American Gothic

ENGL 391W, T, Th 3.05pm – 4.20pm
Asst. Prof. Siân Silyn Roberts (Klapper 612)

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Send all assignments to Amgothic@hotmail.com
Office hours: T 1-3pm

Course description
American authors have long experimented with the languages of horror and terror to produce the national literary style we call American gothic fiction. In recent decades, most scholarly criticism on this type of writing has remained largely unanimous in its assessment of this style of writing: namely, that our gothic fiction is all about representing – in the heavily coded languages of metaphoric blackness, live burial, murder, sleepwalking, contagion, ventriloquism, to name just a few – the crimes of America’s guilty past (slavery, land appropriation, revolutionary regicide, failed political utopianism, etc). That is to say, the gothic is all about America’s historical demons. But that criticism has been surprisingly reluctant to ask a rather obvious question: why was gothic fiction so incredibly popular with changing American readerships if all it was supposed to do was make us feel bad about history’s mistakes? We will try to figure out some possible answers to this question.

We will consider traditional gothic criticism alongside canonical and not-so-canonical literary works. For me everything begins in the eighteenth century and so will this course, with some British Enlightenment philosophy, America’s captivity narratives, and European gothic conventions. This section will give us a sense of the basic rhetorical tools and ideas American gothic writers have been working with. Having arrived at an understanding of what characterizes American fiction as gothic, we can then spend the remainder of the semester focusing on how some of our fiction engages, changes, disavows, and revises gothic phenomena.

Required texts
Herman Melville, Billy Budd and Selected Tales (Oxford) ISBN: 0192839039
Robert Montgomery Bird, Sheppard Lee (NYRB), ISBN: 1590172299

All additional readings will be posted on Blackboard as electronic copies.

Please note: All of these novels should be available at the Queens Bookstore, but all too frequently the wrong editions are made available for purchase. Please make sure you have the correct editions when you purchase the textbooks. I choose these editions for the quality of the editor’s scholarship, and different editions may well have poor or inadequate notes and introductions. Discussion is also much easier when we all have the same editions.
Also, you will likely find Chesnutt’s *Conjure Tales* available at the bookstore as one of the texts for this class. We will **not** be reading *Conjure Tales* this semester, so you don’t need to buy it.

**Course requirements**

You must complete **ALL** of the following course requirements to pass the course. Failure to submit any part of the following constitutes an automatic Fail.

1. **Participation (20%).** This part of your grade comes solely from the contributions you make to class discussion. These should be informed, thoughtful comments based on the week’s readings. If you are absent from class, you obviously cannot participate; hence repeated absences will significantly lower your participation grade. Please note that attendance is **NOT** the same thing as participation. You can come to class consistently for the entire semester, but if you do not contribute to class discussion, you will forfeit this part of your grade. If, for whatever reason, you feel any reservations about participating in class discussion, please do not hesitate to see me, and we will work out some strategies for you.

2. **Weblog (20%).** Each student will maintain an individual blog for the duration of the semester. For the most part, you will be responding to the readings, class discussion, and your peers’ ideas. Most weeks I will give you short blog assignments (close readings, responses to certain ideas, web research, etc). In addition to completing these, you must also respond with comments to your peers’ blog entries. **Everyone is free to post in response at any time, but you must post at least once a week for the duration of the semester. Of course, you should post more frequently if you are interested in doing so!** The blog is intended as a place where you can write informally, and experiment with ideas that come up during your own reading and in class discussion. Approach your own blog creatively and informally. Approach your peers’ blogs in the same fashion, but also with respect. I will be keeping tabs on your blog entries. My evaluation will be based **only** on evidence of sincere effort and critical engagement, not your web expertise or writing structure. The class blog can be accessed at [http://blogs.qc.cuny.edu](http://blogs.qc.cuny.edu). Click on “Blog Login.”

3. **Writing Assignments (25%)** Over the course of the semester, you will write three short (two pages) close readings on passages from the readings. I will explain the requirements of these readings when I issue the first one. **ONE** of these short readings will form the basis of your longer essay (see below)

4. **Long essay (25%)** Critical essay expanded from one of the shorter close readings you write over the course of the semester. **Please note:** you can submit this paper **any time** over the course of the semester after you have submitted the first short reading and before the final day of class.

5. **Final (10%)** This will take the form of a final blog entry. This is an opportunity for you to be as creative as you like, bringing to bear all the critical skills and writing expertise you have developed over the course of the semester. I will provide more details closer to the date.

**Extensions/Late Submission Policy.**

All written assignments must be submitted by their due date as a hard copy in my office (Klapper 612 – just shove it under the door) or to Amgothic@hotmail.com. No late submissions will be accepted unless you have arranged an extension with me. Extensions must be arranged with me well in advance, and will be granted on a case-by-case basis.
Class Absence and Lateness
Repeated absence from class will adversely affect your Participation grade. If you are late for class more than three times, I will deduct 5% from your participation grade, with 5% taken off for every late entry after that. **PLEASE don’t be late.** It is disruptive and disrespectful to your peers and your instructor.

References and Plagiarism
All assignments must conform to the referencing guidelines laid out in either the *Modern Language Association Handbook for Writers of Research Papers* or the *Chicago Manual of Style*. This includes referencing all primary and secondary sources under a **Works Cited** section.

Learning to reference your work is simply good academic practice, as well as being a guard against plagiarism.

Plagiarism is submitting another person’s work as your own without acknowledgement. This includes copying another source verbatim (books, articles, other students’ assignments, the internet, etc), buying a paper from another student or from an online source, passing someone else’s research off as your own, or failing to properly acknowledge another’s research. Contrary to expectation, it is actually extremely easy to spot when a paper has been plagiarized. Professors at Queens also have access to “Turnitin,” an online resource that allows us to check a student’s work against a large database of documents on the Internet and other plagiarized papers. Plagiarism is instant grounds for failing the course and is a disciplinary matter at Queens.

Office hours
I will hold office hours every Tuesday from 1-3pm. This is your opportunity to talk to me about anything relating to the course. This includes – but is not limited to – our readings, ideas that you would like clarified, points from in-class discussion that you would like to explore further, help with your written assignments, advice about your writing, etc. I strongly encourage you to take advantage of office hours. **Please note:** if you can’t make it during office hours, please email me at sian.silynroberts@qc.cuny.edu to schedule an appointment.

Reading schedule. This is a tentative schedule. We’ll probably adjust it as we proceed.

I. “Our Guilty Nation”

Week one
- Tues 1/27: Introduction

Week two
- Thurs 2/6: King, *The Shining*

Week three
- Tues 2/10: Leslie Fiedler, from *Love and Death in the American Novel*
- Thurs 2/12: **College closed – NO CLASS**

II. The Political Origins of the Gothic

Week four
Tues 2/17  Rowlandson, Narrative; the Panther Captivity, possibly others.
Thurs 2/19  John Locke, from An Essay Concerning Human Understanding

**Week five**
Tues 2/24  Walpole, The Castle of Otranto, Baldick and Mighall, “Gothic Criticism”
Thurs 2/26  Walpole, The Castle of Otranto. **First close reading due**

**Week six**
Tues 2/24  Writing workshop
Thurs 3/5  **Class CANCELLED**

**III. Inside the Castle**

**Week seven**
Tues 3/10  Brockden Brown, Wieland
Thurs 3/12  Brockden Brown, Wieland; Davidson, “Early American Gothic: The Limits of Individualism”

**Week eight**
Tues 3/17  Mitchell, The Asylum; Or, Alonzo and Melissa
Thurs 3/19  Mitchell, The Asylum; Or, Alonzo and Melissa

**Week nine**
Tues 3/24  Jacobs, Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl
Thurs 3/26  Jacobs, Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl

**Week ten**
Tues 3/31  Jackson, The Haunting of Hill House
Thurs 4/2  Jackson, The Haunting of Hill House; Perkins, The Yellow Wallpaper. **Second close reading due**

**Week eleven**
Tues 4/7  Writing Workshop
Thurs 4/9  **College closed for Spring Break – NO CLASS until 4/21**

**IV. Communities of the Gothic**

**Week twelve**
Tues 4/21  Bird, Sheppard Lee
Thurs 4/23  Bird, Sheppard Lee

**Week thirteen**
Tues 4/28  Irving, “The Legend of Sleepy Hollow”
Thurs 4/30  Hawthorne, “My Kinsman, Major Molineux”

**Week fourteen**
Thurs 5/7  Poe, “The Fall of the House of Usher,” “The Murders in the Rue Morgue.” **Third close reading due**
Week fifteen

Tues 5/12       Melville, *Benito Cereno*
Thurs 5/14      Melville, *Benito Cereno.*

**All final assignments due:** Wednesday May 20, 5pm.