

Chapter 2 American Horror: Origins and Early Trends

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Gothic horror arrived in America in the latter half of the eighteenth century as one of many imports – literary and cultural – from England during this period of intense transatlantic circulation. As an experimental and often transgressive genre, the Gothic novel found a congenial home in the fiercely independent new nation. By the 1790s the American Gothic was well on its way to establishing a set of themes and concerns that would become uniquely its own. These included the frontier and its native inhabitants, Puritanism and its tendency towards religious excess and the individual in relation to the larger body politic. Aesthetically the Gothic novel embraced several different modes; of these, horror was the most significant and the most deeply rooted in American rhetorical and literary traditions. Present already in the uniquely American form of writing known as the captivity narrative, horror writing emerged in full force in the late eighteenth century as a modern reaction-formation to shifts in the political and religious landscape. As historian Karen Halttunen (2000) has shown, modern American horror was born at the moment when religious narratives had lost their purchase on explaining crime and, especially, murder. While Protestant religious narratives about evil had regarded it as a natural and inevitable fact of fallen existence on earth, the new, secular paradigms of the Romantic movement and the Enlightenment could only consider violent crimes as mysterious aberrations. The result of this epistemological gap was a fascination with the details of bodily mutilation and the life history of killers that has persisted until today.

The moment of horror's arrival in the fledgling United States also corresponded with a time of intense social transition as the new nation struggled to define itself and decide upon the precise character of its political institutions. For example, there was the public debate about federalism against republicanism, with its choice between centralised authority as opposed to greater states' rights. The country had committed itself to a democratic government, but many practical and philosophical questions about what this meant and how to implement it remained. Novelists took up the challenge of thinking through some of the dilemmas raised by the curious phenomenon of a disparate set of colonies banding together to cast off the trappings of empire and now facing the task of inventing themselves as a coherent political unity. Inherently engaged with questions of ethics and moral judgement, the horror mode lent itself to such experiments in political thought, as did the specific historical circumstances and background of the young republic. These included the popular genre of captivity

narratives (first-person accounts of violence and kidnapping by ‘Indians’) and the tradition of Puritan sermons, both of which provided a wealth of imaginative material for early American horror’s anxious examination of the individual in the New World.

Captive Narratives and Puritan Beginnings

The first indigenous form of the horror mode was the captivity narrative. These were usually written by women who had been abducted by Native Americans, often during a violent attack resulting in the death of the woman’s husband and/or children and other relatives. The most famous captivity story, *A Narrative of the Captivity and Restoration of Mrs. Mary Rowlandson*, written by Mary Rowlandson herself, was published in 1682, but the greatest number of captivity narratives appeared in the last decades of the eighteenth century – at exactly the moment when the Gothic novel and its horror aesthetics were becoming popular. There are many structural and thematic similarities between the two forms, including gory descriptions of violence, sequestration and the threat of rape, and the focus on an intrepid female survivor. In this respect the captivity narrative inaugurated a core dimension of the Gothic genre: the heroine who faces and overcomes male violence. The captivity narrative can also be seen as a way of thinking about various models of government in the way it stages scenarios in which different kinds of people (such as Native American tribes and European settlers) either possess enough common ground to co-exist or do not, depending on the political inclinations of the writer.

Another specifically American Gothic literary background is the Puritan tradition. Puritanism was originally a reform movement within the Church of England in the 1560s, but it soon parted ways from the mainstream of English society, its followers believing that the reforms had not gone far enough. The name ‘Puritan’ derives from the idea that these reformers sought to restore the ‘purity’ of the church. Although not necessarily separatists at the start, Puritans nevertheless began to leave England because of persecution; several thousand eventually sailed to the American colonies in the early seventeenth century. Many believed that they had a pact with God to create a new kind of holy community. Such a conviction would remain a running thread throughout American history and self-definition, developing insidiously over the centuries into what twentieth-century scholars would call ‘the myth of American exceptionalism’ – that is, the belief that the United States of America is qualitatively different from any other country in the world and chosen by God for a special destiny. Puritans have been represented quite negatively in the contemporary media, portrayed as a dour and humourless people. Although this image is mostly exaggerated, it is undeniable that the Puritans held a number of

beliefs that were quite dark and deterministic, including the existence of hell and the devil, original sin and innate (or total) depravity. Looking at their surroundings through the prism of their religious beliefs, the Puritans saw a wilderness peopled by devils, in which they had to wage daily and endless war against both Satan and their own inherent sinfulness. Ironically, later generations of Puritan settlers often became even more severe in their application of Puritan doctrine than their forefathers had been, due in large part to their cultural and geographical isolation.

Few incidents in American history have left such an indelible mark on the history of horror – and its literary legacy – in the New World as the Salem witch trials of the 1690s. These were a series of hearings and prosecutions that resulted in 20 executions, almost entirely of women. Nineteen of these were by hanging, and one man was pressed to death with heavy stones laid on a plank over his body for three days in an effort to force a guilty plea. Five more people died in prison, including a child. Although the Salem witch hysteria was over within a year, its impact on the American imagination has been enduring. One immediate effect was a permanent loss of power of Puritan authorities, as the ease with which respected officials were carried away by the frenzy and its murderous results led colonists to view religious fervour with a new wariness. This mistrust has never worn off, just as the Puritans have never shaken off their association with religious intolerance and murderous irrationalism. Narratives about the witch trials proliferated in the nineteenth century, including several stories by Nathaniel Hawthorne (discussed below). These have served as a basis for horror-inflected novels, plays and films throughout the twentieth century, such as Esther Forbes' *Mirror for Witches* (1928), Arthur Miller's *The Crucible* (1953) and the recent *The Lords of Salem* (dir. by Rob Zombie, 2012).

Charles Brockden Brown, America's First Horror Writer

[?np] The first acknowledged American novelist, Charles Brockden Brown (1771–1810), was a writer of horror fiction. The subject of his most famous and important novel, *Wieland; or, The Transformation* (1798), is religious fanaticism, and therefore indirectly interrogates America's Puritan legacy. *Wieland* is also a product of the Age of Enlightenment, as is Gothic horror in general, and therefore a novel that confronts rationalism with religious enthusiasm and discovers that the seemingly disenchanted modern world is full of mysteries. Like the British Gothic novels of Ann Radcliffe, the narrator of *Wieland* is a young woman, Clara Wieland. She begins the novel by telling readers that she is about to recount a narrative that ends with a mangled victim and a rage that 'exterminated' every 'remnant of good' (Brown 1998: 5) in her world. She then narrates the circumstances of her father's strange death by

spontaneous combustion and her childhood as an orphan alone with her brother. The novel contains many strange and sometimes seemingly tangential details and plots, including the story of the villain's life, which was later developed by Brown and published as a separate novella, *Memoirs of Carwin the Biloquist* (1803–5). I say 'villain', but Brown's narrative makes it quite hard to determine who is the villain and who the victim. A spectacular and harrowing scene of violence occurs mid-way, the murder by Clara's brother of his wife and children, one so brutal that the victims are scarcely recognisable. A young woman living in the household like an adopted daughter had been beaten so savagely that '*not a lineament remained*' (Brown 1998: 147; emphasis in original) of her face. Equally chilling is Wieland's written testimony that he had merely acted upon the promptings of a voice he took to be that of God. The first complication here is the whole matter of the legal status of such claims. In a modern court of law the brother's testimony would be taken as the ravings of a madman. Yet claims of direct communication with God are not entirely foreign to the Protestant tradition, and some religions, such as Mormonism, allow for such phenomena. Moreover, the rage and brutality accompanying the slayings also add a layer of horror to the situation that Wieland's testimony does little to assuage or explain.

Further complicating matters in the novel is the fact that Clara's family is being spied upon by a con-man of sorts who uses his powers of ventriloquism to manipulate them for his own amusement. One of his ventriloquist tricks is to pretend to be the voice of God. Yet, confronted with Wieland's testimony, Carwin denies having instructed Wieland to murder anyone. The resulting mysteries are thus entirely secular and naturalistic, but no less irresolvable and mystifying. Is Wieland mad? Is Carwin lying? Did Carwin's ventriloquist games set off Wieland's religious madness?)

Moreover, such uncertainties call into question the whole issue of how anyone can know what they know with any certainty and make judgments, moral or otherwise, based on that imperfect knowledge. The fact that Brown sent his novel to Thomas Jefferson suggests that he believed it contained useful insights about political philosophy, but scholars have disagreed about what these might be. One way to understand the violence that brings the narrative to a climax is that religion is a form of madness and therefore dangerous in a liberal republic. One could also read the relative freedom enjoyed by the protagonists as a tacit argument that a strong central government could keep such excesses in check. This reading would ascribe a deeply conservative slant to the book. Alternatively, more progressively, we could suppose from the fallibility of *all* the characters that a strong central government would be equally vulnerable to errors of judgement, and that therefore a full democracy is the least of all political evils.

In raising these issues, Brown participates in a longstanding tradition in horror fiction of implicitly exploring the connections between psychology and political theory. Inspired by the English radical writer William Godwin (1756-1836), Brown wrote a series of novels focusing on young protagonists navigating the volatile social space of the young nation and confronting situations that strained both their abilities, and that of the reader, easily to judge people and actions. Psychological and physical violence, deadly illness, crime, mental disorders and mysteries abound in the novels. For instance, in *Arthur Mervyn, or Memoirs of the Year 1793* (1799), the protagonist recounts his experiences during an epidemic of yellow fever in Philadelphia. Like today's contagion films, such as *28 Days Later* (Danny Boyle, 2002), the novel is full of horrific descriptions of the physical symptoms of the disease, often plunging into abject details of bodies become monstrous, as well as disturbing descriptions of the breakdown of civil society under the pressure of the epidemic. We hear of family members abandoned by their loved ones, of the dying heaped with the dead and of the cowardice of persons trusted to care for the infected. Once more Brown complicates this already richly horrific plot by making his first-person narrator ambiguous and possibly unreliable. Readers are left wondering if Mervyn is not himself a conman, or at least an opportunist. Questions of motive and character are constantly raised and rendered uncertain, as people themselves scarcely know the reasons for their actions.

Although Charles Brockden Brown is little known today outside of universities, he had a huge influence on the subsequent tradition of American horror. All the great American Gothicists of the nineteenth century – including Poe and Hawthorne – were influenced by his work. Brown made horror a genre of the social and political thought experiment, freeing himself of novel conventions that required consistent characters and unified plots. Instead, in seeking a higher realism, Brown permitted himself complex and ambivalent characters and allowed contingency and the messy complexities of life to seep into his plots. He also made each of his character's subjective experience of his or her world as true and valid as any other – recreating in this respect the individualistic dynamics of American democracy. Such a scenario was both exciting and potentially frightening to Brown and other people of his time, and horror fiction permitted him to explore the more extreme peripheries of individual behaviour and psychology. By placing complex characters in violent or terrifying circumstances, Brown tried to discover certain universals of human nature, or at least to examine the range of its possible reactions. This acute awareness of the diversity and complexity of human motives and behaviour emerged naturally in a nation composed of states which had previously had less contact with each other than with the mother country (and even that had been quite attenuated by distance). American states had been quite autonomous up until the Revolution, each with unique local cultures and values. Moreover, each state was composed

of even more subcultures, ethnic enclaves, races, religions and other communities with markedly different moral and political frameworks. Now these radically different entities had to create a single political organism. Brown's horror fiction offered him and his readers a safe space in which to think through some of the meanings and implications of that diversity.

Subtle Horror in the Short Stories of Washington Irving

A more familiar name is Washington Irving, whose story 'The Legend of Sleepy Hollow' (1820) has been the basis of several films, most notably the 1999 Tim Burton adaptation, and a recent television series in the United States (2013-, Fox). Irving also wrote a companion piece called 'Rip Van Winkle' (1820), about a man who falls asleep and wakes up 20 years later. Both stories are examples of fairly gentle horror fiction, though admittedly 'Sleepy Hollow' is remembered mainly for its headless Hessian horseman. Both stories develop Brown's interest in the question of competing value systems and cultures. In 'Rip Van Winkle', the protagonist wakes up in a dramatically different world from the one in which he fell asleep because the American Revolution has happened in the meantime. His utter dislocation, and the horror of finding all familiar faces and cultural landmarks gone, is part of the darkness of the tale. Similarly 'The Legend of Sleepy Hollow' is about a confrontation of two different worlds – that of the inhabitants of Tarry Town, a remote Dutch village in Pennsylvania, and that of Ichabod Crane, the itinerant teacher who represents the grasping, materialistic values of the new business culture taking hold of American society in the 1820s. Although he seems to represent modernity and progress, Crane's goal is less to teach the town's children than it is to marry the town's richest heiress and acquire her wealth. Despite his education, Ichabod Crane is also terribly superstitious and this is what allows the local admirer of the same young woman to chase him away. Brom, as the local suitor is called, takes advantage of a story-telling session to revive a legend about a headless horseman from the Revolutionary War who roams the woods outside town. Later that evening, as Crane is riding home, he is accosted by a horseman who resembles the Hessian mercenary of the story:

[displayed quote] There was something in the stranger's moody silence that was appalling. It was soon fearfully accounted for. On mounting a rising ground, which brought the figure of his fellow traveler in relief against the sky, gigantic in height, and muffled in a cloak, Ichabod was horrorstruck on perceiving that he was headless! But his horror was still more increased on observing that the stranger's head was carried before him on the pommel of the saddle (Irving 1983: 1083). [end of displayed quote]

The mysterious figure chases him through the woods and throws what appears to be his head at him (1085). The story of Crane's terrifying chase by the horseman has been part of American popular culture for nearly two centuries, often represented visually with a 'real' headless ghost. In the story, however, the reader is subtly but unmistakably invited to read between the lines and understand that the supposed headless horseman is none other than Brom himself. The young man takes advantage of Crane's cowardice and superstition to drive him from the town by pretending to be the horseman and throwing a pumpkin at him. In short, the story is basically a satire of the Gothic, but one so subtle and effective that many superficial readers miss the parody or ignore it. However, the story is representative of the way in which humour and self-irony have been essential features of the horror mode since its inception.

Edgar Allan Poe, The Master of the Early American Horror Story

Probably the best known writer of American horror fiction is Edgar Allan Poe. Not particularly appreciated at home, especially after a scurrilous obituary damaged his reputation by wildly exaggerating his eccentricities, Poe became a sensation in Europe in the second half of the nineteenth century; his fame started in France with Charles Baudelaire's translations and eulogies and then spread across the globe. Poe's work is a perfect example of how horror and humour often go together. One of the greatest challenges – and pleasures – for readers of Poe is how to take the often ironic tone of his stories, especially the most horrific ones. This tonal ambivalence, as we could call it, has been responsible for many Anglo-American critics dismissing Poe as a charlatan or boys' writer. Yet it is precisely this complexity that caused French readers to admire him, and that made Poe something of a star in deconstructionist circles in the late twentieth century (Soltysik 2007: 137–8). For instance, both Jacques Lacan and Jacques Derrida wrote extensively about him (see Johnson 1977).

Poe's biography has been the subject of much exaggeration and distortion, yet remains one of the most fascinating in American letters. He was indeed spared few horrors in his own life. Orphaned as a toddler, he was raised by a wealthy merchant in Virginia and Scotland, only to lose his beloved stepmother to tuberculosis and to be disowned by his stepfather as a young man. Accustomed to a certain comfort as a child, Poe struggled with poverty his entire adult life. He was the first American writer to support himself entirely by writing, in a literary marketplace where copyright laws were weak and writers earned very little. Poe clung to what little biological family he had, marrying a young cousin, largely in order to become her legal guardian and to be able to care for her and her mother. When his young wife also fell ill with tuberculosis and began to slowly waste away, Poe was disconsolate. Much of this grief and horror found its way into his writing, especially into works such as 'Morella' (1835), 'Ligeia' (1838) and the long poem 'The Raven' (1845).

At the same time, Poe was a writer of tremendous wit and satirical genius. His experience of living abroad as a child and of being a perpetual outsider, even in his own family, gave him a privileged insight into the strangeness and absurdity of many cultural conventions. This critical distance, which included a fascination with the arbitrariness of standards of good taste and good judgement, would be translated into an acute sense of irony, and even self-irony, in his writing. A good example of this tonal ambivalence can be found in 'Ligeia'. The story is told by an unnamed male narrator, who describes his marriage to a beautiful, mysterious and extremely erudite woman with whom he spends days in recondite studies, and who tells him that death can be overcome by willpower (Poe 1984: 269). Ligeia contracts tuberculosis, even as did Poe's beloved stepmother and later wife, and dies, leaving the narrator despondent, bitter and addicted to opium. He remarries a fair-haired woman he does not love and neglects her cruelly until she too dies. The main part of the story consists of a scene in which the shroud-wrapped body of the dead second wife seems slowly to re-animate as the black-haired Ligeia – a horrific process of seeming perception and denial complicated by the narrator's opium-induced intoxication. As if these ambiguities were not enough, the entire story is riddled with pretentious foreign references and over-the-top pseudo-scientific riffs that have led many readers to suspect the whole piece is a parody of the Gothic genre, something Poe did more overtly in several other stories of the same period. The result is a radically unstable narrative that succeeds as a tale of horror for many readers while simultaneously working as a subtle piece of mock-horror or self-reflexive metafiction for others.

Poe's skilful manipulation of writing conventions occasionally led to genuine uncertainty about the status of certain tales. One of the more gruesome of Poe's short stories, 'The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar' (1845), for example, was taken by some readers to be an authentic scientific report. The story purports to be an account by a mesmerist of an experiment in hypnotising someone at the moment of death. The result is described as some form of suspended animation in which the test subject is technically dead but still manages to speak, uttering in a thoroughly uncanny way, 'I have been sleeping – and now – now – I am dead' (Poe 1984: 840). The reaction to such a violently unnatural utterance is pure horror and recoil:

[displayed quote] No person present even affected to deny, or attempted to repress, the unutterable, shuddering horror which these few words, thus uttered, were so well calculated to convey. Mr. L___I (the student) swooned. The nurses immediately left the chamber, and could not be induced to return. My own impressions I would not pretend to render intelligible to the reader (840). [end of displayed quote]

This passage bears all the elements of horror as a modern cultural phenomenon: the physical reactions of fear and flight as well as fainting, the seeming inability to describe one's feelings – in other words, an invocation of the unspeakable – and finally a curious self-consciousness about emotion as a calculated product of a certain kind of verbal production. Just as M. Valdemar's words seem 'calculated to convey' a 'shuddering horror' to his listeners, so are they – and the story itself – calculated to convey horror to Poe's readers. The tale ends with a line that is itself clearly meant to produce the purest horror in readers. When the narrator releases M. Valdemar from the hypnotic spell that had bound him after his death, the body instantly melts as seven months of suspended putrefaction rot it away: '[u]pon the bed, before that whole company, there lay a nearly liquid mass of loathsome – of detestable putridity' (842). The reduction of the human body to something that bears no resemblance to the human, to a thing, here a puddle of decay, is the very essence of horror.

[?np] Slavery was a real-life issue at a time in which humans were being systematically reduced to things, and horror became a favoured strategy among abolitionist writers trying to stir outrage against it. Although Poe is scarcely considered an abolitionist, generally avoiding the topic of race and slavery in his work, one of his last published short stories does address this topic, though displacing it to a fictional and fantastic world. 'Hop-Frog' (1849) explicitly dramatises the plight of a slave, a dwarf who has been kidnapped from his native land to serve a cruel king as court jester, and a young girl slave, also a dwarf. Told by an unnamed courtier who fails to understand much of what he is witnessing, the story is a brilliant example of Poe's use of unreliable narration. (Unreliable in this context does not mean dishonest or deceptive, but merely stupid or slow, unable to correctly interpret what he or she sees.) Poe frequently used this device in order to allow readers to make connections and inferences that he wanted to leave unsaid, believing that they made a more powerful impression if suggested rather than stated. The story begins with a scene of cruelty, in which the king and his ministers abuse both Hop-Frog and the other slave, a tiny girl named Trippetta, by forcing them to drink, shoving them, throwing wine in their faces and laughing uproariously at their discomfort, all the while making cruel jokes, such as asking them to toast their absent friends (Poe 1984: 903). Subtly and with indirection, Poe allows the reader to see something that the narrator misses entirely: that the cruelty of the scene leads Hop-Frog to devise an equally cruel plan for revenge. The rest of the story allows the reader to discover, with growing horror, the plan that Hop-Frog has devised, namely to cover the king and his ministers with tar, chain them together like orang-utans and set them on fire – a horrific allusion to some of the most brutal punishments meted out to Southern slaves and later free blacks under Jim Crow (namely tarring and feathering or burning alive).

[?np] The story ends with a scene of carnage almost unparalleled in American fiction, with the king and his ministers hanging from a chandelier – ‘[t]he eight corpses swung in their chains, a fetid, blackened, hideous, and indistinguishable mass’ (Poe 1984: 908) – as the two dwarfs run away, never to be seen again. The story takes place in a fantasy kingdom and therefore does not appear on the surface to be a comment on the Southern institution of slavery, and moreover the grotesque and seemingly comic features of the main character can be seen as examples of racist caricature. Nevertheless, the tale is a devastating rebuke to the Southern defence of slavery on the grounds that slaves are childlike creatures needing the care and control they receive from masters, who were depicted in pro-slavery ideology almost in the role of parents or guardians to their slaves. This argument was predicated on a total denial of the repressive and cruel character of slavery as an institution – including a denial of the possibility that slaves resented their servitude and would take revenge if given the opportunity. That such a fact was likely was the unspeakable open secret of Southern existence, but the official discourse around slavery always represented it as a benevolent and civilising institution. In this light one can see to what extent Poe’s story gives the lie to such fictions, by allowing the reader to perceive something the narrator does not: namely, that the slave hates his master and wishes to be free.

In this way, horror fiction was able subtly to expose social realities in a way that would have been immediately discredited had Poe written an editorial or non-fiction account. Abolitionists and pro-slavery defenders rarely read one another’s work, and neither would have been swayed by the other’s arguments. However, by weaving abolitionist horror into a fictional narrative Poe was able to undermine Southern propaganda about the benevolence of slavery and the seeming acquiescence of slaves to their captivity. In this way, he illustrates the craft and cunning with which writers of horror have been able to participate in larger conversations about social values and practices while appearing to be concerned with wholly imagined or fantastic worlds. TO HERE

Witchcraft in Nathaniel Hawthorne’s Short Stories

The other major writer of horror fiction from the pre-Civil War era in American history is Nathaniel Hawthorne, probably best known for his novel *The Scarlet Letter* (1850). Hawthorne was America’s first great writer of historical horror, often setting his tales and novels in the past. No aspect of American history obsessed Hawthorne more than its Puritan origins and especially the witch trials that had taken place in his native town of Salem, Massachusetts. Hawthorne’s interest in this dark moment of American history was personal as well as

professional – he was descended from the only judge from that period who had not publically repented for having sent people to their deaths.

It is fair to say that the Salem witch trials of 1692–3 have had a hold on the American horror imagination like few other events, though they lasted no more than a year. As previously mentioned, they resulted in 20 executions, 19 by hanging and one by pressing to death. Four more people died in prison, including a child. When the episode had passed and people realised that a kind of mass hysteria had gripped their communities, Puritan authorities found themselves with considerably less power and influence. One of the issues that has particularly bothered Americans about the trials is the harrowingly irrational attitude towards evidence. It sufficed for a person to testify in court that someone's spirit or spectral shape appeared to him or her in a dream – this was called 'spectral evidence' – for the accused to be considered guilty. In practical terms, this meant that anyone could condemn anyone else of witchcraft and there was little the victim could say to defend herself or himself.

Nathaniel Hawthorne returns to this problem of spectral evidence again and again in his work. His most famous story dealing with the Puritans and their problematic relationship to signs is 'Young Goodman Brown' (1835). In this early tale Hawthorne tells of a young Salem man who leaves his pretty wife alone for a night while he travels through a woods for an unspecified 'evil purpose' (Hawthorne 1982: 276). Like many of Hawthorne's stories, the tale leans heavily toward allegory (the wife's name, for example, is 'Faith' and Brown must leave her behind to accomplish his dark journey) while still sounding quite individualised and realistic. The story quickly takes a dark turn as Brown encounters a character who is clearly a version of the devil, an association made more allegorically explicit as we are told his staff resembled a 'great black snake, so curiously wrought, that it might almost be seen to twist and wriggle itself like a living serpent' (277). This mysterious personage accompanies him through the dark forest, telling him that he was friends with many of his Puritan forefathers – including his grandfather, who lashed a Quaker woman in the streets, and Brown's father, who burned down an Indian village. Here Hawthorne evokes the violent excesses of the Puritans in their persecution of others, and suggests that the devil figuratively had a hand in them. As the pair penetrate further into the woods, Brown sees a series of people he knows from his life and town, and is astonished to discover how many of his townsmen have given themselves over to the devil. At one point, he refuses to walk any further, but ends up following the voices of two men who seem to be the minister and the deacon of the town. He then discovers almost the entire town cavorting. Hawthorne is careful to remind the reader that these apparitions may all be spectral illusions of some kind, and sometimes refers to them as merely voices or images of the people they resemble. Brown despairs when he sees what appears to be his wife Faith, and the language of the passage takes a

dark turn as Brown loses his mind and metamorphoses into ‘the chief horror of the scene’, not shrinking ‘from its other horrors’ (284). Like a character from Charles Brockden Brown or Edgar Allan Poe, Young Goodman Brown is pushed into momentary insanity:

[displayed quote] In truth, all through the haunted forest there could be nothing more frightful than the figure of Goodman Brown. On he flew among the black pines, brandishing his staff with frenzied gestures, now giving vent to an inspiration of horrid blasphemy, and now shouting forth such laughter as set all the echoes of the forest laughing like demons around him. The fiend in his own shape is less hideous than when he rages in the breast of man (284). [end of displayed quote]

He participates in a dark mass, discovering that all the most revered figures of his life are sinners in thrall to the dark arts, and emerges from the forest the next day a changed man: ‘stern, [...] sad, [...] darkly meditative’ (288–9), living the rest of his life distrustful and distant from all the people around him, including his wife. With this story Hawthorne alludes to the problem of spectral evidence – after all, Brown’s only proof is what he believes he has seen in the forest – leavening the religious allegory with conventions of the fantastic.

[?np] Also in 1836, Hawthorne wrote another story which developed his preoccupation with the witch trials even more pointedly. ‘Alice Doane’s Appeal’ borrows from a popular nonfiction genre of the time, the sketch, and consists of a frame narrative and an embedded story. In the frame narrative a young man, a writer, accompanies two young women to Gallows Hill in Salem. He takes advantage of the opportunity to read them a horror story he has written about a brother and sister and an evil wizard, a story that ends with fratricide and also includes a scene of demonic spectres in the woods. For the sake of effect, the narrator tries to connect his story to the real world by ending with a claim that the wizard’s bones are buried on Gallows Hill – a strain on his listeners’ credulity that leads them both to laugh. Annoyed by their reaction, the young narrator now tells them of the real history of Salem, conjuring up the gloomy procession to Gallows Hill as the condemned witches are led to their death. Here the mock-horror of the embedded story is replaced by the real horror of history, and the narrator is gratified to see his listeners moved and terrified by the scene he evokes as he attempts ‘to realize and faintly communicate, the deep, unutterable loathing and horror, the indignation, the affrighted wonder, that wrinkled every brow’ (Hawthorne 1999: 112) as the accused approach the gallows. Hawthorne refers to the deluded townspeople as a mass, a ‘universal heart’ (112), while describing many of the condemned individually, stressing their suffering and anguish: ‘one, a proud man once, was so broken down by the intolerable hatred heaped upon him, that he seemed to hasten his steps, eager to hide himself in the grave hastily dug, at the foot of the gallows’ (112). In one of

the few stories where Hawthorne designated moral polarity explicitly and without irony, the narrator describes these condemned witches as ‘victims’ and their accusers as ‘a guilty and miserable band of villains, wretches and lunatics’ (112). He compares Cotton Mather to ‘the fiend himself’ and describes him as ‘blood-thirsty’ and ‘sternly triumphant’ (112) as he leads the small procession to the gallows. In this way, the story exemplifies the complexity of expected victim and villain roles that often characterises American horror writing.

Women of Horror

No portrait of nineteenth-century American horror is complete without exploring the work of women writers. The three most important are Harriet Beecher Stowe, Louisa May Alcott and Charlotte Perkins Gilman. The first two names may be surprising because they are best known for popular sentimental works – *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1852) in the case of Stowe and *Little Women* (1868) for Alcott. However, like Brown, Poe and Hawthorne, all three writers addressed historical and cultural issues with devices borrowed from the horror genre. In Stowe’s case, horror elements are mixed into her *magnum opus*, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1852), a novel that has been credited with turning the tide of American public opinion against slavery. In Alcott’s case her horror writing had been totally eclipsed by her sentimental novels, but has been rediscovered and appreciated in recent decades. This work includes the now widely anthologised ‘Behind a Mask, or, A Woman’s Power’ (1866), as well as numerous short stories she called ‘blood and thunder tales’ and a suspense thriller about obsession and stalking titled *A Long Fatal Love Chase* (written 1866, published 1995). Finally Charlotte Perkins Gilman is remembered as one of America’s most important feminist activists from the First Wave – a journalist, social theorist and author of the ground-breaking *Women and Economics: A Study of the Economic Relation Between Men and Women as a Factor in Social Evolution* (1898). She is also the author of the extraordinary horror story *The Yellow Wallpaper*, first published in 1892. It was republished in 1973 by the Feminist Press, whereupon it became a best-seller and is now recognised as the most important horror story written by a woman in the nineteenth century. Together these three authors comprise a formidable triptych of American horror writing.

Harriet Beecher Stowe created some of the most popular and beloved American characters of her era: Uncle Tom, Little Eva and the little black girl Topsy. She also created one of the most terrifying villains, the slave master Simon Legree, and situated him on a Southern plantation that was meant to represent an earthly hell. Decayed and unkempt, Legree’s plantation is a demonic concentration camp where two brutal black overseers terrorise an exhausted workforce, pushed

to the limits of its endurance and humanity by a policy of exploiting slaves until they die. Violence, despair and fear reign supreme. Legree is depicted as cruel and sadistic, his only weaknesses alcohol and superstition. His slave mistress, Cassy, is able to escape with the adolescent girl that Legree has bought to replace her by playing upon Legree's irrational fear of ghosts – itself a symptom of his lifetime of cruelty and heartlessness, since it is his repressed conscience that feeds his fear of the supernatural. The two women pretend to escape through the swamps, but in fact remain in the attic of the plantation house until the hunt with bloodhounds has been called off. When they do finally escape, they are dressed in white like two ghosts, a sight arousing little notice in a place as haunted and troubled as Legree's plantation. Stowe plays the two kinds of horror – the real historical horror of slavery and the Gothic stratagem of impersonating ghosts – off against each other to evoke a multi-layered network of fear and terror that permeated the institution of slavery and corrupted everyone involved with it.

[?np] Known around the world as the author of sentimental novels for young adults, Louisa May Alcott was also a secret writer of horror fiction. The story that has been the most widely read and anthologised from this hidden trove of dark treasures is a novella titled 'Behind a Mask: or, A Woman's Power'. A tale of psychological perversity and deceit, it reads like the mirror opposite of the guileless sentimentality of *Little Women*. The protagonist, a divorced actress, is a hardened woman of 30, who pretends to be an innocent 18-year-old girl hired as a governess by a wealthy family. Using her theatrical skills and cynical insight into human nature, she seduces every male member of the family into falling in love with her, playing cruelly with some in order to punish them for perceived slights or character flaws. Finally she marries the elderly *pater familias*, partly for his title and partly for his genuine kindness. The horror of the tale lies less in any overt violence than in the cynical machinations of the main character, whose insight into other people is as uncannily penetrating as her unscrupulous manipulation of them is sociopathic. At the beginning of the narrative Alcott also depicts her villainess like a witch: a 'haggard, worn, and moody woman' (Alcott 2013: 12) in her thirties who transforms herself into an 18-year-old girl with the help of make-up, false teeth, a wig and consummate acting skills. When the family acquires the letters she has written to a female friend during her stay with them, they are horrified to discover how cunningly each has been appraised and punished. Like Stowe's work, the tale is also an intervention into the social situation of the time: the protagonist's plight is symptomatic of the dearth of economic opportunities for women of a certain class and age in nineteenth-century America. Though conniving and sometimes cruel, the protagonist also inspires pathos, and at the end is described as genuinely grateful for the security she has found with her elderly husband. The larger social issue at stake is the economic vulnerability of women in a society

where there are few respectable jobs for them. Such a situation makes marriage an economic imperative and invaluable safety net for women who could easily face a wide range of real-world horrors if alone and poor.

The social and economic constraints on women also preoccupied Charlotte Perkins Gilman. Her most important contribution to American horror fiction consists of the brilliantly effective 'The Yellow Wallpaper' (1892), a first-person narrative of a young woman descending into madness because of her confinement at home. The story is loosely based on Gilman's own experience of post-partum depression and treatment by the famous physician Weir Mitchell, whose 'rest cure' forbade female patients from activity of any kind (male patients were treated very differently), including reading or writing. Forced to lie passively in bed, Gilman reported later that she felt her own sanity in danger. Her nameless protagonist, whose husband is a doctor and an acquaintance of Mitchell's, does not confine her to bed, but does discourage any intellectual activity or stimulation. By insisting on what he calls 'rest', the husband drives her deeper and deeper into madness, as she begins to believe there is a woman trapped behind the wallpaper and finally convinces herself that she is that very woman. Gilman's story also includes unsettling details suggesting a history of madness, imprisonment and horror in the house: the windows in the room with the wallpaper have bars on them; the bedframe has teeth marks; the walls have rings as if to attach chains. The remarkable story blends a Poe-esque first-person narrative mode with a feminist critique of nineteenth-century gender ideology, and even anticipates the rise of asylum horror in the twentieth century.

With its origins rooted in religious enthusiasm and tales of captivity, American horror fiction has often expertly woven psychological and political concerns into its tales of cruelty and violence. Subjective distortions of perception and interpretation are foregrounded, while the subtexts frequently involve political philosophy and theory. Women have played an important role in American horror writing, as have African Americans and Native Americans (especially later in the twentieth century). Horror often looks forward, even as it appears to look back. In the case of Charlotte Perkins Gilman's classic feminist horror story, for example, we have the first intimations of the subgenre of medical or asylum horror, which has assumed significant contemporary proportions. A major genre of American literature in the 19th and 20th centuries, horror shows no signs of abating in the 21st.

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What to Read Next

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