilson's own justification of US "Tales of Horror" as

a means for American audiences to articulate “the terrors that lie deep[est] in the human psyche” (Wilson 1950: 175). But it is Fiedler who has most applied “orthodox Freudianism and Jungian revisionism” together (1966: 14) in distinctively American terms. What Freud sees as the preconscious drive of the son seeking to rejoin the mother (which would really mean death) but being prevented by the father-figure he desires to kill, all of which makes up the Oedipus complex, is for Fiedler’s collective American psyche “the guilt of the revolutionary haunted by the (paternal [European]) past he has been striving to destroy” (1966): that repressed conflict includes “the fear that in destroying the old ego-ideals of Church and State” the American “has opened a way” to either “insanity and the disintegration of the self” or a regression into the maternal “womb from whose darkness the ego first emerged” (1966: 129–132); hence the American Gothic hero’s flight towards ever-new frontiers and away from the feminine other to whom he is all too deeply attracted in texts from Brockden Brown’s *Edgar Huntly* and Poe’s “Ligeia” to Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby* and beyond. The theoretical richness of this reading, which makes the Gothic’s original tendencies quite broadly suited to the American experience, has consequently continued to reappear in approaches to the American Gothic for several decades, if sometimes with only half-agreement. It is there again, for example, if somewhat more hopefully, in Irving Malin’s *New American Gothic* (1962) on the fiction of Flannery O’Connor, Carson McCullers, and J.D. Salinger, among others, and as recently as the essays by William Veeder and Maggie Kilgour in the highly theoretical collection *American Gothic* (Martin and Savoy 1998: 20–53).

Marxism, though, is just as important to Fiedler’s retheorizing of the American Gothic, and so that perspective has become equally influential in the decades following the early 1960s. The Gothic from the time of Walpole, as suggested above, has been rooted in conflicts among ideologies and class-based genres (aristocratic/Catholic vs. bourgeois/Protestant) that arise from highly material conflicts among cultural groups and retrogressive-versus-progressive modes of production, all of which *The Castle of Otranto* and its immediate progeny disguise, but also suggest, by displacing eighteenth-century social issues into the medieval past. Consequently, occasional Marxist analyses of the European Gothic have paralleled the psychoanalytic ones from the 1930s to the 1950s, building on Karl Marx’s nineteenth-century theory that all cultural constructs are rooted in socioeconomic rivalries of particular historical eras that are distorted by, yet reflected in, the contending belief-systems and art-works that are produced to deal with them. When Fiedler brings this perspective to bear on the American Gothic, he sees the beginnings of both America and its Gothic fictions as arising from the ideological tug-of-war in the “bourgeois, Protestant mind” between “Rationalism and Sentimentalism” as dominant ideologies. These half-cloak and half-manifest a deeper struggle “between the drive for economic power” that pulls people back towards Old-World forms of domination in new guises, on the one hand, “and the need for cultural autonomy,” on the other, that could make the New World and its rising classes more progressive than the Old with its ruling orders and myths, by which the American experiment is still attracted, and thus haunted, in trying to

overthrow them (Fiedler 1966: 32). Criticism, then, has a license it has used long after the 1960s to make both past and recent examples of US Gothic show, under a hyperfictional guise, that “American identity always comes back to social relations that are simultaneously economic and cultural”; each American Gothic “novel” of importance by these lights is a “palimpsest” that, once penetrated, “reveals traces” of such hidden dynamics as a conflicted “sense of identity that is conferred by historical ownership of plantations and slaves” or “the erotic” being pursued yet also seen as “disruptive to the process of commodity production and the flow, circulation, and expansion of value” (Sonser 2001: 103). Readers can find this approach quite recently in such studies as *A Passion for Consumption* by Anna Sonser or *The Suburban Gothic in American Popular Culture* (2009) by Bernice M. Murphy. The combination of psychoanalytic and Marxist theory in Fiedler, since both are always focused like the Gothic on repressed levels and their sublimations, also continues in scholarship long after *Love and Death*. One example is in *Redefining the American Gothic* by Louis Gross, in which older and newer Gothic texts and films are paired with each other to reveal “alternative vision[s] of the American experience” appropriate to each era, retorts to those discourses that have avoided the deepest-seated “social, sexual, and political projections” of American thought (Gross 1989: 2).

The revival of the American Gothic’s importance because of psychoanalysis and Marxism, however, continues as it does, in part, because these theoretical schemes have been forcefully challenged by, then often combined with, other types of theory that have asserted themselves, mainly after 1965. One such scheme is poststructuralism, particularly the kind linked to “deconstruction” in the writings of Jacques Derrida, whose first major texts appeared in 1967. French structuralism in the 1950s–1960s developed Ferdinand de Saussure’s much earlier theory of language as composed of conventional but firmly structured relationships between signifiers (acoustic images without meanings attached), signifieds (concepts), and referents (objects). Literary structuralists used such terms to describe the dominant symbolic relations and oppositions that underlie whole genres of writing, and these included the ways different genres connect signifiers to signifieds at their deepest levels and yet reveal how each side of an opposition is dependent on its counterpart, for instance “the identification of center with self” and “the symmetry of the inside–outside relation” in the early Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s *The Coherence of Gothic Conventions* on the British Gothic (Sedgwick 1980: 14). But Derrida has shown that the extra-verbal “presence” asserted as the point of reference for traditional signifying structures (the supposed oneness and always-present “essence” within an object, thought, or God) is always a projection out of what comes first: the differing-between and deferring-to-each-other among signifiers themselves, which, if pointed out, can put in question the philosophical and religious priority of “centers,” “insides,” or “origins,” since representations of these must refer, before anything, to other ones that are also signifiers, just as texts have to refer to other texts (prior uses of the same signs, their “intertextuality”) before they can begin to posit foundations or objects behind or beyond their symbolic forms. This view, as older theories could not yet see, is an excellent fit for a Gothic mode that has

always been dependent on signifiers that have “floated” away from grounded points of reference. *The Castle of Otranto*’s allusions to medieval Catholic superstitions, including its ghosts, are defined in its first edition preface as based only on beliefs “exploded now even from romances” (Walpole 1996: 6), making Walpole’s specters clearly shades mainly of previous texts. By the end of the 1970s, therefore, critics of the British Gothic start claiming that it could really be about a decentering instability of signification that haunts claims of certainty in absolutist constructs, and, not surprisingly, analysts of the American Gothic have followed this lead in the 1980s and 1990s. In *Through the Custom-House*, John Carlos Rowe sees several novels now widely recognized as Gothic from Hawthorne and Poe to Twain and James as driven by “the repeated desire to establish a structural center that is perpetually frustrated by the straying of the text” (Rowe 1982: 23). By doing so, Rowe extends a tendency already well launched, especially regarding Poe, in John T. Irwin’s *American Hieroglyphics* (1980), which combines deconstruction with elements of psychoanalysis and the History of Ideas. More recently, too, Dieter Meindl, ranging from the American Renaissance to postmodern uses of Gothic, adds the existential phenomenology of Heidegger and the highly linguistic Marxism of Mikhail Bakhtin to Derrida’s “rejection of the metaphysics of presence” so that the texts now analyzed manifest the links of their grotesque incongruities to a “decentering of consciousness” in the American psyche faced with a “nonrational, pre-individual dimension of the totality of life” that is ultimately a play of differences and never an organic coherence (Meindl 1996: 9–11).

It has been especially difficult for poststructuralism, even so, to leave psychoanalysis behind, not just because of Fiedler but because of Jacques Lacan, some others in his wake, and how suitable *their* theories have turned out to be to the American Gothic. Once Lacan collected nearly thirty years of writing in his *Écrits* (1966) and thereby gained worldwide influence, there came to be wider acceptance of his Saussurean sense of the unpredefined subject existentially thrown forth to fashion its self-construction in the Symbolic Order of “floating signifiers” that can refer to many potential signifieds, some of them suppressed to keep them from the gaze of the father-figure that supposedly regulates the subject’s possibilities. This vision has even taken the place in some circles of the psychoanalytic interiority and even the Marxist “alienation” attached by Fiedler to the American Gothic. After all, the Gothic is inherently Lacanian from outset, since the Walpolean Gothic even in 1764–1765 is about characters cast into a mysterious arena where all the signs are uprooted, cryptic suggestions of either old or newer assumptions about identity. All of these contend with each other while each questing subject remains fearful of an overarching male gaze, which in *Otranto* ultimately takes “the form of saint Nicholas” (Walpole 1996: 113), one of the figures pre-established as but a sign now emptied of its medieval Catholic power. Moreover, as Lacan himself is famous for seeing in his published “Seminar on ‘The Purloined Letter’” (1955), this kind of subject-in-process is the most frequent central figure in the tales of Edgar Allan Poe. It is thus not a leap for Lacanian approaches to treat the American Gothic, in (say) Melville’s *Pierre* (1852), as a place where haunted subjects “disturb [what seems to be] the walls of the paternal vault” that apparently



restrict the child's self-expansion in order "to challenge [this] basis of symbolic being" in "ambiguous signs" interpreted both in retrograde and disruptive ways all at once (Régis Durand in Davis 1981: 71). Such readings of Faulkner's Gothic as well as Melville's appear in the collection *The Fictional Father* (Davis 1981: 48–72 and 115–168), and there are similar interpretations of Hawthorne and Henry James at their most Gothic in *Using Lacan, Reading Fiction* (1991) by James Mellard. At the same time, such fusions of the psychoanalytic with the poststructural deemphasize some dimensions of Lacan and related thinkers that have come to be just as valuable for unlocking the "depths" in the American Gothic. Allan Lloyd-Smith has shown the revelatory power of the suggestions in Lacan, reinforced by Slavoj Žižek from the later 1980s on, of a level of being called "the Real" which lies outside of all signification and is feared to be a locus of chaos, "trauma," and the blurrings of all distinctions (such as American vs. un-American or white vs. black) but is capable of disguised "incursions" into the Symbolic that suggest that horrific morass, as in H.P. Lovecraft's subterranean grotesques mixing different species (Lloyd-Smith 2004: 142). There is additional insight for Lloyd-Smith, too, provided by a psychoanalytic-symbolic notion that Derrida has highlighted in the work of Nicholas Abraham and Maria Torok: a "geneological inheritance" within the "unconscious" that they call "the *phantom*" in a special sense. In this scheme, spectral signs that haunt subjects internally or externally harbor "unacknowledged traumas" in the minds of much older ancestors and/or a collective unconscious of suppressed "*cultural* determinants," as in *The House of the Seven Gables* when its characters' memories and hidden documents turn out to sequester a "class wrong" against one man and his sect several generations ago and "the larger wrong of the dispossession of the Native Americans," aspects of which were kept secret by the wronged man, his descendents, and their usurpers (2004: 146–148).

Nonetheless, another "large wrong" of "dispossession" has given rise to a different vein of theory and criticism that has just as strongly, and sometimes in concert with psychoanalysis and poststructuralism, transformed the study of the American Gothic over the same span of time (the late 1960s through the early 2000s). This is the vein instigated by feminism, which has itself widened out into several multifaceted forms of gender theory in more recent years. The women's movement of the 1960s–1970s, aided in literary studies by Ellen Moers, Elaine Showalter, and Annette Kolodny (among others) in the United States and several rising French feminist critics who extended the arguments of Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (1947) in poststructuralist ways, demanded a change in the second-class status of women in general and a recovery-from-repression of writing by and about women in particular, thus challenging the traditional "canon" of largely male-authored texts. These drives, among the many influences on them, actually echoed earlier ones endemic to the already non-canonical Gothic. Large portions of Walpole's *Otranto* and his Gothic play *The Mysterious Mother* (both written in the 1760s as challenges to the traditions they combine) are about the fearful confinement of women in patriarchal institutions, especially in underground vaults or inaccessible upper rooms. These semi-protests

against the oppression of femininity and the burial of the legacy of mothers, more importantly, led to the adoption of this mode, albeit in the disguise it provided, by women authors and female readers of the later eighteenth century and beyond, a gender-based shift given ocean-crossing force by the popularity in England and America of Ann Radcliffe's Gothic "Romances" published from 1789 to 1797 in England in the wake of the American and French revolutions (including appeals for the rights of women) that they never directly address. The post-1960s recovery of older writings by American women, then, has seen the republication of Gothically inflected texts by female Americans under Radcliffe's influence ranging from Sarah Orne Jewett and Louisa May Alcott to Charlotte Perkins Gilman and even Edith Wharton. Much of the criticism of these, and even male-authored, writings about women, though, has concentrated on their "double-voiced discourse" (Elaine Showalter's theoretical phrase) in which the feminine perspective, somewhat as in Radcliffe, must express itself under and through the cover of what seems styled as a "normal" male style of writing, thereby making the "woman's voice" multilayered and in that way only subtly subversive. Inspired by Julianne Fleenor's British-oriented collection *The Female Gothic* (1983) and Janice Radway's *Reading the Romance* (1984) about the value of Harlequin fictions to seemingly *unliberated* women of the twentieth century, Marianne Noble has thus shown how "masochism" in American Gothic female sentimentality from Harriet Beecher Stowe to Emily Dickinson and others is often a way for "women to wield power in complicitous alliance with hegemonic ideologies" via the "double-edgedness of masochistic fantasies" that keeps the potential pain at a distance while allowing an assertion of female control that seems its very opposite (Noble 2000: 11–13). This kind of feminist reading, in fact, has diverged in two main directions when it has not been extensively linked to other theoretical schools. In one direction are revelations of how American women have used Gothic fictions to openly criticize male dominance and hold up a female alternative – seen in the essays collected by Lynette Carpenter and Wendy Kolmar in *Haunting the House of Fiction* (1991) – and in the other are studies of how American Gothic novels by women bring out gender-blurring, liberatory tendencies that were actually there in some male writing as far back as Brockden Brown and Hawthorne, in part because of their Gothicism, the argument made in *Engendering Romance* (1994) by Emily Miller Burdick.

As these forms of scholarship have been proliferating, in addition, the effectiveness of French feminist poststructuralism as intensified by both Lacanian constructivism and a Marxist view of how women become commodified, including symbolized in marketable fictions, has led to an increasing theoretical awareness that *both* genders are cultural manufactures fashioned within linguistic-ideological state apparatuses (in Louis Althusser's sense). These self-fashionings inherently contain and distort the prelinguistic "fore-language" of the quite fluid human body whose drives, deeply primal and thus "uncanny" by Freud's definition when they appear in external suggestions of them, always have the seemingly monstrous potential to exceed the limits imposed upon them for the sake of social exchange. As a result, building on the work in this vein of Judith Butler, Diana Fuss, and the later Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, who

starts to see the Gothic as unusually suggestive about such gender constructions in *Between Men* (1985), gender theory scholars of the American Gothic have increasingly foregrounded the potential for “alternative sexualities” that question the dominant constructs of the gender market by exposing a mobile plurality that has always been there, incipiently at least, in Gothic characterizations and their “uncanny” self-projections. Horace Walpole and Matthew Lewis of *The Monk* (1796), after all, were very likely gay – hinted, perhaps, when *Otranto*’s Prince Manfred, “flushed with wine and love, had come to seek him . . . Frederic,” the father of Isabella, Manfred’s apparent love-object (Walpole 1996: 108). Several studies since the late 1980s have consequently underscored how the “spectralization of setting, the derealisation of plot, and the ambiguation of character” characteristic of the Gothic can be powerful means for symbolizing “the rent at the heart of America’s national narrative” about any “polymorphous self-actualisation outside [normative] constraints” (Jarraway 2000: 92, 96). In *Queer Gothic* (2006), George Haggerty even sees American works from Henry James to Shirley Jackson and Anne Rice “defy limits and preconceptions of [human] behavior [to] offer an . . . uncategorized range of personal, sexual, and emotional behaviors and attitudes” in Gothicized situations where these threaten conventional perceptions with their fear-inducing alterities (Haggerty 2006: 202). Such “queer” understandings, I might add, gain a further aid to analysis from post-1980 interpretations of the Gothic influenced by the French linguistic psychoanalyst Julia Kristeva. She posits in *Powers of Horror* (1980–1982) the need of people to “abject,” or throw off into uncanny “others,” all those inconsistencies in themselves from the personal to the cultural, even at the moment of birth (when we are half-dead/half-alive), that prevent our attempted claims of coherent identity and so must be displaced elsewhere, in such forms of otherness as the anomalies of Frankenstein’s creature or the “Black Cat” in Poe’s 1843 story of that name (see Lesley Ginsberg in Martin and Savoy 1998: 99–128). Lloyd-Smith sees this process unfolding repeatedly in the gender politics of American Gothic texts from Alcott and Gilman to William Gibson, where characters who seek the illusion of sexual consistency according to dominant norms “abject” all other tendencies, particularly alternative sexualities, in themselves to make them appear in monstrous, othered guises as though they were “over there” in aberrant and un-American locations of horror – Gilman’s “yellow wallpaper” or Jackson’s Hill House, say – and not in the presented, “acceptable” public self (see Lloyd-Smith 2004: 97–108 and 158–160).

And yet, as time has gone on, the historical and social dimensions of what the American Gothic “abjects” have become more important to scholars overall compared to the difficulties of personal self-realization that gender-based theory has brought so valuably to academic attention. A major reason has been the dominance in literary studies since about 1980, especially in America, of the “New Historicism” begun initially in English Renaissance scholarship, which has itself come to be combined with the more Marxist “cultural studies,” so much that both of them have swept in dimensions of gender and queer theory, Lacanian–Kristevan psychoanalysis, and Derridean “intertextuality,” along with critical race theory, eco-criticism, and disability

studies, to make them all functional within the multiple challenges of these movements to Old Historicism, among them an interest in the Gothic that Old Historicism disdained. New Historicism was launched most by Stephen Greenblatt's *Renaissance Self-Fashioning* (1979) and its debunking of both unified period mentalities and internally coherent ideas accepted uniformly across a culture. Here a play or poem or narrative, by its verbal nature, is in an intertextual, as well as socioeconomic, set of conversations with other verbal constructs of many kinds at that particular time: legal documents, sermons, older "classics," contemporary broadsides, etc., all with the sectarian, class, gender, and racial prejudices carried by their words. This arena of multiple discourses, feeding into and drawing further constructs out from the focal text, as in the "thick description" analysis of the anthropologist Clifford Geertz, is a crucible of fervent disagreements without overarching unity in which any work's apparent solution is momentary and unable to avoid some irresolutions within its complex textuality. Such a vision essentially agrees with the "heteroglossia" of any culture defined by Bakhtin, for whom almost all uses of words are "dialogically" torn between different socio-ideological circles of discourse in contests with each other. New Historicism even adds in the historicized poststructuralism of the Michel Foucault who published *Discipline and Punish* and his first *History of Sexuality* volume in the 1970s. For him, competing cultural lexicons organize areas of knowledge, which have no order on their own, by configuring their elements in discourse-arrangements that, in their deployments of signifiers, assert such *power* over what they claim to comprehend, as well as over people, that other discourses arise in resistance, making all discourse-assertions about power to some extent at the most local, as well as state, levels of culture. As quickly as a New Historicism so oriented surged into other periods of literary study beyond Britain's Renaissance, it also began to transform American literary studies by the mid-1980s, and the American Gothic was already primed for this blend of perspectives, given the heteroglossic contestation of discourses and the power-plays pitting older and newer systems of knowledge against each other in the Gothic from Walpole on. Granted, Donald Ringe's important *American Gothic* (1982) hesitates between Old and New Historicism. It concentrates on American appropriations of older Gothic elements to express the philosophical "assumptions of [each new author's] time," a reliance on the History of Ideas, even as it also traces "increasingly complex [interwoven] lines of influence" that complicate every text from Brockden Brown's to Ambrose Bierce's (Ringe 1982: 12). New Historicism comes more into full flower in Teresa Goddu's *Gothic America* (1997), which so invokes Greenblatt's sense of any text as "part of a network of historical representation[s]" at a moment in time that the American Gothic in this study is as "informed by its historical context," in a complex give-and-take, as "the horrors of history are also articulated through gothic discourse" (Goddu 1997: 2). In this view, American Gothic plays the role of the "abject" by providing "sites of historical haunting" in "othered" spaces or beings which "harbor the cultural contradictions that undermine the nation's claim to purity and equality" and so half-question, half-uphold its power structures in the process of fictionalizing them (1997: 10).

Still, *Gothic America* and the ongoing explosion of American Gothic studies in its wake have also gone well beyond New Historicist intertextuality. Especially in the ways Goddu grants renewed importance to the history of slavery as the most “abjecting” of the tangled discourses that are woven into the Gothic, her kind of work, like its many successors, turns towards an Americanized version of “cultural studies” that strives to carry out – by pulling together *many* theories – the work of the Center for Contemporary Cultural Studies in Birmingham, England, from which this mix of theory and social research still takes its name. Cultural studies continues to analyze the way discourses of many kinds channel the circulation and contestation between many different kinds of texts and social levels during specific spans of time, but it is particularly focused, within issues of class conflict and power (including race and gender), on relationships between symbolic performances typed as “high” or dominant culture and almost any counter-discourse or reference point labeled “low” or subaltern culture, be that “othered” realm an ethnic group, a subculture, a colonized people, a non-normative sexual orientation, individuals considered “disabled” and/or otherwise “abnormal” (even “mad”), or efforts to preserve from misconstruction what various minorities see as “natural” (including the physical environment) against the threats to it of, or dangers projected into it by, corporations, governments, and other hegemones. Although Goddu’s book ferrets out some of these dimensions more than others in American texts from Brockden Brown’s to Toni Morrison’s, her attention to cultural subordinations and how they haunt both their “masters” and victims matches the historical otherness of the Gothic as a mode throughout its history, based as it has been since Walpole on interplays between the “high” (tragedy or romance) and the “low” (comedy or the novel at his time), one reason for its being “low culture” for so much theory and criticism before 1960. The results just before and after Goddu have consequently come to include an astonishing array of cultural studies approaches to the American Gothic that continue to exfoliate and redefine its restless, and sometimes radical, nature and potentials. In addition to further studies of race (inside and outside the Southern American Gothic) inspired, as is Goddu, by Morrison’s own non-fiction book of lectures, *Playing in the Dark* (1992), there have been provocative studies of how Gothic horror stories, especially in American films, show us the ways by which dominant culture produces, “queers,” and instigates resistance from many different instances of “deformity and imperfection” (Halberstam 1995: 155); eco-critical analyses of American Gothic texts that bring out the “ecophobia” projected onto “representations of nature” – such as the title figure in Poe’s “The Raven” (1844) – “inflected with fear, horror, loathing, or disgust” as far back as Puritan New England (Hillard 2009: 688); and even accounts of how American Gothic tales of disease and disability, viewed through the recent lenses of disability studies, have revealed the cultural “horror [that can arise] in response to reform movements,” such as accommodations for the disabled, that seem a fearful “threat to a rational and enlightened republic” (Lisa Hermsen in Anolik 2010: 157). The symbolic range of the American Gothic has clearly been opened up enormously for more than half a century since Leslie Fiedler placed it at the heart of US literature, and among the main causes, aside from the

suggestions that have always lurked in American Gothic texts themselves, are manifestly the advances in literary theory and criticism that have allowed us, at last, to see the Gothic as all that it really has been and can still be as a cultural force in America.

## CROSS-REFERENCES

SEE CHAPTER 2 (GOTHIC, THEORY, DREAM), CHAPTER 3 (AMERICAN RUINS AND THE GHOST TOWN SYNDROME), CHAPTER 4 (AMERICAN MONSTERS), CHAPTER 5 (CREATION ANXIETY IN GOTHIC METAFICTION: *THE DARK HALF* AND *LUNA PARK*).

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