

The Haunted Muse

The Haunted Muse:

Gothic and Sentiment in American Literature

By

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INTRODUCTION: CONCEPTION, GESTATION, AND REPRODUCTION OF TEXTS

The first horror story written in America—if we allow for a very generous definition of “horror story”—is Anne Bradstreet’s 1666 poem, “The Author to Her Book.” Bradstreet was an English Puritan who journeyed to New England in 1630 during the second large wave of immigration, sailing on the *Arbella*, the same ship that brought John Winthrop. She was a devoted wife and mother who, surprisingly for the time, managed to find time during her no doubt busy days to write poems about her family, her travails, and her devotion to her husband and her god.¹ Her brother in law took several of her poems without her knowledge or consent and published them in England under the title *The Tenth Muse*. Bradstreet found out about this (one can only imagine the tense conversations at family gatherings after that) and wrote a poetic preface—“The Author to Her Book”—for the second edition.

The poet begins with a pathos-drenched assessment of her talents, dismissing her art as “Ill-formed offspring of my feeble brain.” Although this sad little creation stays by her side, it is soon “snatched” by “friends, less wise than true,” a surprisingly generous description of her brother in law’s presumptuous decision to have her poems published. Bradstreet then begins to emphasize her central conceit in earnest, building on the parallels between two types of creation, poems and children. This particular child appears dressed in rags, and the “rambling brat” presents an “irksome” visage. Up to this point, Bradstreet’s poetic persona seems to be more embarrassed and annoyed by the shambling, ugly little creature she has

¹ Elaine Showalter, speaking about Anne Bradstreet and Mary Rowlandson, points out that both authors “thought of themselves as good wives and mothers. Both made the glory of God their justification for writing, but they prefigured themes and concerns that would preoccupy American women writers for the next 150 years and more” (3).

bred, and her impulse is to shun it and leave it stumbling through the streets.²

Her maternal instincts soon arise, though, and Bradstreet admits that “affection would / Thy blemishes amend.” She claims the feeble child/poems and sets out to make them more presentable to the world by washing off their faces and rubbing off spots in the best Lady Macbeth tradition. Like Lady Macbeth, she soon realizes that attempting to rub off spots only makes the essential flaws more obvious and spreads the smirch around. Because of this, she resorts to more drastic attempts to force her creature to be acceptable in polite society, and “stretched thy joints to make thee even feet.” This somewhat gruesome image, of a mother pulling on a child’s legs as if that would make everything better, is made even more pitiful by Bradstreet’s acknowledgment that it does not work: the creature still “runs’t more hobbling than is meet.”

The last eight lines of the poem show Bradstreet’s resignation about the awful appearance of her creature as she finds “nought save homespun cloth” for the creature to wear out in public. She gives some last minute instructions to her creature about the necessity of avoiding critics and staying in lands where it is not known; the creature, like all misshapen characters from Grendel onward, must be an outcast shunned by society. Bradstreet’s final injunction is both chilling and devastatingly sad. She informs the creature to tell those who ask that it does not have a father, placing it in an even more precarious social position.

However, Bradstreet’s poem is not, of course, a horror story in any conventional sense. Instead, Bradstreet presents a creative take on the typical author’s apology to the reader that, with either real or false modesty, proclaim the work to follow something less than perfect. Aside from seeking to blunt any criticism of the author’s work, the apology fits in the same tradition that leads Puck to ask the audience of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* not to be offended but to consider the past two hours little more than a harmless dream. In Bradstreet’s case, there are additional factors that render her apology more sincere and help underscore a prototypical theme that will begin to emerge in many works of American literature. Because she had not, apparently, intended her poems to be published, we can see in her apology a very real anxiety that the works are not polished enough for public consumption; they may appear to a jaded

² Susan Stanford Friedman, in “Creativity and the Childbirth Metaphor: Gender Difference in Literary Discourse,” offers a solid analysis of the ubiquitous writing as childbirth metaphor. Many authors, both male and female, have used the writing as childbirth metaphor, “taking female anatomy as a model for human creativity in sharp contrast with the equally common phallic analogy” (49).

audience to be the “hobbling” poor specimens she laments in the poem. Furthermore, her authorial power has been subverted by the premature publication. She retained power over the poems while they were gestating in her imagination, but once their birth sent them out into the world, her ability to manage them diminished, and any flaws they exhibit are permanently set by publication. Finally, as a woman living within the strict patriarchal boundaries of Puritan New England, Bradstreet finds her writing is a potentially dangerous and subversive act; her creative talents should be directed towards reproduction, not production of secular texts.³

Nevertheless, Bradstreet’s anxieties about what she is producing do reveal an important tension that we can see in many works of American horror literature written by both men and women. Obviously, the monster—whatever form it takes—looms large in many horror stories, and the conception, birth, and growth of the monster shows significant parallels to the inspiration, writing, and publication of a work of fiction. What makes Bradstreet’s example so much more compelling than a simple accident of metaphor is the anxiety that she feels as a writer reflects what we often see in writers of genre fiction, especially horror fiction. For many reasons, as we will see in this study, writers who seek inspiration from the shadowy muses often find the child of that artistic union troublesome, awkward, and even dangerous. Thus, many horror stories reveal a complex and contentious relationship between parent and child, representing a similar tension between author and audience, and an obsession with production and reproduction.

Salem and the Birth of the Haunted Muse

In order to see how these anxieties and tensions play out, we must first go a few decades beyond Anne Bradstreet’s ungainly, monstrous poetry to a much more notorious moment in American history, one that still infects the cobwebbed corners of the national psyche: the Salem witch trials. The outlines of the Salem trials are familiar to most, from the more or less innocent beginnings with several girls playing divination games to the increasingly frightening flood of accusations, culminating in trials and the execution of nineteen convicted witches. Largely thanks to Arthur Miller’s ubiquitous play, *The Crucible*, the social horror of the injustice of the trials

³ William Scheik, in *Authority and Female Authorship in Colonial America* spends a great deal of time outlining how great the anxiety about writing was. He sees biblical allusions in women’s texts as something that caused “submerged anxiety” because “such scriptural citation was circumscribed by male authority” (13).

remains in the foreground, and today any dubiously motivated official search for hidden enemies is known as a witch hunt. Historians today variously attribute the witchcraft scare to mass hysteria, cynical manipulation, pressures brought on by fears of Indian reprisals, anxiety over Salem's precarious political situation, ergot poisoning, and many other factors or combination of factors. For many reasons, however, the terror of witchcraft has not been sufficiently examined as the mother of a peculiar set of themes within American literature. This study proposes to consider how the long shadow cast by Salem has inspired the darker fantasies of many American authors.

The specter of Salem contains, upon close examination, many elements that have appeared in various guises in many subsequent works of American literature, and one important fact about the trials holds the key to all of the influences: the majority of the accused witches were women. In outbreak witchcraft cases (that is, in times when a number of witches were being accused at once, as opposed to isolated accusations) between 1620 and 1725, out of 205 accused witches, 156—or just over three-quarters—were women (Karlsen 49). The Salem outbreak numbers fit within the larger pattern of witchcraft accusations: out of 185 accused witches, 141 (76%) were women, and those who actually went to trial and were convicted show a disproportionate number of women as well (Karlsen 51). Furthermore, not only were women more frequently the target of prosecution, they were more likely to be the victims of alleged witchcraft attacks, and were thus more likely to make the accusations (Norton 4). Finally, of the nineteen witches executed in Salem, 14 were women and five were men, further reinforcing the popular image of the witch as female.

The most obvious and pressing question these figures promote is why did women figure so prominently in the witchcraft accusations? In his study of monsters throughout various cultures and historic periods, *On Monsters*, Stephen Asma asserts that “women were considered carnal flashpoints for any man’s spiritual journey” (118). Numerous legal and spiritual guides seem to support this point of view, as anxieties about female sexuality and—perhaps more importantly—male reactions to female sexuality reveal themselves in sources such as the notorious *Malleus Maleficarum*, the fifteenth-century guide written by Heinrich Kramer and Jacob Sprenger for discovering, interrogating, and punishing witches.⁴ A brief glance at the questions posed in Part One of the *Malleus*

⁴ Carol Karlsen spends considerable time examining the reasons for and implications of the intense focus on women as vessels for demonic possession and

clearly illustrates the emphasis on sex and reproduction as avenues for satanic corruption. Question 3, for example, asks, “Whether children can be generated by Incubi and Succubi”⁵ and goes on to explain, at great length, how and why the devil will interfere with normal reproduction, using the “privy parts” to ensnare men through women and use them. Question 6 is “Concerning Witches who copulate with Devils,” which ruefully states that there is “much difficulty in considering the methods by which such abominations are consummated.” Nevertheless, the *Malleus* does consider this question, as well as the reason why women are more susceptible to superstition and therefore demonic possession. The answer to this secondary question lies in women’s inherent inferiority: they are considered both weaker in mind and body, and more dominated by their carnal desires, both of which are weak spots the devil may easily exploit.

Other questions examined by the *Malleus* offer even greater insight into the anxieties that lie at the heart of the fear of witchcraft. Question 9 reads like some sort of Freudian parody of male insecurity: “Whether Witches may work some Prestidigatory Illusion so that the Male Organ appears to be entirely removed and separate from the body.” Kramer and Sprenger conclude that witches, can, in fact, remove the male organ, a demonic process allowed by God because “first corruption of sin” came from “the act of generation.” In other words, sexual organs are instigators of Original Sin, so they are fitting targets for demonic mischief. However, if one is in a state of grace, one’s male organ is not actually removed but only appears to be missing through an act of witchcraft; otherwise, the removal might very well be real and not illusory.

These atavistic fears of dismemberment combined with the anxieties about reproduction reveal a common stream in the social and cultural imagination that seems to arise from a nightmarish vision of the feminine. The notorious vagina dentata—the tricky, devouring female—lurks behind these fears, and this, in turn, possibly results from a pathological and near-universal misogyny. In his long and detailed examination of misogyny throughout history and many different cultures, David Gilmore points out

witchcraft in the *Malleus*. She states, “In sum, women became witches because they were born female, not male, because they were dissatisfied with their natural inadequacies and limitations, and because they wanted revenge and retribution badly enough to sell their souls for it” (156).

⁵ Succubi and incubi (singular succubus and incubus) are female and male demons, respectively. According to Stephen Asma, “The succubus was thought to lure a man into her arms, engage him in sex, and then steal his semen after climax,” after which the semen would be used in a “demonic insemination process” resulting in a “doomed child” (113).

that many “preliterate peoples” tended to see the vagina as “a gateway through which evil enters the world, as something ‘uncanny,’ the portal to a dark and menacing underworld” (Gilmore 4). Gilmore goes on to argue that the ubiquity of misogyny does not always necessarily arise from attempts to “dominate or politically control women.” Instead, he sees that much of the fear and hatred of women is due to a psychic struggle by men to “diminish the importance of the object of man’s inner struggle” (9). In other words, men attempt to gain control of their desires by turning the object of their desire into something dark, horrifying, and worthy of contempt. It is also worth taking special notice of Gilmore’s use of the word “uncanny” in describing the misogynistic fear of the vagina; as we will see later, Freud’s definition of the term is crucial to establish the workings of Gothic literature.

This image of the terrifying female does contribute to the fear that witches inspire, and, significantly, is intimately connected to one of the most damning notions of a witch’s behavior: she is guilty of “entertaining” or having sexual relations with Satan.⁶ We may read this as a sort of transference: because men feel a near-constant shameful anxiety about their desire for women, they project an even greater shame and degradation onto women and imagine them sleeping with Satan. Although this explanation does have some appeal, it is incomplete. When we consider the long history of male control over female fertility, whether to guarantee paternity or for other reasons, we can see that there are more significant fears at play. It is one thing to be cuckolded, but it is infinitely worse when one is cuckolded by Satan, with all of the possibilities of demonic offspring that implies.

The fear of demonic offspring pervades the hidden and frightening realm of the monstrous. In his study of monsters, Stephen Asma notes that “witches were the monsters foremost in the imagination” (107). They earned this spot not just because of the immediate physical dangers they represented, with their abilities to cast spells, make one’s penis go missing, or wreak havoc in countless other ways. Witches, by their very nature,

attempt to counter the sacred purpose of procreation. The first [method]...is to render the penis flaccid. The second is to produce a miscarriage or prevent conception altogether. The third is to steal the infant shortly after birth in order to eat it or to offer it to an evil spirit. (Asma 112)

⁶ So powerful is the idea that women practicing witchcraft were sexual partners with the devil that John Demos chose that image for the title of his important book on the Salem trials, *Entertaining Satan*.

Here, the fear is not that the birth will yield a perverted and monstrous version of a human but that it will be thwarted entirely. Witches, then, can foil reproduction entirely, spirit the baby away after its birth, or twist it into some monstrous form. Carol Karlsen makes this point even more emphatically:

When ministers and magistrates discussed the seductive power of witches they often linked it—albeit covertly—to women’s functions not only as midwives and healers but also as childbearers and childrearers. The procreative, nurturing, and nursing roles of women were *perverted* by witches, who gave birth to and suckled demons instead of children and who dispensed poisons instead of cures. (144, emphasis in original)

Once again, the fear inspired by witches is deeply embedded in the sense that they subvert the natural order by exploiting the central idea of the feminine—that is, motherhood, and all that entails—and twisting it to satanic ends.

The fear that witches might somehow subvert normal, proper reproduction naturally led witch hunters to focus on the female body, which could betray a woman by exhibiting signs of satanic influence. The most notorious sign is known as the “witch’s teat,” an excrescence of skin believed to be used by the witch to nourish Satan or his imps. Paul Boyer and Stephen Nissenbaum describe this phenomenon as

an abnormal physical appendage, ordinarily quite small, through which the witch or wizard was thought to give suck to the devil in the form of a bird, a turtle, or some other small creature. While the “witch’s tit” was part of the vulgar lore which the authorities generally tried to suppress in 1692, it did have the advantage ... of being empirically verifiable. (13)

Although such evidence was “empirically verifiable,” it was nevertheless a complicated and problematic process to examine the evidence and pass judgment. Puritan society in Salem valued scientific evidence and the processes that yielded this evidence, and many in the Massachusetts colony regularly corresponded with members of the Royal Society in London in their desire to remain informed on the most recent scientific developments (Fox 5). Thus, for judges in the witch trials, the physical evidence of satanic interference provided reassuringly logical corroboration of the oftentimes confusing and contradictory accusations—accusations that were further problematic because they generally came from “hysterical” female witnesses.

The search for the condemning physical evidence did not always yield unambiguous answers, however. In order to bring the necessary evidence

to light, the magistrates brought in female experts to examine the bodies of the accused; these experts based their judgment on their own understanding of female anatomy.⁷ As one might expect, there were frequent disagreements about what constituted unusual growths or other marks significant enough to hold up as legal testimony. Furthermore, the attempts to mandate an objective, scientific viewpoint were not immune to political pressures, and one expert witness in a Connecticut witch trial, Mary Staples, examined the dead body of an accused witch after her execution and made her determination “after pressure” (Godbeer 95). The physical evidence the body examinations produced did, however, follow particular forms, with warts, moles, other unusual marks providing proof that the accused was guilty.

Because the nature of the physical evidence was literally occult, and because the specter of witchcraft was so intimately tied to images of perverted procreation, the body searches usually involved careful examination of the genitals. Mercy Disborough, an accused witch in a Connecticut trial the same year as the Salem trials, was found to have “on her secret parts growing within ye lep of ye same a los [loose] piece of skin and when pulled it is near an Inch long somewhat in form of ye finger of a glove flatted” (Reis 113). In the case of Bridget Bishop, several expert witnesses found “preternatural Excrescence of Flesh between pudendum and Anus much like to Tetts & no usuall in women” (Reis 114). The descriptions of the unusual features were often vague and formulaic, essentially claiming that whatever the experts discovered was not quite right in some way. Examiners in the Connecticut case found one of the accused, Goody Clawson, to have “in her private parts more than is common to women, we can’t say teats, but something extraordinary,” and on Goody Disborough “something like it [i.e. that which was found on Clawson], but a great deal smaller” (Godbeer 95). What we might today see as normal variations of the size, shape, or color of the genitals were seen in the seventeenth century as possible signs of satanic dalliance.

That the examinations should focus on the “private parts” of the accused does show a certain sort of logic—the damning evidence is hidden because it is damning—but it also underlines the deeper roots of the witchcraft fears. As I pointed out earlier, David Gilmore notes the almost universal fear of the vagina as a gateway to evil. Thus, witches are not

⁷ Sanford Fox notes that the female experts were familiar with anatomy and, “to some extent, with that field that is now known as gynecology” (84). As I have noted elsewhere, many of the women involved in the witchcraft scares were midwives, and the expertise of some of these investigators derived from their experience in this capacity.

merely servants of Satan but also embodied representations of another world that is not only frighteningly unknown but also, most likely, evil and hostile to the good Christian community.

As I noted above, the examination of the bodies of accused witches required expert witness testimony, and that expertise came from other women, who could be said to serve as proto-gynecologists. The connection between witchcraft and childbirth is even more troubling than this might suggest. As Barbara Ehrenreich and Deirdre English argue in their foundational study *Witches, Midwives, and Nurses*, witchcraft trials and executions predate modern medical practice, and many of the accused were “lay healers serving the peasant population” (31). As the practice of medicine slowly began to professionalize in Europe in the sixteenth century, with male doctors at the center, women healers were pushed out and pathologized. The subsequent witch hunts and executions left huge swaths of dead women in their wake, and the authors note that in 1585, two villages in the Bishopric of Trier “were left with only one female inhabitant each” (34). The crimes these women allegedly committed varied, but they essentially boiled down to the fact that they were women:

First, witches are accused of every conceivable sexual crime against men. Quite simply, they are “accused” of female sexuality. Second, they are accused of having magical powers effecting health—of harming, but also of healing. They were often charged specifically with possessing medical and obstetrical skills. (39)

Witchcraft accusations, at least in Europe, were very explicitly tied to a set of skills that united sexuality and healing. Although this connection was not as explicit in the American witch trials, the shadow of female sexuality did loom large.

The Salem witch trials loom large in the American imagination, and the meaning and implications of the trials have changed to reflect the various cultural and political imperatives prevalent at any moment. The trials’ impact on American fiction, particularly horror and Gothic fiction, is undeniable, but, when we consider another important literary genre—sentimental and domestic fiction—the influence becomes richer and more complex. Sentimental fiction dominated American publishing in the middle of the nineteenth century, and, although its reputation as a legitimate literary enterprise suffered undeservedly at the hands of numerous critics, sentimental writing exerted and continues to exert significant cultural influence. Its popularity reached its zenith coincidentally at the same moment better-remembered authors such as Nathaniel Hawthorne and Edgar Allan Poe were experimenting with Gothic tropes, and a closer

examination will reveal the extent to which the anxieties and methods of each genre shared their respective literary DNA.

Sentimental Literature

Before examining the way in which these genres combine, we should first establish what sentimental literature is and how it dominated in the nineteenth century. Sentimental literature was largely written by women and its readers were usually women and girls. The domestic realm stands firmly at the center of sentimental literature, and the “separate sphere” of the woman’s world of home and hearth plays an important role as model for behavior and subject for cultural critique. In a typical sentimental story, the emotional connections of characters—usually family members but not always—are paramount. Thus, the worst fate many characters must face is the loss of an emotionally charged relationship; women in these stories must deal with losing mothers, husbands, or children, and the emotional consequences of these losses form the basis of the conflicts.

In her 1997 article, “Reclaiming Sentimental Literature,” Joanne Dobson argues for a “more traditional literary approach to the influential body of mid-nineteenth century writing we have come to designate sentimental” (263). She goes on to outline the history of literary criticism about sentimental literature before pointing out that the “shift to a cultural critique” of sentimental literature has “tended to direct scholars away from the kind of evaluation available in more traditional aesthetic and formalist investigation” (264). In this study, I intend to follow the sort of traditional approach Dobson suggests by performing very close readings of the language used by the authors, but I also plan to combine this New Critical approach with a significant amount of cultural critique. The authors in this study deploy the language of affect and emotion, which form the foundation of sentimental literature’s appeal, and, in so doing, they reveal certain prejudices, fears, and anxieties prevalent in American culture.⁸

The sentimental itself stands as one of the most significant anxieties the authors and readers face. To again go back to Dobson’s reclamation project, we see a long history of sentimental criticism that is “scathing and

⁸ Since the time sentimental literature was “rediscovered” by academia, the study of sentimental literature has moved in myriad different directions. Leonard Cassuto’s *Hard-Boiled Sentimentality*, a study of sentimental themes in crime fiction, is one prime example of this trend. Marianne Noble’s *The Masochistic Pleasures of the Sentimental Text*, an examination of the manner in which pain and suffering appear in sentimental texts, offers another example of the breadth and complexity of the study of sentimental literature.

dismissive.” In her overview of dominant critical attitudes towards sentimental literature, she points out that critics have been victims of “an anxiety reaction”; they are objecting to “‘repulsive’ emotions”; their criticism shows a “slightly hysterical quality”; and they feel a “sense of revulsion” towards the literature (282, note 3). As this brief example makes perfectly clear, sentimental literature is a suspect genre, not respectable, and certainly not serious. Readers are made to feel guilty or embarrassed about reading sentimental literature.⁹ Even more importantly, writers feel anxious about their production of something subliterate and unimportant, and I will argue later that these fears are linked more broadly to an elite cultural contempt for genre fiction, especially Gothic or horror fiction.

Sentimental literature also served an important ideological and didactic function, emphasizing the importance of the woman’s role in creating and maintaining a civil society while also teaching its readers how to ensure that the home served as a classroom for future citizens. One of the best-selling novels of the nineteenth century, Susan Warner’s *The Wide, Wide World*, illustrates this imperative vividly. The protagonist of the novel, a young girl named Ellen, is forced by difficult family circumstances to live with her stern and strict Aunt Fortune Emerson.¹⁰ While Ellen is there, her mother dies, leaving her an orphan. As she grows up, she is taught proper Christian humility and fortitude, along with all of the things she would need to know in order to maintain a happy home—cooking, cleaning, Bible study, and so on. This novel, which resolutely refuses all

⁹ Madison Malone Kircher argues that the real reason to buy a Kindle or other tablet for reading is to hide the embarrassing books one is reading. In her informal survey of her coworkers, she found that the most popular digital book was *Fifty Shades of Grey*, which she describes as a “romance novel that bought BDSM into mainstream media.” Arguably, E. L. James’s hugely successful novel does many of the same things nineteenth-century sentimental novels did: it appeals to women readers; it deals with relationships; and it examines emotions. Although it is difficult to imagine the readers of *The Wide, Wide World* finding anything appealing in *Fifty Shades of Grey*, I would argue that they serve a similar critical function, right down to the criticism of their literary shortcomings.

¹⁰ Darryl Hattenhauer sees Eleanor, from Shirley Jackson’s *The Haunting of Hill House*, as a figure who “recuperates the victimized heroines of eighteenth-century sentimental novels.” He goes on to summarize the argument of Elizabeth MacAndrew and David H. Richter: “the sentimental heroine is not the simplistic stereotype that scholars such as Leslie Fiedler make her out to be, and she is central to the development of Gothic fiction” (157). Ellen Montgomery, then, prefigures many of the characters I will examine more closely in the following chapters.

temptations to become a Gothic tale, presents the home as a safe haven separate from the corruptions and evil of the world, and as the place where proper moral values are taught and upheld.

Because the home enjoys high status as the bulwark against the corruption of a morally questionable society, we can easily imagine how that status could be deconstructed. The journey from the safe, morally pure home to the evil, corrupt haunted house is very short indeed. Furthermore, the cultural anxieties represented by the witch trials and the moral values espoused by many sentimental texts appear on close examination to be congruent. The fear that a demonic force can co-opt the reproductive process and introduce a monster into the household grows from the same soil that nourishes the sentimental ethos of motherhood as a sacred duty. One of the largest threats to motherhood could be seen to come from the mothers themselves, and mothers are able to corrupt their charges at any point after conception, with that corruption taking on many forms: biological, social, religious. As in the case of the witch trials, a woman may be powerless to thwart any evil designs upon her children even if she herself is the dangerous figure; because she is seen as the weaker sex, she may not be able to help hurting her children. We may turn to Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* for a literary example of this fear: the magistrates and divines of Salem contemplated removing Pearl from her mother's care because they believed Hester's sinful nature put her daughter in jeopardy even though Hester had no apparent desire to cause pain.

The popularity of women writers in the nineteenth century posed another danger intimately connected to the fears of corrupted reproduction, and this danger has profound implications for this study. Women who wrote could find themselves in a paradoxical position. On the one hand, they were often writing works that tended to emphasize the importance of motherhood and the role mothers played in raising the next generation of good citizens. On the other, these writers were deploying their creative efforts in directions other than childrearing. They were, in short, raising books instead of children. As Anne Bradstreet's poem revealed, the substitute child can take on a monstrous and threatening appearance. Monstrous children must have fathers, and, as we have seen with the witch trials, the most likely candidate for monstrous paternity was Satan or some demonic surrogate. In the case of metaphoric children, the stakes are lower, so the progenitor takes a correspondingly lesser role; however, there still remains significant anxiety about the source of inspiration. The muse who impregnates a mind with a monstrous literary zygote becomes a source of fear.

Gothic and Horror

I was in the early stages of research for this book when a colleague asked me what I was working on. I explained the basic premise, using the terms “Gothic” and “horror.” “They’re not the same thing at all,” he warned me. “Well, they are related,” I replied, somewhat lamely. As I sit here at my desk in the final stages of my writing, I look at the various books on the Gothic and *Gothic Horror*, edited by Clive Bloom, sits atop the stack next to my computer. The line between Gothic and horror is blurred, and I will do much throughout this study to blur that line even further, but it may be useful to establish the terms I am using and explain exactly how the Gothic influences horror stories and why those influences are significant. Jack Morgan notes that “Criticism addressing the literature of horror is notoriously lacking in an established terminology” (60). The lack of terminology adds to the difficulty of writing about the differences and similarities between Gothic and horror.

Most literary scholars point to Horace Walpole’s *The Castle of Otranto*, first published in 1764, as one of the first Gothic narratives, with Ann Radcliffe and M.G. Lewis following his dimly lit path through the catacombs. Charles L. Crow, in attempting to define the Gothic, calls it “famously difficult to define” before offering a very fine definition. Crow says the Gothic

is now usually seen as a tradition of oppositional literature, presenting in disturbing, usually frightening ways, a skeptical, ambiguous view of human nature and of history. The Gothic exposes the repressed, what is hidden, unspoken, deliberately forgotten, in the lives of individuals and cultures. (2)

Crow later places the Gothic within a historical framework that positions it in a sort of opposition to the rationalism of the Age of Reason. Later writers took the Romantic interest in individual expression and imagination and set that against “Obsessive rationalism combined with authority” (Crow 4). In Crow’s formulation, the Gothic offers a counterpoint to cold, unimaginative reason.

The sense that the Gothic violates decorum informs most definitions of the genre. Clive Bloom, in *Gothic Histories*, notes that the “Gothic sensibility takes pleasure in the bizarre and the wild, the magical and the arabesque” (GH 3). This echoes Edgar Allan Poe’s *Tales of the Grotesque and Arabesque* (published in 1840), and, by extension, Flannery O’Connor’s essay exploring her Southern Gothic, “Some Aspects of the Grotesque in Southern Fiction,” published in 1960. Crow identifies this

pleasure in the bizarre as one of the crucial building blocks of Gothic fiction, and he defines it as “the strange, distorted or monstrous, usually as applied to human characters” (6). As we have already seen in Anne Bradstreet’s poem, the distorted and monstrous evoke feelings of fear and disgust, and this emotional response is a marked feature of the Gothic and horror stories I will consider later.

Many of the tropes of Gothic literature have become standards in horror, most especially the haunted house. In the early Gothic novels, the terrifying events and grotesque characters inhabit the dark, ruined monasteries and castles whose architectural style gave the Gothic its name (and were obviously representative of the English Gothic anti-clerical and anti-Catholic tone). As the Gothic grew and travelled across the Atlantic, the setting shifted from the extraordinary to the mundane, and the castle becomes the home. Dale Bailey identifies the haunted house formula as it develops from the nineteenth through the twentieth century. He says:

the house itself is sentient and malign, independent of any ghosts which may be present (and very frequently none are). Into this setting, comes a family—real or symbolic—which is skeptical of the house’s dire reputation. Subjected to gradually escalating supernatural assaults, they are simultaneously forced to confront the fault lines in familial relationships. While some of the central characters always survive to fight another day, the formula sanctions two endings for the house. In the first, it is destroyed; in the second, it survives to await fresh victims. (6)

Kate Ferguson Ellis sees the “central characters” of this trope as the most significant, and she argues that the Gothic is “preoccupied with the home” (ix). In her book, she considers “the idealization of the home and the popularity of the Gothic” and argues that these two things are connected by the “woman novel reader” (ix-x). The Gothic, with its emphasis on a safe, solid, and protected home separate from the fallen world outside the home, gains much of its narrative power from the horror readers feel when that safe home is threatened by grotesque characters or supernatural forces.

These grotesque characters and supernatural forces may be grouped under a key heading in the Gothic lexicon: the uncanny. Freud introduced the term in a paper originally published in 1919, and the article and the term have both been reprinted frequently, taking on an uncanny life of their own. His attempts to define the term are circular and reflexive; Hélène Cixous points out that his definition of the uncanny is “without any nucleus,” and that it appears to be on the “fringe of something else” (Cixous 528). Freud defines the uncanny this way:

It [the uncanny] is undoubtedly related to what is frightening—to what arouses dread and horror; equally certainly, too, the word is not always used in a clearly definable sense, so that it tends to coincide with what excites fear in general. Yet we may expect that a special core of feeling is present which justifies the use of a special conceptual term. (qtd in Cixous 619)

Freud's definition feels suitable for such a strange term—its resistance to a clear definition is part of the appeal, and that resistance echoes the Gothic's resistance to a clear definition. Both definitions rely on feeling, or a sense of strangeness. Freud marches on with great determination, however, adding to his definition and attempting to clarify it. He notes that part of the meaning of the term has to do with things that are not familiar, so unfamiliarity or strangeness is a component of the uncanny. Quoting Jentsch, Freud argues that the uncanny is seen in instances where one “doubts whether an apparently animate being is really alive; or conversely, whether a lifeless object might not in fact be animate” (qtd in Cixous 625). Things such as dolls, dead bodies, mannequins, puppets, and the like are by their nature uncanny because they create the uncertainty Freud notes above. We can all think of instances in real life or in literature where all of those objects take on malevolent force because of their uncanny attributes.

The most important part of Freud's definition, however, may be found in its original German, *unheimlich*. The German *heimlich* means “homely,” so anything that is *unheimlich* is not homely or unfamiliar.¹¹ The link between the uncanny and the central setting of so many Gothic stories is irresistible, as Charles Crow points out:

The essence of the uncanny is a sense of weirdness, created when something that seemed safe and familiar suddenly becomes strange, or something that should have remained hidden is revealed. In German, the root of “*unheimlich*” is *Heim*, home. Thus Freud's term contains the idea of a haunted house: the place that should have been comforting, home-like, revealing something ominous or threatening. (7)

The haunted house is not just the setting for the Gothic, then; it is the very essence of the Gothic.

¹¹ Because Freud is nothing if not methodical, he spends several pages looking at various definitions of *heimlich*, along with extracts from literary sources. He comes to the conclusion that “among its different shades of meaning the word ‘*heimlich*’ exhibits one which is identical with its opposite, ‘*unheimlich*.’” He seems to be delighted in this paradox, but notes that “*heimlich*” may mean “familiar and agreeable” as well as “concealed and kept out of sight” (qtd in Cixous 623).

But what is the link between Gothic and horror? After all, the Gothic stories of Louisa May Alcott, with their grotesque but decidedly human characters and rational settings seem far removed from the stories of Stephen King, which abound with otherworldly creatures, haunted houses, and supernatural themes. The bridge between the two may be found in Edmund Burke's *A Philosophical Enquiry*, a standard text in any analysis of the Gothic. Burke's definition of the sublime is essential:

Whatever is fitted in any sort to excite the ideas of pain, and danger, that is to say, whatever is in any sort terrible, or is conversant with terrible objects, or operates in a manner analogous to terror, is a source of the *sublime*; that is, it is productive of the strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling... When danger or pain press too nearly, they are incapable of giving any delight, and are simply terrible; but at certain distances, and with certain modifications, they may be, and they are delightful, as we every day experience. (36-37)

Burke's definition of the sublime explains our attraction to the Gothic; the uncanny is often represented by "terrible objects," and our identification of those terrible objects and our underlying knowledge that these objects are part of a fictional world renders them pleasurable. Horror, too, relies on the same identification of the terrible objects viewed from a safe distance.

The reader's reaction to the story obviously has much to do with how we position the story in any genre, and the bridge between Gothic and horror is constructed of a complex spectrum of emotional reactions. Stephen King argues that there are three levels of emotional effects that a horror writer can instill in readers, with each level being "a little less fine than the one before it" (King *DM* 21). At the top of King's hierarchy is the feeling of terror, which does not thrust terrible images before the reader but instead creates the heightened sense of dread by implication and insinuation. Horror arrives one step lower than the fine-grained terror, and this effect contains not only the mental apprehension—what we might also call the sublime effect—but is accompanied by an intense physical reaction. Revulsion hangs on the lowest rung of the horror ladder, and this is an almost entirely physical, visceral reaction to the terrible events in a story; King also calls this lowest level the "gross-out" and he's not afraid to use it (King *DM* 25). If we step back and consider these levels, we can see a definite movement from the Burkean sublime, with an intense but still intellectual response to gradually more physical and atavistic fears. King's notion of terror is somewhat similar to what Burke says about the importance of obscurity in arousing feelings of the sublime; Burke says, "a great clearness helps but little towards affecting the passions, as it is in some sort an enemy to all enthusiasms whatsoever" (56). While King

would probably argue that clearness is quite effective in the lower levels of his hierarchy, Burke's point about obscurity or veiling does hit at the heart of terror.¹²

Therefore, for the purposes of this investigation, I shall consider the Gothic/horror divide to be a spectrum. At one end of that spectrum we can see stories with no overt or obvious supernatural occurrences, but peopled by grotesque characters, set in dimly lit locales, and featuring plot guaranteed to cause anxiety and possibly even terror. We will find at the other end of the spectrum horror in the most commonly accepted use of the term: supernatural characters, events, and plots, with scenes that are contrived to evoke atavistic and visceral responses in the readers.

A Note on the Texts and Authors

All literary criticism is necessarily incomplete, and the choices the scholar makes possibly reveal agendas, biases, and personal preferences. In the interest of clarity, I wish to explain my selection process and the criteria I used to determine what texts and authors would appear in the final draft. My overall argument is, as I have explained, that the anxieties about devilish usurpation of reproduction arose during the Salem witch trials. Witches either stole Christian babies, made it impossible for Christian men to impregnate their wives, gave birth to imps or demons themselves, or nourished imps or demons with their notorious witches' teats. Authors frequently express their own anxieties about their writing in terms remarkably similar to those used to describe the fear of witchcraft; authors' creative offspring (their books) can be seen as some sort of perverted or usurped (re)productive endeavor. In some Gothic and horror stories, we can see these parallel fears working together, as authors use images of childbirth and other forms of non-reproductive creativity together.

In the first chapter I consider Nathaniel Hawthorne, who, as the descendant of a Salem witch trial judge, is perfectly situated for this study. His complicated relationship with his profession, which was troubled by concerns over financial and critical success, emerges in his fiction as philosophical digressions about art, the artist, and the beautiful, the province of the artist. Any thorough reader of Hawthorne will be able to remember many examples of the artist's anxieties, but I will generally

¹² In *Dissecting Stephen King*, Heidi Strengell offers a solid analysis of King's particular approach to horror, but it also works well for any consideration of the horror genre. See pp 22-27 for her complete analysis.

confine my focus to three texts: the short story “Alice Doane’s Appeal”; “The Custom House” preface to *The Scarlet Letter*; and *The House of Seven Gables*. Each of these works displays a concern for artistic reproduction that is underscored either by domestic themes, images of childbirth or sexuality, or both.

Notably missing from my analysis of mid-nineteenth century fiction is Edgar Allan Poe. Poe very frequently expounds upon the role of the author or the complexities of writing, with his often anthologized essay “The Philosophy of Composition” an obvious example of the genre. Furthermore, his anxieties about creating a successful writing career show through frequently in both his written works and in his biography. Poe confronted the same fears that Hawthorne did about whether or not he could make writing pay enough to survive, and he often expressed a complex and contradictory attitude towards his audience and the works that sold. David Reynolds, in *Beneath the American Renaissance*, points out the tension between audience demands for more sensational literature and Poe’s “dismay at the wildness and repulsiveness of much American writing” (227). Poe understood that “[t]o be appreciated you must be *read*” (qtd in Reynolds 226). At the same time, however, he realized that to be read, you must pay “minute attention to the sensations” (qtd in Reynolds 226). Because of this, we might suppose that Poe’s relationship with his artistic offspring reflects an Anne Bradstreet-like anxiety over creating a monstrous literary child, and this is often the case. However, Poe’s stories and poems tend to move in a direction away from the domestic and towards death instead of birth. Although this is certainly a path worth exploring further, I felt that it would take my current study in a direction contrary to what I wished.

In the next chapter I turn my attention to three authors whose works frequently fall into critical obscurity. Louisa May Alcott is no stranger to canonical American literature, but her “blood and thunder” tales, usually published under her pseudonym, were unknown enough that they were collected and reprinted in 1984 under the title *The Hidden Louisa May Alcott*. “Behind a Mask,” the story of the supposedly demure and timid governess Jean Muir, is a beautifully wrought example of the tormented connections between female sexuality and the muse. The other authors in this chapter, Rose Terry Cooke and Charlotte Perkins Gilman, likewise present their readers with a view of female creativity pushed into monstrous shapes by the patriarchal demands of society.

I then move into the twentieth century for a sustained examination of Shirley Jackson, whose novel *The Haunting of Hill House* is arguably one of the finest examples of the haunted house story ever produced. Jackson

is an odd and contradictory figure, who is both fiercely devoted to her craft and, at times, defensively dismissive of it. Her position as a housewife—and a faculty spouse at that—in postwar America (the stereotypical land of June Cleaver) adds a particular flavor to her presentation of domestic haunting. Even more important, she was known as much for her largely biographical essays on motherhood and domestic chores (collected into two volumes in 1953 and 1957) as for her notorious and terrifying short story “The Lottery.”

Stephen King, an admirer of Jackson, called *The Haunting of Hill House*, along with James’s *The Turn of the Screw*, one of “the only two great novels of the supernatural in the last hundred years” (King *DM* 285). King’s own venture into the haunted house trope, his iconic novel *The Shining*, follows in Jackson’s considerable footsteps.¹³ The author tormented by his own inner demons is a frequent theme in King’s novels, and Jack Torrance, the author at the center of *The Shining* projects that torment outward. In my analysis of this novel, I look outward to King’s treatment of this theme in many of his other novels, as well as at his own complicated relationship with genre fiction and his status as an icon of popular but not literary fiction.

Finally, I end my analysis with Ira Levin’s tightly focused novel *Rosemary’s Baby*, whose publication in 1967 set off a veritable baby boom of demonic children novels and movies. Levin is the only author of my study to take the concept of demonic inspiration all the way to an actual child of the devil. In other works, we see characters who fear that their attempts at creativity will be distorted or usurped by malevolent forces; in Levin’s novel, we see a patriarchal figure willingly sacrifice his wife and, more importantly, her reproductive power, to the devil in order to advance his own creative career as an actor. Levin, a sly satirist, pulls the patriarchal rug out from beneath our feet, however, as Guy is slowly revealed to be a significantly weaker figure than the disarmingly meek-seeming Rosemary. In the end of the novel motherhood triumphs.

Before turning to the novels and stories, I want to reiterate my claim of incompleteness. This is by no means meant to be an exhaustive work, and I wish to see it instead as an introduction or invitation to start a longer conversation. I am almost tempted to call this book the conception of a larger idea, but that might be stretching my metaphor to the breaking point.

¹³ In a footnote, King admits that he wrote *The Shining* with another Jackson novel in mind—*The Sundial*, which tells of a group living in a house separated from the rest of their community when an apocalypse strikes (King *DM* 281 note)

“MIGHT AS WELL HAVE BEEN A FIDDLER!”: HAWTHORNE’S CONTENTIOUS RELATIONSHIP WITH HIS WRITING MUSE

Let’s begin with a story. Our hero is a sensitive young man who finds himself torn between two competing desires: the desire to express his artistic ideals to the world, and the desire to make a decent living. He looks out at the world and finds little there to sustain his ideals. Instead of finding a deep appreciation for Beauty, he sees crass commercial enterprise. Instead of seeing sympathetic souls, attuned to the same needs he has, he sees sidelong glances and hears cynical laughter aimed at his retreating back. He nevertheless perseveres in his quest to create beautiful artifacts that will speak to unjaded souls. But—and here is the true heartbreak—he feels he must set aside his search for Beauty in order to address the everyday realities that will not bear being ignored; he must, in short, put food on the table and a roof over the heads of his loved ones. The young man rails against the banal practicalities, in his frustration resorting to intemperate language and uncharacteristic fiery outbursts. In the end, he finally reconciles himself to his life, but our story ends not on a victorious note but on one of resignation.

The story we have just pondered sounds a great deal like Nathaniel Hawthorne’s “The Artist of the Beautiful,” a tale about an extremely talented young watchmaker who longs to create something more stunning and extravagant than the practical timepieces he is known for. He labors at night, after he has done the work that pays the bills, on his magnificent, otherworldly creation: a clockwork butterfly that appears to be eerily sympathetic to the emotions of those around it. The butterfly is the antithesis of the clocks and watches the young artist is known for, in that it is impractical and seems to transcend the mechanical.

Our story is also that of Hawthorne himself. In one of his best-known discussions of the life of a writer, “The Custom-House” introduction to *The Scarlet Letter*, Hawthorne explains that he had to return to writing to support himself after his patronage job at the Custom House in Salem, Massachusetts, fell through with the changing political winds. He longed to write, but it has always been a difficult proposition to support a family on a writer’s income, and Hawthorne returns to this theme often. One of

the major difficulties of making a living by writing is the unpredictable tastes of the reading public. Is it worthwhile to spend months (if not years) writing a novel that, even if it has the good fortune to get picked up by a publisher, will fail to find an audience? The profession itself then becomes a sort of marginalized space, where only fools or the foolishly overconfident will try their chances.

Hawthorne recognizes that he stands in a precarious social position as an author, and that an author of Romances adds ridiculousness to his shaky social standing. As he talks of his return to writing after leaving the solid, socially acceptable job in the Custom House, he imagines his eminently sober and serious ancestors looking down on him with mixed contempt and horror. "What is he?" Hawthorne imagines one "gray shadow" asking. "A writer of story-books! What kind of business in life,--what mode of glorifying God, or being serviceable to mankind in his day and generation,--may that be? Why, the degenerate fellow might as well have been a fiddler!" the imagined ancestor goes on to exclaim (*CE* 1:10).¹ Although Hawthorne imagines his Puritan ancestors fitting into their scripted roles as scolds and moral authoritarians, the criticism he presents is familiar to many of us. Every year as I teach new English majors, I hear that they are fielding questions from serious-minded relatives that sound frighteningly similar to those lobbed at Hawthorne by his grizzled forebears: "What are you going to do with an English degree? Become a *poet*?" The (sometimes) unspoken question lurking beneath is, essentially, "Why don't you do something practical?"

Hawthorne is not merely generating a lighthearted jibe at his own artistic ambitions when he imagines his ancestors' response to his profession. His mother's family descended from Nicholas Manning, who arrived in the New World in 1680 (Coale 83). The Mannings, like many other families who left Europe for New England, sought their fortune through the rich resources and relative freedom of the growing colonies, and Hawthorne's uncle, Robert Manning, was a perfect emblem of this mercantile ambition. Hawthorne lived with his Uncle Robert for a time, and many scholars note that the relationship between uncle and nephew was troubled.² As "the main male authority" that the fatherless Hawthorne had to deal with, Uncle Robert was most likely an easy target for the younger man's resentment (Moore 60). Hawthorne's problem with his

¹ All references to Hawthorne's works come from the *Centenary Edition*.

² Samuel Chase Coale summarizes Gloria Erlich's argument about Hawthorne's relationship with his uncle, saying, "Hawthorne, according to Erlich, internalized the values of his mother's family, the Mannings, and realized that life for him would always be a struggle between bookkeeper and poet" (109).