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The Gothic Tower: How the Genre has Lent Itself to Depictions of Evil throughout the 18th, 19th, and 20th Centuries

From its very inception, the term “Gothic” has held astonishingly varied connotations. It initially referred to the body of individuals who originated from present-day Sweden and invaded southern Europe during the fourth, fifth, and sixth centuries (Bayer-Berenbaum 19). Notorious for their merciless treatment of captured prisoners, the Goths acquired power through their “barbarian” attacks upon the Roman Empire, and even conquered Byzantium in 267 AD. Eventually, however, the Romans drove them back and successfully enculturated them through trade during the fourth century.

Despite this enculturation, the word “gothique” harbored connotations of the uncivilized and the crude. During England’s Middle Ages, the term reemerged as an architectural style widely used in cathedrals and churches. Devendra Varma identifies the gothic-style architecture as having shadowy vaulted roofs, pointed arches, flying buttresses, grotesque sculptures, rugged walls, darkened air, and a massy design (13). All of these elements combine to give the impression of the building being simultaneously ponderous, somber, extravagant, imposing and lavish. Following the Dark Ages and its origination of such distinct architecture, though, was the European Renaissance, during which time critics began to apply the word “Gothic” to such a style because they thought it originated with the Goths. As a result, Linda Bayer-Berenbaum observes, “this architecture was held in low esteem during the Renaissance, and the word Gothic therefore developed pejorative connotations suggesting the uncouth, ugly, barbaric, or archaic” (19). Originally, then, the
term referred to the perceived savagery, barbarity and violence associated with the northern Gothic tribes. Later, during the European Renaissance, it became linked to ideas of the medieval and the outdated through the medium of architecture.

By the eighteenth century, however, the word had acquired a third and wholly different meaning in Great Britain. Indeed, the idea of the “Gothic” was reevaluated, adopted, and embraced by the Romantics in order to describe the sublime. As Varma notes, the Romantics realized that while a “work of Renaissance or Classical art often excite[d] a feeling of elevated beauty, and an exalted notion of the human self, [. . . ] the Gothic architecture [made] the beholder abashed with awe” (15). Surrounded by the ruins of Gothic cathedrals and castles already termed Gothic, the Romantics combined mystical antiquity with “wild landscapes and other mixtures of sublimity and terror” to create a term that referred to the supernatural (Bayer-Berenbaum 19).

With such a complex and nebulous linguistic history, it makes sense that the word “Gothic” continues to conjure up ideas of fright and mystery within present-day readers. With its emphasis on the unknown and depiction of the areas of life which the human mind fails to adequately comprehend, Gothicism remains peculiarly suitable for writers seeking to communicate ideas which extend beyond the immediate confines of everyday life. For this reason, Gothicism can aptly capture the often inconceivable presence of evil within the world. Yet often the genre is disregarded from serious scholarship because of its reliance upon seemingly impossible and ridiculous portrayals of evil within the world. Defying this very claim, Paul Nisly asserts that

to reject summarily the possibility that Gothic fiction through its use of terror and horror may be exploring the human situation through means not available to strict realism is to limit the variety of ways by which literary artists may probe the human situation. (4)
A malleable genre, particularly in its distinct ability to capture evil in often absurd, though legitimate manners, Gothicism provides a valuable avenue of study for scholars. Indeed, the genre of Gothicism has enabled British and American authors throughout the eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth centuries to present their unique perceptions of the nature of evil formed in response to their individual historical situations.

Initiated by the momentous discoveries of scientists like Newton, whose work in physics revolutionized understandings of the universe, and further emboldened by such philosophers as Voltaire, whose cry to “Écrasez l'infâme!” [Crush the thing!] displayed his unabashed disdain for religion, the Age of Enlightenment represents a time in which reason was hailed by European intelligentsia as the sole giver knowledge and truth. Drawing from the momentum already created by scientific findings earlier in the century, thinkers in the late 1700’s began to extend the same methodical approaches devised to aid in scientific endeavors to every area of life, including religion. As a result, many found that in order to remain intellectually consistent and respected, they had to reject any notions which even remotely engaged mysticism, dismissing them as unprovable, irrational, and thus worthless. Steadily encroaching upon the radiance of the Enlightenment, however, were the shadows of the Gothic literary tradition. Determined to recognize the existence and power not only of the intellect, but also of the imagination, the Gothic embraced the supernatural, the inexplicable, and the creative. As Coral Ann Howells notes, Gothicism embodied everything which [was] the opposite of the Augustan: instead of notions of order and decorum and rational judgment, it represent[ed] the darker side of awareness, the side to which sensibility and imagination belong[ed], together with those less categorisable areas of guilt, fear, and madness which [were] such important and terrifying components of the earlier Augustan anti-vision and of Romanticism. (5)
The initial introduction of the Gothic tradition in literature as invented by Horace Walpole, therefore, symbolizes a rejection of the assertion that life is a merely rational or cerebral experience, instead acknowledging the existence of the mysterious and the absurdly evil. Yet Walpole drew not only from the revolt against the ideals of the Age of Reason, but also from the superstition of his time. In the midst of numerous reports made by individuals claiming to have had interactions with the ghosts of departed souls, Walpole was very much influenced by such spectacles, no matter how skeptical he remained about their veracity. One such episode hit British newspapers in the second week of January 1762, only two years before Walpole published *The Castle of Otranto*. Purportedly, after being enticed into London, a young lady named Fanny Lynes, who also happened to be carrying the child of her deceased sister’s husband, was kidnapped and poisoned. “Sensational though this was,” E. J. Clery notes, “it was nothing to the revelation which followed a few days later: the source of the story was the victim herself, returned to the world as a ghost” (*Rise* 13). As the news of Fanny’s tragedy spread, so did talk of her nightly appearances at the séances held at Cock Lane, during which the ghost would indicate her responses to questions by rapping on wood. “Scratching Fanny” drew so many “thirsty sightseers” that the town’s taverns and alehouses soon overflowed (15), Walpole himself being such a visitor (13). Although an investigating committee eventually found the story false, the incredible influence of the claim becomes apparent not only by the droves of people who came in hopes of contacting the spirit world, but also from the large number of plays and pamphlets published that referred to it. No matter his reservations, Walpole’s visit to Scratching Fanny clearly indicates his interest in the supernatural and its interactions with the living world.

This cultural and personal fascination with the inexplicable which materialized as a reaction against the Age of Enlightenment lends a great degree of insight into Walpole’s understanding of evil as notably captured in his novel, *The Castle of Otranto*. A distinct
point of origin in Gothicism as utilized in literature, his book is hailed “not because of its intrinsic merit, but because of its power in shaping the destiny of the novel” (Birkhead 20). It introduces many of the classic Gothic motifs and harbingers of evil, such as “creaky doors, extinguished lamps, rusty hinges, subterranean passages, dank dungeons, lightning, wind, storms, thunder at critical moments, mysterious manuscripts, ancestral portraits, [. . . and] long-lost relatives” (Varma 52). Relating the actions of a purportedly imperial family, this work was indubitably revolutionary in its day for the ways that it challenged the supremacy of rational thought in understanding the world and the human mind. Although the novel appears formulaic to modern audiences in its portrayal of evil as a kind of external force inspiring terror in grotesquely bloody brawls and frightening supernatural occurrences, readers must appreciate the ways that Walpole’s representation was radical in his day.

Exploring how evil reveals itself in bizarre and unreasonable ways, he paints a picture of a world in which random tragedies and absurd viciousness begin to dominate the lives of individuals. Walpole’s over-simplification of evil is nevertheless revealed, however, in his novel’s one-dimensional and predictable characters, as well as in the ways that it portrays evil as an external and impersonal force to be lightly, if not playfully, considered.

Indeed, one might understandably conclude, after a perusal of Walpole’s novel, that evil may be expressed or carried out only by those whose characters who are wholly defined by its power. Prince Manfred, for instance, fanatically bent upon maintaining his crown, repeatedly displays an appalling proclivity towards evil, such as when, minutes following the sudden and inexplicable death of his only son, he attempts to divorce his wife and force his would-be daughter-in-law, Isabella, to wed him instead. His callousness towards his doting wife; his disdain for his faithful and selfless daughter, Matilda; his brutal treatment of the peasant Theodore; his utter contempt for the laws of the church; and his merciless actions toward the defenseless Isabella all further the reader’s certainty of the vileness of Manfred’s
character. Even when confronted by others, such as his daughter and the friar of the adjoining abbey about his horrifying actions, the Prince of Otranto cannot seem to keep himself from his evil devices. Ultimately, Manfred’s malevolence becomes absolutely reckless and misdirected when he mistakenly slays his daughter Matilda, thinking her to be a scheming Isabella. Although the tragedy jars him enough to make him relinquish his original aspirations of interminable kingship, it still seems as though Manfred cannot make choices to perform acts of goodness because they would stray from his personality as determined by his character type.

Although Matilda, unlike her father, never commits any sort of evil, her character remains just as shallow as his in her performance of the flawlessly faithful daughter who maintains a perpetual hope in the goodness of humankind, no matter how revolting its actions. Even as she bleeds to death by the fatal wound inflicted by Manfred’s wicked hand, Matilda defends her father against the censures of the friar, Jerome, calling the latter a “cruel man” (Walpole 109). She further reveals her unbelievable goodness when she begs Manfred for his forgiveness, and, almost deifying herself by suggesting that heaven has a lesson to learn from her example, even goes so far as to plead heaven to “bless [her] father and forgive him as [she] does” (109). Yet Matilda displays steadfast loyalty to her father not only when she must sacrifice her own happiness, but also at the expense of the fulfillment of others. Despite the mutual love existing between Matilda and the peasant, Theodore, she flees from his offers in order to remain obedient to her father and to protect her maiden purity. Only once does she disregard her father’s orders in order to release Theodore from the Black Tower and attempt to remedy the prince’s name following his misdeed. Despite her modesty and wholesomeness, or perhaps due to them, Matilda remains a dull and uncomplicated character; because she never even seems to struggle with doing what is right, readers are left with the sense that she hasn’t any choice at all because of her infallible and impossible
perfection.

In Walpole’s Gothic story, then, good and evil characters act in manners entirely consistent with their character types, with evil eventually succumbing to the influences of the good and promising reform. Elementary in its portrayal of evil and its effects upon people, The Castle of Otranto nonetheless remains a worthwhile piece of literature, for it represents the birth of Gothicism and the potency of the genre in its acknowledgment of the supernatural and the inexplicable. Challenging the very foundations of the Enlightenment, Gothicism, as observed by Linda Bayer-Berenbaum, “insist[ed] that what [was] customarily hallowed as real by society and its language [was] but a small portion of a greater reality of monstrous proportion and immeasurable power” (21). Though he did not to feel his way back into the darkest corners of Gothicism in order to explore this “greater reality” in a more serious and developed way, Walpole must still be credited with the initial invention of the genre, which later succeeded in abandoning banality in order to probe the depths of evil more extensively.

Like Walpole’s novel, Ann Radcliffe’s The Mysteries of Udolpho is also deeply influenced by the Age of Enlightenment, except that it seems to support rather than defy the century’s ideals concerning rationality. Indeed, instead of showing how evil works in random and unfathomable ways, Radcliffe’s work suggests that most events labeled as evil have logical explanations if one takes the time to reason. As Edith Birkhead puts it, “Mrs. Radcliffe deliberately excites trembling apprehensions in order that she may show how absurd they are” (51), as when Emily finds a corpse and dramatically concludes that it is her aunt’s, though she later learns that the body belonged to a member of the banditti, slain in a bloody battle. Yet this depiction of evil remains just as unsatisfactory as Walpole’s, for it, too, trivializes the its power and, further, implies its subordination to the rigors of the intellect.

Though Radcliffe upheld the eighteenth-century emphasis on the ultimate supremacy
of the mind, she also refined it by asserting her view of evil as a direct result of the breakdown of traditional domestic life. With the advent of the Industrial Revolution in the late eighteenth century, ideas about gender roles had changed drastically. Prior to the Industrial Revolution, the home represented a place of unity and involvement for each family member, with the majority of men and women living, as well as working, together within it. It symbolized the center not only of family life, but of social and professional life as well, with people only rarely leaving their residences for extended periods of time. The Industrial Revolution, using the scientific and technological advances of the previous age, altered the economy by replacing jobs which were once accomplished by the individual through manual labor in the home, with those in bulk manufacturing at factories away from the home. The availability of jobs in the workhouses and the growing difficulty of personally supporting one’s family necessitated one spouse to leave the home to work. Often falling to the man because of the wife’s unique ability to care for children through breastfeeding, the need to leave the house in order to make a living established what is now known as separate spheres, or the division between life within the home and that outside of it.

This disconnection of domesticity between men and women concerned Radcliffe, as evidenced in her novel, *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, which depicts how evil enters the life of Emily St. Aubert through the dissolution of her own home life. Following the death of her mother and father, Emily must leave her ideally-situated, rustic home to travel with her new guardians through the glamorous social networks France and the crumbling castles of Italy. As pictures of domesticity, family, and conjugal happiness disintegrate, the presence of evil becomes increasingly apparent, transforming Emily from an adored daughter into a vulnerable orphan and later into a harassed victim. Hence, Radcliffe communicates her support of a more traditional conception of the home by showing how evil resides within the ruins of broken familial relationships and physical houses.
Radcliffe further illustrates her desire to uphold earlier constructions of gender roles and the centrality of the home by allowing her female characters to exhibit power only within domestic settings. As a result, the traveling heroine, Emily, remains disappointingly demure, passive, and virtually faultless, or, as Birkhead puts it, “emotional, but passionless” (56). Indeed, Emily finds bliss, even as a young child, in perfecting her lute and voice performances, as well as in composing sonnets and learning to replace frivolous superstition with what her father calls “self-command” (Radcliffe 20). Following the death of her mother, she assumes the role of the nurturing female figure, taking upon herself all of the responsibilities of domesticity and aligning herself with Radcliffe’s idealization of the homemaker. Although Emily remains easily frightened and frequently allows her imagination to formulate conclusions before logically weighing them, her shortcomings remain few and never result in any serious harm to her or others. The strength of her resolve to act rightly becomes most apparent when she continues to obey her ignorant and unkind aunt, and, like Walpole’s Matilda, suppresses her love for her suitor, Valencourt, in order to abide by the commands of her guardian, even refusing a marriage proposal. Neither Matilda nor Emily ever falter in their choices to do the right. Thus, though Radcliffe’s conception of the source and nature of evil differs from that of Walpole, both bolster the view of women as saintly do-gooders.

Opposite to Emily, but similar to Walpole’s Manfred, Montoni, the cruel husband of Emily’s guardian aunt, virtually never shows any consideration of others, unless it is to dupe and manipulate them. He remains an unsurprisingly evil character. His secluded castle, with its decaying corpses, raucous carousals, high turrets, crass banditti inhabitants, torture chambers and hidden dungeons, symbolizes his inner life, and facilitates his outward tyrannous rule over the household. His failure to achieve any of the ideals set forth by Radcliffe in her understanding of domesticity reflects, and perhaps causes, his malevolence.
Indeed, Montoni fails as a husband, father, bread-winner, and home-owner. Seduced completely by the desire to cause destruction and garner power, Montoni never redeems himself, just as Emily never defiles herself.

Though a number of Gothic novels, such as Ann Radcliffe’s *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, were best-sellers in England during the latter part of the eighteenth century, with editions upon editions being printed and reprinted to satiate the public demand, they could not entirely escape the skepticism of the Enlightenment. Indeed, such so-called “horrid” novels (Austen 1020) came to be viewed as a type of popular novel, admired by the masses, and, more particularly, by seemingly hypersensitive young women, but without any serious implications for thinkers of the time. Though the influence of early Romanticism sought to recognize the legitimacy of emotion and the inexpressible sublimity in nature, Gothicism was rejected by the more serious-minded. Seen merely in terms of its effusive absurdities and exaggerations, the genre became the object of blatant scorn and condescension among intellectuals, who instead advocated reason and methodology as the proper means of perception.

To attack Gothic fiction in the late 1790’s, therefore, as Coral Ann Howells relates, “was not unusual;” to do so “with creative insight,” however, remains an ability peculiar to Jane Austen (116). Her novel, *Northanger Abbey*, then, does not distinguish itself simply because of its parodic elements, but rather due to its decided, yet non-derisive, usurpation of the genre. As Birkhead observes, though Austen does assail the genre with earnest criticisms and satirical jabs, she “has no tinge of bitterness or malice” in her tone (129). Careful neither to err on the side of unbridled romanticism nor staunt rationality, she opens the novel with a thorough refutation of the prototypical Gothic heroine. Catherine’s father is not a tyrannical ruler, nor does she have a delicate mother who dies in childbirth, nor is she an only child; rather, the unremarkable fourth child of ten, she is a “thin, awkward” girl, “fond of all boys’
plays and greatly prefer[ing] cricket not merely to dolls, but to the more heroic enjoyments of infancy, nursing a dormouse, feeding a canary-bird, or watering a rose-bush” (Austen 1005). Further, unlike her Gothic predecessors, her accomplishments lack brilliance: she cannot write sonnets (though she reads them), she has little chance of “throwing a whole party into raptures by a prelude on the pianoforte” (though she can “listen to others with very little fatigue”), and, worst of all, she has “no notion of drawing – not even enough to attempt a sketch of her lover’s profile” (an area in which she truly “[falls] short of heroic height”) [1007].

Despite Gothicism’s eccentric archetypes, however, Austen argues for the tradition’s reevaluation and respect in serious literary pursuits. She ultimately defends Gothicism by providing instances of reasonable and trustworthy individuals, such as Henry Tilney, who possess an appreciation for the genre, and by depicting weak, unimaginative characters as those who cannot appreciate either the genre or the novel form, like John Thorpe, who claims that “novels are all so full of nonsense and stuff” that he never reads them (Austen 1026). Austen also displays her approval of carefully-monitored readings of Gothic fiction by showing how horrifying situations do in fact take place in real life, often in the least expected places. Recognizing the tensions between sense and sensibility, Austen cleverly demonstrates in her novel how indulging in imaginative fancies as encouraged by Gothic literature can prove not only disappointing, but actually harmful, to those thoughtlessly subscribing to it; yet she simultaneously shows how such shocking evil does exist in reality. She desires readers and the heroine to have “a balanced awareness of the interplay between imagination and reason [. . .], arguing for sensitivity and discrimination as crucial factors in the cultivation of right judgment” (Howells 130). Austen stresses the importance of the cultivation of graciousness and sense as a part of social, as well as personal, wholeness.

To make her point, Austen omits such social and individual perfection in the character
most likely, according to the genre’s historical formula, to display it. In a truly intriguing
twist, she depicts Catherine Morland, the main female protagonist, not merely as failing to
embody the role of the classically well-rounded Gothic heroine, but actually as failing to act
in responsible and benevolent ways. Consistently permitting the fancies she has gleaned
from the Gothic novels she is so fond of reading to dictate her decisions, Catherine forsakes
her better judgment for superstition, a choice which begins innocently enough but proves
more grave an error in the end. Though her suspicions about the weaknesses existing in
General Tilney ultimately prove somewhat well-founded, she fails to detect them within
herself as she misjudges him, going so far as to label him a murderer, when really he is only a
proud and selfish man, obsessed with surrounding himself with his financial equals.

Only after Catherine becomes conscious of the folly and cruelty of her judgments
because of the censures of Henry Tilney, himself a connoisseur of Gothic novels, does
Austen begin to redeem the genre. First debunking the picture of reality as set forth by
Gothicism, Austen then shows how truly mortifying situations do occur in people’s lives.
Abruptly dismissed from the Tilney home because of her family’s supposed penury,
Catherine experiences the pain of “mortifying and grievous” discrimination herself (Austen 1128). As Coral Ann Howells writes, Catherine’s last night at Northanger “is as isolated and
fearful as [that of] any Gothic heroine, but here the genuineness of her feelings is spelled out
in explicit contrast to her first night of imagined terrors in the same room” (127). Real
cruelty has revealed itself in tangible ways and she has been confronted by “actual and
natural evil” (Austen 1128). Such encounters, however, have left her insensible to her former
terrors and she lies in solitude in her dark chamber, listening to the high wind as it produces
“strange and sudden noises throughout the [ancient] house . . . without [the] curiosity or
terror” which she experienced the first night of her arrival. By bestowing upon Catherine the
ability to choose between right and wrong, and, more importantly, the freedom to choose
wrongly, Austen institutes a strikingly different conception of female roles within the
narrative. She makes Catherine guilty of the same type of misapprehension of which she
later becomes the victim. Thus, Austen “does not reject Gothic because it is different from
life, but because it can so easily distort one’s real life responses” (Howells 127).

General Tilney’s wrongs, which, ironically enough, also represent the result of the
workings of an overactive imagination, become apparent only after Catherine’s suspicions
about his darker crimes have proven ill-founded. Austen artfully plays upon Catherine’s and
the reader’s knowledge of the genre by initially making the General seem to embody the
aloofness and severity of the traditional overbearing Gothic patriarch. The extent of his
stifling and harsh presence is reinforced when he leaves the Abbey for a brief time. During
his absence, the tediousness of life seems to lift, with Catherine and Eleanor enjoying the
“happiness with which their time [passes], every employment voluntary, every laugh
indulged, every meal a scene of ease and good-humour, walking where they [like] and when
they [like], their hours, pleasure and fatigues at their own command” (Austen 1124). Yet,
Austen also subverts the idea that the General represents a Gothic villain in Henry’s censure
of Catherine’s feeble ideas of his father’s brutality towards Mrs. Tilney. Sensitized rather
than blinded by his love for her, Henry confronts Catherine about the “dreadful nature of the
suspicions [she has] entertained” and, in the name of justice and civilization, urges her to
reconsider her atrocious surmises. She departs from him in utter humiliation and shame. The
General’s hasty return from London and unexpected discharge of Catherine from his
household, however, tempts readers into believing in his treachery once more; Austen uses
Catherine’s troubled, though by no means extreme, reaction to show that such conclusions
remain faulty and inapplicable to reality, despite their seeming validity. Ultimately, Austen
reasserts General Tilney’s truly humane nature, for he eventually gives his consent to Henry
and Catherine’s marriage. Thus, Austen humorously plays upon and overthrows
Gothicism’s archetypes as they relate to the heroine and the villain by characterizing neither as immune to faults or irresponsible choices, though with the definite capacity to better themselves.

Yet this idea of betterment, or progress, existed not only in the world of the socially-conscious Jane Austen; it is also inextricably linked to the industrial, technological, and economic conditions of the early nineteenth century. The innovation of the steam engine; more efficient mining techniques; improvements in steel and iron production; domination over the natural world through mining and the building of roads, canals and railroads; and the movement of workers out of rural agricultural settings into urban factories all contributed to the lasting influence of the Industrial Revolution. While such leaps towards greater control over the environment and increased efficiency furthered the economy of Western Europe, it simultaneously diminished much of what the Romantics had so cherished. Motivated by an almost inhuman greed and the desire for uninhibited progress, devoted supporters of the Industrial Revolution compromised the very lives of those living in English cities, permitting women and children to work long hours doing dangerous factory work, leaving the poor to live in squalor, and forcing those in rural areas to move into the already over-crowded urban hovels in order to find work. Surrounded by filth, pollution, poverty, and machinery, individuals of this time found themselves overcome by their own inventions.

Writing in 1818, Mary Shelley provides an intricate and fascinating discussion of the effects of the shift towards machinery and technology. Her classic tale, *Frankenstein, or the Modern Prometheus*, represents one of the most influential novels written to explore mounting concerns about the human desire for control within the context of nineteenth-century science. Shelley also challenges the ideas of the centrality of progress and industry as she wrestles not only with the effects of the creation of a being “on the soul of the man who has pursued scientific inquiry beyond legitimate limits” (Birkhead 159), but also with
the spiritual implications concerning the creature. As noted by E.J. Clery, Dr. Frankenstein’s creation “is almost always referred to as a ‘daemon’ and rarely as a monster to emphasize the metaphysical ‘other’ which it represents” (Women’s Gothic 136). Shelley recognizes that, though the creature fashioned by Frankenstein and the methods of modern science, has physical human body parts, it seems to remain spiritually distinct from its human counterparts. Ultimately, then, Frankenstein becomes the tale of a man who, much like Shelley’s contemporaries, attempts to claim god-like power for himself and, through such an evil action, leads both himself and those around him into profound suffering.

Indeed, it is most intriguing that Dr. Frankenstein, the central character of Shelley’s novel, is both the subject of readers’ pity and the cause the dreadful events it relates, thus doubling as both a protagonist and an antagonist. This usurpation of Gothicism’s formulaic distinctions of good and evil, hero and villain represents another way in which authors following Walpole utilized his tradition to capture their individual views of vice in the world. Similar to earlier Gothic villains, Dr. Frankenstein fosters an intense desire for renown and recognition, as well as for some type of paternal power over another being. His yearning for knowledge and supremacy incites him to father a being, not through a normal method of procreation, but rather through his own intellectual vigor. Unquestionably fallen and defeated, Dr. Frankenstein nevertheless fulfills a sort of heroic role in Shelley’s novel, for his original motives are innocent enough. Relinquishing his wholesome upbringing and the simplicity of domestic home life, Frankenstein allows himself to become obsessed with fashioning “[a] new species [that] would bless [him] as its creator and source,” later claiming that he had “lost all soul or sensation but for [his] one pursuit [. . .], as if in a trance” (Shelley 65-66). In his quest for the status of a god, Frankenstein forsakes humanity, allowing his “inhuman passion [. . . to give] birth to a non-human being” (Clery, Women’s Gothic 128). Eschewing the warnings and pleadings of his family and professors, Frankenstein makes very
deliberate decisions which lead to his eventual downfall. Yet readers continue to have the
sense that Frankenstein, in spite of his errors and foolishness, represents a type of hero within
the novel. Indeed, Dr. Frankenstein gives his life to the creation which initiates its misery
and ultimately ends it. Further, Frankenstein’s last words faintly echo those of Christ: “Man
[...] how ignorant art thou in [thy] pride of wisdom! Cease; you know not what it is you
say” (Shelley 254).

Essentially abandoned by his creator and parent, the “fiend” Frankenstein produces
represents Shelley’s conception of the innate and evil proclivities of unrestrained scientific
innovation (Shelley 123). The monster’s immediately destructive, frightening, and malicious
actions suggest not only the idea of innate evil as it exists in creatures, or at least those
begotten by humans, but also in science itself. Although the monster, for a brief time,
appears to learn to value and attempt to practice ethical living, he cannot maintain such
goodness due to his inherent nature. Consequently, the monster, like his creator, though more
consciously, forsakes the pursuit of good to embrace the pursuit of evil. Yet readers are
aware that the creature is not completely separate from his master, and that Shelley’s
judgment of the former does not exclude the fault of the latter. On the contrary, she
illustrates how Frankenstein’s handiwork “is not just a shadowy creature who exists to terrify
others: he is the reflection, the embodiment of Frankenstein’s dark inner self” (Nisly 14).
Ironically, what Frankenstein initially believes resides outside of himself, actually comes
from within. Frankenstein and the monster experience profound social, moral, and physical
isolation, then, as the result of the cold, mechanic, inhuman workings of science.

Though written by a British author, Frankenstein distinguishes itself from the typical
English novel, with its concerns about community life, and instead appears strikingly
American in its focus on the depiction of the individual’s bleak isolation from society.
Indeed, from the start, novels written in America have tended to offer a portrayal of one
particular individual, rather than the story of a number of individuals interacting with each other. This focus on the individual originated perhaps from the lifestyles of early European colonists as they endured the harsh elements, lawlessness, and seclusion of the “New World” in their small, remote settlements. Or, perhaps it is an early indication of the development of the American Dream, with its emphasis on prosperity, material comfort, and fame as acquired by independent thought, determination despite the odds, and self-reliance. In either case, the American novel’s concentration on the singular character largely remains a unique element in the genre of the novel.

Charles Brockden Brown’s novel *Wieland, or the Transformation*, published in 1798, illustrates this characteristic of American novels, and applies it to the Gothic genre. Taking its title from the name of a family in ruins, the novel follows the tragic story of Theodore Wieland, a second generation immigrant whose religious fanaticism eventually leads to his undoing. The events described in *Wieland* are based upon an “authentic case” which became public in 1796 when the *Weekly Magazine* published the story of a John Yates. As documented in this as well as other periodicals of the time, Yates, who lived in Tomhannock, New York, claimed that he heard voices which instructed him to heed a divine order to “destroy ‘false idols’” in his life (qtd. in Brown, Introduction xxiv). Interpreting this message as a reference to his wife and children, Yates brutally murdered the members of his immediate family and attempted to kill his sister shortly afterwards. While in court, Yates expressed no remorse for his actions, truly believing that he was justified in his obedience of the voice (Brown, Introduction xxvi). This startling story influenced Brown deeply, provoking within him questions about the early ideals set forward by the country’s founding leaders, such as Benjamin Franklin, who rejected Europe’s inflexible class system and instead argued that, with hard, calculated work, one could improve one’s situation in life. When considering Brown’s work within the context of the conclusion of the French Revolution,
during which the frightening deficiencies of the human mind were revealed, Eric Savoy argues that readers must understand the increasing fear felt by Americans at that time. He aptly observes that Gothicism’s cultural role [in the United States] has been entirely paradoxical: an optimistic country founded upon the Enlightenment principles of liberty and “the pursuit of happiness,” a country that supposedly repudiated the burden of history and its irrational claims, has produced a strain of literature that is haunted by an insistent, undead past and fascinated by the strange beauty of sorrow. How can the strikingly ironic, even perverse, career of the Gothic in America be accounted for? Why has it been so at home on such inhospitable ground?

(167)

The answer to the question of why Gothicism has thrived in the United States, Savoy insists, can be traced to the country’s strange history and to a growing disenchantment with the American dream. American Gothic, then, becomes a haunting exploration of the underside of its own country’s dark obsessions, ideals, and past.

Joel Porte also argues that Brown’s novel represents the growing terror over the ideas of biological predisposition and Calvinism’s “relentless determinism” (51). The former concern, also explored in Shelley’s novel, calls into question the ideas of liberal ideology: are human beings “moulded by the circumstances in which they are placed such that differences [...] are the function of situation rather than essence?” (qtd. in Brown, Introduction xix)? Porte elaborates on this point, observing that,

Carwin, for example, Brown’s mysterious biloquist, bears a certain resemblance to Frankenstein’s creature: considered a ‘monster’ of malignant intention, he is in fact a kind of outcast fallen angel who [...] wanders pathetically in search of love and fellowship (indeed, Carwin’s ventriloquism
may be seen as a twisted attempt to supply the society that he otherwise lacks). In the end, however, the seeds of disaster are shown to lie closer to home: in the guilt-racked and corruptible heart of man, who is internally bound to an ineluctably dark fate.” (58)

Such inquiries into issues of moral responsibility were only exacerbated by Locke’s theory of property, which based property acquisition upon the actions of the individual instead of birthright, as well as his assertion that the human mind “is a ‘tabula rasa’—a blank slate—on which cumulative experiences mediated by reflection construct ongoing identity” (Brown, Introduction xix). Thus, Brown contemplated identity and its development on a national, as well as individual level, and attempted to gauge the amount of responsibility laid upon a person for his or her actions. For if identity grew out of one’s internal nature, then how could people be held accountable for their actions, born merely from their innate proclivities? Similarly, how could an individual’s nurture, an aspect of their life over which they exercise no control, be inextricably linked to their social liability? Brown wrestles with these battling theories, further complicating them with the introduction of religion, or Calvinistic determinism.

The power and danger of unchecked and excessive religious zeal is evidenced in Theodore Wieland and his father, who both, despite all attempts by the former, remain tragically similar. In fact, Theodore’s sister, Clara, observes that her brother resembles their father in some key ways. Both had “grave” deportments (Brown 25) and felt plagued by mysterious voices. Although Theodore seems more sensitive to the injurious effects of his father’s fervor, for he pursues the “austerer and more arduous path” of the history of religious opinions and “[takes] pains to ascertain their validity” before embracing them (Brown 25-26), he cannot overcome his innate proclivity for spiritual radicalism. Again, as Savoy observes, “the role of Gothic [...] is figuratively to embody an intergenerational tendency when the
son finds himself, to his horror, transformed into the very father whose fanaticism he had vehemently rejected” (175). Though Brown intimates that Wieland has the power to choose to ignore and disobey the voices, he gives credence to the character’s fear that it would be at great eternal cost through the harsh penalty suffered by Wieland senior.

Carwin, too, represents an individual literally haunted by voices. While initially he appears to have instigated the story’s multiple murders, Carwin turns out to be less malicious and at fault than initially believed, if readers find his confession truthful. Indeed, he claims that he only used his unique gift of biloquium in several specific moments, which, though disconcerting, never prove disastrous. When he sees how his actions create mayhem and anxiety, he “[vows] never again to employ the dangerous talent which he [possesses]” (Brown 228). Yet Carwin’s “passion for mystery and species of imposture [. . . does awaken] afresh” (229) and, claiming that “some daemon of mischief seized [him]” (230), he begins employing his biloquium once more. Again, though, he refuses to admit his responsibility in the initiation of the Wieland family murders. Though dark, mysterious, and unquestionably susceptible to flawed decisions, Carwin may escape from personal wickedness based upon his claims of possession by some type of spiritual influence or innocence of murderous messages. Nevertheless, Brown challenges Locke’s idea of the mind as a tabula rasa by presenting the ambiguity present between the existence of one’s innately evil proclivities and the effects of outside influences upon a person.

Like Brown, Harriet Beecher Stowe relied upon the Gothic to reveal the underbelly of the American Dream. In a remarkable display of Gothicism’s versatility, Stowe utilized some of Gothicism’s most organic elements in her novel, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin, or Life among the Lowly* to express her concerns over the evil existing in the social, political, and religious realms within in America. She argued that the system of slavery reduced, if not completely eliminated, one’s ability to realize independence, social respect, and autonomy because it
allowed the dream to be realized only by those who are white, male, and free. Writing during a period of American history defined by starkly divided senses of morality, Stowe is frequently reprimanded, particularly by modern scholars, for over-moralizing her novel. Despite these criticisms, however, her work had a profound effect upon attitudes toward slavery, both in her day and in present times. Written in direct response to the Fugitive Slave Laws, which required Northerners to turn in runaway slaves from the South and punished law enforcement officials who did not arrest alleged runaways, Uncle Tom’s Cabin represented a voice speaking out against the political injustices of the mid-nineteenth century. Yet Stowe relied upon a religious, as well as political and social, platform to make her argument.

Elizabeth Ammons captures the opposing responses to the novel from those supporting slavery and those condemning it, despite their shared faith, when she observes, “Abolitionists hailed it as a work of genius sent from God to open the hearts and minds of waffling white people,” while “Slaveholders damned it as a pack of lies, gross misrepresentation of slavery, or, as it was classed, the ‘peculiar institution.’” Almost no one was indifferent” (Stowe, Preface vii). Further, Stowe claimed to draw several of the vignettes in her novel from real accounts which she heard. For instance, she maintained that one of the novel’s opening scenes, which captures the character Eliza as she miraculously crosses a frozen river in order to save her child from a slave trader, was in fact a record what she heard from an escaped female slave.

Drawing from the social, political, and religious realities of her day, Stowe drew a troubling picture of the nineteenth-century antebellum South. Though Uncle Tom’s Cabin as a whole is rarely classified as a Gothic novel, Stowe unquestionably draws from the tradition, perhaps most notably in the last third of the story, which captures Tom’s experiences after he is sold “down river” to Simon Legree. The white owner’s cotton plantation represents an intentional and politically-supported form of evil, a sort of institutionalized feudal Hell, as
intimated by Cassy, Legree’s African-American mistress, when she tells Tom that “[t]he Lord never visits these parts” (Stowe 306). Ultimately, Stowe reverses the archetypes of Gothicism, while at the same time enriching the genre by allowing the virtually helpless characters of the novel to realize power and freedom by appealing to their African roots and the darker suggestions prompted by the imagination.

Not hesitant to confront some of the most challenging and ambiguous moral questions, Stowe captures the acute tension existing for African American slaves as they attempted to apply their faith in the face of evil on a national level and, on a more personal level, within truly appalling living conditions. Uncle Tom, the saintly hero of the novel, rejects multiple opportunities of fleeing from his masters because of the religious convictions which he steadfastly holds. Even when given the chance to escape from Legree’s tyranny, Tom responds that “[he] shall have [his liberty. . .] in God’s time,” adding that he’d “sooner chop [his] right hand off” than run away (Stowe 344). Though profound in his pacifism, Tom’s character in retrospect, may represent little more than a stereotype of the eager-to-please, devoted, and selfless African American slave. Tom attempts to use the system, to work within it, in order to fight against the injustices of slavery; yet it becomes clear approach will fail to provoke lasting, widespread change for slaves in the South.

While Tom chooses to forego the use of his active power, Cassy, as a woman, an African-American, a slave, and the mistress of her white owner, represents an individual deprived of any type of official authority. Suffering in the most degraded social position imaginable at that time and refused any educational or political rights, she and her young companion, Emmeline, must literally embody Gothicism in order to escape from oppression. After faking their own escape, the two haunt Legree’s home, donning ghost’s apparel to enable their actual escape in the chapter entitled “An Authentic Ghost Story.” Cassy, who desperately confesses to Uncle Tom that she believes “evil spirits [follow her]” (345),
eventually gains even his blessing to “get away from here [Legree’s plantation], if the thing was possible” (345). Stowe thus creates some degree of confusion about whether or not it remains right for slaves to run away; yet simply by giving Cassy the power to decide what to do and allowing her success in her choice perhaps suggests that there exist some circumstances when fleeing was permissible, necessary and even right. In any case, however, Stowe presents her argument for the power of imagination within the individual, for Cassy and Emmeline eventually do escape successfully from Legree.

This same Legree, the merciless, almost inhuman villain, receives multiple occasions to choose to act in a right, or at least, a less evil manner; however he rejects them all. Confronted by Tom’s humility and faith, Legree beats him so that he never recovers. Even as his hideous violence is exposed to “Mas’r George” during Tom’s agonizing death, Legree merely “saunter[s] up to the door of the shed [where Tom lies], look[s] in with a dogged air of affected carelessness, and turn[s] away” (363). Though the extremely good and bad figures act in ways consistent with their character types, Stowe intriguingly allows for some middle ground. Particularly in the character of Cassy, Stowe shows how the right answers to ethical issues are not always clear-cut or applicable to every situation, and how fears and suspicions produced by the imagination can overpower the evils of physical, political, and social domination.

With the United States moving towards civil war, the import of the struggle among nineteenth-century Americans heightened as they attempted to reconcile the troubling details of their nation’s history with differing visions for its future. Finally confronting the issues of race which had been simmering under the surface of social interaction for decades, Americans found themselves divided by differing, but equally vehement voices on both sides. The questions surrounding race and individual freedoms had implications not only on the very foundations of American politics and society, but on the definition of humanity itself,
thus making the issues at hand tremendously significant. As the country braced itself for the
blows of combating beliefs over race and slavery, it also harbored bitter disagreement over
religion. The battle between Protestants and Catholics raged on with the Know Nothings,
who established themselves in the 1850’s. Convinced that the Pope craved to weaken
American democracy and fearful of Irish Catholic immigrants who moved into the cities, this
group of Republican, nativist Protestants organized themselves, demanding instant reforms to
Immigration and Citizenship laws. Though the group’s cries remained largely unheard
within the political realm, the Know Nothings did publish numerous anti-Roman Catholic
texts, such as Charles Frothingham’s *The Convent’s Doom* (1854) and Edward Beecher’s *The
Papal Conspiracy Exposed* (1855) (Levine 23), which advanced American fears of “the
other.”

Nathaniel Hawthorne’s fourth Romance, *The Marble Faun: or, the Romance of Monte
Beni* responds to the recurring fear of the evil of Catholicism which existed with the United
States and had even crept into earlier Gothic works, such as those by Walpole and Radcliffe.
Set in the classically Gothic (and Catholic) city of Rome, where its author vacationed for a
year with his wife, *The Marble Faun* captures Hawthorne’s struggle with the conflict between
faith and nationalism. His time in the Italian capital, the seat of Roman Catholicism, forced
Hawthorne to reevaluate the legitimacy of the religion and its implications for him as an
American. The ambiguity of the relationship between Catholicism and Protestantism as
portrayed in Hawthorne’s novel also represents, perhaps, the influence of his wife, Sophia
Peabody. An American Transcendentalist, Sophia rejected the established doctrines of the
early nineteenth-century Unitarian church, instead believing that truth could be discovered
through intuition alone. The impact of Transcendentalism upon Hawthorne reveals itself also
in the mingling of picturesque antiquity and the almost magical power of nature, with the idea
of an Eternal City’s increasing modernization. Indeed, this ominous conflict between the old
and the new reveals the lasting influence of the Romantic movement on Transcendentalists as they argued that nature aided the individual in finding the truth which existed within them.

*The Marble Faun* also represents a reaction to a number of other historical events taking place during the middle of the nineteenth century. It introduces a commentary on the evil which Hawthorne perceived in his own young nation, which lay just on the brink of Civil War, as well. He depicts a contemporary version of the Genesis story of the sin and fall of humankind, likening the United States to a fallen type of Eden. His gloomy conclusions regarding the individual capacity for evil are somewhat dispersed by playful mythical allusions and the restorative healing which some characters experience; the fact that he “was convinced that the darkness lay within the individual” (Nisly 19), however, reveals itself as even the most innocent characters become stained through the actions of others. Within this underlying assertion of human evil lies Hawthorne’s use of Gothicism.

Hilda, the naïve, pure, and soft-spoken American copyist, satisfies the typical Gothic role of heroine in Hawthorne’s novel. Keeper of the shrine and ever-burning lamp of the Virgin, Hilda lives in a “loftier” (Hawthorne 60) tower, down from which she must “descend into the corrupted atmosphere of the city beneath” (54). Content at first to copy the genius of others rather than to form works from her own imagination, she further aligns herself with the Virgin. Indeed, the passive role which Hilda plays in the creation of her art parallels that of the mother of Christ according to the idea of the Immaculate Conception, a relatively new doctrine which the Pope confirmed in 1854 and which further distinguished Catholicism from Protestantism. Yet Hilda’s innocence becomes irrevocably stained when she witnesses a murder committed by her friend. Following the crime, Hilda finds refuge in the Catholic ritual of Confession. Through Hilda’s actions, Hawthorne indicates his belief in the sacredness of Catholicism, yet he complicates matters by ultimately characterizing the religion as treacherous and by having Hilda reject it. In a rare moment of assertiveness, Hilda
declares to her priestly confessor that she will “never dip [her] fingers in holy water; never [her] bosom with the cross” (Hawthorne 362). Despite the deeply personal ways in which the Catholic faith aids her in her desperation and guilt, Hilda decides to “remain a daughter of the Puritans” (362). She realizes that Catholicism exists outside of her national and personal identity, later attributing her choice of Protestantism over Catholicism to her lament of the imperfections of the latter: “If its ministers were but a little more than human, above all error, pure from all iniquity, what a religion it would be!” (368). Though Hilda finds “sweet peace, after a great anguish” (369) in the Catholic Church, it ultimately betrays her and, consistent with her initial judgment, is portrayed as beautiful and full of genuine emotion, but flawed in its Papal administration.

Initially “disturbed by his idea of [Hilda’s] Catholic propensities” (Hawthorne 368) and the danger which they subject her to, Kenyon serves as Hilda’s American companion in Italy. He begins as an embodiment of rational thinking, disregarding anything that could be interpreted as supernatural and applying strict precision, and even logic to his artistic pursuits in sculpting. As the novel progresses, however, Kenyon finds he must reevaluate the ability of reason to explain life. In the face of Donatello’s despair, the disappearance of Hilda, and the exposure of Miriam’s true self, Kenyon discovers the limits of the mind. The grave effects of the conflicts Kenyon confronts reveal themselves in the temporary waning of his artistic abilities. He first becomes “[h]opeless of a good result, [. . .] gives] up all preconceptions about the character of his subject, and let[s] his hands work, uncontrolled, with the clay, somewhat as a spiritual medium, while holding a pen, yields it to an unseen guidance other than that of her own will” (271). Yet even after this surrender, he remains dissatisfied with his work and it is not until, “[by] some accidental handling of the clay, entirely independent of his own will,” Kenyon, through the work of nothing else but chance, finally captures the face of Donatello accurately.
Even his love of art and thought diminishes, however, compared to growing love for Hilda. Hawthorne tells readers that “the sculptor forgot his marble” and “Rome ceased to be anything, for him, but a labyrinth of dismal streets” (413) following her mysterious disappearance. After all logical attempts to find her fail, Kenyon becomes “haunted” with the feeling that he has overlooked some detail which would reveal her whereabouts and, whereas once he had “seemed to cut his life in marble, now he vaguely clutched at it, and found it vapour” (414). Again, though, after he admits philosophical defeat, after he submits to the power of intuition over reason, Kenyon passively receives news of Hilda and may act. Thus, Kenyon resembles the Gothic hero pursuing the maidenly heroine, though his role as active pursuer diminishes as he is forced to acknowledge the limits of his rationalist humanism.

Like Kenyon, Miriam also symbolizes rational thought. Although she gives herself over to fanciful thinking at some points, she remains too shrewd to give it any real credence. Indeed, when the friends jest about Donatello being a Faun, Miriam expresses in a tone “between jest and earnest” how delightful a life as a mythical creature would be, free of the anxieties of conscience, remorse, burdens, or troublesome recollections to darken the future (Hawthorne 13). Haunted by her past, Miriam cannot escape from the harsh realities of life for long. A foil to the more intuitive and fair “Saxon” (56), Hilda, Miriam has a coquettish, daunting, dark splendor. Throughout the novel, Hawthorne likens Miriam to a number of different historical females. Similar to Eve, she brings temptation and sin to Donatello, an unblemished male figure, by inciting him, albeit silently, to murder her model. As in the Genesis story, this act instantly separates her from the initial bliss of life, and morbidly unites the two murderers in suffering and guilt. Recognizing the biblical parallel, Miriam goes so far as to suggest that just as Adam’s sin “was the destined means by which, over a long pathway of toil and sorrow, we are to attain a higher, brighter, and profounder happiness than our lost birthright gave” (434), so hers would have the same outcome.
Miriam also resembles, in many ways, Beatrice Cenci, a sixteenth-century Roman
noblewoman who joined with her two brothers, mother, and working-class lover to murder
her abusive father. Though they carried out their deadly plot, their crime did not go
unpunished, for the Pope had them all tortured and sentenced the older brother, mother, and
Beatrice herself to death. The latter became shortly thereafter an Italian symbol of tragedy
and resistance against the nobility. Miriam is also compared to Judith, Lady Macbeth and
Cleopatra, for she instigates the murder of her model. Linked to her lover, Donatello, by “a
marriage-bond of crime” (435), Miriam represents the fallen heroine, who opens the chasm of
sin and death for all around her to fall into. As Miriam herself explains, there exists a pit of
blackness that lies beneath every person, which

[t]he firmest substance of human happiness is but a thin crust spread over it,
with just reality enough to bear up the illusive stage-scenery amid which we
tread. It needs no earthquake to open the chasm. A footstep, a little heavier
than ordinary, will serve; and we must step very daintily, not to break through
the crust at any moment. By-and-by, we inevitably sink! (Hawthorne 162)

*The Marble Faun* also captures the story of the fall of an entire family, whose last
descendant, the “Faun” Donatello, sacrifices his unfettered, mythic spirit for his love of a
mortal. His obsession with Miriam robs from him his former sprightliness, and he becomes
stained by the murder which he commits at her intimation. Like his ancestors and, indeed,
much like Adam, the ancestor of the human race, Donatello forsakes his harmonious
existence with nature at the unspoken suggestion of Miriam. No longer able to “live [his
forefather’s] healthy life of animal spirits, in their sympathy with Nature, and brotherhood
with all that breathed around them,” he becomes a wanderer beset with “sin, care, and self-
consciousness” (239). Perhaps depicting the immorality and unwholesomeness of the city
and the corruption which results from being away from home, Hawthorne likens the effects
of travel upon Donatello to those upon his family’s wine, which, when taken from its native home, “turns quite sour” (Hawthorne 224). Through the character of Donatello, Hawthorne represents how the “perfect blend of nature and art” (Liebman 62) fails to withstand the temptations of sin and simultaneously expresses his cynical attitude toward the idea of his native country as an “Eden.”

By the 1930’s, however, the image of the United States as an Eden had certainly begun to deteriorate for most Americans. The Southern aristocracy, which had earlier thrived on the power of elitism and segregation, encountered opposition as national law sought to recognize the rights of African Americans, whose presence in various social settings, such as movie theaters, restaurants, and private parties, increased. Spurred on by these revolutions in the law and the xenophobia resulting from the isolationist philosophy of the United States following WWI, militant groups of racist societies such as the Ku Klux Klan and other anti-Communist, anti-Catholic, and anti-Semitic groups formed to try and uphold the “pure” ideals of the nation. Thus, although the Emancipation Proclamation and subsequent Constitutional Amendments officially freed African Americans from slavery and recognized their rights as US citizens, there continued to exist social, political, and educational codes which sought to preserve the segregation of whites and blacks. Further social upheaval occurred with the addition of the 19th Amendment in 1920, which gave women the right to vote, one not recognized since the founding of the American government. The failure of the stock market in the years of the Great Depression influenced many to lose their faith in free market capitalism and to radically modify their lifestyles of glamor, excess and leisure which had become so commonplace during the Roaring 20’s. Religious figures, fueled by what they viewed as rampant liberalism in urban areas, aided in the passage of the Volstead Act, which supported the 18th amendment and perpetuated Prohibition in the United States. Yet religion, still reeling from the blows of Darwin’s The Origin of Species, did not go completely
unchallenged. In 1925, a Tennessee court ruled in the Scopes “Monkey” Trial that public school teachers did, in fact, have the right to teach their students about Darwin’s theory of evolution. No facet of life seemed to escape from fundamental challenges to its veracity.

In the wake of such rapid social, political and economic changes of the early decades of the 20th century, readers find William Faulkner, the author who, Carol Polsgrove argues, was unmatched by any other author in shaping the literate Americans’ impression of the South (93). His novel, Sanctuary, in particular, with its sharp criticism of what he viewed as idealism and its portrayal of a frighteningly cyclical pattern which penetrates all civic, religious, professional and legislative circles, becomes the most disturbing and bleak of the Gothic novels discussed thus far. Set in Faulkner’s fictitious, microcosmic county of Yoknapatawpha, Mississippi, the novel captures the struggles and impending downfall of both poor and wealthy American families. Although he does not focus on racial issues as clearly as in some of his other novels, Faulkner presents the desperation of those living in poverty and the destructive carelessness of whites luxuriating in Southern wealth. The American Dream, according to Faulkner, battered from the Great Depression and disintegrating with the exclusion of African Americans into the public arena of a self-proclaimed democracy, finally dissolved completely in the country’s illegal casks of moonshine. Though he maintained until the end that he wrote this novel with solely pecuniary motives, Faulkner, ironically enough, scoffs at wealth as it creates an impermeable barrier between people in Sanctuary. While he does include some of the more traditional Gothic elements, such as gruesome murders, grisly details, a sense of impending doom, and the concept of the isolated “castle,” he emphasizes evil’s presence through realism, omitting any supernatural or inexplicable occurrences from his novel. Sanctuary demonstrates how altruistic attempts, honesty, and dedication ultimately all fail, leaving behind only disillusionment and hopelessness in human systems of government, cultural morality, and
Initially a believer in the potential of such systems, Horace Benbow serves as a rather unorthodox Gothic hero. Middle-aged, “given to much talk” (Faulkner 8), and an avid bird-watcher, Benbow, at the start of the novel, has recently left his wife. Sick and tired of complying with his wife’s demand that he carry home stinking shrimp that “drips and drips” (12), he finally leaves her and moves into the house he owns in another nearby town. Yet Benbow’s departure may have had a darker impetus behind it as well. Joseph Urgo suggests that Benbow leaves, not only because his uxorious marital relationship has become absolutely unbearable, but also because he cannot control his desire for his stepdaughter, Little Belle. In order to reassert his masculinity, which has, according to the cultural mores of the time, been challenged since leaving his wife, and to aid in the carrying out of justice, he takes the case of Goodwin, a man wrongly charged with the murder of a black man. When Benbow locates Temple Drake, the sole witness to the murder, he hears the story of Popeye’s heartless murder of Tommy, but also of his brutal rape of the college-aged girl. Following his meeting with Temple and her telling of such a gruesome story, he returns home and experiences a violent episode. Faulkner writes that,

... the face [of Little Belle] appeared to breathe in [Benbow’s] palms in a shallow bath of highlight, beneath the slow, smokelike tongues of invisible honeysuckle. Almost palpable enough to be seen, the scent filled the room and the small face seemed to swoon in a voluptuous languor, blurring still more, fading, leaving upon his eye a soft and fading aftermath of invitation and voluptuous promise and secret affirmation like a scent itself. Then he knew what that sensation in his stomach meant. (177)

Urgo argues that the “sensation” Benbow experiences, “contrary to the usual reading of the passage, is not nausea,” but rather sexual arousal (442). He finds Temple’s story both erotic
and criminal. He also discovers “a potentiality within himself which places him in collusion with a rapist” (442). Following this sequence, Horace, usually assertive and talkative, becomes silent in the courtroom during Temple’s perjurious testimony and, upon hearing the verdict of his client’s guilt, climbs resignedly, “like an old man” (Faulkner 231), into his sister’s car and allows her to take him back to his wife’s home. Shamed by his own capacity for such horrendous depravity, he loses faith in his own his claim that “a man might do something just because he knew it was right, necessary to the harmony of things that it be done” (219). Indeed, Benbow succumbs to utter despair after perceiving the cyclicality and pervasiveness of evil: it resides within the victim, Temple, as she lies under oath in court; within the court system as the jury wrongly convicts Goodwin; within his society as the mob tortures, sodomizes, and murders Goodwin; within his family as he resignedly returns to his nonchalant wife only to watch Little Belle appear to experiment with Temple-like coquetry; and, finally, within himself as he discovers his own capacity to fantasize about a gruesome crime.

The character who seems least shocked by this sort of evil, and, indeed, who initiates and furthers it, is Popeye. As illustrated in the first scene of Sanctuary in which he holds a literal standoff with the idealist Horace Benbow, Popeye directly opposes the novel’s hero in a classically Gothic sort of way. Unblinkingly cruel and calloused, even when faced with his own death, Popeye represents unfeeling and ruthless evil. Born on Christmas day and killed by the government for a crime which he did not even commit, Popeye also becomes the perverse antithesis of a Christ figure. Though clearly a criminal (he rapes and prostitutes Temple, commits multiple murders, and establishes a moonshine business during Prohibition), the fact that he receives the death penalty for a crime which he actually did not do, further destroys the soundness of the judicial system in which Benbow has had so much faith. Despite the power he wields over Temple, Goodwin, Tommy, and even Benbow,
Popeye is physically weak. Born small and sickly due to the syphilis his mother contracted during pregnancy, he remains scrawny for the rest of his life. As another result from complications in the womb, Popeye also suffers from impotency, which explains why he uses a corncob with Temple and why he must watch her with Red in order to gratify his longings. Whatever he may lack in brawn, however, he makes up for in his use of his pistol. Like Benbow, Popeye strives to legitimize his masculinity. He masks his physical frailty through the use of his gun, undoubtedly a phallic symbol. Hence, Popeye fills the role of the Gothic villain, though he represents a far more pitiless and vicious type than portrayed by earlier writers.

Markedly dissimilar from the traditional Gothic heroine in her coyness and rebellion against authority, Temple Drake leads a highly privileged life. The daughter of a well-to-do judge and a student at the college, she gets her thrills in life from living on the edge. Her habit of sneaking out of school in order to date the town boys turns nightmarish, however, when the already hung-over Gowan Stevens brings her to Goodwin’s remote farm. As Temple becomes increasingly aware of the danger she is in at Goodwin’s, her movements reflect her growing unease and sense of being prey to the males hunting her. Once so poised and cool, Temple frantically “scramble[s]” (Faulkner 33), “whirls” (39), is “lifted up [...] by the scruff of the neck, like a kitten” (40), and “[springs]” (53) in response to her situation. Yet in doing so, she further attracts the attention of the bootleggers, an action which Ruby claims Temple knows she is accomplishing. While it is abundantly clear that Temple is conscious of her power as a female figure, it does seem that, contrary to Ruby’s belief, she remains somewhat oblivious to the effects she has upon males. Not until Popeye horribly rapes and kidnaps her does she finally realize the power she has at her disposal. She then utilizes her influence to manipulate others, such as when she attempts to challenge Popeye by enjoying herself with Red.
Following her testimony in court, however, Temple reacts to her horrendous experiences by dulling herself to the pain and becoming apathetic towards others. She has reentered the world in which the “good men, [the] fathers and husbands hear what [she] has to say and right [her] wrong for [her]” (Faulkner 226), and does not need to allow herself to take responsibility for anything. In the most telling instance of her carelessness, she testifies against Goodwin, a man she knows to be innocent of the crime for which he is tried, and contributes to his sentence of guilt. Indeed, although Goodwin certainly terrorizes her at his farmhouse, he does not murder Tommy, nor rape Temple. She continues to suppress her emotions, yawning as she vacations with her father in the posh gardens of Paris and forbidding herself to react to any stimulus. Faulkner reveals that great evil resides in the careless passiveness of Temple, as well as the idealistically naïve denials of Benbow, and calculated cruelty of Popeye.

Pessimism about the future of the United States and the actual humaneness of humanity, rather than lessening, seems only to have grown in the years following the publication of Faulkner’s novel, Sanctuary. The horrific events of the Second World War, the atrocities made possible by the “progress” of modern innovation, and the continuing crisis over race all ravaged the country’s citizens and forced them to critically consider the principles of liberty, equality, and justice, which were claimed to be the bedrock of their nation’s history and identity. In response to widespread dissatisfaction with the traditional answers to life’s most difficult existential questions, individuals began to explore options which had been earlier disregarded. For many, there was little to find. In the wake of WWII, countless people found themselves floundering to understand their surroundings and cynical about ever finding the same sort of sanguinity which existed before the war. Hope and trust in the human ability to accomplish good works yielded to a darker view of humanity. Had not people seen modern innovation, originally invented to promote the ease...
and productivity of existence, warped into brutal tools of warfare? Had not the technological advances in warfare allowed the World War II combatants to become separated from both those on their own side, as well as those on the opposite one, degrading the humanity of those on the other side? Though undoubtedly altruistic in its attempt to challenge a vicious dictator, had not the United States used some of the most the brutal tools of warfare as a means of accomplishing its own purposes?

This sense of distrust in the capacity within the individual to act in a philanthropic manner reveals itself within Flannery O'Connor, who remained skeptical of the real benefits of social work, instead remaining convinced of the existence of evil in such human efforts. Growing up and residing in the rural South during the years of the Civil Rights movement, O'Connor saw first-hand the struggle to live that some had to endure, despite the fact that they lived in a country which proclaimed “justice for all.” Deeply influenced by her surroundings, O'Connor, like her fellow writers William Faulkner, Tennessee Williams, Carson McCullers, and others, created Southern Gothic, a genre which relied upon grotesquity to depict the struggles of southern America. Further, her own battle against discrimination, as a devout Roman Catholic living in a predominantly Protestant area known as the Bible Belt, undoubtedly motivated her to comment upon such concerns. The brutal murder of Father James Coyle in 1921 by Ku Klux Klan members, the publication of Paul Blanshard’s book *American Freedom and Catholic Power* in 1949, and the censure met even by presidential candidate John F. Kennedy in 1960 all bespeak of the discrimination which Catholics living within twentieth century American culture continued to face. In her 1957 essay entitled “The Church and the Fiction Writer,” O’Connor explicitly countered the claim that her faith impeded or devalued her writing by quipping that, “When people have told me that because I am a Catholic, I cannot be an artist, I have had to reply, ruefully, that because I am a Catholic I can afford to be no less than an artist” (qtd. Friedman 2). Clearly, O’Connor
received a fair amount of condemnation from others who discriminated against her on the basis of her religious beliefs, yet she used such incidents as fuel for her fiction. In her novel, *The Violent Bear it Away*, O'Connor depicted her belief in the ultimate triumph of the "religious individual" (*Added Dimension* 258) over the evils of secularism, as well as her broader sense of the ultimate futility of human reason and philanthropy in the face of God.

Ironically enough, O'Connor, as a Catholic, illustrates her confidence in the victory of faith over the modern world through the portrayal of two thoroughly Protestant characters, even going so far as to say that the "backwoods prophet, [...] Old Tarwater, is the hero of *The Violent Bear it Away*, and [she is] behind him all the way" (*Added Dimension* 258). Old Mason Tarwater, a fanatical man whose very name intimates contradiction and duality, is a prophet who attempts to rear both his nephew, George Rayber, and his great-nephew, Francis Marion Tarwater, to follow his ways. When the former rejects his teachings and escapes into the city, Old Tarwater turns his attention to the latter, endeavoring to implant his vision to baptize and thus spiritually save Rayber's mentally limited son, Bishop. Indeed, Old Tarwater "had raised the boy to expect the Lord's call himself and to be prepared for the day he would hear it" and furthermore had "schooled him in the evils that befell prophets" (*The Violent* 5). The greatest of the worldly evils, Old Tarwater remained convinced, existed in the false security of intellectualism. Setting himself in direct opposition with Rayber, a schoolteacher, Mason undertakes the responsibility of educating Francis, teaching him "Figures, Reading, Writing, and History beginning with Adam expelled from the Garden and going on down through the presidents to Herbert Hoover and on in speculation toward the Second Coming and the Day of Judgment" (4). Having once himself been duped by Rayber's seemingly altruistic attempts, Old Tarwater warns his younger nephew against the power of the mind which the schoolteacher advocated. Although during his life, Old Tarwater had several chances to perform the act of baptism upon Bishop himself, he failed to do so because
"he was too fat and stiff" to kidnap the child and because the one time he did see the child, he remained so stunned at the resemblance between himself and the boy, that he could not act.

Young Francis Tarwater distinguishes himself from Old Tarwater by priding himself on his ability to act. Following Old Tarwater’s death, Francis, going against the wishes of his elder, attempts to burn his corpse instead of burying it. Then, he forsakes the country in order to travel to Rayber in the city, an impersonal place which young Tarwater earlier characterized as having the darkest evil within it. Yet his efforts to bypass his calling and his great-uncle’s teachings ultimately fail as his destiny becomes inextricably tied to Bishop. Indeed, Tarwater’s bond with his young cousin is foreshadowed early on in the novel, when Francis goes with Old Tarwater to Rayber’s house. When they reach the home, Francis knows “by some obscure instinct that the door was going to open and reveal his destiny” (The Violent 31). In his mind’s eye, he sees “the schoolteacher about to appear in it, lean and evil, waiting to engage whom the Lord would send to conquer him” (31-32). When the door actually opens, however, it reveals not Rayber, but his mentally retarded son. Thus, young Tarwater finds his spiritual fate in Bishop, who, due to his mental incapacity, represents a sort of anti-intellectualism and who ultimately confirms Tarwater’s calling to become a prophet.

Yet Francis resists with all of his might following in his great-uncle’s footsteps. An inner voice, one of skepticism and intellectual rationalism, tries to dissuade him from doing so by continually plaguing him with questions and doubt:

[W]here is the voice of the Lord? I haven’t heard it. Who’s called you this morning? Or any morning? Have you been told what to do? You ain’t even heard the sound of natural thunder this morning. There ain’t a cloud in the sky. The trouble with you, I see, he concluded, is that you ain’t got but just enough sense to believe every word he told you.” (“The Violent” 42)

Throughout the novel, the voice issues from within young Tarwater, attempting to dissuade
him from following his great-uncle’s example. Ultimately, however, the voice is silenced when Tarwater, in an attempt to drown Bishop, actually mutters the baptismal words “by accident” (209). He then runs from Rayber, but cannot run from his calling to become a prophet. In his last attempt at refusal, Tarwater is picked up by a man in a lavender car, the physical embodiment of his inner voice and of the evils of modernism, who drugs and rapes him. At this point, the landscape turns unmistakably Gothic as young Tarwater turns the scene of the crime into a “roaring blaze” of fire (232). As a result of this refining fire, his “scorched eyes, no longer [looking] hollow or as if they were meant only to guide him forward,” rather look “as if, touched with a coal like the lips of the prophet, they would never be used for ordinary sights again” (233). His eyes have been “burned clean.” He discovers that, though he tried to incinerate the body of his great-uncle, another person had already buried the body beforehand. Thus, murder transforms into baptism, rape becomes revelation, and disobedience turns into belief. With his conversion, evidences of evil are subverted and even transformed into holy events.

Outside of young Tarwater’s metamorphosis from recalcitrant apprentice to devoted prophet lies Rayber. Initially believing that he has the answers to life, Rayber rejects the teachings of Old Tarwater. Indeed, he asserts that he has “the guts to maintain [his] self-respect and not to perform futile rights,” as well as to resist becoming “the prey of superstitions” (The Violent 172). Such a denial of religion leads Rayber to think that he can help free young Tarwater from their uncle’s power and he claims that “[all he] wants to do is help [him] in any way [he] can” (107). A picture of pure rationalism and secular modernism, he embraces the workings of the mind and believes that thought provides the means of improving life. Yet the functions of his mind bear him a dim-witted son and produce him nothing more than cold, impersonal data. Ultimately, Rayber is defeated, for O’Connor illustrates how even an encounter with his own son’s violent and appalling death fails to
move him. Indeed, following Bishop's drowning, Rayber stands “waiting for the raging pain, the intolerable hurt that was his due, to begin, so that he could ignore it, but he continue[s] to feel nothing” (The Violent 203). Only after he reflects for some time does he realize “that there would be no pain” and he collapses (203). Rayber crumbles, and with him, the idea of the infallibility of humanitarian efforts through mental power and logic. O'Connor reveals the dehumanizing evil which resides in individuals who, like Rayber, so fully commit themselves to the human mind and attempts at philanthropy. Like young Tarwater, Rayber has been forced to confront faith and, though he may continue to mentally reject it, he can no longer deny its existence, nor claim complete logical consistency in his beliefs.

Thus, although it originally depicted evil’s power in trite and less compelling manners, Gothicism has emerged as a genre uniquely able to fully express the terrifying realities of evil in life. From Walpole to Shelley and Stowe to O'Connor, the Gothic form has accommodated changing perceptions of evil in their development as reactions to historical impetuses. It has enabled individuals to explore the intangible, extensive, and numinous power of terror, a force often discounted, or at the very least stifled by strict or absolute realism. Yet despite its true value, artists have exploited the genre in recent years and, much like Walpole, have attempted to appeal merely to the simplistic reactions of individuals when they encounter anything gruesome. Scholars cannot wholly dismiss the genre from critical thought, however, for it has become increasingly pertinent to the postmodern world. As Steven Bruhm argues in his essay “Contemporary Gothic: Why We Need It,” the literary audience “needs the Gothic because [its] anxieties need to be aroused and assuaged” (259). Gothic, Bruhm says, is, first and foremost, a “narrative of trauma” (268). And humans today have experienced profound distress. Events such as the Vietnam and Cold Wars, the explosion of the Challenger space shuttle, the constant and unjust economic exploitation of undeveloped nations, and the spread of terrorism have thoroughly
shocked and debilitated people.

Further, Bruhm points out one of the greatest dichotomies of modern-day existence: while humans can lead enriched and lengthened lives due to technological developments, they must also accept the opposite of such gifts, for advances in “weaponry, both military and medical, have rendered our culture vulnerable to almost total destruction” (260). As Frankenstein and Rayber discovered, the work of one’s hands fail and ironically lead to one’s own undoing. The Gothic genre is hence necessary to explore the frustrating and terrifying presence of such threats to life. As a “narrative of trauma,” Gothicism, in spite of its often disparaged reputation, ought to be reconsidered as a valuable way of grappling with evil as it reveals itself throughout history.
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