

American Gothic: From Poe to King

Dr. Yael Maurer

In this course we will explore a literary genre known as "Gothic fiction" in its American form. We will read texts by American writers Washington Irving, Nathaniel Hawthorne and Edgar Allan Poe, and move on to Stephen King, one of the most prolific and bestselling American authors today, whose writing follows this American tradition but reinvents it to fit our day and age.

Gothic fiction, as Joyce Carol Oates states in the introduction to her collection of American gothic tales, is a fitting literary form for the first settlers in the New World, the Puritans. The Puritan sensibility may be termed "Gothic" in the sense that the Puritans believed themselves to be chosen by God, but also potentially damned if they did not receive God's grace and were excluded from what they termed God's "Covenant of Grace". This sense of fear of the unknown and invisible world which exists somewhere outside our known world, but which has the power to invade and influence it, is at the heart of the Gothic tale. It is therefore fascinating to explore the ways in which this literary form came into being and how its influence is still very much with us today. One just has to glance at recent best-seller lists to see that the most popular books today are tales of vampires and demons.

As Eric Savoy and Robert K. Martin note in their study of the American gothic, the gothic is the most American of literary "turns" (rather than a coherent genre or mode) in its ironic dialogic relation with a haunted past. The irony lies in the fact that American civilization is founded on the attempt to get rid of this very past. Thus an essentially gothic American culture is produced by a society driven by the need to get rid of its ghosts and shadows. Teresa Goddu notes in her study of the sources of the genre and its historical beginnings that American history "remains troubled and haunted despite its claims to newness and innocence". Goddu discusses "the nightmare of American history", a fitting appellation for the literary texts and the films we'll be discussing.

We will watch a film based on a gothic tale (Timothy Burton's *The Legend of Sleepy Hollow*) and explore how it adapts and reinvents the original work of fiction. We'll also watch the filmic adaptation of Stephen King's Southern gothic novel *Green Mile* to see in what ways the South is re imagined as a gothic locale.

Primary texts:

Washington Irving, "The Adventure of the German Student", "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow", "Rip Van Winkle"

Edgar Allan Poe, "The Black Cat", "Hop Frog", "Murders in the Rue Morgue"

Nathaniel Hawthorne, "Old Esther Dudley", "Dr Heidegger's Experiment", "Young Goodman Brown"

Stephen King, *The Green Mile*

Theoretical texts

Gothic America Teresa A. Goddu Columbia University Press, 1997

The Gothic David Punter and Glennis Byron (Editors), Blackwell Publishing, 2013

American Gothic Robert K. Martin and Eric Savoy (Editors), University of Iowa Press, 1998

Requirements

Active attendance and participation 15%

Midterm (in class) 15%

Final paper (home) 70%