THE GOTHIC

A Reader • Edited by Simon Bacon

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Robert Bloch's *American Gothic* (1974)

In 1932, when Grant Wood titled his painting of a black-clad farmer and a woman standing in front of a house in Iowa *American Gothic* he was yoking together what seemed like two incongruent terms. At the time, the painting offered a series of ironic contrasts: between the stern Iowan farmers and their somewhat pretentious Gothic Revival house, between the portrait genre and the oddly severe looks on the couple, and finally, between the very terms 'American' and 'Gothic', which seemed as opposed as white and black. Yet, by the time Robert Bloch gave the same title to his 1974 novel about a conman and serial killer preying on visitors to the 1893 Columbian Exposition in Chicago, the irony had all but disappeared. Instead, in the wake of the Vietnam War, renewed awareness of the Native American genocide and other American horrors, the term seemed perfectly apt for a novel about the American fascination with swindles, murders and dismemberment. In other words, by the mid-1970s, there *did* seem to be something inherently 'Gothic' about America. This genre seemed to portray an alternative American history that was written on the margins and revealing the violence and horror often glossed over in official versions.

The American Gothic novel has its roots both in the British tradition, that was invented by Horace Walpole in 1764 (with *The Castle of Otranto*), and in another tradition more specific to the North American continent: the captivity narrative, which described the protagonist's (usually a woman see – Rowlandson 1682) kidnapping and survival in the hands of Native Americans. The plucky female heroine was a common feature of both the British Gothic novel and the American captivity narrative. The first American Gothic novelist was Charles Brockden Brown (1771–812), and his most famous and influential work, *Wieland: Or the Transformation* (1798) is a first person narrative told by a young woman whose brother goes mad and murders his family,

partly because of the machinations of a mysterious conman and ventriloquist. The narrative situation of the young woman, like that of many an American Gothic protagonist, is to try to make sense of what is going on around her even though she has no past experience or formal knowledge that could prepare her to understand either the manipulations of the conman or the religious madness of her brother, who claims to be acting out God's will. The specificity of the American Gothic tends to be in the way its characters are forced to make judgment calls and decisions despite a total absence of institutions and epistemological frameworks to guide them. While the British Gothic portrayed individuals oppressed by outmoded social forms like the Church or aristocratic privilege, the American Gothic stages characters facing each other and the world with a bewildering absence of forms (in the sense of traditions, conventions and a shared ethos) to guide them. America has from the start often been a society of strangers, brought together by circumstances or a desire to 'start over', which created the conditions in which the figure of the confidence man could thrive.

The American Gothic also grew out of a late eighteenth-century fascination with horror. As Karen Halttunen has argued the shift in moral paradigms at this time from religious to secular brought with it a loss of the ability to account for particularly heinous crimes (Halttunen 1998). While an earlier religious blueprint saw sin and depravity as the natural condition of man, the modern worldview with its belief in an inherently good human nature was unable to explain violent crimes by people who had no apparent trauma in their upbringing. Halttunen shows that while violent crimes became more difficult to understand and explain, a fascination with the details of the crimes, and the reactions of people who witnessed or discovered them became paramount (4). This is the beginning of the modern fascination with serial killers, she proposes.

Serial killers have been a staple of the American Gothic since the start. Charles Brockden Brown's character Wieland can be considered is a serial killer, killing his wife, children and a boarder and being prepared to continue to kill others upon the promptings of the inner voice he believes belongs to God. The villain of Robert Bloch's novel is also a serial killer, actually based on a real murderer, H. H. Holmes (1861–96), who is considered one of the first serial killers in the modern sense of the term. He killed between twenty-seven and

200 people, many at the hotel he built near the grounds of the 1893 Chicago Columbian Exposition or World Fair. Bloch's serial killer, G. Gordon Gregg, like Henry Howard Holmes, was a swindler and a bigamist, repeatedly seducing, marrying and then killing his wives for their insurance policies or savings. While Gregg justifies himself by describing his actions as simply imitating all the major industry magnates in the US, who ruthlessly stole land and capital in order to build their business empires, the heroine – who has discovered his secret cabinet of women's hearts preserved in jars as trophies – suspects that the real motive is a sadistic pleasure in power and sexual conquest.

Like many genre texts, *American Gothic* pays homage to the classics of its own tradition, and the novel is a veritable compendium of allusions to other American Gothic and Female Gothic texts. It begins with a nod to both Poe's 'The Fall of the House of Usher' and Henry James's *Turn of the Screw*. A young woman looks up at the 'towering turrets' of 'the castle', the hotel *cum* pharmacy that Gregg has built with his victims' money in Chicago in anticipation of the opening of the World Fair. The real Holmes did actually build a large mansion that came to be called 'Murder Castle' after his crimes were discovered. In the novel, Gregg ensures he is the only one who understands the design of the house, which contains as many secret passages, trapdoors, labyrinthine corridors and trick walls as the earliest Gothic novels. The *faux* castle also recalls other haunted houses in American and European literature, many of which share the theme of men and specifically husbands trying to murder their wives, which Bloch tries to connect with the exploitative and ruthless spirit of American history more broadly.

Thus, *American Gothic* is typical of the American Gothic genre in the way it links the psychological to the ideological in order to offer a critical reflection on American history and culture. In this vein scholars such as Louis Gross argue that the American Gothic reminds us that America is a country of 'brutal repression' as well as 'great accomplishment' (Gross 1989: 92). Whilst Teresa Goddu proposed that the Gothic was a 'primary means of speaking the unspeakable in American literature' (Goddu 1997: 10), specifically concerning slavery, Indian massacre and the status of women. Bloch's depiction of the Columbian Exposition of 1893 brings all these themes together in a scathing indictment of American self-complacency and ruthlessness. This event was designed to demonstrate white American superiority in every way.

The centrepiece was the White City, a majestic neoclassical building made of plaster and stucco but meant to imitate gleaming white marble, which featured the achievements of white Protestant American men and lauded them as the pinnacle of human civilization.

In another section called the Midway Plaisance, which Bloch describes in detail, there were displays from different countries and cultures of the world jostling each other in a cacophonous marketplace of racist kitsch. According to Robert Rydell, the Midway Plaisance was organized loosely along a 'ladder of human evolution' design, in which the most 'advanced' races or cultures would be on one end, and the more 'primitive' races on the other (Rydell 1984: 40). A major sensation on the Midway Plaisance was the 'Street in Cairo', which featured notably a belly dancer named 'Little Egypt', and where Bloch makes his journalist heroine discover her embarrassed fiancée. Bloch dwells on this incident, emphasizing the uncomfortable self-awareness of the young man that he was no better than the other 'grinning, gaping men' mesmerized by the semi-clad woman dancing the *hutchi-kutchi* for their voyeuristic pleasure. In this scene, Bloch combines a critique of the sexualized display of the Orient with a critique of the commercial objectification of women. A later scene in the novel describes Chicago male elites arriving at an exclusive brothel, and the novel clearly disapproves of the corruption the scene implies among the ruling class in the city.

The common denominator for Bloch would appear to be the continuity between male sexual appetite and greed and a general drive for conquest and acquisition. The novel suggests that these are all linked – and nowhere is this connection clearer than in the character of Gregg, who strikes the young heroine as a terrifying mixture of savagery camouflaged by refinement. She observes him eating dinner at one point and notices the way he has impeccable manners but nevertheless his 'jaw rippled convulsively, voraciously', as his teeth 'tore' the meat he was dining on. She also notices that he cuts his steak like a surgeon dissecting a body, indirectly linking medical science to the critique. She concludes that 'the hands belonged to a surgeon, the face was that of a gentleman, but the appetite was animal' (Bloch 1974: 192). This observation is typical of Gothic villains and the Gothic genre more generally, which has among its main preoccupations the exposure of the violence and corruption underneath deceptive facades of privilege.

The American twist on this convention here is that Gregg is not *really* a gentleman. Having studied medicine for only one year, he knows just enough to pose as a physician and be able to sell tap-water as a specially designed scientific elixir convincingly. Yet underneath his appearance as an educated and genteel doctor, he is a conman unable to resist the lure of easy money. The critique that Bloch makes here is that of American greed posing as entrepreneurship. Gregg speaks of 'building capital' just like any industrialist, but in fact he simply robs and murders people in order to create a house where he can rob and murder some more. He is the ultimate American type: the conman.

Writing in an era marked by the Women's Movement, Bloch adds an extra layer to his villain, making him also an amalgam of men who use and even murder women for their own profit. The novel makes references to the 1930s play and 1940s film *Gaslight*, about a man trying to drive his wife to suicide in order to inherit her money, and to Stanley Kubrick's *The Shining* (1980), also about a man trying to kill his wife. There is an explicit Bluebeard reference when the protagonist finds a closet full of the pickled hearts of previous mistresses and wives. This intersects with Female Gothic, a subgroup of the Gothic genre that has been particularly well developed in the United States, with classic texts such as Louisa May Alcott's *Behind a Mask* (1866) and Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *The Yellow Wallpaper* (1892). The theme is generally linked to the dangers faced by women as they navigate the treacherous byways of courtship and romance in the hope of securing safe haven in marriage, but often finding themselves victims of manipulation or deceit.

The fact that the protagonist is an intrepid young woman, a daring and independent journalist, who nevertheless nearly falls victim to the seductive Gregg, is also quintessential American Gothic. The Gothic novel has featured bold female protagonists from the very beginning, starting with Walpole and Radcliffe, and American authors have continued this tradition. After Brown's *Wieland*, there was Isaac Mitchell's *Alonzo and Melissa* (1811), Alcott's 'potboilers', and many others in the twentieth century, all the way up to the so-called 'final girl' device in the 1970s horror film. The female heroine is not always perfect, and may be tempted by the villain, as is the protagonist, Crystal, here. Her attraction to him is not based on his proclamations of love, which she can easily read through and finds somewhat ridiculous. 'Had he really deluded all those women with this rubbish, this dialogue straight

out of a Bertha M Clay romance?', she thinks to herself (214). Instead, and in more quintessentially Gothic manner, Crystal's attraction is based on sexual fascination with a dangerous and forbidden object, a perennial theme of the British and American Gothic. She finds herself drawn to him even though she suspects he is a seducer, thief, and murderer – and nearly succumbs in a moment that is interrupted only by an intruder in the house. This sexual and moral ambivalence is an essential part of what has made the American Gothic so compelling and enduring a genre in the last 200 years.

The way that the heroine can read *through* the villain, identifying him with a genre of popular romance novels, not only demonstrates her belonging to a tradition of canny female protagonists who are excellent readers – of books and of people and of signs – but also speaks to the generic self-awareness and metafictional aspect of the American Gothic in general. Writers who choose to write in the Gothic mode tend to do so self-consciously and often play explicitly and ironically with the conventions of the genre, referring frequently to other well-known texts of the genre, and exaggerating to the point of camp and comedy. *American Gothic* is full of such references and such playfulness. As Avril Horner and Sue Zlosnik argue there has always been a streak of black humour and lightness in the Gothic, especially insofar as parody, self-consciousness and self-referentiality are important features of literary modernity, and the Gothic emerged at precisely the moment that modernity began its obsessive interrogation of epistemology, representation and judgment (Horner and Zlosnik 2004).

Yet, behind black humour there is usually a serious moral intent and outrage, and this too is present in Bloch's novel. The last paragraph of the 'postmortem' pretends to dismiss the horrors of the real Holmes' murders by claiming, à la Nathaniel Hawthorne in *The House of the Seven Gables*, that 'as this, of course, was long ago and far away ... Mass murderers, gas chambers and secret burials and coldblooded slaughter belong to the dim and distant past ... Today we live in more enlightened times ... Don't we?' (Bloch 1974: 246). With this ironic ending, Bloch evokes the Vietnam War and other twentieth-century atrocities that serve as backdrop to his story of mass murder, manipulation and swindling, reminding us that the American Gothic has always had a strong political sensibility despite its sensationalism, black humour and misleading reputation as escapist fiction.