

English 159—American Gothic Fiction, Summer 2023



Professor Niles Tomlinson

Day/Time: 10:50-12:55 MTWR

Email: bnt2@georgetown.edu

Office hrs: 1:00-2:00 M & W and by appt

In this course we will explore the haunted houses and woods of the American imagination. Through our study of mid-19th-Century American Gothic writers, we will engage the persistent question of why a country that values clarity, freedom, religious purity, inclusion, and progress, produces literature so often characterized by darkness, claustrophobia, madness, monstrosity, and haunting. Specifically, we will look at dialogues between the American dream and madness, between “normal” communities and maniacal individuals, between “The City on the Hill” and the “wilderness” beneath. Then, as we move into the late 19th Century and 20th Century, we will consider what these novels and short stories reveal about alternative narratives (especially narratives of otherness) that confront the dominant story of a “self-evident” culture. Among many questions we will address: What is the relationship between the distinctly interior notion of America as an idea (a dream) and the psychological nightmares expressed in many of these texts? What are the distinct forms of dominant culture paranoia that issue from nature spaces and urban spaces? Why might the American South be a repository for the Gothic and the grotesque?

Grades will be determined as follows:

Presentation	15%
Participation and preparedness	20%
5 discussion analyses of class readings	20%
Midterm paper (3-4 pages)	15%
Final paper (5-7 pages)	30%

Grading Scale: 100-92% A; 91-89% A-; 88-87 B+; 86-82% B; 81-79% B-; 78-77% C+; 76-72% C; 71-69% C-; 68-67% D+; 66-60% D; 59%

Required Texts (in addition to the short stories in Canvas "Files")

Great Tales and Poems, Edgar Allan Poe

The Haunting of Hill House, Shirley Jackson

Psycho, Robert Bloch

Requiem for a Dream, Hubert Selby Jr.

Participation and Attendance

Participation is an essential part of this course (and a significant percentage of your final grade), and entails not only showing up to class but also coming prepared.

You get two free absences. At three absences, a student's final participation grade will be lowered by one point, and each subsequent absence will incur the loss of another point. I realize, of course, that a fully online course during a pandemic needs to offer flexibility since some of you will likely experience technology problems and life issues that may make it difficult for you to fully participate in a synchronous platform at times. I am happy to offer asynchronous participation workarounds (perhaps through added content to the Discussion board) when these issues occur. Just keep me informed so I can set up alternative methods.

Paper Formats and Deadlines

Please share your two assigned essays as Google docs. Use twelve-point Times or Times New Roman fonts. All essays should include your name, the project #, the date, and a title.

Discussion Analyses

The Canvas "Discussions" will be crucial component of your class experience and will offer you opportunities to develop your ideas and improve your argumentative writing skills. Think of this as an opportunity to generate ideas for your papers. You need to compose 5 responses in all and they should be spread out over all 5 weeks. The length of responses should be 300 to 500 words. As one of the goals of this exercise is to create a dialogue between you and your classmates outside of class, you are encouraged to also respond to other analyses that address a common reading.

While your writing style can certainly be less formal than in your essays, you should refrain from merely summarizing—that is, your close-reading should offer interesting, and substantial critical insights into the texts we are discussing in class. How does a particular passage resonate with a larger theme of the work? How does it identify a central tension? What figurative language does your chosen passage employ that serves as a key to unlocking hidden meaning? How does it reflect the concurrent cultural/historical moment? How does it complicate conventional readings of the text?

Presentations

The purpose of these presentations is to provide you with an opportunity to develop a deeper, more expansive understanding of a chosen text and to connect this knowledge to some of the other cultural, scientific, philosophical issues we've been exploring. As a group, you will essentially run the class for 30-50 minutes according to a method that best allows you to communicate this knowledge. You'll want to provide an overview of your material (using Powerpoint, Google Slides, Prezi, etc.) to offer criticism and clarification, but you'll also need to plan a class activity or two that generates dynamic participation among the other students. These activities might include small group discussions, debate, close-reading activities, panel discussions, responses to Youtube clips or audio-recordings, role-playing, mapping, or other imaginative approaches. Inspire us, dazzle us!

The four requirements are: 1) address your given theme; 2) reflect on the primary text we are currently studying; 3) present the arguments of the scholarly article or excerpt that I assign you; 4) make a connection to one additional source which may be another primary source (novel,

film, short story, poem, speech, etc.), another secondary (scholarly source), a theoretical/philosophical source, or any kind of source that produces an “a-ha” connection.

Course Schedule

Please be advised that this schedule might be revised during the semester. I will, of course, always let you know ahead of time via email. Also, note the readings for a particular class session are considered homework and need to be read ahead of time. All readings marked [pdf] will be available on Canvas under the “Files” button.

Week 1

American Gothic Roots—Religion, Science, and the Haunting of “Paradise”

Mon. June 5: Introductions. Syllabus. Gothic American images and key concepts of the American Gothic mode. Origins of the American Gothic: English Gothic traditions and Puritanism.

Tues. June 6: Charles Brockden Brown, *Wieland* selection; Nathaniel Hawthorne, “Young Goodman Brown”, “The Minister’s Black Veil” [all pdfs Canvas]

Wedn. June 7: Edgar Allan Poe, “The Black Cat”, “Murders in the Rue Morgue”, “The Masque of the Red Death”

Thurs. June 8: Hawthorne, “The Birthmark” [pdf Canvas]; Ray Bradbury, “The Veldt” [pdf Canvas]; **Presentation #1**

Week 2

Haunted American Houses and Minds

Mon. June 12: Poe, “Fall of the House of Usher”, “Tell-Tale Heart”; Shirley Jackson, *The Haunting of Hill House* (Chpts 1-3)

Tues. June 13: Jackson, *The Haunting of Hill House* (Chpts. 4-6)

Wedn. June 14: Jackson, *The Haunting of Hill House* (Chpts. 7-9); **Presentation #2**

Thurs. June 15: Charlotte Perkins Gilman, “The Yellow Wallpaper” [pdf Canvas]; Marie Wilkin’s Freeman, “Old Woman Magoun” [pdf Canvas]

Week 3

Mon. June 19: *No class—Juneteenth Holiday*

Tues. June 20: Bloch, *Psycho*; **Presentation #3**

African America Gothic and the Haunted American South

Wedn. June 21: Paul Laurence Dunbar, “The Lynching of Jube Benson” [pdf Canvas]; Octavia Butler “Bloodchild” [pdf Canvas]

Thurs. June 21: Film clips from Jordan Peele’s *Get Out*. Midterm paper workshop.

Week 4

Mon. June 26: William Faulkner, “A Rose for Emily”; “Barn Burning” [both pdfs Canvas]

Tues. June 27: Flannery O’Connor, “A Good Man Is Hard to Find”; “Good Country People”, “The Life You Save May Be Your Own” [all pdfs Canvas]

Wedn. June 28: O’Connor, “The Displaced Person” [pdf Canvas]; **Presentation #4**

Haunted American Cities

Thurs. June 29: H.P. Lovecraft “The Haunter in the Dark” [pdf Canvas]; Thomas Ligotti, “The Last Feast of Harlequin” [pdf Canvas]

Week 5

Mon. July 3: Hubert Selby, Jr., *Requiem for a Dream*, chpts 1-6

Tues. July 4: *No class—4th of July Holiday*

Wedn. July 5: Selby Jr., *Requiem for a Dream*, chpts 7-9; **Presentation #5**

Thurs. July 6: Herman Melville, “Bartleby the Scrivener” [pdf Canvas]

Frid. July 7: Paper Workshop. Evaluations.

Final paper due Tuesday July 11 by 5:00 pm (email it to me)