

Marquette University

**e-Publications@Marquette**

---

English Faculty Research and Publications

English, Department of

---

2003

**Introduction to *Approaches to Teaching Gothic Fiction: The British and American Traditions*, Tamar Heller and Diane Hoeveler, eds.**

Diane Hoeveler

Marquette University, [diane.hoeveler@marquette.edu](mailto:diane.hoeveler@marquette.edu)

Tamar Heller

University of Illinois at Chicago

Follow this and additional works at: [https://epublications.marquette.edu/english\\_fac](https://epublications.marquette.edu/english_fac)



Part of the [English Language and Literature Commons](#)

---

**Recommended Citation**

Hoeveler, Diane and Heller, Tamar, "Introduction to *Approaches to Teaching Gothic Fiction: The British and American Traditions*, Tamar Heller and Diane Hoeveler, eds." (2003). *English Faculty Research and Publications*. 209.

[https://epublications.marquette.edu/english\\_fac/209](https://epublications.marquette.edu/english_fac/209)

## INTRODUCTION TO THE VOLUME

---

Ever since “horrid” novels (as Jane Austen called them in *Northanger Abbey* [40]) were the best-sellers of the late eighteenth century, the Gothic has been an important and influential literary genre. In its two hundred plus years of enduring popularity, the appeal of the Gothic has been both transhistorical—inspiring writers as separated in time and place as Ann Radcliffe, Edgar Allan Poe, and Isak Dinesen—and historically specific and contingent, since Gothic fiction responds to such events and trends as the French Revolution, the rise of the bourgeois family, developments in science and technology, racism and sexism, and postmodern alienation.

The Gothic has made us familiar with such paraphernalia as claustrophobic castles, beleaguered heroines, and animated corpses. But, more important, the narratives that employ these conventions have been a storehouse of themes consistently compelling to post-Enlightenment writers: the dialectic between reason and irrationality, science and religion; the nature and limits of human knowledge; and, in such texts as Mary Wollstonecraft’s *Maria*, William Godwin’s *Caleb Williams*, and Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*, the conflict between the individual and the social order. The recurrent theme in Gothic fiction of the tension between the individual and society—a theme that reflects a variety of ideological perspectives—can be cast as the tension between subaltern and dominant classes, between children and parental authorities, and between women and men.

Moreover, in its representation of the family and the workings of the conscious and unconscious mind, Gothic fiction raises questions of identity and sexuality that have been major cultural concerns both before and after Freud. Thus the Gothic lends itself to a richness of theoretical approaches that examine the genre in the light of history, politics, and psychology—interdisciplinary perspectives that trace the complex relation between literary form and its cultural matrices. Because of the questions that Gothic raises about the interplay between genre and culture, during the last several decades there has been a strong revival of interest in, and reevaluation of, the genre. One aesthetic and cultural issue is the disjunction between the wide popularity of the genre and its descendants (such as mass-market romances, fantasy, horror, and detective fiction) and the relative marginality of the Gothic to literary canons. Interestingly, criticism is seeking to understand what this disjunction tells us about the development of a split between high and low cultures. As interest in the study of popular fiction and processes of canon formation has grown, the Gothic has become increasingly visible on college syllabi as students examine how it and the popular genres descended from it continue to fascinate readers.

In addition to courses on Romanticism and Gothicism, the history of the novel, and the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century novel, women’s literature

courses are one place in the literary curriculum where the continuing vitality of the Gothic is most evident. The study of the Gothic has been of particular importance to the development both of feminist literary scholarship and of the pedagogy influenced by it. The tradition of feminist scholarship of the Gothic—embodied by such studies as Anne Williams’s *Art of Darkness* (1995), Michelle Massé’s *In the Name of Love* (1992), Diane Long Hoeveler’s *Gothic Feminism* (1998), and an entire 1994 issue of *Women’s Writing* (*Female Gothic Writing*) devoted to articles exploring the nature and meaning of the female Gothic—reaches back to early classics of feminist criticism such as Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar’s highly influential *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1979), whose guiding metaphor for the situation of the nineteenth-century woman writer is the Gothic image of the imprisoned wife in *Jane Eyre*. Like Gilbert and Gubar, in their studies of a female literary tradition Ellen Moers (*Literary Women*) and Elaine Showalter (*Literature*) identified the Gothic as an important genre for telling stories, as Moers puts it, of “female heroinism” (91).

Moers’s term “female Gothic” has been used to describe the tradition of women writers of Gothic that includes Ann Radcliffe, Jane Austen, Charlotte Dacre, Mary Wollstonecraft, Mary Shelley, and the Brontës and continues in the work of such twentieth-century women writers as Margaret Atwood, Angela Carter, Iris Murdoch, Muriel Spark, Joyce Carol Oates, Anne Rice, Toni Morrison, Gloria Naylor, and Poppy Z. Brite. Themes central to the female Gothic are also central to women’s literature courses. They include women’s claustrophobic experience in the bourgeois family; father-daughter relations; the mother-daughter bond; and women’s often ambivalent attitudes toward sexuality, the body, and artistic creativity. As courses on women’s literature continue to grow in number, the study of the female Gothic tradition, already important, will become increasingly more so. The diversity and complexity of the Gothic tradition are reflected by the range of critical approaches that have been applied to it. Much feminist criticism of the Gothic (such as Claire Kahane’s work on mother figures) draws on psychoanalytic models, which have been important to the reevaluation of the genre because they raise questions about how Gothic conventions like doubling relate to identity formation and the representation of familial tensions. Marxian, and more recently, new-historicist critics have also looked at how narratives about identity, sexuality, gender, and class in the Gothic reveal the construction of the bourgeois subject. And, as Kari Winter’s book on women and power in Gothic novels and slave narratives suggests (*Subjects*), race and imperialism are also important themes in the Gothic, from *Frankenstein* and *Jane Eyre* to Naylor’s *Linden Hills* and Morrison’s *Beloved*. African American literature is inspiring vital and exciting new work in Gothic studies, a trend with great pedagogical relevance, given the courses in multicultural studies that are currently multiplying in, and significantly changing, the college curriculum.

The Gothic is, then, taught in a number of contexts and from a variety of perspectives in the contemporary English department curriculum. In addition

to theme and genre courses—like women's literature, minority literature, or the history-of-the-novel course—in which Gothic conventions can be addressed, works of Gothic fiction are taught in period and survey courses (for example, Radcliffe's *The Mysteries of Udolpho* in a course on eighteenth-century literature, Poe's and Faulkner's Gothic works in a survey of American literature). And, while we have pointed to the importance of the Gothic in courses that widen the canon, a knowledge of Gothic conventions is useful also in courses on already canonical literary figures, such as the Brontës, Dickens, and Poe. Given the current critical visibility of the Gothic, many more courses will be developed that focus on the history and permutations of the genre itself.

It is appropriate that a volume on teaching the Gothic should appear at this time. The volume coincides not only with renewed critical attention to the genre but also with the greater number and variety of reprints and improved editions of Gothic texts now available for classroom use (two competing editions of Dacre's *Zofloya; or, The Moor* were published in 1997 alone). Note too the recent appearance of anthologies such as Chris Baldick's two editions of *The Oxford Book of Gothic Tales*, Patrick McGrath and Bradford Morrow's *The New Gothic*, and Oates's *American Gothic Tales*. While there have been many new critical studies of Gothic literature published during the past decade, there is as yet no volume that distills this knowledge in a form specifically designed for the use of teachers who wish to apply these insights in the university and college classroom.

This volume begins with the section "Materials," prepared by Tamar Heller, who reviews and summarizes the nearly one hundred responses to the survey sent to MLA members and others who teach the Gothic. Heller also discusses the wide variety of bibliographic and teaching materials available in the field.

Perhaps the first pedagogical concern and one of the most important raised by the Gothic, given its vast influence but canonical obscurity, is simply one of definition: therefore, the first essay in the collection—contributed by Judith Wilt—addresses that issue. We hope to provide teachers with a clear sense of the issues involved in a study of the Gothic in fiction and help them recognize and make meaning out of Gothic conventions. We also hope to give a sense of the richness of interpretations suggested by these conventions and of the variety of theoretical models—psychoanalytic, feminist, Marxian, new-historicist, ideological, poststructuralist among them—that can be used to structure these interpretations. Marshall Brown supplies the philosophical background necessary to teach the Gothic; Robert Miles relates teaching the Gothic to ideologies of the period; Stephen Behrendt discusses teaching the Gothic through the visual arts; Anne Williams uses the Gothic to introduce students to feminist theory; and Carol Senf examines the Gothic in its extended scientific context. The next essays survey the major British and American Gothic texts commonly taught in the college curriculum: Horace Walpole and Ann Radcliffe; the early female Gothicists like Sophia Lee, Clara Reeve, Mary Wollstonecraft, Charlotte Dacre, Jane Austen, and Mary Shelley; the male Gothicists Matthew Gregory

Lewis, William Beckford, and Robert Louis Stevenson; the homosocial Gothics of William Godwin, James Hogg, and Oscar Wilde; the dramatic adaptations of popular Gothic novels in relation to their sources; the Irish Gothicists Charles Robert Maturin and Sheridan Le Fanu; the Victorian Gothicists in relation to commodity culture, gender, racial theories, and imperialism; the vampire motif in the British Gothic tradition; and the contemporary female Gothicists Iris Murdoch, Margaret Atwood, and Angela Carter.

The American section of the volume also surveys the major figures and texts in that tradition: Charles Brockden Brown's *Wieland*, Edgar Allan Poe, Henry James, Nathaniel Hawthorne, and Herman Melville; Sarah Orne Jewett, Mary Wilkins Freeman, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, and Edith Wharton; the African American Gothic; and finally Anne Rice and Stephen King. The final section of the volume contains essays that position the Gothic in relation to pedagogical practices: the Gothic as taught to honors students; the Gothic and techniques of role-playing and identity writing; the Gothic as taught through a number of filmic adaptations.

The coeditors wish to thank Sonia Kane for her patience and assistance throughout the editorial process. In addition, the series editor, Joseph Gibaldi, is owed a debt of thanks for his belief in this project and Michael Kandel for his copyediting.

DLH and TH