

The political, social  
and philosophical  
analysis of 19th  
century american  
gothic ...



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The highly innovative studies of Russian philosopher Svetlana Boym, which explore the human psyche and its relationship to the past, argue that 'nostalgia has historically coincided with revolution', (Askenaizer, 2016). Boym refers to the French and Russian revolutions' influence on cultural nostalgia; a Romantic revival flourished throughout the fashion of France following the nation's revolt, as the toga became a symbol of liberty and the red bonnet an expression of political radicalism, notably worn through the streets of London by the Romantic poet William Blake.

In England, earlier that century, a cultural nostalgia began and coincided with the country's own state of political upheaval, foremost with architecture: the Gothic revival. This ran concurrent with the Jacobite uprisings and Civil War of the 1740's, as the Catholic monarchy reared back from its defeat in the 1600s with desire to reclaim the throne. English literature began its contribution to the culture of Gothic revival in 1764 with Horace Walpole's incredibly influential novel *The Castle of Otranto*, which, whilst can be read as sensationalizing Protestant suspicions of Catholicism and its repressed debauchery, employs a medieval nostalgia as a reaction to a new revolution, which began earlier that decade: the Industrial. From its very origins, we can see that the Gothic literary genre is fundamentally reflective of the political, social and philosophical attitudes of its time, as its purpose of communicating terror and horror allow modern critics and readers a telling glimpse into the 'oldest and strongest emotion of mankind', as seminal Gothic horror author H. P. Lovecraft proposes in his essay *Supernatural Horror in Literature*; that emotion is 'fear' (1927).

American Gothic writing began in the 19th century as a reaction to the transcendentalist movement which was established early in the century. Authors such as Nathaniel Hawthorne and Washington Irving introduced the concept of American Gothicism through their utilization of superstition and fear that was specific to their nation; Hawthorne's terrifying portrayal of Puritanical life in *The Minister's Black Veil* and *The Scarlet Letter* and Irving's headless ghost of a Hessian soldier, evoking post-American-Revolution paranoia, in *The Legend of Sleepy Hollow*.

Edgar Allan Poe; arguably the finest writer of the American Gothic genre in the 19th century and one of the most influential authors of the nation's literary history. Poe's macabre tales initiated an evolution in the Gothic genre and horror writing, emphasizing the psychological over the supernatural; moving from the mysteries of archaic medieval castles to the mysteries lurking within the common domestic home; highlighting the terror and horror that humans inflict upon other humans, as opposed to otherworldly beasts or antagonistic creatures; essentially progressing away from the fantastical and metaphorical to horrific realism, whilst still maintaining the fundamental tone and characteristics of the Gothic genre and its myriad of motifs, brought to a level that better related to the audience contemporary to the author's historical and geographical context. Despite never achieving much economic success throughout his career, the writer captured the imagination of readers of the time, the 1845 poem *The Raven* catapulting the author to national fame.

For these reasons, Poe is an incredibly revealing author in regards to his context, for within the strange and grisly works there undoubtedly lies indications of the national Zeitgeist and political landscape of the time.

Poe's short-story *The Black Cat*, published in 1843, can be read as a racial allegory and a critique on the severe Southern household in its relation to slavery. Whilst the seeking of allegory within a text frequently risks appearing forced and more reflective of a critic's own philosophies, there is, in fact, substantial historical and textual evidence to suggest Poe was 'aware of market trends' and 'capitalized on the conventions of slavery in his sensationalist fiction' (Goddu, 2002). The literary critics Leland Person and Lesley Ginsberg view the Nat Turner Rebellion as a clear point of inspiration to *The Black Cat*, referenced in Hannah Walker's inspired essay "The Black Cat: A Reflection of Pre-Civil War Slavery, which proposes that the tale offers a more general damnation of Southern politics and the manner in which slavery taints and haunts the South (n. d.). The allegorical reading of the narrative, on a rudimentary level, is distinguished through the interpretation of the narrator as the slave master and Pluto as the slave.

The opening line of the tale bears significance to this reading, as the narrator describes a 'most wild, yet most homely narrative', which signifies the Gothic through its 'wild' yet 'homely' setting, adjectives that evoke Freud's theory of the 'unheimlich' or 'uncanny', a key sensation to Gothic literature and contemporary examinations of the slave narrative (Poe, 1843). The described setting also illustrates the juxtaposed space of the Southern plantation, which would function dually as proud monument to Southern domesticity and economy, through its boastful white mansions, and spotlight

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upon the most savage corners of humanity, in its great agricultural expanses, in which blood was regularly spilled, torture was regularly exercised, rebellion sporadically attempted and a ' wild' atmosphere of persistent conflict and distress prevailed.

The focal symbol of this interpretation is, naturally, the character of Pluto and its treatment. Firstly, the color, execution and hierarchical role of this character holds significance, as to depict a black victim lynched by an abusive domestic authority during the turbulent political climate in which *The Black Cat* was published, suggests evidence that there is a clear subtext of racial commentary flowing through the narrative. In addition to this, there is importance in the relationship between the two characters being established as ' man' and ' animal'; this drives the abolitionist argument of the time that slaveholders did not treat slaves as if they were human, but more akin to livestock.

One aspect of Pluto's treatment that demands exploration is the mutilation of the eye; ' I took from my waistcoat-pocket a pen-knife, opened it, grasped the poor beast by the throat, and deliberately cut one of its eyes from the socket!' (Poe, 2008, p. 231).

Poe's tales are full of psychologically confused, traumatized and complicated individuals, many of whom feature as narrators and this creates the potential for psychoanalytical criticism of the work. In addition, Poe's narratives, despite existing before the publishing of Sigmund Freud's unprecedented theories on human psychology, exhibit many examples of Freudian symbolism, notably the phenomena of the ' uncanny' and the prolific

emphasis on damage to 'eyes'. Freud claims that a violent removal of eyes in art, literature or our dreams is symbolic of the 'punishment of castration' (1919). This strengthens the notion that *The Black Cat* mirrors the concurrent slave narrative, as the castration of African American males was a common occurrence for those accused of the rape or attempted rape of a white woman; and, of course, there is the more metaphorical castration of the slaves, stereotypical concepts of masculinity deem the subordinate position of slave as inherently emasculating, but also the incessant rape of both male and female slaves lead to what historian Nell Irvin Painter describes as 'soul murder' (Rooks, 2004).

Teresa A. Goddu proposes in her essay *The African American Slave Narrative and the Gothic* that there is an inherent connection between Gothic literature and slavery, 'the spectre of slavery haunts the American Gothic', and even that 'there is a structural affinity between the discourse of slavery and the conventions of the Gothic' (2013). Goddu also notes ways in which the abolitionist movement adopted the Gothic literary form as a means to convey the institution of slavery as a 'diabolical system of merciless horrors and the slaveholder as a relentless demon or a monster in human shape' (2013). Arguably the most well known slave narrative author of the 18th century was Frederick Douglass, a former slave whose autobiographical depiction of the slave experience, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave*, published in 1845, functioned as a significant proponent in the anti-slavery movement.

Douglass employs tropes of the Gothic in the opening chapter of the narrative whilst describing the first acts of violence presented to the reader <https://assignbuster.com/the-political-social-and-philosophical-analysis-of-19th-century-american-gothic-literature/>

in the plot. By using elements of the Gothic in his writing of the gory punishments and vicious treatment of the slaves, Douglass highlights the inherent 'horror' in slavery and communicates this to the white American audience, who better understand through its Gothic packaging and, therefore, more likely to be persuaded towards abolitionist politics.

Douglass sets up the character of the master to us by describing him as a 'cruel man, hardened by a long life of slaveholding', showcasing a subtle proposition of abolition to the reader, suggesting the master's transformation into the bloodthirsty Gothic villain Douglass goes on to illustrate is a consequence of his direct involvement in slavery (Douglass, 1845). Interestingly, much of the violence in the narrative is directed at women, and whilst this was representative of the actual atrocities on the plantations, it can be interpreted that Douglass emphasizes the 'damsel in distress' trope of the Gothic, as this would prove more effective in its stirring of emotion in white audiences. Furthermore, Douglass even draws in the Gothic theme of sexual power, a trope that, as Professor John Bowen states, is fascinated with 'obscene patriarchal figures, who seem to be able to have no restraint whatsoever on their desire' (Bowen, 2014).

These conventions of Gothic literature are exercised through the treatment of the character of Aunt Hester, a rebellious slave, who is also strikingly attractive, as Douglass details how she has 'very few equals, and fewer superiors, in personal appearance, among the colored or white women of our neighborhood' (1845, p. 5-6). It is hinted that the master possesses a desire for Aunt Hester and this is what fuels his motivations to torture her in such a degrading, bloody and sexual manner; it is noted that he would 'take great  
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pleasure' in the whipping and that Douglass 'often' would wake to the 'heart-rending shrieks' of his Aunt (Douglass, 1845, p. 6). This establishes Aunt Hester as the 'damsel in distress' character and the master Anthony as the patriarchal tyrant overcome with his own perverse desire, manifesting into violent villainy, as, 'No words, no tears, no prayers, from his gory victim, seemed to move his iron heart from its bloody purpose' (Douglass, 1845, p. 6). Douglass displays fantastic persuasive use of the Gothic in this sentence, employing the 'power of three' nouns to highlight the master's rejection of language, emotion and religion as he whips the slave, demonizing him and removing the audience's empathy for the character. The master is also firmly placed in a predatory position, abusing his power, as Aunt Hester is illustrated as 'his gory victim'. Lastly, Douglass cements the dehumanization of the character through the image of the 'iron heart', which, in the commencing years of the popularity of transcendental philosophy, capitalized on the suspicion of dictators and rejecting the natural.

Douglass uses anaphora through the repetition of the adjective 'whip' and the noun 'blood' that occurs across the ten-line description of Aunt Hester's torture, to drive the connection between the two, to draw some pathos from the reader, to emphasize the consequence of slavery; when cold, patriarchal, monstrous whips are cracked, human blood is spilled.

Arguably the most Gothic referential line of the narrative is written within this chapter, 'It was the blood-stained gate, the entrance to the hell of slavery, through which I was about to pass', conjuring images of the supernatural and explicit Gothic horror, simultaneously connoting slavery to sin and religious evil; which, to many 19th century American readers, who <https://assignbuster.com/the-political-social-and-philosophical-analysis-of-19th-century-american-gothic-literature/>



practiced devout Christianity, would have been a shocking and potentially emotion-stirring comparison, in favour of the abolition movement (Douglass, 1845, p. 5).

The Gothic genre was also put to political use in the 19th century to assist in the promotion of a new agenda: feminism. In reference to Edgar Allan Poe, a man who experienced the tragic loss of many of the most important and beloved women, and the hatred of authoritative patriarchal figures throughout his years, the 1843 short-story *The Tell-Tale Heart* can be read through a feminist lens. We can interpret the erratic nature of the narrator as reflective of the contextual concept of women as emotionally and mentally volatile, which is also presented through the narration of Gilman's *The Yellow Wallpaper*. Further evidence to support a feminist reading suggests that no gender is specified to the narrator, the relationship between the narrator and the 'old man' is not given and considering that they appear to live in the same house, we can see this as potentially marital, romantic or sexual. In addition, some critics, such as Mary J. Couzelis, argue that narrator's hatred of the old man's 'vulture' eye is symbolic of the objectifying 'patriarchal gaze' (2012).

Charlotte Perkins Gilman employs the Gothic literary genre in the 1892 short-story *The Yellow Wallpaper*, in which she applies a plethora of Gothic tropes to the objective of conveying an early feminist agenda. As well as a writer of fiction, Gilman published many innovative non-fiction meditations on the subject of feminism, notably *Women and Economics* (1898), her philosophical and political ideologies inspired by her experience with post-partum depression and a divorce; her poor treatment during the troubled <https://assignbuster.com/the-political-social-and-philosophical-analysis-of-19th-century-american-gothic-literature/>

period served as the primary incentive for writing *The Yellow Wallpaper* (Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study, 2011). Depression in women was widely dismissed in the 19th century as 'female hysteria', which contextual physicians regarded as a symptom of the womb and the stereotypical notion of women as uncontrollably emotional (Joshi, 2017). Gilman expresses her disdain for male insolence and arrogance when concerned with female mental health through the Gothic literary genre, communicating the terror of untreated mental illness and the patriarchal oppression of women through a manner which many readers of the time could more easily be shocked by, empathise with and comprehend.

Notably, in conjunction with Douglass, the narrative opens with the Gothic trope of the 'imprisoning... violently archaic' setting, which profoundly comments on racial oppression and arguably draws a link between colonial slavery and the oppressive treatment of women in the 19th century (Bowen, 2014). The narrative is set within a 'colonial mansion, a hereditary estate', which the narrator personally believes to be a 'haunted house' (Gilman, 1892, p. 1). As the United States were barren of the medieval architecture that many of the Victorian Gothic novels would employ to 'see the relationship between the modern world and the past - not as one of evolution or development - but of sudden juxtaposition and often violent conflict', it is interesting that Gilman chooses to present a 'colonial mansion', in which it is heavily suggested represents the horrors of the past through its allusion to being haunted (Bowen, 2014). Professor John Bowen proposes that this Gothic trope is used to exhibit ways in which 'the past erupts within the present and deranges it', a phenomena which in the early

20th century would be theorized as psychologically symbolic of repression in the mind and the resurfacing of undealt with trauma in Freud's essay *The Uncanny* (1919). Through this scope, we can interpret Gilman's placement of the haunted colonial mansion as a comment on the patriarchal, Eurocentric obsession with power that fueled the colonial empire of the 17th and 18th centuries and the birth of the United States as a nation. There is an unequivocal influence of Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre* through Gilman's association of mentally ill women trapped within domestic confines and colonial oppression. Additionally, the contextual stereotype of black women's sexual promiscuity and unruly nature coexisting with the narrative's depiction of the colonial mansion's 'ghosts' as rebellious yet entrapped females further drives the subtext of racial commentary, its concurrence with female oppression and their connection to the 'terror' that could be explored through the Gothic genre. Whilst the presence of the supernatural is ambiguous with Gilman's narrative, arguably deliberately so, as a means to convey the destructive force of depression and isolation, still many critics do choose to interpret the hallucinatory aspects of the text as a more literal usage of the supernatural. Alan Ryan considers its potential to be a 'ghost story' (1988) and the innovative Gothic horror author H. P. Lovecraft suggests that, in theme with a colonial interpretation, the narrator is driven mad through a possession of the 'madwoman' who 'was once confined' within the yellow room (1927).

In addition, it is important to notice that Gilman also relates the oppression to issues of class, as the narrator informs us it is a 'hereditary estate', and, therefore, in similar vein to Poe's *The Fall of the House of Usher*, this setting

functions as a critique of the politics and ideologies that are inherited down within the families of authority which maintains the imposition of tyranny upon women, former slaves, non-white ethnic groups and the lower classes in the USA throughout the 19th century.

However, the primary focus of Gilman's narrative is the appliance of the Gothic literary form as a vehicle to drive a subtext of feminist ideology accessible to the average reader of the time.

The wallpaper is a symbol for the shallow male reassurance and feeble decoration of the confining walls of domesticity, a ' revolting' yellow, the color of happiness, a patronizing dictation to abide by the social expectations of women set by the patriarchy of the nation during the 19th century.

Interestingly, there is in fact some neurological merit to Gilman's text, Carlton Wagner, the director of the Wagner Institute for Colour Research, proposes that yellow walls ' activates the anxiety centre of the brain', (Van de Water, 1992). The room can be seen as a social immurement, making resource of the ' buried alive' trope of American Gothic fiction, popularized by Edgar Allan Poe, to effectively push the notion of female isolation from any sort of societal progression.

In conclusion, from its very roots, Gothic literature mirrors the issues of the society in which it is conceived, and therefore it comes as no surprise that the American authors of the 19th century adopted the genre to comment on their own nation's social issues. Most interesting, however, is the manner in which these authors progressed the Gothic form out of the medieval nostalgia conventional to the works of British writers and, through the

profound influence of Edgar Allan Poe's experimental and ground-breaking canon, propelled the genre into new explorations of the human psyche and social critique.

The United States is a nation that was born from the genocide of a Native people, began its civilization enshrouded in Puritanical paranoia and patriarchal oppression, enslaved and traded the people of Africa to brutally empower its capitalist foundation, underwent insatiable political turmoil and social conflict throughout its development and fought against the very countries that first colonised its soil with European blood. Its establishment has consistently been experimental in its approach, which, arguably, has exhibited both the most inspiring and progressive accomplishments of humanity and some of the most inhumane atrocities to occur in our history. America is truly a nation of revolution and this is prolifically reflected in the work of its artists.

As we conceivably enter a new age of revolution, that of the digital and the internet, we can expect with confidence and hope for a new abundance of artistic terror, nostalgia and the next progressive step in the genre of the American Gothic.

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